

THE DISCRIMINATING GENEALOGIST: TELLING GOOD EVIDENCE FROM BAD



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Overview: The “best evidence” rule in law requires the presentation in court of an original rather than a copy, and in many cases a copy won’t even be allowed in evidence if the original is available. In genealogy, our rules require us to do the same: to discriminate, choose in favor of, prefer certain types of evidence to others, certain bits of information to others, certain sources to others.

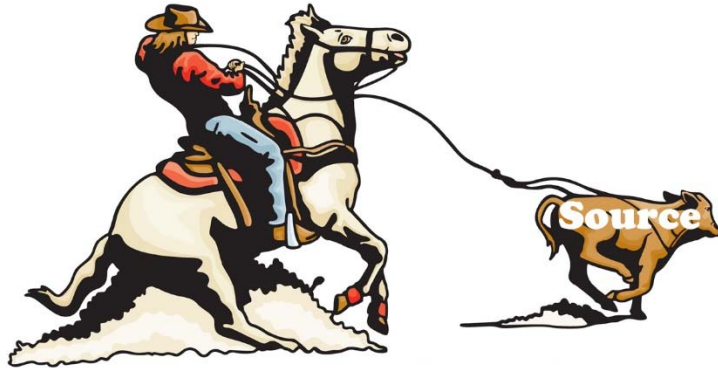
A Pop Quiz

- The birth certificate identifies the father as John. The death certificate names the father as David. Which of the documents do you choose to accept? Why?
- The 1940 United States census of Chicago lists her first name as Marie. The 1920 census lists it as Margarethe. Which of the first names is more likely accurate? Why?
- Kentucky birth records in the 1850s, assembled from tax records, show the four youngest children of Mary and Mathew Johnson as William, male, born 1853; Mary, male, born 1856; Mathew, male, born 1857; and Penelope, female, born 1859. On the 1860 U.S. census of Pulaski County, Mathew Johnson's household includes seven-year-old William, five-year-old Mary, three-year-old Martha and one-year-old Nelly. What is the correct name and gender of the third child? Why?
- Two affidavits were submitted by the Revolutionary War soldier’s widow in support of her pension application. One says she married the soldier in 1793, the other says the marriage was in 1795. Which one do you believe? Why?

In each of these cases, the researcher is being asked to begin the process of telling good evidence from bad, to engage in what the best practices of genealogy require us to do: evidence discrimination.

The Standards:

Evidence discrimination begins with reasonably exhaustive research: we cannot analyze what we do not identify. [BCG, *Genealogy Standards*, Standards 12, 14, 17.]



*“Tie each detail to
a source.”*

— “Research Techniques:
Evaluating Evidence,”
Family Chronicle, Jan-Feb 2001

In reviewing information in source materials, we appraise each source thoroughly: its physical condition; legibility; evidence type (original, derivative authored); internal consistency; external consistency; and history. [Ibid., Standard 35.] We analyze the information within each source: its legibility; the source of the information; that person’s reliability and consistency as witness and as reporter; nature of the information (primary, secondary, or undetermined); internal consistency; and external consistency. [Ibid., Standard 36.]

In all cases we prefer “original records that reliable scribes carefully created soon after the reported events” and that “competent authorities checked or vetted and that institutions maintained with protections from alteration, damage, and tampering.” [Ibid., Standard 38.] And – where we can get it – we want “information provided by consistently reliable participants, eyewitnesses, and reporters with no bias, potential for gain, or other motivation to distort, invent, omit, or otherwise report incorrect information.” [Ibid., Standard 39.]

And when we get all these pieces in place, ***we discriminate***: “Genealogists include in their reasoning all known sources and information items that seem relevant to a research question. They exclude all sources and information items that seem irrelevant to that question. To ensure that their reasoning identifies all known relevant evidence, genealogists examine their justifications for including and excluding sources and information items. They are prepared to defend those justifications.” [Ibid., Standard 42.] In supporting our conclusions, we “do not trim, tailor, slight, or ignore potentially relevant evidence to fit a bias or preconception, to harmonize with other evidence, or for any other reason.” [Ibid., Standard 43.]

Some Questions to Ask

The kinds of questions the Discriminating Genealogist will ask when evaluating each and every bit of information include:

- When and where was the record created?
- Who created the record?
- Why was the record created?
- Who provided the information for the record?
- How was the information recorded?
- How was the record preserved?
- What kind of information is missing or incomplete in the record?
- Are there any other records that are usually associated with the record?
- Which records came just before and after this record, and would they give further information?
- Is the record part of a series of records that may contain further information about the family?
- Where are other associated records located?
- How reliable is the information contained in the record?
- What other information is suggested by the record but missing?
[drawn from the *Principles of Family History Research*, “Step 5: Use the Information—Evaluate the Evidence,” FamilySearch Wiki, https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Evaluate_the_Evidence.]

The Discriminating Genealogist will also use the usual questions taught of every journalism student in the world: **who** (created the source); **what** (information is provided); **when** (was the source created); **where** (was the source found and where had it been kept); **why** (was the source created); and **how** (does the information agree or conflict with other information from other sources). [Betty Lou Malesky, “Six questions speak to evidence analysis,” *GreenValleyNews.com* (<https://goo.gl/dgJyPz>), 6 Sep 2011.]

Analytical Tools

The Discriminating Genealogist will use analytical tools to help distinguish good evidence from bad, including in any given case:

- Timelines, to plot out the events shown in the sources, to help determine if a source is or is not reporting accurately, whether it creates a pattern with other pieces or shows they cannot be fitted together.
- Charts, ranging from pedigrees to research logs to census forms and everything in between, or to present evidence logically.
- Mind Maps, with or without software, to create and show hierarchical relationships among individual bits of evidence.
- Spreadsheets, to help create timelines and charts and more, particularly when DNA evidence is incorporated into the mix.
- Specialized software to identify sources, and record and cross-check evidence analysis and identify holes in research.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Evidence Analysis Generally:

1. Anderson, Robert Charles. *Elements of Genealogical Analysis: How to Maximize Your Research Using the Great Migration Study Project Method*. Boston, Mass.: New England Historic Genealogy Society, 2014.
2. Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards*. 50th anniversary edition. Nashville, TN: Ancestry, 2014.
2. Devine, Donn. "Evidence Analysis," chapter 17 in Elizabeth Shown Mills, editor, *Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians*. Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2001.
3. Evans, Stefani. "Correlation of Evidence," *OnBoard: Newsletter of the Board for Certification of Genealogists* 18 (September 2012): 21–23. <https://bcgcertification.org/skillbuilding-evidence-correlation/>
4. —. "Data Analysis." *OnBoard: Newsletter of the Board for Certification of Genealogists* 18 (May 2012): 13–14. <https://bcgcertification.org/skillbuilding-data-analysis/>
5. Fox, Judy Kellar. BCG "Ten-Minute Methodology" Series. Board for Certification of Genealogists. <https://bcgcertification.org/learning/skills/10minute/>.
6. Jones, Thomas W. "Evidence Analysis." In Elizabeth Shown Mills, editor, *Professional Genealogy: Preparation, Practice & Standards*, Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publ. Co., 2018.
8. —. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, Virginia: National Genealogical Society, 2013. See particularly Chapter 6, "GPS Element 4: Resolving Conflicts and Assembling Evidence."
9. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. 3d ed. rev. Baltimore, Maryland : Genealogical Publishing Co., 2017.
10. —. "Working with Historical Evidence: Genealogical Principles and Standards." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 87 (September 1999): 165-184.

Analytical Tools:

11. Clooz. Software. <https://www.clooz.com/>
12. Detroit Society for Genealogical Research, "Excel Tools for Genealogy," posted 14 October 2013. <https://dsgr.org/blog/?p=472>
13. *Evidentia*. Software. <https://evidentiasoftware.com/>
14. *GenDetective*. Software. <https://www.rumblesoftinc.com/index.cfm>
15. Grant, Kathryn. "The Timeline Grid." Slideshow online. <https://goo.gl/BXkRTq> [Google Docs presentation, Creative Commons license]
16. —. "Timeline Grid Templates." <https://goo.gl/ezcAY2>
17. Ingle, Cyndi. "Cyndi's Timeline Template." <https://goo.gl/eTwlso> [links to *Cyndi's List* Evernote template for personal use]
18. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "QuickLesson 6: Mindmapping Records." *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage*. <https://goo.gl/p4MtVL> [via Wayback Machine]

Charts and forms, free templates:

Ancestry.com. <https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/Free-Charts-and-Forms>

Cyndi's List. <https://www.cyndislist.com/charts/printable-charts-and-forms/>

FamilySearch. https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Genealogy_Research_Forms

Family Tree Magazine. <https://www.familytreemagazine.com/FreeForms/>

Mid-Continent Public Library. <https://www.mymcpl.org/genealogy/family-history-forms>

National Archives. <https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/charts-forms/>

Website URLs verified 26 September 2018

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