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Would you leave the skin on an onion when preparing it for cooking and eating? Of course, not. Neither would you want to settle for information from an authored narrative, database entry, index entry, compilation of abstracts, or other derivative sources when working on a genealogical research project.

The conclusions at which a genealogist arrives are measured by the five elements of the Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS). One of those elements is “Reasonably exhaustive research—emphasizing original records providing participants’ information—for all evidence that might answer a genealogist’s question about an identity, relationship, event, or situation.”<sup>1</sup>

Several of the Genealogy Standards stress the priority given to original sources:

- Standard 13: Source-based content

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<sup>1</sup> Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards* (Nashville: Ancestry.com, 2021), p. 1.

- Standard 17: Extent
- Standard 38: Source preference
- Standard 58: Research scope

To meet the GPS's element of reasonably exhaustive research and satisfy the Genealogy Standards, getting to those original sources—or as close to them as is possible—is necessary. Skill in “peeling the onion” becomes essential.

## **Tips for Getting to the Original Sources**

- ***Evaluate the source.***

As soon as you find a source, evaluate what you have. Sources are classified as:

- “*Original sources*—material in its first oral or recorded form. Examples: the testimony of someone relating events that he or she personally experienced or witnessed; or an original document created by a party with firsthand knowledge of the information recorded.”<sup>2</sup>
- “*Derivative sources*—material produced by copying an original or manipulating its content e.g., abstracts, compilations, databases, extracts, transcripts, translations, and authored works such as historical monographs or family histories.”<sup>3</sup>
- “*Authored sources*—a hybrid of both original and derivative materials, produced by writers who study many different sources, reach personal conclusions, and present a new and original piece of writing.”<sup>4</sup>

If you don't have an original source, move on to the following tips and look for the original underlying the derivative with which you are working.

- ***Look for clues.***

What does the author of the derivative say about how and where they found the information they have shared? If you are looking at a database entry, look for a reference to the underlying original used to create the database. If you are looking at a family history, does the author mention—perhaps in a preface or a section introduction—how they came across their information? What do you discern about the information that might help you infer what the original was and where it might be located?

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, 3rd ed., rev. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2017), §1.4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

- ***Check the footnotes.***

Does that family history, mug book, or authored narrative actually include footnotes citing sources? How fortunate you are! You have a prime clue for finding the underlying original source. Just take that footnote with a grain of salt. Don't assume that the author of the derivative or authored source has accurately transcribed or summarized the information contained in the original. Make sure you examine the original for yourself.

- ***Trace back the clues.***

Where do the clues take you? Do they take you to another derivative or authored source? Start looking for clues again. Do they take you to the underlying original source? Celebrate! And get to work mining the source for its information.

- ***Know the context.***

Sometimes the clues need interpretation. Sometimes you need additional information to make sense out of the clues. What do you need to know to use the clues? What do you need to learn about the time and the place in which the original source was likely created? What repositories—online or brick-and-mortar—are likely to hold the originals you seek? What do you need to know to find that out? Are there articles or books you should consult?

- ***Persist in peeling back the skin.***

Onions have multiple layers of skin to be peeled away before you get to the usable vegetable. Likewise, you might need to peel back multiple layers to locate the original source. Keep at it! Persevere! Shampoo—Rince—and Repeat!

### **Case Studies: Which tips are used?**

1. Starting with a 1980 unsourced family history

2. Starting with an 1856 unsourced family history

3. Starting with a 1996 unsourced family history

4. Starting with a 1906 compiled list

### **Homework**

Take a derivative or authored source with which you are currently working. Think through how you might apply these tips to locate the underlying original source.

## **Sources**

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## **Additional Reading**

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