

# Analyzing Documents Sparks Ideas for Further Research



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**Webinar sponsored by the Board for Certification of Genealogists**  
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Analyzing documents for reliability, context and information can provide useful clues. Using these clues to map out a research plan can advance your research and help you solve tough problems.

The second element of the Genealogical Proof Standard (see reference #1) states the need to analyze all documents or sources, and the information contained in the documents. This session will walk step by step through analyzing several documents and highlight questions designed to promote thorough analysis.

## **When do we analyze?**

- When we start a new research project we analyze the starting point information
- When we pick up a project that we have not worked on for a while
- When we locate a new document
- When we ask a new research question

## **How do we analyze?**

- We analyze one document at a time
- Some analysis happens naturally when we view a document and think about the information it contains
- We can ask a variety of questions about the document to assist in our analysis

## **Why do we analyze?**

- To assess the reliability of the information contained in the document
- To look for clues for further research
- To determine if the evidence in the document answers our research question

In *Genealogy Standards* (reference #1) there are two standards that address analysis directly (#35 & 36), and fourteen standards that go into detail on “Reasoning from Evidence” (#37-50). We can use these standards to guide our analysis.

*Mastering Genealogical Proof* (reference #4) has a full chapter on “Analysis and Correlation” and provides a variety of tests to determine the reliability of a source, the information it contains, and the evidence that may answer a research question. See especially the questions on determining the accuracy of a source on page 58.

## Suggested Questions for Analyzing Documents, Information and Evidence

### Analyzing the Document or Source

- What type of document is this?
- Why was it created? What was the purpose?
- What is the legal or historical context for this document?
- Is the writing legible?
- What is peculiar about this document?
- Is there anything in the record that you do not understand?
- What assumptions do you have about the document that may affect your analysis?



### Analyzing Documents for Reliability

- Is this an original or derivative record? Is it a narrative or authored work?
- If this is a record copy of an original document, does it appear to have any changes or alterations?
- What is the provenance of the record?
- Who is the informant for the information in the record? Is there more than one informant?
- Was the informant in a position to provide primary or first-hand information?
- Is the information secondary or second-hand?
- Does the informant show any bias?
- Was the document created or certified by an individual in his/her official line of work?
- Was the document created at the time of the event, or at a later time?

### Analyzing Documents for Clues to Other Records

- What other records are there that would relate to this document?
- What clues in this document would lead to other records?
- If this record is a derivative, can you locate the original?
- Have you scrutinized the document for information regarding your research question? What might have been overlooked?
- What do you know about the people mentioned in the document? What could you learn?

### Analyzing Documents for Evidence Regarding a Research Question

- Is there information that is relevant to the research question?
- Does the document provide direct evidence to answer the research question?
- Does the document contain indirect evidence relating to the research question?
- Does the evidence in this document change your research strategy?
- What other records does this document lead to that may provide evidence?

### Analyzing Overall Research

- Has the research been thorough?
- Does the research include “all documents that a competent genealogist would look at” for this research question?

## References for Further Study

1. Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards*. 50th-anniversary edition. Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry, 2014.
2. Board for Certification of Genealogists. "Rubrics for Evaluating New Applications for BCG Certification," revised 18 January 2016. Available online at <http://www.bgc certification.org/brochures/BCGNewAppRubrics2016.pdf>
3. FamilySearch Wiki contributors, "Use the Internet for Family History Research," ([https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Use\\_the\\_internet\\_for\\_family\\_history\\_research](https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Use_the_internet_for_family_history_research) ). Scroll to bottom to find the Original Records Table in Appendix B.
4. Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, Virginia: The National Genealogical Society, 2013.
5. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2015. See especially:  
    "Evidence Analysis Research Process Map" on inside front cover  
    Chapter 1 on "Fundamentals of Evidence Analysis"
6. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Quicklesson 17: The Evidence Analysis Process Map." *Evidence Explained.com*. (<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-17-evidence-analysis-process-map>).
7. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers and Librarians*. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2001.  
See especially:  
    Chapter 14 "Problem Analyses and Research Plans" by Helen F. Leary  
    Chapter 17 "Evidence Analysis" by Donn Devine
8. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Quicksheet: Genealogical Problem Analysis: A Strategic Plan." Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2010.
9. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Quicksheet: The Historical Biographer's Guide to the Research Process." Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2012.