



Beginning Research Techniques

G. David Dilts, AG, U.S. and Canada Research Specialist

FamilySearch

E-mail: diltsgd@familysearch.org

At the end of class each student will be able to:

I. Explain why family history research is worth it.

- A. To know who you are
- B. Respect for your ancestors and heritage
- C. To understand history better
- D. Genetics and health
- E. Religious reasons

II. Explain how the correct hierarchy of goals helps move research forward effectively.

- A. Family History **Quest**: Overall goal it will take two or more years to accomplish; should involve sharing your well-documented findings. *For example*: find and document a crucial (immigrant) family; submit photos of a family, or publish a family history
- B. Research a specified **cluster of families** to help accomplish the above quest.
- C. Complete research on one specific nuclear **family** from the above cluster before starting research on another family.
- D. Research **one event in one person's life** from the above family. If the first search fails, substitute a record, record type, jurisdiction, repository, or kin, but keep the same event. Such a hierarchy of goals should help us see better what needs doing, get our research organized, and help focus us on a methodology most likely to succeed.

III. Briefly describe how selected tools are used in family history research.

- A. **Family Group Records**: best place to document events in the life of the family
 - 1. lowly **source footnote**: the most powerful weapon against computer coping run amok
 - 2. Genealogy **note keeping programs** (keep your "good stuff" separate from things you are still collecting): Ancestral Quest, Family Tree Maker, Legacy, Roots Magic
- B. **Research Logs**: to organize and show what has worked and not worked in your research
- C. Internet for finding
 - 1. FamilySearch
 - a. **FamilySearch Tree**: clumps of good research but often weakly documented—use compiled genealogy databases like this as a starting place to be verified
 - b. **Family History Research Wiki**: a genealogy reference Wiki
 - i. **Records selection tables**: show substitute record types (what to search)
 - ii. Indispensable hints at where to find records
 - c. **FamilySearch Catalog**: describes holdings of the Family History Library

2. Genealogy **databases** (low hanging fruit): American Ancestors, Ancestry.com, FamilySearch Historical Records, Find-a-grave, FindMyPast, Fold3, Heritage Quest, LegacyStories.com, World Vital Records, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers
3. **Google**: to find and learn about names, genealogies, repositories, jurisdictions
- D. Internet for sharing: **FamilySearch Tree** and related programs to share your findings
- E. **DNA testing** attract interest; ethnic percentages; if 2 males are related; and adoptions

IV. Explain how following the research cycle improves research quality.

- A. Identify what you know: ask relatives what they know
 1. Organizing: prepare family groups and research logs in organized files
 2. Survey: research “low hanging fruit” databases and U.S. federal censuses
- B. Decide what you want to learn: pick one event in one person’s life (easiest first)
- C. Select records to search: Learn about record types, records, jurisdictions, and repositories—then select the **easiest** to find records first
- D. Obtain and view the records: always ask who else might have such a record
- E. Use the information
 1. Decide if it is relevant: compare new information with what you already know.
 2. Copy relevant documents.
 3. Assess its reliability: Did the data provider or keeper have any reason to deceive?.
 4. Record the genealogy data, source footnotes, and your assessment. File copies.
 5. Share it: at family reunions, on the Internet, and local libraries/ historical societies.
- F. Restart the research cycle

Consciously following the cycle helps get organized, be methodical, keep rolling forward on-track, and reminds us to follow through. See Wiki *Principles of Family History Research*.

V. Explain the best way to guess where to start your family history research and why.

Assumed 1: You have already talked to relatives and gleaned their information.

Assumed 2: You’ve organized what you know on family group records and research logs.

Assumed 3: “Low hanging fruit” databases, and US federal censuses have been searched.

- A. Select the family and person you know the best (for which you have the most data).
 - B. Select the one event in that person’s life that would be easiest to document **based on**:
 1. The completeness of information about ancestor’s name, event date, and event place.
 2. Likelihood of documents existing which cover the event time period and jurisdiction
 3. Ease of access to those documents.
 - C. Work back one event at a time from the most well-documented back to the least documented event, and from the best-documented to worst documented family group.
 - D. If the first search fails, repeat for the same event, but substituting a different record, record type, jurisdiction, repository, or kin. Persevere until you exhaust all possibilities.
- This method works best because the more clues you have, the easier it is to guess. As you build up documentation you have even more clues with which to work on a family group.

VI. Explain the best way to ask family history research questions.

- A. Bring your most well-documented (with all the footnotes) version of the relevant family group record with you.
- B. Bring the relevant research log and document copies.
- C. Select one person and one event in that person’s life about which to ask.
- D. If they cannot help, ask for advice where else you might inquire with the same question.

VII. Explain how to overcome common research rookie mistakes

- A. problem: **Helter-skelter** research with notes on scratch paper. cure: Organize and document AS YOU GO!
- B. problem: **Accepts only one spelling** of a name. cure: Realize you are not doing research right until you find it with more than one spelling.
- C. problem: **Ending a search too soon**. cure: if at first you don't succeed . . . substitute spelling, indexes (or no index), records, record types, jurisdiction, repositories, or kin.
- D. problem: **Never leaving survey phase**. cure: Research one family at a time. Be reasonable about searching low-hanging fruit databases.
- E. problem: **Failure to use the Wiki**. cure: Use the Wiki for almost every search.
- F. problem: **Failure to do thorough research**. cure: Be reasonably thorough in your research.
- G. problem: **Failure to document** every event in an ancestor's life with **at least** one source. cure: Document, document, document AS YOU GO!

Homework

1. Find one of your ancestors who lived in the United States between 1850 and 1940 in at least one United States census.
 - A. Fill out a research log BEFORE starting the search. Complete the log after the search.
 - B. Using a genealogy note keeping program, fill out as much of a family group record as you can before the search.
 - C. Add a source footnote about the census for each member of the family found in the census.

Optional: Continue on with census research finding the main ancestor in each available United States census during his or her entire lifetime. Document using research logs and source citations on the family group record.