



PLANNING RESEARCH*

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Reasonably exhaustive research is the first component of the Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS).¹ The thorough research required by the GPS is a process that should not be undertaken in a haphazard manner. Specific guidance on developing research plans is provided by ten of the ninety standards set forth in *Genealogy Standards*.² Additional direction can be found in the rubrics developed by the Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG) for evaluating applications for the Certified Genealogist[®] credential but widely used throughout the genealogical community.³ To illustrate the application of the applicable standards, this lecture focuses on the development of a research plan based on a single record.

Craft A Research Question

What do you want to know? A research question should be based on documented information. The objective should be clear enough to be answerable, given the records available in the relevant timeframe and geographic location.⁴

What do you know? Sound research planning begins with the formulation of a focused research question. Research questions may revolve around issues relating to identity, kinship, or life events. The starting point is always an assessment of the accuracy of the information that is known (e.g., that provided by oral history or a compiled genealogy).⁵ This provides a basis for determining whether there are issues that require further research, such as undocumented assertions that need

* All cited websites were last viewed on 25 October 2021.

¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, “The Genealogical Proof Standard,” *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed. rev. (Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry.com, 2021), 1.

² “Standards for Researching,” *Genealogy Standards*, 11–15.

³ Rubrics for Evaluating New Applications for BCG Certification, Revised 1 January 2021”; PDF, *Board for Certification of Genealogists* (<https://bcgcertification.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/BCG-New-Application-Rubrics-2021.pdf>).

⁴ *Genealogy Standards*, 9, Standard 10, “Effective Research Questions.” Also, BCG Rubrics, “RR1. Focus and responsiveness.”

⁵ *Genealogy Standards*, 10, Standard 11, “Sound Basis.” Also, BCG Rubrics, “RR4. Adequacy of starting-point information.”

corroboration. This initial step might also identify conflicting information items that require resolution, as well as clues about potentially relevant sources.

An effective research question provides enough detail about a unique individual or family group to narrow the scope of the research plan. Too narrow a question—such as an exact date for a life event during a period when a geographic area was wilderness—might not be answerable. Too broad a question, such as “Find more information about my great-grandfather,” would be susceptible to a multitude of possible answers

Develop A Research Plan

The research question will inform the development of the research plan, the design of which may change as progress is made and new avenues to explore are uncovered. Ideally, the research plan will identify and prioritize commonly used sources that have the potential to provide information relevant to the research question.⁶ Some commonly used sources are:

- Vital records of births, deaths, and marriages;
- Federal and state census records;
- Probate records, including wills and estate files;
- Land and tax records;
- Military records; and
- Immigration and naturalization records.

Is there relevant context to consider? Standard 12 requires the consideration of context—ethnic, historical, legal, or other—in developing the scope of research plans.⁷ For example, Unique records might be included where a research subject is an African American with roots in the antebellum period.

Topical breadth. In addition to sources that may name a research subject or their associates, consider whether there are other sources that could shed light on aspects of a research question, such as sources concerning occupations, DNA, or laws.⁸

What sources are available? The preliminary research plan may include online sources or records that are only available at physical repositories such as archives. In either case, although accessibility should be considered in prioritizing, preference should be given to sources that are likely to provide the most reliable information. Aim for original records containing primary

⁶ *Genealogy Standards*, 12–13, Standard 13, “Source-based content”; Standard 15, “Efficient sequence.” Also, BCG Rubrics, “DW10. Efficiency of research plan.”

⁷ *Genealogy Standards*, 12, Standard 12, “Broad Context.”

⁸ *Genealogy Standards*, 13, Standard 14, “Topical breadth.”

information. Information about the availability of records for specific eras and geographic locations can be found in research guides in print or online.⁹

Following are examples of finding aids:

- *FamilySearch Research Wiki*. https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main_Page.
- National Genealogical Society. *Research in the States Series*. <https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/ris/>.
- *The Handybook For Genealogists, United States of America*. Draper, Utah: Everton Publishers: 2002.
- Greenwood, Val D. *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*. 4th edition. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company 2017.

The GPS cannot be met if a research plan is terminated before sufficient evidence is found.¹⁰

Developing a Research Plan From a Single Record

- What do we want to know?
- What information do we know is correct?
- Survey finding aids and research guides for the geographic area.
- Identify potential sources and how they can be accessed?
- Which sources should be prioritized?

Additional Resources

The BCG Application Guide. Washington, D.C.: Board for Certification of Genealogists, 2021.

DeGrazia, Laura Murphy. "Problem Analyses & Research Plans." Mills, Elizabeth Shown, ed. *Professional Genealogy, Preparation, Practice, & Standards*. Baltimore: Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2018, Pages 295–316.

Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. National Genealogical Society: Arlington, Virginia, 2013.

———. "Skillbuilding: Focused Versus Diffuse Research," *OnBoard* 17 (September 2011): 17–18.

Leary, Helen F. M. "A Master Plan for North Carolina Research." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 75 (March 1987): 15–36. Pages 15–16 provide an excellent summary of the preliminary assessment required for successful research.

Penner, Mary. "S-T-P: Another Way of Looking at Research Plans," *OnBoard* 27 (21 May 2021): 10–11.

Powell, Kimberly. "Creating a Genealogy Research Plan Like a Detective." *ThoughtCo*, Sep. 8, 2021. [Thoughtco.com/how-to-develop-genealogy-research-plan-1421685](https://www.thoughtco.com/how-to-develop-genealogy-research-plan-1421685).

⁹ *Genealogy Standards*, Standard 13, "Source-based content"; Standard 17, "Extent."

¹⁰ *Genealogy Standards*, 15, Standard 18, "Terminating the plan."