



# WHY STANDARDS ARE FOR EVERYONE\*

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**Standard: “something established by authority, custom, or general consent as a model or example.”<sup>1</sup>**

Adherence to standards is imperative for anyone who endeavors to reach credible genealogical conclusions. Before the development of comprehensive genealogical standards, even well intentioned researchers could go astray.<sup>2</sup> In the worst cases, bad actors perpetrated fraudulent schemes and/or fabricated genealogies.<sup>3</sup> This state of affairs spurred the development of a uniform measure of competence in the field of genealogy:

“the idea of forming a learned society to foster the training of genealogists, eliminate improper and unethical practices, elevate the profession of genealogy . . . , and establish a code of ethics and standards for the governing of the profession. . . . became a reality [in]... 1940” with the formation of the American Society of Genealogists (ASG).<sup>4</sup>

ASG, the field’s honorary scholarly society, initiated the process that resulted in the organization of the Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG). BCG was established in 1964 as a nonprofit credentialing body for genealogists. Today BCG publishes the field’s only comprehensive set of criteria (Standards) for evaluating genealogical work

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\* Referenced websites were last accessed on 23 October 2023.

<sup>1</sup> *Merriam-Webster* ([merriam-webster.com/dictionary/standard](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/standard)), “standard” as a noun, definition 4.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Judy G. Russell, JD, CG, CGL, “Fifty Years Of Genealogical Credentialing,” *NGS Magazine* (January–March 2014), 15–19. Russell provides the example of the second president of Stanford University, a geologist by training, who relied on “research by correspondence” as a primary source.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Charles W. Duke, “Mirage of Gold Entraps Many in Baker Estate Hoax,” *The Sunday Oregonian*, 22 May 1921, p. 3 of Magazine Section; *University of Oregon* ([oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/sn83045782/1921-05-22/ed-1/seq-85.pdf](https://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/sn83045782/1921-05-22/ed-1/seq-85.pdf)). People were led to believe that they could claim rights to real estate in the area occupied by the Philadelphia City Hall if they paid for a genealogist to prove a connection to the family tree of one “Colonel Jacob Baker.”

<sup>4</sup> *The American Society Of Genealogists, 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Volume (1940–2015), Selected and Original Articles by Fellows of the Society, Past and Present* (2015), xi.

products.<sup>5</sup> The Standards set forth in BCG’s publication is not limited to those who aspire to obtain the Certified Genealogist® credential—they are community wide standards used in producing family histories, client reports, blogs, and other genealogical work products.

“A rigorous proof standard helps genealogists avoid error. Adhering to the GPS gives us results that are as reliable as possible.”<sup>6</sup>

Standards are not static; rather, they reflect evolving “best practices” in the field. BCG first published the Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS) in 2000, the five components of which are:

1. The conduct of reasonably exhaustive research;
2. Complete and accurate citations to the sources of information;
3. Evaluation of evidence using tests of analysis and correlation;
4. Resolution of any conflicting evidence; and
5. A coherent written conclusion

BCG has continued to refine the Standards that flesh out the requirements of the GPS.<sup>7</sup> As recently as 2018, the growing practice of genetic genealogy prompted BCG to promulgate standards for using DNA evidence.<sup>8</sup> The Standards have also been amended from time to time to “tie them more directly to the [GPS].”<sup>9</sup> The BCG Rubrics add another layer of details regarding the determination whether standards are met.<sup>10</sup>

Standards inform the research process, providing guidance regarding the adequacy of research, the identification and quality of sources, and need for documentation. There are

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<sup>5</sup> Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed rev. (Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry.com, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington, Virginia: National Genealogical Society, 2013), 3.

<sup>7</sup> “Introduction to the Second Edition,” *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed rev., xix–xx

<sup>8</sup> Board for Certification of Genealogists, “Board for Certification of Genealogists Adopts Standards for DNA Evidence,” *Springboard Blog*, 28 October 2018 ([bcgcertification.org/standards-for-dna-evidence/](https://bcgcertification.org/standards-for-dna-evidence/)).

<sup>9</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed rev., xx.

<sup>10</sup> Rubrics for Evaluating New Applications for BCG Certification, Revised 1 January 2021”; PDF, *Board for Certification of Genealogists* (<https://bcgcertification.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/BCG-New-Application-Rubrics-2021.pdf>).

standards for documenting,<sup>11</sup> standards for researching,<sup>12</sup> and standards for writing.<sup>13</sup> Genealogy Standards are augmented by the rubrics developed by BCG for measuring whether standards are met or unmet.<sup>14</sup>

### **Standards For Documenting**

“Documentation is fundamental to planning and executing genealogical research.”<sup>15</sup> Documenting your research enables you to return to a source more easily and others to judge its reliability. These objectives are accomplished by understanding and citing the sources that you actually used.

### **Standards for Researching**

Planning Research is necessary to meet the requirement of “reasonably exhaustive research.”<sup>16</sup> The objective of planned research is to discover evidence that will help answer a specific research question. In addition to identifying logical sources, the BCG rubrics add that, you must also efficiently prioritize first steps. Issues that could prevent a research plan from meeting standards, include:

- An inadequately focused research question;
- The omission of logical first steps;
- Giving low priority to logical first steps; or
- Proposing redundant or other unproductive steps.<sup>17</sup>

### **Standards for Writing**

The last prong of the GPS requires a written conclusion, to eliminate “the possibility that the analysis is based on bias, preconception, or inadequate appreciation of the evidence.”<sup>18</sup> Proved conclusions (“proofs”) can take the form of documented

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<sup>11</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, Standards 1-8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, Standards 9-57.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, Standards 58-80.

<sup>14</sup> Rubrics for Evaluating New Applications for BCG Certification.

<sup>15</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> BCG Rubrics, “DW10. Efficiency of research plan.”

<sup>18</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, 3

statements, summaries, or arguments.<sup>19</sup> Five standards address clarity of writing.<sup>20</sup> Proofs must be clearly explained and logically sequenced.<sup>21</sup>

### **Additional References**

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> BCG Rubrics, CS7, citing Standards 67–71.

<sup>21</sup> *Genealogy Standards*, Standards 59–61.