

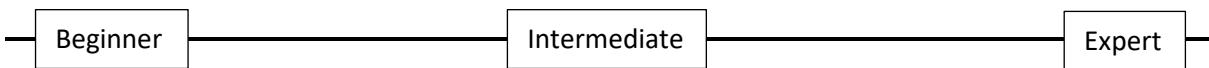
# The Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS) is Your Friend, not Your Enemy

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## INTRODUCTION

As genealogists, we search for truth. We yearn for additional details about the families we are researching. This is our passion, it is more than a hobby. We love sharing what we have found with others. We love discussing it with others and celebrating each new found piece of evidence. We love it that is, until the day when we are asked to submit it for publication or for the purpose of becoming a credentialed genealogist. Suddenly, our minds are flooded with doubts. Did I do enough? Are there other sources that I haven't searched? What if someone finds something that overturns my conclusion? Am I really good enough to publish my research findings?

Along the path of learning, we are all at some point along the spectrum. Those who are further down the path look backwards and want to assist those who may be struggling. Looking at those ahead of us, we may be yearning for a little recognition that our work is credible and acceptable.



## THE GENEALOGICAL PROOF STANDARD

The five steps of the Genealogical Proof Standard,<sup>1</sup> both the official version and the friendlier version. Below is the friendlier version...

- A. Gathering the evidence – when is enough enough?
- B. Identifying the bread crumbs back to the source.
- C. Correlating your findings – analyzing and testing the facts.
- D. Checking for discrepancies – resolving the conflicting evidence.
- E. Crossing the finish line – writing the conclusion!

### **A. Gathering the Evidence – when is enough enough?**

As with any project, whether it be baking or carpentry, the doer must gather together the elements of the project together to successfully complete it. In some disciplines, there is a well-crafted recipe or architectural drawing to guide the doer to complete a successful product. Genealogy is a bit different in that there is a historical record trail of original sources that ultimately leads one to the conclusion. For those who like precision, this can be discomforting. For those who don't like to read instructions and just like to put things together, this can be extremely frustrating and unrewarding, often going in endless circles looking at the same sources many times.

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<sup>1</sup> Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. (Washington, D.C.: Ancestry, 2014) 1-2.

## **B. Identifying the bread crumbs back to the source**

Accurate source citations are fundamental to good research. We all know we should do them, we just haven't always done it well. Those who are just beginning their genealogical research often fail to record vital elements of a sound citation – we've all been there! Ask any professional today and they will likely tell you that they have had to return to a source they previously examined to gather additional information for their source citation. Realizing that all we are really trying to do is to get someone else back to the same source we examined is really like leaving a trail of bread crumbs. Missing elements in the citation is equivalent to birds eating a portion of those crumbs, thus disrupting the trail.

## **C. Correlating your findings - analyzing the facts**

Our ability to correlate and analyze facts rests on several factors. First, we are the sum of our experiences and the way we look at family relationships and apply them to history. As the context of the family has changed, our views change. If we misapply or superimpose our predisposed twentieth century frame on a set of nineteenth century facts, we may reach an incorrect conclusion. Second, as our research skills accurately link families and lineages together, we begin to go with solutions that worked previously. Many "brick wall" problems simply remain unsolved due to a lack of analytical experience in a given culture and time period.

## **D. Checking for discrepancies - resolving the conflicting evidence**

The beginner may want to dismiss discrepancies in their findings based on what they believe to be true. This is a certain trap. Just because the evidence doesn't agree with a pre-conceived notion of what the family or individual's life events should look like, doesn't make it wrong. In our evaluation, we are not judging our ancestors, we are judging the evidence in the trail of records left by our ancestors. We may wish that all of our ancestors were legally married, that their children were not born out of wedlock, that they committed no crimes or that they didn't own slaves. But if not our ancestors – whose? Just because grandma wrote the year of her marriage date in the family Bible for the year prior to the birth of their first child and the record in the courthouse is for the year after, don't assume that grandma's "first-hand knowledge" supersedes the clerk's record.

## **E. Crossing the finish line - writing the conclusion!**

Attending school for many years, teachers would announce that there was a required paper due during the school term. They would carefully instruct the elements of the paper and sometimes when key pieces were due. The repetition of this process year-after-year drilled into many that writing was not only difficult, but it was the *worst* part of going to school.

Fast-forward to today. Many, not all, would agree that the research is fun, but the writing is drudgery. For those who struggled to write and didn't enjoy the learning process, the teacher's red pen reinforced what, for some, was a negative experience. Think instead, that your writing is encapsulating someone's life. That as you write, the people and the places lead to solving a mystery-tell the reader how you arrived at your conclusion. If your work will be published, editors are there to assist you and help you understand when you may have injected bias or left out a key piece of evidence. They are reading your work with a fresh perspective and different viewpoint.

## USING THE STANDARDS

Obviously, we should each study the *Genealogy Standards* as written and published by the Board for Certification of Genealogists. This work summarizes years of lessons learned by the world's leading genealogists. The standards and methods have been proven countless times with a wide-range of genealogical problems.

The standards are grouped into three broad categories:

1. Standards for documenting
2. Standards for researching
3. Standards for writing

### **Standards for Documenting**

It may seem unusual to begin with this category ahead of research, but experience illustrates that this is the most common mistake made by beginners and even some more experienced researchers. It is easy to get caught up in the research looking to see if your analysis is correct and quickly moving from source-to-source. You find the record you were hoping to find, but in your excitement, you fail to record the elements of the trail that led you to your success. It isn't until after you leave the archive that you discover that to cite your sources properly, you have missing data elements. Or, you are skipping from website-to-website and now you have the difficulty of trying to reconstruct your research.

Don't despair, you aren't the first researcher to make this mistake. However, it is why experienced researchers gather the overall elements of the source citation *before* they look at the record and the specific elements *after* they find the evidence. This is often recorded in a research log.

### **Standards for Researching**

The most common mistake is to have an objective, but not a research plan to support it. Plans come from a reasoned statement of what, where, and how you want to conduct your research. All records have dependencies which lead to sequencing the order of what records and repositories should be searched first.

Understanding a broader history of the area provides a foundational element to your research. For example, if a history indicates that the area was built up by several Irish stonemasons and you believe you have an ancestor who was an Irish stonemason, then your research strategy may employ sources and methods to identify who they were and from where they originated.

Today there are many tools in the genealogical research toolbox. The depth and breadth of these tools require some knowledge of a variety of disciplines. To understand the marriage laws, you need to find the appropriate statutes for the time. This is useful in determining if either the bride or the groom needs parental consent to get married. If so, it may help you to distinguish between two persons of the same name. DNA has become a critical component to validating the historical record set and it takes its rightful place beside a wealth of other record sources.

The standards detail the differences between a transcription and an abstract. A common mistake by inexperienced researchers is to abstract a document with which they are unfamiliar and leave out or misinterpret key elements of the document. By making a full transcription when beginning to use an unfamiliar record, the document may be used to explore all the elements useful for analysis. Fundamental to all genealogical research is the preference given to original records over transcripts, copies or secondary records.

## **Standards for Writing**

Over many years, the professional genealogical community has settled on a set of standards that illustrate the thoroughness and completeness of their work.

The Genealogical Proof Standard requires a written conclusion. Genealogists, therefore, write proofs. (Sources and citations are not genealogical proofs.)

Depending on the complexity of the genealogist's research question and the evidence supporting its answer, the proof may take the form of a proof statement, proof summary, or proof argument.<sup>2</sup>

A critical element of writing a summation of your work is to select the appropriate proof option. There are three, namely:

1. *Proof statements* are source-cited sentences and data items in thoroughly documented contexts demonstrating adequate research scope.
2. *Proof summaries* are relatively straightforward narratives or lists with documentation...used when the evidence is direct, and any conflicts are minor.
3. *Proof arguments* are extensive documented narratives that often include figures, tables, or other enhancements.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, when many beginning genealogists are just starting, they are introduced to the leading genealogical journals full of proof arguments crafted by very seasoned genealogists and they fail to see the simplicity of *proof statements* and *proof summaries*. This can be very discouraging as it is implied that to be a good beginning genealogist, you must illustrate these skills.

## **PRACTICAL EXAMPLES**

Class participation illustrating the five steps and examples drawn from original records and source research.

## **CONCLUSION**

These skills are fundamental to your research and will provide an incredible peace of mind that you have done everything that should reasonably be done. As with any science or discipline, you will learn as you follow the process. The standards are there to guide you through this process.

There are some problems where the physical evidence and the historical record set simply does not provide enough evidence to make a positive identification of parentage or relationship. Do not let that convince you that you have not done enough or that you aren't smart enough to solve the problem. You cannot find what isn't there. It is still profitable to future researchers for you to document what you have done, what your hypothesis was for your approach and how you reached the point where you put the problem down. Who knows when another previously unknown record source may be discovered that will provide the answer.

## **SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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2. Rose, Christine. *Genealogical Proof Standard*. San Jose: CR Publications, 2009.

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<sup>2</sup> Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. (Washington, D.C.: Ancestry, 2014) 31.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 32-3.