Resolving Conflict:

A Key to Sound Genealogical Conclusions

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The Genealogical Proof Standard consists of five interconnected components that together establish proof in genealogical conclusions. Only the fourth component of the Genealogical Proof Standard can sometimes be omitted: resolution of conflicts among evidence items. As long as there are conflicts, genealogists must address them to establish credible conclusions.

"Resolution of conflicting evidence substantiates the conclusion's credibility. (If conflicting evidence is not resolved, a credible conclusion is not possible.)"[1]

Recognizing Conflict

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines conflict as a noun that can mean "competitive or opposing action of incompatibles.[1] As a verb, conflict can mean "fail to be in agreement or accord."

Source: *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, eleventh edition (Merriam-Webster: Springfield, Massachusetts), 261

Genealogy Standards, second edition revised, defines conflicting evidence as "evidence items that could not all be correct" and "the opposite of compatible evidence."[1] Compatible evidence is defined as "evidence items that agree even if differing in detail."

Source: *Board for Certification of Genealogists*, *Genealogy Standards*, second edition revised (Nashville: Ancestry, 2021), 73-74. [Resource #1]

Objective: Recognize conflicts and determine whether the evidence is compatible.

All sources are updated as of 16 October 2025.

1. Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, second edition revised (Nashville, Tennessee, 2021), 2. [Resource #1]

As genealogists correlate evidence, potential conflicts may appear. While all conflicts must be resolved in order to establish genealogical proof, it is first necessary to determine whether a conflict actually exists or whether the information is compatible.

Surnames: It was common for individuals and families to use variants of surnames, as spelling names a certain way was of "small importance."[2] There is a pervasive myth that people's names were "changed at Ellis Island" but there is no record of this ever happening since the manifests were completed at the port of departure.[3]

Example: One Collier family used several spelling variations of their surname, including Colier, Collyer, Colyer, and Collar. It is important to closely examine details and use available information to help determine if it is the same person using a name variant, thereby making it "compatible evidence" rather than a conflict.

Middle names: Sometimes people did and still do interchange their first and middle name. Some people use their middle name as their "call name" and their legal name on formal documents. For example, someone with the name Charles Robert Smith might go by "Rob" or "Robert."

Nicknames: It is common for people to use nicknames, or names that are different than their legal or "given" name.

A woman by the name of Elizabeth may be known by several names, perhaps even depending on who is referring to her, their relationship to her, or the time in her life when they knew her. Elizabeth may have been called Libby as a child but later called Lizzie or Eliza,

> "Every man is privileged to spell his own name as he sees fit. But because you and perhaps your father and grandfather spelled the name a certain way, is no reason for being concerned to prove that your first American ancestor spelled it the same way. It is a matter of small importance whether he did or not, and our first American ancestors were too much occupied with serious matters to worry much about how their names were spelled." – Donald Lines Jacobus, *Genealogy as a Pastime and Profession*, 59.

2. Jacobus, Donald Lines, *Genealogy as a Pastime and Profession* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 1968), 59. [Resource #5]

3. "Passenger Search: Connect with Your Heritage," *Statue of Liberty—Ellis Island Foundation, Inc.*, https://www.statueofliberty.org/discover/passenger-ship-search/, 2023, "A Note on Names."

Betsy, or another variation. It is important to recognize that some nicknames, for example "Mo," may be used for a variety of given names. [Resources #2 and #12]

People often used variations of a given name or surname used in their country of origin. A man by the name of Hans Heinrich Stief might have gone by Henry once he arrived in an English-speaking country. A man by the name of William O'Dooling might appear as the Latin variation Guilielmus Dooling in a church record.

Relationships: Careful consideration of each connection can help to reveal conflict. While it is not possible that Helen could have two biological mothers, it is possible that she may have had a mother who married multiple times and went by Ann McFarland, Ann Marr, Ann Dixon, and Ann Cooke at various times during her life. On the other hand, it is not possible that another person was Helen's biological mother if Ann was Helen's mother.

DNA Haplogroups: Sometimes two closely related individuals who share Y-DNA or mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) receive different haplogroup designations. This does not always represent a conflict, and there are several reasons this might happen. Due to the limited SNP process used at 23andMe, a mother might have a haplogroup H result while her child returns an H2 result. These are not conflicts, but compatible data. The son simply has a more refined result than the mother. A similar situation occurs when two closely related men test at different marker levels. [Resource #3]

Locations: Genealogists sometimes find variant locations in the records of an individual. Sometimes, it is not possible for them both to be correct. Susan could not have been born in both New York and Boston. Other times the locations, although technically different, are compatible. Susan could have been born in both Massachusetts and Boston. Additionally, boundaries and placenames may change over time. [Resource #11]

Dates: Sometimes dates conflict although other evidence supports that the discrepant dates point to one unique research subject. In this case, genealogists rely on thorough analysis and correlation.

Addressing Conflict

Objective: Assemble, evaluate, and correlate evidence and implement strategies to resolve inconsistencies and form credible conclusions through the Genealogical Proof Standard.

What happens when all evidence cannot possibly be correct?

When genealogists gather data and the evidence is simple, no conflicts may exist. However, genealogists often encounter situations where evidence is partially or completely in conflict with other evidence.

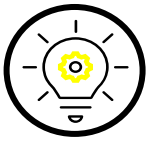
Consider relevant questions!

- Is the discrepancy important and relevant to the research question?
- How reliable is the information? Who was the informant?
- Why was the record required? What can be inferred from this answer?
- Did the individual have a reason to intentionally provide inaccurate data? Be sure to consider the law in the time and place.
- What story does the correlated information tell? Would considering the evidence from another perspective tell the same story?

Lay it out!

- Identify evidence to support each side of the conflict.
- Use tools such as charts, diagrams, lists, and tables to demonstrate the reasoning utilized in the conflict resolution.

Genealogy Standards [Resource #1] throws a lifeline for problem-solving! The following standards mention conflict:



Standard 40 Evidence mining
Standard 44 Evidence reliability
Standard 47 Evidence correlation
Standard 48 Resolving evidence
Standard 49 Unresolved evidence inconsistences
Standard 50 Assembling conclusions from evidence
Standard 53 Extent of DNA evidence
Standard 55 Integrating DNA and documentary evidence
Standard 60 Selection of appropriate items
Standard 65 Content

"Once a genealogist resolves conflicting evidence, all remaining relevant evidence items are compatible with a single answer to the research question."

- *Genealogy Standards*, 28.

Conflict Resolution

> "If conflicting evidence is not resolved, a credible conclusion is not possible."
> - *Genealogy Standards*, 2.

The process of assembling evidence may reveal inconsistencies and the Genealogical Proof Standard tells us that credible solutions are not attainable without conflict resolution. Therefore, these conflicts must be addressed.

Resolve conflicting evidence when it is possible!

- Explain why evidence items supporting all but one of the outcomes can be set aside due to of lack of corroboration, quality of evidence, an explanation of why only one side of the conflict can be correct, or any combination of these three.
- If unable to resolve a conflict and therefore, unable to reach a credible conclusion, repeat the five-stage research and reasoning cycle until achieving proof. Sometimes, proof is not possible.

When addressing conflict, researchers can take some steps to help mitigate the risk of inaccurate conclusions. Don't fall into a trap!

- Consider all alternative conclusions that can be possible. *Try to disprove the potential conclusions.*
- Do a bias self-check. *"Is this what I wish happened or what really happened?"*
- Evaluate assumptions. *Are they sound and logical or unsound?*
- Determine whether all intermediate and final conclusions have sound reasoning. *It can be easy to "write something off" but doing so without sound reasoning is risky.*

Scenarios for resolution: *No conflict or resolved conflict?*

- Direct evidence with **no conflict**
- Indirect evidence, negative evidence, or a combination with no direct evidence and **no conflict**.
- **Resolved conflicting** direct evidence
- **Resolved conflicting** direct and indirect or negative evidence
- **Resolved conflicting** indirect evidence, negative evidence, or a combination with no direct evidence.

Write it up!
It can be tempting to skip this important part of the process! Don't shortchange your research!

Resources

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3. Estes, Roberta. "Haplogroup Matching: What it Does (and Doesn't) Mean." *DNA-Explained*. https://dna-explained.com/2021/02/03/haplogroup-matching-what-it-does-and-doesnt-mean/.

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5. Jacobus, Donald Lines. *Genealogy as a Pastime and Profession*. Second edition revised. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 1968.

6. Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof.* Arlington: National Genealogical Society, 2013. Particularly Chapter 6.

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11. William M. Scholl Center for American History and Culture. "Atlas of Historical County Boundaries." *The Newberry*. https://digital.newberry.org/ahcb/ : 2012.

12. Withycombe, Elizabeth Gidley. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*. https://archive.org/details/oxforddictionary0000with/mode/2up : 1963.