



Document Analysis: Digging Into the Details

Angela Packer McGhie, CG, FUGA ▪ mcghiefamilyhistory@gmail.com

Analyzing Documents

Analyzing documents for reliability, context, and information can help solve challenging research problems. In the initial phases of research, genealogists mine documents for clues to other records and use them for mapping out a research plan to advance their research.

Genealogists work to gain the knowledge and skills needed to correctly interpret the language and meaning of the information found in documents. They learn these skills by study and practice. The evidence needed to answer a research question is often buried deep in the document. It may be missed if the source is not carefully analyzed and interpreted. Working carefully through each document genealogists work to discover details and understand the meaning of the information.

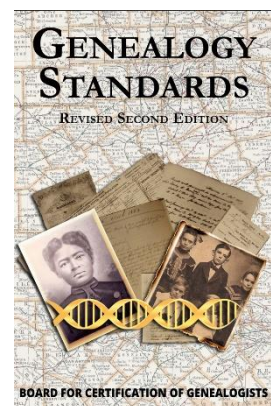
Genealogy Standards describes research as “an investigation designed to discover or interpret facts and thus to advance knowledge.”¹ The word “investigation” implies a systematic examination of the documents located. This involves taking time to study, analyze and record the information in each source. Too often, we jump from one document to the next. This “hunt” for documents is fun, but moving too quickly, we may never discover the evidence in the documents needed to solve challenging research problems.

Standards For Analysis

In *Genealogy Standards*, standards 35 and 36 address analysis directly, and fourteen standards discuss “Reasoning from Evidence” (#37-50). Use these standards to guide your analysis. The following characteristics and suggested questions reflect the main ideas in the analysis standards.

Source Characteristics -- Appraise each source considering:

- Physical condition
- Legibility
- Type of source—original, derivative, or authored narrative
- Internal consistency
- External consistency
- History, provenance, and purpose



¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, revised second edition (Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry.com, 2021), 87.

Information Characteristics

Appraise each information item considering these characteristics:

- Legibility
- Informant, including reliability and bias
- Type of information—primary, secondary, or undetermined
- Internal consistency
- External consistency

Evaluating Sources, Information, and Evidence²

A **SOURCE** can be:

Original = written record made at the time of the event or soon afterward

Derivative = created from a prior record

Authored work = compiled from several sources

INFORMATION can be:

Primary = reported by an eyewitness or someone who participated in the event

Secondary = reported by someone who obtained the information from someone else
(second hand or hearsay)

Undetermined = reported by an unknown informant, so we cannot tell if the information is primary or secondary

EVIDENCE can be:

Direct = directly answers the research question

Indirect = infers an answer but does not directly state it; it needs to be combined with other information to answer a question

Negative = absence of information that could have answered the research question

Critical Examination

Sometimes it is necessary to dig deep to analyze documents. This critical examination may involve:

- transcribing the document and studying every word
- looking up the legal terminology in a law dictionary
- studying similar documents in the same volume or collection
- looking up the law governing the creation of the document
- studying other documents of the same type to determine what is “boilerplate” language

² Elizabeth Shown Mills, “QuickLesson 17: The Evidence Analysis Process Map,” *Evidence Explained.com* (<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-17-evidence-analysis-process-map>).

Suggested Questions for Analyzing Documents

Prepared by Angela Packer McGhie, CG, FUGA

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 I do not understand?
- What assumptions do I have about the document that may affect my analysis?



Analyzing Documents for Reliability

- Is this an original or derivative record? Is it an 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 firsthand 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 could 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? Are there any details you may have 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?

References for Further Study

- Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards*. Revised second edition. Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry, 2021.
- Fox, Judy Kellar. "A Case Study in Source and Information Analysis: Electa Ward." *OnBoard* 22 (January 2016): 5–6.
- Freilich, Kay Haviland. "Background Information: An Overlooked Research Tool." *OnBoard* 11 (September 2005): 17–18. Online at *Board for Certification of Genealogists* (<https://bcgcertification.org/skillbuilding-background-information-an-overlooked-research-tool/>).
- Henningfield, Melinda Daffin. "The Role of Background Context in Document Analysis." *OnBoard* 23 (January 2017): 1–2. Online at *Board for Certification of Genealogists* (<https://bcgcertification.org/skillbuilding-context-document-analysis/>).
- Johnson, Melissa. "Assessing Reliability of Information." Blog, 16 May 2016. *NGS Monthly: Methodology, News, and Views*. <http://ngsmoonthly.ngsgenealogy.org/2016/05/> : 2018.
- Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, Virginia: The National Genealogical Society, 2013.
- Jones, Thomas W. "Perils of Source Snobbery." *OnBoard* 18 (May 2012): 9–10, 15, online at *Board for Certification of Genealogists* (<https://bcgcertification.org/skillbuilding-perils-of-source-snobbery/>).
- Jones, Thomas W. "Reasoning from Evidence." Elizabeth Shown Mills, ed. *Professional Genealogy: Preparation, Practice, and Standards*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2018.
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Analyzing Deeds for Useful Clues." *OnBoard* 1 (Jan. 1995): 8. Online at *Board for Certification of Genealogists* (<https://bcgcertification.org/skillbuilding-analyzing-deeds-for-useful-clues/>).
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Analyzing Wills for Useful Clues." *OnBoard* 1 (May 1995): 16. Online at *Board for Certification of Genealogists* (<https://bcgcertification.org/skillbuilding-analyzing-wills-for-useful-clues/>).
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. 3rd Edition. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2015. See especially chapter 1 on "Fundamentals of Evidence Analysis."
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "QuickLesson 5: Analyzing Records." *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage*. (<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-5-analyzing-records>).
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "QuickLesson 17: The Evidence Analysis Process Map." *Evidence Explained.com*. (<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-17-evidence-analysis-process-map>).