



What is the Genealogical Proof Standard and Why Should I Care?

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Do you have a brick wall? Most of us do but everyone's is different. Frequently it is an issue of process. Have you only searched online by putting a name into a database search engine? If the problem is a record that was never recorded or was lost through neglect or disaster, have you considered alternative sources? Creating a research plan will help focus your research.

All research begins with a question.

It's important to have a goal when you research. A goal can be general but the objectives (the questions) you set to meet that goal need to be specific and measurable. Once you have a question in mind, write it down at the top of your [research plan](#). Next, write down everything you know about the individual that might help you define the problem. This is where you should re-read everything you have in your files about the individual. If you've been researching for a while, and this is a brick wall situation, you may find that the answer to your question is already in your files. It may be something you didn't recognize when you began your research, but with additional information it becomes the missing piece of your puzzle. When developing your plan, keep in mind the following questions:

- Who are you looking for?
- What type of event?
- When did they live?
- Where did they live?
- What else do you know about them? What differentiates them from someone of the same name.

Do you have a hypothesis...write that down, too. Now list the types of records that might answer the research question. At this point, your research relates to identifying sources and the repositories (both on and offline) where the records reside.

Whenever you build something it's important to have a strong foundation and building your family tree is no different. A weak foundation can cause your tree to collapse. Whether you are just starting or trying to fix some earlier problems (we all have them), focusing on the basics can help you get back on track.

The foundation for your research begins with the [*Genealogical Proof Standard*](#).

- A reasonably exhaustive search
- A complete and accurate citation to the sources
- Analysis and correlation of the collected information
- Resolution of conflicting evidence
- Soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion¹

¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *The Genealogical Proof Standard*, <https://bcgcertification.org/ethics-standards/>
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What constitutes a “reasonably exhaustive search?” Is it one record that states the answer to your research question? Is it two documents that state the same information? Is it everything we can find online? The answer can vary, but it should be all of the sources, with an emphasis on original documents, that can shed light on the research question about a person’s identity, relationships or situations. And, it definitely means more than just online research.

Complete and accurate source citations will benefit your research in a number of ways. Do you share information? How frustrating is it to find information, perhaps in an online family tree that might answer a brick wall problem, only to find that there are no source citations. You don’t want to be that person! You don’t want to add something to your tree until you can independently verify the information, and without a source, you can’t do that. Also if you come across conflicting information how can you evaluate the information if you don’t know where it came from? Any information that is not common knowledge requires a source citation. Many software packages provide templates for adding sources, but even if they don’t, make sure you capture the source so you can find the information in the future. Keep in mind that URL’s change, so if you are working with an online database, capture the original source of the information.

If you are to analyze and correlate the evidence, you need to understand the key components of sources information and evidence. As you look at various sources, be they books, certificates, census records or other artifacts, you are gathering evidence from them and it’s therefore important that you understand what you are looking at, why it was created, and the origins of the information contained in that source. As genealogists and family historians, our goal is to find *original sources*: (1) documents that were created at the time an event took place, (2) by someone with first hand knowledge of the event. You are not always able to find original documents, but that is the goal to support your research. If a source does not meet the two criteria listed above, it is a *derivative source*.

The fact that a source is original doesn’t mean the information contained in it is correct. My father-in-law’s original birth certificate spelled his name incorrectly. All sources contain information and the information can be *primary* or *secondary*. Primary information is information given by someone who was a participant in the event or who witnessed it. Other information is *secondary*. Primary information may contain errors as well. A mother was present at the birth of her child, yet we all know of instances where the birthdate is incorrect. A death certificate is an example of a document that contains both primary information (that related to the death) and secondary information (all other information that does not qualify the informant as a primary witness to the event).

The third concept is of evidence. *Direct evidence* provides the answer you are looking for such as a birth certificate with the name of the father and mother of the child. Sometimes there is no direct evidence available and you need to write a *proof summary* using *indirect evidence* from multiple sources not directly related to the question you are trying to answer. I needed to prove James, who lived in New York was the son of David who died in Connecticut but there was no extant birth or baptismal record. By following James’ land deeds through three New England towns, and two states, along with David’s will and the sale of the dower property, I was able to “prove” that James was the son of David. Proof is always open to change should new evidence become available.

Here’s something I can guarantee...just like death and taxes...you will find conflicting evidence. What you can’t do is sweep it under the rug. You must resolve it. How you resolve it depends on the conflict. Sometimes you can find a more definitive source, such as a birth certificate where you have conflicting dates. Sometimes you make a judgment based on the quality of the sources, another reminder of how important sources are. You need to explain why you came to the conclusion you did, understanding that if new evidence comes to light, your conclusion is subject to change.

Finally, write it down! I’ve learned through experience that writing clarifies whatever issues I have. When I’m analyzing a document I write down the evidence presented, my analysis of the evidence and

the next steps I'm led to based on the document (and of course the source citation). When I'm dealing with conflicting evidence, I do the same thing. And when no direct evidence is available, then a proof summary explains how and why I came to the conclusion I did. If you're sharing your genealogy, it makes it easier for others to understand and if they have additional evidence, they can provide it. This will also make it easier to write a sketch on your ancestor (perhaps the beginning of your book?).

Adherence to the principles of the *Genealogical Proof Standard* and research process will give your genealogy a strong foundation as well as provide you with a methodology to break through your brick walls.

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