

Enough is Enough! Or is it?

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How do you know when you have completed reasonably exhaustive research? Is there enough evidence to come to a logical conclusion about the research problem you have tackled? Have you consulted as many different types of sources as are available to answer your questions? Is it okay to stop with one piece of direct evidence? Do you have a valid answer if you found only indirect evidence to support your conclusion?

This session provides tips and some sample vignettes to help attendees learn how to determine when adequate research has been conducted to meet the goals of a project.

Research Standards

Don't be intimidated by standards; they are necessary in any field to ensure a level of quality. In the case of genealogical research, following accepted standards helps us be relatively certain that the family we have constructed is, in fact, the *right* family. Adherence to the five-step Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS) means that we: 1) conduct a reasonably exhaustive search for all information that is or may be pertinent to the identity, relationship, event, or situation in question; 2) collect and include in our compilation a complete, accurate citation to the source or sources of each item of information that contributes to answers about the identity, relationship, event, or situation being researched, whether that evidence is direct, indirect, or negative; 3) analyze and correlate the collected information to assess its quality as evidence; 4) resolve any conflicts caused by items of evidence that contradict each other or are contrary to a proposed (hypothetical) solution to the question; and 5) arrive at a soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion based on the strongest available evidence.¹

Gathering

Many researchers struggle with step 1 of the GPS. What exactly is *reasonably* exhaustive research? In order to comply with this step, you must know what records are available for the area and time period you are researching so you can be fairly certain that you have left no stone unturned in your quest. There is no magic formula for the number of records you should consult. In *Mastering Genealogical Proof*, Tom Jones suggests “at least two independently-created evidence items in agreement” may suffice.²

1 Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards* (New York and Nashville: Ancestry.com, an imprint of Turner Publishing Company, 2014), 1–2.

2 Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2013), 23.

The adjective *reasonable* carries an implication that a search of every single record in the courthouse is probably not necessary—just the relevant ones. And what if the courthouse burned or there are no birth records for the time period you are researching or you have conflicting information? Then a reasonable search requires that you look elsewhere and seek alternate records to answer questions that the missing records would ordinarily clarify. Always consult multiple sources; it may not be possible to complete reasonably exhaustive research in one repository. Evidence from a birth record at the county courthouse might be validated or invalidated by other information found in a military record at the National Archives or a diary at a university manuscript collection or a death certificate online at a reliable website. A reasonably exhaustive search takes into account the many (or few) records available that might affect the conclusions reached.

Organizing and Analyzing

Steps 2 and 3 of the GPS ask that we provide complete accurate citations for the sources that we use, and that we analyze and correlate the information from a source to assess its quality as evidence. One need for citing sources is obvious—so that we or others can find the information again. But the analysis of the information in the source is more important, so don't move off-target and waste time agonizing over the exact citation format. Use your word processor's footnote feature to easily insert the basic information for a citation while you are sifting through and analyzing the information's validity as evidence; come back later to concentrate on punctuation. The more you practice the art of writing citations, the easier it will become to remember the elements and their correct order and punctuation. It's important to put the source citation's commas and semi-colons in the right place; it is more important to assess the quality of the evidence gathered as part of analyzing its worth and relevance as proof. And it's not enough to analyze in your head; write down your analysis in some kind of logical order.

As a way to help analyze and correlate the evidence, consider transcribing rather than just skimming a document. Transcribing forces you to read it word for word and try to decipher handwriting that may seem illegible but makes sense in context. Read a document for meaning. If you don't understand a word or phrase, look for a definition. Learn about the law influencing the era and the document you're analyzing.

Resolving Conflicts

Step 4 of the GPS involves resolving any conflicts caused by conflicting or contrary evidence. How do you know there is a conflict? If a birth certificate provides a mother's maiden name as Margaret Pate but the person's death certificate gives the mother's name as Margaret Brown, you have conflicting evidence that must be resolved. Weigh that evidence. The mother probably provided her own maiden name on her child's birth certificate, but a survivor provided her maiden name years later at her death. Which evidence has more validity? Have you looked for all records that might provide her maiden name—marriage licenses, obituary, cemetery records, other childrens' birth certificates? If not, you have not completed a reasonably exhaustive search. You need more evidence to resolve the conflict of her name.

In Conclusion

The last step of the GPS calls for a soundly reasoned coherently written conclusion. Yes, a solid *written* conclusion. Don't trust your memory to retain all the details; write a report for others or for your own files. In previous steps, you have documented sources used, including standard citations and evaluation of the evidential information found in those sources. Before moving on to another project, write a valid conclusion based on the evidence. Record the thought process (analysis) that led to arrival at the final sound conclusion. What did the sources and evidence say? Verify that you did conduct reasonably exhaustive research by including in your report information about the records searched. Then, five years from now you won't have to wonder if you checked a particular repository or source when working on this problem; you'll have the answer in your report. This is also the time to clean up the report, check the facts, and format the citations according to an accepted standard such as Mills's *Evidence Explained*.

When is Enough Enough?

Today's reasonably exhaustive research may be found lacking tomorrow. Enough is enough today, but there is almost always another source, or there will be in the future. Don't neglect further research because you can't go to a distant courthouse or repository or you can't afford a subscription to the latest, greatest online service. Use the resources of the Family History Library in Salt Lake City by ordering microfilmed records at a local Family History Center, use the ever-increasing number of original digitized records online at Family Search and elsewhere, hire a local researcher to find the document you need, or use that expensive online database at a regional library or archive that has a subscription. There really is no good excuse for not completing reasonably exhaustive research for any given genealogical project. Not conducting a thorough enough search may lead to a faulty conclusion that can be disproved by a more conscientious researcher.

Nor can we rest on our laurels for long when, almost daily, new records become available that may cause us to re-evaluate the evidence and come to a different logical conclusion than the previous one based on less evidence. The relatively recent use of DNA evidence in genealogical problem solving is an example of a new source with the potential to completely negate a long-standing accepted ancestral line, or conversely, to verify thorough, reasonably exhaustive research that led to an accurate conclusion born out by hard science.

Today we conduct reasonably exhaustive research and draw our carefully considered conclusion; tomorrow we may find new evidence and need to re-evaluate before coming to the same or a different conclusion.

Resources

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