

# When Wrong is Actually Right: *Constructing Proof Arguments for Counterintuitive Conflicts*

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## *Purpose*

- Conflicts arise in all kinds of genealogical research.
- Rather than ignoring conflicts—which can create issues down the road—we address them in our analysis.
- Some sources contain several pieces of information that conflict with our other research, which I like to call “layered conflicts.”
- Where do you begin when you’re trying to untangle layered conflicts?
- Once you reach a conclusion, how do you explain your findings to others?

In order to jump straight to the conflicting evidence part of the case studies in this webinar, I’ll be skipping over some of the beginning steps of the Genealogical Proof Standard (e.g., reasonably exhaustive research). Other Reisinger lecturers will be covering these steps in more detail. You can find recordings of past lectures online via Legacy Family Tree Webinars.

## *Types of Genealogical Proofs*

We use three different types of proofs in genealogy:<sup>1</sup>

**Proof statements** can be explained in a sentence or two. They are best used when two or more pieces of *direct evidence*\* are in agreement about a research question, and there are no conflicts. Since this webinar is all about conflicts, we won’t be focusing on proof statements today.

**Proof summaries** can be explained in one or several paragraphs, give or take. They are best used when conflicting evidence can be easily resolved, but the case requires a little more explanation to reach a conclusion than with a simple proof statement. There might be some indirect or negative evidence that needs a brief explanation, but nothing too crazy here.

**Proof arguments** are the most complex types of proofs. This is your vehicle for major conflicts in evidence, or situations where there is no direct evidence at all. A

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions paraphrased from, Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, second edition revised (Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry, 2021), pp. 31–32.

\* Direct evidence is information that answers a research question. For example, if my research question is, “When was Seiya born?” and Seiya’s birth certificate says 1 January 2022, then 1 January 2022 would be *direct evidence* of when Seiya was born.

clue that you're looking at a proof argument is the presence of charts, tables, and other visual aids. Proof arguments also have the longest word count of the three genealogical proof types. *This is the proof type we'll be discussing today.*

*Tip:* Genealogical journals are great places to look for examples of proof arguments. Jump down to the “Resources” section for a list of publications.

### *Keep It Logical*

In genealogy, we accept certain information as givens. For example, a person who is dead cannot get married and have eight children (*I'm looking at you, public family tree*).

We can use other principles of logic in our analysis, such as:

- If  $A = B$  and  $B = C$ , then  $A = C$ 
  - If Carmela's parents are Maria and Paolo, and Nancy's parents are Maria and Paolo, then Carmela and Nancy are siblings.
- Similar to the above example, it is possible to take one data point that is known to be true (a *given*) and build upon it, creating a chain (*more about this later*).
  - Despite Liza's death certificate having the wrong name, wrong husband's name, and the wrong age compared to her headstone, it is definitely hers.

### *Writing Up Your Research*

Congratulations! You've solved a super complex research problem that had tons of conflicting evidence. Now it's time to write it down.

Why?

The goal of writing up your research is to share it with others—family members, friends, a publication, a client, or a genealogical credentialing organization, to name a few. The easiest way to share genealogical research is in writing.

1. **State Your Research Goal:** This will give your reader a preview of what to expect.
2. **Identify the Givens:** Explain what you know and how you know it. This is the *relevant* background information that you started with at the beginning of your research. “Relevant” because not all of your research is necessarily going to be useful when you're trying to explain your proof.
  - a. Depending on the sources you started with, you might need to do a little analysis to get your reader up to speed. They don't know what you know!

*Tip: Know your audience. Pretend you are speaking to a friend, family member, or genealogy colleague to get in the right frame of mind.*

3. **Analysis:** Give your reader a tour of your sources and analysis.
  - a. How often have we all found a record and said, “It would have been great if I’d had this X months ago”? Save your reader the struggle you went through—introduce information in the order that makes sense, not necessarily the order that you made your discoveries.
  - b. Break down your analysis one step at a time. How do you know that that record belongs to the right person? Work your way through bit by bit.
  - c. Utilize visual aids like bullet points, tables, and maps to streamline the most relevant information for your reader.

*Tip: When in doubt, be more elementary than you think you need to be. Few readers will be frustrated because you were too clear in your explanations.*

4. **Address and resolve conflicts,** AKA what this webinar is about.
  - a. Cite cultural knowledge, even if you are addressing an audience with the same background as your research subjects. Not everybody knows the same things.
5. **State your conclusion:** You’re done!
  - a. If you’re not able to reach a conclusion about certain points, couch the findings as needed using terms like “possibly,” “likely,” “probably,” and “almost certainly.”

## *Tips*

When you’re just getting started with complex conflict resolution, it can be hard to tell if you’re forcing a bad fit or falling prey to *confirmation bias*.\*

- **Avoid confirmation bias:** We’ve all made mistakes in our family history research. Think back to a time when you made a mistake: did you feel like you rushed through the analysis? Did you not do enough research first? Did you get caught up in a cool story? Remember the feeling you felt when you were heading down the wrong path, but didn’t realize it yet. Keep an eye out if you get that feeling again: it’s your own emotional cue to slow down and check your facts.
- **Phone a friend:** Share your in-progress research with a friend, family member, or genealogical study group. Explaining our research to others can illuminate holes that need to be filled.
- **Familiarize yourself:** Read up on the naming patterns, geography, religion, and local customs of your research subjects, and remember to include relevant information in your proof argument. Cultural context can make or break otherwise solid-looking analysis.

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\* *Confirmation bias* means viewing new information through a lens that is favorable to your hypothesis or other preferred outcome. In other words, confirmation bias means saying something is true because you *want* it to be true, not because you *know* that it is true.

## Resources

Peer-reviewed genealogical journals offer many examples of challenging case studies that use conflicting evidence. Here is a selection of genealogical journals published in the United States to get you started (in alphabetical order):

- *The American Genealogist (TAG)*
- *The Genealogist*, published by the American Society of Genealogists (ASG)
- *The National Genealogical Society Quarterly (NGSQ)*, published by the National Genealogical Society (NGS)
- *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register (The Register)*, published by the New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS)
- *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record (The Record)*, published by the New York Genealogical & Biographical Society (NYG&B)

If you are not already a subscriber and/or member of the above organizations, many journals are available at your local public library or through interlibrary loan. Individual articles may be available for purchase from publishers.

The BCG Learning Center section of the Board for Certification of Genealogists' (BCG) website includes articles and case studies that can be downloaded for free, including several from the above journals: <https://bcgcertification.org/learning>

Legacy Family Tree Webinars, which hosts the recording of this lecture (thank you!), includes recordings of case studies by BCG associates, many of which were first published in the above journals: <http://familytreewebinars.com/bcg>