

ASSUMPTIONS: PROBLEM-SOLVING FRIEND OR FOE?

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Standard 45: Assumptions

“As they obtain evidence, genealogists recognize their assumptions, categorize them, and differently address each kind of assumption.”¹

Standard 11: Sound Basis

“...Plans also avoid assumptions about people and events that documentation does not support.”²

RECOGNIZE ASSUMPTIONS

An assumption is a fact or statement taken for granted.³

CATEGORIZE ASSUMPTIONS

Fundamental Assumptions

Fundamental assumptions, also known as necessary assumptions, are required for logical reasoning. These statements are known to be true in the time and the place.

Valid Assumptions

Valid assumptions are generally considered true unless convincing evidence is presented to support an alternate position. After testing hypotheses, assumptions that are not disproven can be incorporated into reasoning.

Unsound Assumptions

Unsound assumptions may be true, but convincing evidence is required to support them.

Unrecognized Assumptions

Unrecognized assumptions are commonly related to learned bias and stereotypes.

1. Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, second edition revised (Nashville, Tennessee, 2021), 26-27.

2. Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 12.

3. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assumption>) : accessed 19 September 2023), assumption.

ADDRESS ASSUMPTIONS

Appropriately address each type of assumption to form sound conclusions.

<i>When encountering a fundamental assumption...</i>	<i>Incorporate it.</i>
People can travel via available transportation	Reason based on this information.
People can do business while they are alive	Reason based on this information.
A parent must be older than their child	Reason based on this information.
Prior to medically assisted reproduction, biological parents had to be in the same place at the same time to conceive a child.	Reason based on this information.

<i>When encountering a valid assumption...</i>	<i>Challenge it.</i>
Women conceive babies between 12 and 49	Seek evidence to disprove it.
Most official copies are true copies.	Seek evidence to disprove it.
People generally follow the law.	Seek evidence to disprove it.
People generally act in customary ways.	Seek evidence to disprove it.

<i>When encountering a potentially unsound assumption...</i>	<i>Question it.</i>
They didn't spell their name that way	How might their name have sounded?
The adults in the household are the parents	How are these people related?
The wife is the mother of the children	Was the father married more than once?
The man would have controlled the land	What did the law say?
No one by that name appears in the records	Could it be under a different name?
They are not in the enumeration district	Were they in a different place?

<i>Don't fall prey to bias and stereotypes!</i>	<i>Question everything!</i>
I think...	What does the evidence say?
She would never...	Is it biologically possible?
That's how they did things...	What really happened?
Everybody says so...	Is the evidence independent?
It looks like...	What am I taking for granted?

SELECTED RESOURCES

**All resources last checked 19 September 2023.*

ARTICLES & PAMPHLETS

Bloom, Jeanne Larzalere, CG. "Assumptions: The Traps and Snares of Genealogy." *NGS Magazine* (July 2021): 23-26.

Miller, Anne J., PhD. "Case Study: They Did NOT Die About 1820..." *NGS Magazine* (July 2009): 37-41.

BLOGS & WEBPAGES

Philbert-Ortega, Gema. "Danger! Watch Your Assumptions!" *Legacy Family Tree*. 29 July 2021. https://news.legacyfamilytree.com/legacy_news/2021/07/danger-watch-your-assumptions.html : 2023.

Richard, Diane L. "Forget What You Know & Challenge Assumptions – You Might Just Knock Down that Brick Wall!" *UpFront with NGS*. 6 December 2013. <https://upfront.ngsgenealogy.org/2013/12/forget-what-you-know-challenge.html> : 2023.

University of Kansas. "Section 2, Thinking Critically." *Community Tool Box*. <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/analyze/analyze-community-problems-and-solutions/think-critically/main> : 2023.

BOOKS

Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards*, second edition revised. Nashville: Ancestry.com, 2021.

Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington: National Genealogical Society, 2013.)

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, third edition revised. (Baltimore, Genealogical Publishing, 2017). Particularly, chapter 1.

WEBINARS & RECORDINGS

Bloom, Jeanne, CG. "Valid and Unsound Assumptions: What Was She Thinking." webinar, 21 May 2019. *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*. <https://familytreewebinars.com/webinar/valid-and-unsound-assumptions-what-was-she-thinking/> : 2023.

Garrett, Martha, PhD, CG. "Finding Immigrants Who 'Disappeared': A Research Approach Based on Recognizing and Challenging Assumptions." Webinar, 6 September 2019. *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*.

<https://familytreewebinars.com/webinar/finding-immigrants-who-disappeared-a-research-approach-based-on-recognizing-and-challenging-assumptions/> : 2023.

Passey, Cheri Hudson. "Gen Friends: Lisa Lisson—Genealogy Assumptions." Chat show episode with panel. *YouTube*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pi82WS6B350> : 2023.

Scott, Craig R., CG. "Just Genealogy: Assumptions Will Cause You Problems in Genealogy – JG0107." Recording. *YouTube*.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJwl_5vU9dU : 2023.

Scott, Craig R., CG. "Just Genealogy: More Genealogical Assumptions That Will Get You in Trouble– JG0135." Recording, *YouTube*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1Hc-L8chGc> : 2023.

LITERATURE REFERENCES TO ASSUMPTIONS

"Making assumptions simply means believing things are a certain way with little or no evidence that shows you are correct, and you can see at once how this can lead to terrible trouble." – Lemony Snicket, *The Austere Academy*

"I see truth and knowledge and understanding like layers of an onion, peeling away assumptions, leading to recognizing even more assumptions, leading to research to discover more knowledge, leading to deeper truths and greater understanding."
— Shellen Lubin

"Power of generalizing gives men so much the superiority in mistake over the dumb animals."
— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

"The explanation requiring the fewest assumptions is most likely to be correct."
— Franciscan friar William of Ockham

"About the only thing you should ever assume is responsibility."
— J.S. Felts, *Ageless Wisdom: A Treasury of Quotes to Motivate & Inspire*