

APPLYING EVIDENCE TO GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Presented by Melissa A. Johnson, CG®
mjohnson@johnsongenealogyservices.com

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Developing a focused research question and devising a plan to resolve that question are essential steps toward successful genealogical research. Research questions involve a specific and documented person of interest, and focus on specific information related to that individual. Most genealogical research questions are centered on problems of identity, relationship, or circumstance.

- **Identity** (for example, differentiating between three men of the same name, or identifying which of several men with the same name is a specific soldier who fought in the Revolutionary War)
- **Relationship** (for example, identifying the parents of a great-great-grandmother, or connecting two men as father and son)
- **Circumstance** (for example, whether an individual fought in the Civil War, or when an ancestor immigrated)

TWO KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Who is your research subject? Be specific. Identifying the research subject as “John Parker” is not sufficient. A more specific identification, such as “John Parker, husband of Mary Jones, who lived in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, during the 1760s,” helps identify the research subject as a specific individual and separates him from other with the same name. If identifying information is uncertain, inaccurate, or insufficient, then the research should be redirected to identify more detail about the research subject. In this example, John Parker is a known and specific individual, and a research question may pertain to identifying something unknown, such as his parents or his date of birth.
- What information are you seeking? A research question must inquire about something specific, typically related to (1) the research subject’s relationship to someone else, such as a parent, child, sibling, etc.; (2) the research subject’s identity—in comparison to a contemporary, or to connect a name with a specific individual’s identity; or (3) an event or circumstance that took place in the research subject’s life. Specificity is key; however, the research question should not be so specific that it is impossible to answer.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD RESEARCH QUESTION

- **Specific:** The question relates to a specific and documented person, and asks a specific question about that person.
- **Feasible:** The question has a likelihood of being answered based on available sources for the location and time period. It is also a question that is objective and can be answered by facts, as opposed to subjective and answered by opinion or perspective.
- **Ethical:** The question does not invade any person’s expectation of privacy.

APPLYING EVIDENCE TO GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

WHAT IS A “BAD” RESEARCH QUESTION?

“Bad,” or insufficient research questions are those that:

- are not specific enough about the individual in question or the information being sought;
- are so specific that they cannot be reliably answered;
- are too subjective or have the potential for multiple answers; and
- are not likely to be answered based on relevant records for the time and place.

EXAMPLE RESEARCH QUESTIONS (GOOD & BAD)

RELATIONSHIP

Bad: Who were the parents of John Parker, born in 1731?

(This question is not specific enough about the research subject. Which John Parker? Where did he live? Who were his associates?)

Good: Who were the parents of John Parker, husband of Mary Jones, who was born in 1731 and lived in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, during the 1760s?

IDENTITY

Bad: Who was John Parker who lived in Shrewsbury, New Jersey and married a woman named Mary?

(More detail about John Parker needs to be established. Where was John Parker from? When did he live? Is more information known to identify Mary? Additionally, the question needs to include more specificity about the information is being sought. “Who was” questions are open to interpretation and could have multiple answers depending on a person’s take on the question.)

Good: Was John Parker, husband of Mary Jones, who lived in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, during the 1760s, the man of the same name who died in Freehold in 1794?

CIRCUMSTANCE

Bad: What happened during John Parker’s later years in New Jersey?

(This question is much too broad. Is the question about his death, immigration, military service, or another aspect of his later years?)

Good: Why did John Parker, husband of Mary Jones, who lived in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, during the 1760s, move to North Carolina in 1782?

HOW DO WE ANSWER THE RESEARCH QUESTION?

A research question can be considered answered, accepted, resolved, or proven when it satisfies the five elements of the Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS): reasonably exhaustive research; complete and accurate source citations; analysis and correlation; conflict resolution; and a sound, written conclusion.¹ The research question has an impact on how each of the elements of the Genealogical Proof

¹ “Ethics and Standards,” *Board for Certification of Genealogists* (<https://bcgcertification.org/ethics-standards/>).

APPLYING EVIDENCE TO GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Standard (GPS) will be met. The approach taken to identify relevant sources and perform reasonably exhaustive research is driven by the research question. The research question also dictates which pieces of information found within those sources are relevant (and which do not apply to the research question), and thus which should be cited. Analysis and correlation focuses on piecing together relevant information to form evidence in response to the research question. Any conflicts that are identified and resolved relate directly back to the research question. And, in the written conclusion, evidence is arranged in an understandable way in response to the research question.

Thorough research involves analyzing the research question and understanding the starting point in order to identify sources that competent genealogists would use and that have the potential to answer the research question, either directly or indirectly. Identifying relevant sources involves understanding records and methodology related to the time period, geographic area, ethnicity, religion, etc. This can be achieved by studying the sources available through the Family History Library; consulting general, state, or region-specific research guides; searching through catalogs for state archives, historical societies, and other relevant repositories; targeted DNA testing; and studying journal articles to identify relevant sources and methodologies. Reasonably exhaustive research should extend beyond the research subject to include their family, friends, neighbors, and associates. The sources searched should be reliable sources, in their most original form. Relevant sources should be searched regardless of whether they are readily available online or more difficult to access. After the findings are analyzed in the context of the research question, the process of identifying relevant sources is refined, broadened, and repeated until a logical and convincing conclusion is found.

Documentation strengthens the credibility of an argument written to prove a conclusion. Complete and accurate source citations give readers an understanding of whether reasonably exhaustive research was conducted, whether original records and primary information items were used, and whether the sources consulted were appropriate for the research question and scope.

Answering research questions, especially those that rely on complex evidence, involves skillful analysis and correlation—examining the sources and information piece by piece to understand the context and nature, and determining how those pieces fit or don't fit together *in the context of our research question*. This thought process is what transforms information into evidence that applies to the research question. In order to reliably establish proof, any information or evidence that conflicts with the conclusion being presented must be resolved. This eliminates the possibility of *other answers to the question*.

The last component necessary to establish genealogical proof is a written discussion of the relevant information, analyzed and *discussed in the context of the research question*. The three types of proof discussions include proof statements, proof summaries, and proof arguments.

KEY TERMINOLOGY

Understanding how to apply evidence to research questions and meet the Genealogical Proof Standard requires a thorough understanding of key terminology: sources, information, and evidence.

APPLYING EVIDENCE TO GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

SOURCES

Every genealogist consults sources. Sources are the census enumerations, wills, DNA match lists, deeds, vital records, family bibles, and tombstones that we examine at archives, view on our computers, and see in cemeteries. Sources are not the repositories, courthouses, websites, or libraries where we find those materials. Sources are divided into several categories: **original sources**, **derivative sources**, and **authored works**. An original source is the initial recording of an action or event, such as a birth certificate created immediately after the birth. A derivative source is a source that was created at a later date, such as a delayed birth certificate created 30 years after the birth. An authored work is a written body of work, such as a book or article, that includes information from a variety of sources. The potential relevance of the source depends on the research question. If the Parker question of relationship (who were John's parents?) was of interest, the sources consulted would be much different than if the focus was the Parker question of identity (was John the man who died in Freehold?).

INFORMATION

Sources provide information in several forms—primary, secondary, and unknown. Information must be assessed to determine its validity and relevance in relation to the research question. **Primary information** has a higher probability of being accurate because it is provided by an informant with first hand knowledge of the event. **Secondary information** has a lower probability of being accurate, since it is hearsay. Sometimes the identity of an informant or their personal experience regarding the event is not known. In these instances, it is impossible to determine whether information is primary or secondary, so it is considered **unknown**. Information that is relevant to a research question must be assessed using these parameters.

Examples of information include an individual's birth date on his birth certificate; the names of a woman's children in her last will and testament; the marriage date in a family bible; a maiden name on a tombstone; and the amount of DNA shared between two individuals. Any given source can provide information that is both relevant and irrelevant to the research question. Consider a pension file for John Parker's widow that includes an affidavit regarding his death. That information would be useful for answering the Parker question of identity (was John the man who died in Freehold?), but may not be helpful for answering the Parker question of relationship (who were John's parents?). However, a pension application form in the same pension file that identifies John's place of birth may be useful information that can help identify John's parents.

EVIDENCE

Evidence is much more complex—it only exists in response to a research question. Various pieces of information are interpreted, considered as a whole, and analyzed in the context of the research question. **Direct evidence** is information that directly and simply answers the question. In the case of the Parker question of identity (was John the man who died in Freehold?), an affidavit from John's widow stating his place of death would be considered direct evidence in response to the question of whether or not he was the man who died in Freehold. Although the place of death from the affidavit is direct evidence, it still needs to be assessed for accuracy. In some instances, researchers may question why the GPS must be met and why reasonably exhaustive research is necessary in instances that appear to be easily solvable with direct evidence. For example, why is reasonably exhaustive research necessary when an original record

APPLYING EVIDENCE TO GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

provides direct evidence of the the name of an ancestor's father? *Direct evidence can be proven wrong.*

Indirect evidence is information that does not directly answer the research question, but that can be combined with other clues to provide the answer. DNA evidence is always indirect evidence, as it must be combined with other clues to answer a question. With regard to the Parker question of relationship (who were John's parents?), John's date and place of birth as identified on his pension application, does not identify his parents directly. However, when combined with other information, the date and place of birth could be part of a body of indirect evidence that helps to resolve the question of parentage. The amount of shared DNA between John Parker's descendants and Thomas Parker's descendants, along with other documentary and genetic sources, can form a body of indirect evidence to answer the Parker question of relationship. **Negative evidence** is the absence of information that in itself suggests the answer to a research question. The fact that John Parker does not appear on tax lists after a certain year can suggest when he died.

Indirect evidence can be used to resolve many types of research questions, especially in cases involving significant record loss, unrecorded events, and undocumented events. Indirect evidence can often be more compelling than direct evidence. Using indirect evidence involves skillful analysis and correlation to make a compelling case, and the totality can be presented to help prove a conclusion. We may never find the sought-after record that gives us the name of our elusive ancestor's father. However, if we know how to use indirect evidence, we can solve that research problem.

WORKING WITH EVIDENCE

Reliably answering genealogical research questions relies on exploring different classes of evidence. A lack of direct evidence does not mean that a research question cannot be resolved. When faced with challenging research problems, the ability to work with indirect or negative evidence can be a valuable skill for problem solving and breaking through brick walls. Genealogists should never draw conclusions based on one piece of information. Reasonably exhaustive research, including broadening the research scope beyond records relating only to the person of interest, and examining the greater context of the research subject's life, is essential to drawing sound and accurate conclusions. This element of the GPS helps lessen the chance of an inaccurate or hasty conclusion that could be overturned by information in another source.

LEARNING FROM PUBLISHED PROOF ARGUMENTS

Published case studies cover families, places, and ethnicities not found in our own ancestral lines. Why spend time reading about someone else's ancestors when we have so many of our own to research? As genealogists, we need to develop problem-solving skills. One way to do this is to study how other researchers have identified research questions and applied evidence to resolve them—from the research phase and the sources used, to the reasoning and construction of the proof argument. Studying the peer-reviewed and published work of other genealogists allows us to understand reasonably exhaustive research and determine how evidence is pieced together to develop a proof argument.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Board for Certification of Genealogists®. *The BCG Application Guide*. Washington, D.C.: Board for Certification of Genealogists, 2017. <https://bcgcertification.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/BCG-Application-Guide-2017.pdf>
2. _____. *Genealogy Standards*. Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry.com, 2014.
3. _____. *Rubrics for Evaluating New Applications for BCG Certification*. Washington, D.C.: Board for Certification of Genealogists, 2018. <https://bcgcertification.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/BCG-New-Application-Rubrics-2018.pdf>
4. Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, Virginia: The National Genealogical Society, 2013.
5. Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Documentation*. Arlington, Virginia: The National Genealogical Society, 2017.
6. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, 3rd edition, revised. Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2017.