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The Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS): A Review

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The Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS) is a cornerstone in genealogical research, underlining the importance of accuracy.

*Accuracy is fundamental to genealogical research.
Without it, a family's history would be fiction.¹*

This statement encapsulates why the GPS is needed. Conclusions should be based on facts and evidence. Nobody wants their genealogical research to be considered fiction. The GPS has evolved, and the current version can be found in Chapter 1 of *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd edition revised, released in 2021.

Unlike a linear process, the GPS is a framework comprised of interdependent components. It can be viewed as a measurement or evaluation tool. Completed research is compared against the GPS; the conclusion is proven if it meets the GPS. It is not limited to self-assessment; it is a valuable tool for evaluating others' research as well.

WHEN DOES THE GPS NOT APPLY?

Not all genealogical research is about proof. For example, when transcribing a Civil War pension file or researching what working for the Pony Express was like. Limitations imposed by clients on time, travel, or expenses may also prevent researchers from being able to meet the GPS.

"THE STANDARDS" VS. THE GPS

Distinguishing between "The Standards" and the GPS is crucial. The 90 standards in the book apply to all genealogical research, whereas the GPS only applies to completed research that satisfactorily resolves a genealogical question. You are expected to meet these standards, regardless of whether you are working towards the GPS.

¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed. rev. (Nashville, Tenn: Ancestry.com, 2021), xix.

FIVE COMPONENTS OF THE GPS

For a genealogical conclusion to be considered proven, you must:

- Conduct reasonably exhaustive research.
- Craft clear and accurate source citations.
- Perform tests of analysis and correlation.
- Resolve conflicts.
- Write a defense of the conclusion.

REASONABLY EXHAUSTIVE RESEARCH

What is “reasonably exhaustive”? You can’t examine every record, so you must make choices. Since you can’t examine everything, knowing what records are most likely to contain relevant information to help answer the research question is essential.

What is “search” vs. “research”? Searching is plugging something and seeing if you get any results. Research is systematic and thorough. Research is focused and planned. Sometimes, researching means reading hundreds of pages of handwritten documents.

What is “enough” when it comes to reasonably exhaustive research? It depends on how complicated the research problem is. More complex cases require more depth and breadth. It also depends on what challenges you encounter. If you are researching in a place where vital records exist, then reasonably exhaustive research might be quite reasonable. However, if you work in a burned county with no marriage, land, or probate records, proving much of anything will require significantly more research.

Consider making a records checklist and a locality guide to plan for reasonably exhaustive research. Use sources such as the following:

- Webinars
- Published guides
- Journals
- Local repositories
- Contextual research on the era, laws, events, and groups.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Does my research answer the research question?
- Have I eliminated all other hypotheses?
- If new evidence should come to light, will it overturn my conclusion or support it?
- Do I have multiple independent sources that agree?
- Do I use the “typical” sources to answer my research question?
- Can I replace indexes or other derivatives with original records?
- Do I have the context necessary to understand the sources and correctly interpret evidence?

SOURCE CITATIONS

Standard 2 tells you when to cite. Every fact should be connected to a specific source. However, you do not need to cite common knowledge. Be sure to include negative search citations. These are when you look in a source and don't find anything. Negative search citations should consist of where you looked and your search parameters.

Standard 3 explains three purposes of citations.

1. To locate the source
2. To assess the source's credibility
3. To assess the scope of research.

The deed was not recorded in county deed books.¹

1. Searched for William Hicks as grantee 1700–1740: Queens Co., New York, grantee index H; *FamilySearch* digital film 8202415, images 283-288.

Figure 1: Example of a negative search citation.

Standard 5 identifies the elements to include in a citation: **who**, **what**, **when**, **where**, and **wherein**. Here is an example. Can you try to find this deed?

Queens Co., New York, Deed Book KK:101-104, Robert Van Zandt et al. to George Douglas, 28 May 1835; *FamilySearch* digital film 8627569, images 524-525.

Figure 2: Sample citation with color-coded elements.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Is every statement of fact cited?
- Does the citation accurately portray the narrative?
- Have I cited my negative searches?
- Did I follow citation formats covered in Evidence Explained and the Chicago Manual of Style?
- Do my citations have enough details for others to locate my sources?

ANALYSIS & CORRELATION

Analysis and correlation are very different. Analysis assesses how reliable the source, information item, or evidence is. It doesn't prove if something is correct, just how likely it is to be accurate. The analysis is conducted one source at a time. Correlation compares and contrasts evidence. You can see patterns, areas of agreement, and conflicts with correlation. Correlation requires multiple sources.

Source analysis might include these considerations.

- Is the source original, derivative, or authored?
- Physical condition: Are there inkblots or tears that obscure the record?

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- Legibility: Is the handwriting clear and easy to read?
- Internal consistency: Are there multiple handwritings or inks suggesting later additions?
- External consistency: Is the record consistent with others in the collection?
- Purpose: What was the original purpose of the source?
- Custody: Has it been in government custody or private hands?
- Time lapse: Was there a significant lapse between the event and the recording?
- Legal context: What were the legal requirements?

Information analysis might include these considerations:

- Identify the informant.
- Assess the informant's reliability.
- Is the information primary, secondary, or undetermined?
- Internal consistency: Is the information within the record consistent?
- External consistency: Is the language consistent with others in this time and place?
- Was the information open to challenge?

Evidence can be direct, indirect, or negative. One type of evidence is not better than another. Evidence only exists in relation to a research question. Remember: any source can be wrong.

Correlation is comparing information from different sources to see if they are the same or different or how they work or don't work together. You need to ensure the information you correlate is independent. What you are correlating cannot have the same origin. Otherwise, the correlation is invalid.

You can correlate almost anything, depending on where the evidence leads you. You can correlate evidence within a record group (such as census, deeds, tax records, DNA) or across record groups (such as evidence relating to parentage, residence, and signatures). A timeline is a powerful correlation tool. You can put whatever you want in a timeline, which can help you take an overall look at your subject's life.

You can correlate evidence in the narrative (such as paragraphs, bulleted lists, or numbered lists) or in enhancements (such as tables or figures).

Questions to ask yourself:

- Do I understand the source's history, purpose, and custody?
- Have I tried to replace derivative and authored sources with original records?
- Have I tried to replace sources containing secondary and undetermined information with sources containing primary information?
- If I use weak evidence, do I have a defensible rationale?
- Have I recognized all of the evidence?
- Have I compared and contrasted the evidence?
- Did I appropriately correlate evidence?

RESOLVE CONFLICTS

This is the one GPS component you can skip. If there are no conflicts, then you have nothing to resolve. All conflicts need to be acknowledged. Minor conflicts should not be over-emphasized. They can be addressed in the narrative or a footnote. Different doesn't mean conflicting. For example, "Sally" is a nickname for "Sarah"; thus, they are different but not conflicting.

To resolve conflicts, identify all of the evidence supporting the different conclusions. Then, articulate a defensible rationale for dismissing all but one of the conclusions as incorrect. The four defensible rationales for resolving conflicting evidence are:

1. Lack of corroboration.
2. Quality of evidence
3. Explanation
4. Combination

Questions to ask yourself:

- Is there conflicting evidence that needs to be resolved?
- Have I recognized all conflicting evidence?
- Are minor conflicts over-played?
- Is there a defensible rationale for resolving conflicts?

WRITTEN DEFENSE

According to the GPS, you must include a "soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion based on the strongest available evidence."² These proofs should take one of these forms: a proof statement, a proof summary, or a proof argument. A proof argument is "a documented narrative that explains why a genealogist's answer to a complex genealogical problem should be considered acceptable and which may either be a stand-alone product (like a case study, journal article, or report) or appear within a chapter, family history, or other genealogical work in print, online, or elsewhere."³ The key part is that a proof argument is a documented narrative that should meet the GPS.

The discussion must have a logical organization and sequence. It should be divided into different parts to help the reader follow along. Assembled results should be a combination of narrative and enhancements. The narrative and enhancements together demonstrate the reliability of sources and information and correlate evidence. The evidence presented should be relevant to the research question. Conflicts should be addressed and resolved, if possible.

² BCG, *Genealogy Standards*, 2.

³ BCG, *Genealogy Standards*, 83.

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Questions to ask yourself:

- Am I using my best evidence?
- Is all evidence presented relevant to the research question?
- Do the narrative and enhancements together demonstrate reasonably exhaustive research?
- Do the citations allow the reader to assess the extent of my research?
- Do the citations allow the reader to assess the reliability of my sources and information?
- Have I logically resolved all conflicts?
- Am I providing the context required for the reader to understand the conclusion?

RESOURCES

For examples of proof arguments that meet the GPS, read case studies found in the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* (NGSQ), the *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* (the Record), the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (the Register), *The American Genealogist* (TAG), and *The Genealogist*.

For information on the **Genealogical Proof Standard in general**:

- Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd edition, rev. Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry, 2021.
- GenProof Study Groups. Virtual course. <https://genproofstudygroups.com/>
- Johnson, Melissa. “Applying Evidence to Genealogical Research Questions.” 19 Feb. 2019. *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*. <https://familytreewebinars.com/> : 2023.
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- ProGen Study Groups. Virtual course. <https://progenstudygroups.com/>

For information on **reasonably exhaustive research**:

- Fox, Judy Kellar. “Ten-Minute Methodology: [“Reasonably Exhaustive”—How Do We Know We’re There?”](#) 17 Sep. 2015. *Board for Certification of Genealogists*.
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- Henderson, Harold. “Research Procedures.” Elizabeth Shown Mills, ed. *Professional Genealogy: Preparation, Practice & Standards*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2018. Pages 317-336.
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. [“Reasonably Exhaustive Research: The First Criteria for Genealogical Proof.”](#) 6 Sep. 2019. *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*. <https://familytreewebinars.com/> : 2023.
- Russell, Judy G. [“Skillbuilding: DNA and the Reasonably Exhaustive Search.”](#) Rev. 30 Apr. 2015. *Board for Certification of Genealogists*.

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- *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Graham, Paul K. "Cite Anything: a Unified Approach to Crafting Citations." *Association of Professional Genealogists Quarterly* (Sept. 2020): 10-17.
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- _____. *Mastering Genealogical Documentation*. Arlington, Va.: National Genealogical Society, 2017.
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, 3rd edition. Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publ. Co., 2015.

For information on **analysis & correlation**:

- Green, Shannon. "[3 Ways to Advance Your Research with Correlation](#)." 21 Apr. 2021. *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*. <https://familytreewebinars.com/> : 2023.
- _____. "Correlation: A Powerful Research Tool." *NGS Magazine* (July-Sep. 2022): 17-23.
- Jones, Thomas W. "Reasoning from Evidence." Elizabeth Shown Mills, ed. *Professional Genealogy: Preparation, Practice & Standards*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2018. Pages 265-292.
- Joyce, Jan. "Diving Deep Into Analysis." *Crossroads* vol. 19 no. 1 (Jan. 2024).
- McGhie, Angela Packer. "[Document Analysis: Digging into Details](#)." 18 Jan. 2023. *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*. <https://familytreewebinars.com/> : 2023.
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "[QuickLesson 5: Analyzing Records](#)," *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage*.
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "[QuickLesson 17: The Evidence Analysis Process Model](#)," *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage*.

For information on **resolving conflicts**:

- Russell, Judy G. "[When Worlds Collide: Resolving Conflicts in Genealogical Records](#)." 7 Oct. 2016. *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*. <https://familytreewebinars.com/> : 2023.
- Wentling, Mark A. "[Five Wives & A Feather Bed: Using Indirect and Negative Evidence to Resolve Conflicting Claims](#)." 18 May 2022. *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*. <https://familytreewebinars.com/> : 2023.

For information on **writing up conclusions**:

- Bittner, Warren. "[Proof Arguments – How to Write Them and Why They Matter](#)." 30 Mar. 2016. *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*. <https://familytreewebinars.com/> : 2023.
- Jones, Thomas W. "Proof Arguments & Case Studies." Elizabeth Shown Mills, ed. *Professional Genealogy: Preparation, Practice & Standards*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2018. Pages 475-500.

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- _____. "[Writing and Publishing for Genealogists](#)." Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research (IGHR). Offered 2024.
- Joyce, Jan. "[Assemblage: Preparing, Writing, and Revising Proof Arguments](#)." Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy (SLIG). Offered 2023.