



## From Clues to a Conclusion: Evaluating Evidence in Genealogy

*This class is intended to help you approach your research and evidence analysis more intentionally. We will explore how the research process works in genealogy by focusing on three basic building blocks:*

- Research Questions
- Research Plan
- Evidence Analysis

### General Research Process

Question → Gather Evidence → Test Hypotheses → Establish Conclusions → Prove →

### Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS)

“Accuracy is fundamental to genealogical research. Without it, family’s history would be fiction.”

*Genealogy Standards: Second Edition*

- The GPS is the foundation of solid genealogy research
- It sets a baseline so all genealogists can work within the same framework
  - And evaluate each other’s research and conclusions for thoroughness, accuracy, and compliance with process
- Like with the scientific method, all genealogy research conclusions must be replicable

### The GPS: 5 Components

1. Reasonably exhaustive research – lowers risk of undiscovered evidence and hasty conclusions.
2. Complete and accurate source citations – reveals qualities of sources as providers of evidence.
3. Test relevant evidence with analysis and correlation.
4. Resolve conflicting evidence.
5. Soundly reasoned and written conclusion – lays foundation for future research.

### The Research Question

- Helps frame our research
  - Two characteristics:
    - Pertains to a documented person
    - Seeks specific information about that person
- Avoid a question that is too broad or too narrow.
  - Too broad allows for multiple “correct” answers
  - Too narrow may be unanswerable

### The Three Types of Research Question

- *Relationship* – focused on determining the nature of a relationship between two or more people
- *Identity* – used to determine the identity of an individual, often when distinguishing between two (or more) same-named people
- *Activity* – related to determining if an individual participated in an event or activity

### Supporting Questions

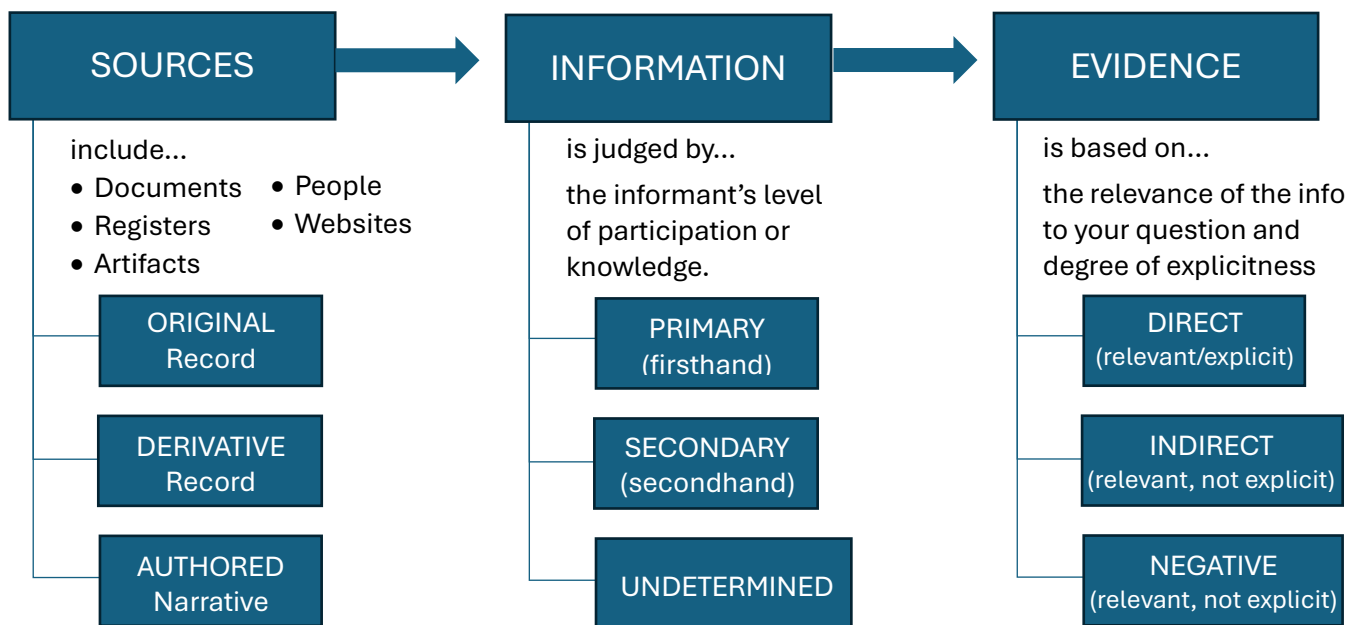
- Help support and guide your main research question
- May include questions about:
  - Names
  - Dates of events and locations
  - Other distinguishing biographical details

## The Research Plan

Your plan can be flexible to meet the needs of your research as it progresses.

- Establish your research question.
- Choose four or five collections to research. What do you hope to find? Write it down!
- Record your sources, the date you search them, and what you do (or don't) find.
- Analyze and correlate the evidence.
- Establish a sound, well-reasoned and cited conclusion.

## Evidence Analysis Process Map



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## Types of Sources

- **Original Record** – created at the time of the event or soon after and not based on a previously existing record
  - i.e. Vital records (birth, marriage, and death), census
- **Derivative Record** – created from a prior record by either transcribing, abstracting, or translating it
  - i.e. Indexes, abbreviated transcriptions
- **Authored Narrative** – written work with info from many sources
  - i.e. Obituaries, family history books, periodical articles, etc.
    - Caution: includes the writer's own conclusions and interpretations

## Information – Informants

- Information usually comes from an informant – *a person who provided the info, reported on an event they witnessed, recounted info they heard*
- Recorder may or may not be informant
  - Usually not informants: Census takers, court clerks, oral history interviewers
  - Exceptions: writer of a diary, religious official recording a baptism they officiated, person writing their own will
- Sources may or may not identify the informant(s) directly
  - We may or may not be able infer when the informant is not identified.
- Sources can have multiple informants and contain multiple types of information.

- Informants may create info by inferring own conclusion or by inventing info (misinformation)

### Types of Information

- IF and ONLY IF we can confirm the informant's identity, we can determine the information as either:
  - **Primary** (firsthand) – reported by an eyewitness, often recorded soon after the event
  - **Secondary** (secondhand) – reported by someone who obtained it from someone else
- IF NOT, it is considered to be **Undetermined/Indeterminable**.
- Pursue primary information to locate the least error-prone sources possible to strengthen the credibility of our conclusions.

### Evidence

- Suggests an answer to a specific research question
  - Information is not necessarily evidence.
- One piece of evidence alone is not a conclusion.
  - Analyze and correlate.
- Some evidence may require additional reasoning (deductive/inductive) to detect.

### Types of Evidence

- **Direct** – it answers research question by itself.
  - Straightforward, unambiguous
- **Indirect** – it addresses the research question but only when combined with other evidence.
  - Piecing together multiple sources, information, and evidence to reach an answer
- **Negative** – an absence of information in records that we were expecting to find
  - “Contextually suggestive silence”
  - Caution! A negative search or negative finding is **not** the same thing as negative evidence.

### Citing Your Sources

- Documentation does three things:
  - Tells us the quality of the source.
  - Describes where to view the source.
  - Shows our research scope.
- Document everything, including negative searches!
  - Include search parameters you tried in your citation.

### Writing Conclusions

- Proof Statement
  - No conflicting evidence present
  - Uses original records and primary information
- Proof Narrative
  - Less complex
  - No conflicting evidence or fairly easy to resolve
  - Some evidence is indirect.
- Proof Argument
  - More complex
  - Conflicting evidence needs thoughtful resolution.

### Final Notes

- We don't always successfully answer a research question, but...
- By documenting and keeping track of the records we find and our analysis, we can avoid:
  - Unnecessarily re-researching — this is not the same as checking back later for new records to be available.

- Drawing incorrect conclusions
- Written proof is open to reevaluation should new evidence comes to light.

#### **Citations and Recommended Sources for Further Reading**

- Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards, Second Edition Revised*. (Nashville: Ancestry.com, 2021).
- Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Documentation*. (Arlington: National Genealogical Society, 2017).
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