
The Advance of Research Habits over Recent Decades—And the Downside

Thomas W. Jones, PhD, CG, FASG, FUGA, FNGS ♦ Tom@JonesResearchServices.com

The Internet, other technological advances, indexing projects, and DNA testing have revolutionized genealogical research. Have those advances also promoted counterproductive research habits?

The past

- ◆ Researchers consulted mostly textual records.
- ◆ Microfilm publications and research and preservation microfilms of textual records were available at a limited number of local sites.
- ◆ Researchers viewed records in the context of surrounding records, even when using microfilm or other media.
- ◆ Original record-keepers created most indexes that researchers consulted.
- ◆ Otherwise, indexed materials were few in number.
- ◆ Research often required travel, postal mail, or both.
- ◆ Researcher connections occurred almost exclusively via postal mail.
- ◆ Mail inquiries had high response rates from distant relatives, but not all shared information was accurate.
- ◆ Research guides, few in number, were available only in print.
- ◆ Genealogists had few formal-education opportunities.
- ◆ Most researchers advanced their skills through trial and error.
- ◆ Identity theft was unknown, and few people had privacy concerns.

The present

- ◆ More genealogical resources are available.
- ◆ DNA testing has added a new dimension to genealogical research.
- ◆ Researchers routinely use search engines and benefit from many large indexing projects.
- ◆ Many more people than in the past pursue genealogical research.
- ◆ Genealogists have many formal-educational opportunities.
- ◆ Some genealogists extensively take advantage of many electronic connectivity opportunities.
- ◆ Concern for record preservation and access is greater than in the past.

The upside

- ◆ Many records are easy to find.
- ◆ Genealogists can do much of their research without leaving home.
- ◆ Advanced researchers build cases by assembling pieces of evidence.
- ◆ Some researchers discuss and critique genealogical proofs.
- ◆ Advanced researchers build, separate, and consolidate identities.
- ◆ Some genealogists share information and benefit from shared information.

The downside

- ◆ Most people pursuing their family history seem to have superficial understandings of genealogical research and outcomes.
- ◆ Copying of others' information without interacting is epidemic.
- ◆ Much research consists of nearly random search-and-click hunting ("grazing"), which leads to avoiding source contexts and research continuity.
- ◆ Many researchers fail to follow indexes and clues to useful records.
- ◆ Many genealogists seem to have little knowledge of off-line records, despite the vastness of such records. Genealogists also seem not to know how to acquire that knowledge.
- ◆ Many genealogists seem to have little awareness of ancestral biographical factors or interest in them.
- ◆ Many researchers seem to consider source information unimportant.
- ◆ Researchers receive low response rates via e-mail and messaging, especially from distant relatives. That might be compounded by record-provider messaging issues.
- ◆ Although connectivity opportunities are high, researchers seem to "lurk" more often than they engage with other researchers.
- ◆ Misinformation from record providers and users is widespread.
- ◆ Many genealogists do not consider record purposes or other factors that might help them understand their ancestors. The belief that genealogical research is easy is widespread and promoted commercially, although the opposite is true.
- ◆ Many genealogists give up too easily, build their own brick walls, or both.

Suggestions

- ◆ All beginners and new subscribers should receive information emphasizing at least five practices:
 1. Keeping track of sources they have consulted
 2. Being concerned about accuracy of their sources and their conclusions
 3. Interacting with other researchers
 4. Researching and publishing (online or off) ethically
 5. Understanding that the outcome of genealogical research is a clear and accurate understanding of each person in a family tree or other genealogical compilation
- ◆ Information about research methodology should routinely accompany information about online source materials.
- ◆ Information about related off-line materials should accompany information about online collections. That information should include where and how to access the related off-line materials and how users of online collections can benefit from also using the related off-line materials.
- ◆ Genealogical websites should by default show their users' e-mail addresses and encourage communication among potential distant relatives via e-mail and outside their own groups of subscribers.
- ◆ Frequent newsletters from genealogy website publishers to their users would help accomplish the above goals and minimize the downsides of genealogical research in the twenty-first century.

For today's standards, see Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed. Nashville: Ancestry.com: 2019.