



10 Things You Are Probably Doing Wrong With Your Research

- Jenny Joyce

It isn't just beginners who do things wrong when researching their trees. Even the most experienced genealogists sometimes fall into the trap of making mistakes, and there are some very experienced people I know who are making at least one of these. Here are ten mistakes that you may well be making in your genealogical research.

1. Not checking the help for online searches

Each online site you are likely to look at for genealogy has its own help. This help tells us, among other things, how the search function works on their particular site. This is important, because the search does not work in the same way on every site. If you enter two words in a search is there an implied AND, or an implied OR? What wildcards (if any) can be used in that search? Is there anything else useful in the help, like how to search for terms with punctuation?

Checking these out for each site you search for your ancestors will help you get better results from your search.

2. Not using the Advanced Search

The Advanced search function on a site allows you more control over your searches and can teach you how to craft better queries for yourself. It can also be time saving, allowing you to narrow down the dates you are searching, or in the case of the National Archives of the UK, by specifying a record series to search.

3. Not reading the research guides

Most, though not all, archives have research guides. They can give all manner of useful information about the collections held in a particular archive. This information might include limitations (such as gaps) in the collection, and in the case of the National Archives of the UK most of the guides give links to any information of this type available online, whether on the National Archives website itself or on any other web site.

The following are just some of the useful ones, but it is by no means an exhaustive list:



THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES (UK)

<https://nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/#find-a-research-guide>

TIP: Don't just look at the Family History group

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF IRELAND

<https://www.nationalarchives.ie/historical-records/research-guides-sources/>

PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/information-leaflets>.

TIP: Don't limit yourself to only looking at the *Your family tree* series.

TIP: The General information series contains a guide on Latin terminology in Roman Catholic records.

WEST SUSSEX RECORD OFFICE

<https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/leisure-recreation-and-community/history-and-heritage/west-sussex-record-office/record-office-sources-and-collections/>

TIP: Some of these are very basic, but the guide to census records is very useful if you have ancestors from this region.

SCOTLAND'S PEOPLE

<https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/guides>

NATIONAL ARCHIVES (USA)

<https://www.archives.gov/research/topics>

STATE LIBRARY OF NSW

<https://guides.sl.nsw.gov.au/>

STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA

<https://guides.slv.vic.gov.au/>

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

<https://www.nla.gov.au/research-guides>

IRISHGENEALOGY.IE

<https://www.irishgenealogy.ie/en/> (select the Research tab)

4. Not checking the dates of a dataset

It might sound silly, but I know of people looking in the 1828 census of New South Wales for a family which they know did not arrive in the colony until the 1830s. I have also heard people saying that they want to get a death certificate for someone who passed away in Sydney before 1856, which is when civil registration started. These cases seem farfetched, but they are more common than you think. People don't always think about the dates covered in a book or resource before looking for their ancestors. It is not only a waste of time, but also leads to frustration that may make them tempted to give up the search altogether.



But there are other cases where there are gaps in a dataset. This can frequently happen with parish registers and Bishop's Transcripts. Much as we want them to be complete, there are often gaps. Check for them before getting dismayed at not finding an ancestor. And if there are gaps, then bear in mind that there might be people being born or dying in that period of which you are unaware.

5. Not seeking proof yourself

We all know you should just accept those Ancestry shaky leaf hints without verifying yourself, but there are other places where people seem to accept what they find as truth without checking the connections and conclusions for themselves: printed pedigrees. Many of these were compiled and printed in the nineteenth century, often by noted antiquarians.

6. Not reading the introductions to books

The introductions to genealogy books often look very dry and boring. But not reading them can be a big mistake. They often contain details about how the information was gathered and any known gaps or areas with conflicting information. In these latter cases the introduction may provide some possible reasons for the conflicts.

The introductions often also contain background to the collection of the data contained therein. Not only can this explain some of the "findings", but it can also provide important historical and social context.

7. Not checking jurisdictions and border changes

Except in the case of islands, borders change over time. The area of one jurisdiction might grow or shrink, or it might get subdivided into two or more new jurisdictions. It's important to know about this because if you don't you will be conducting your search in the wrong place. That might be as simple as looking in the wrong section in a large genealogical library (like the Family History Library in Salt Lake City), or physically going to the wrong County Record Office (in England & Wales) or the wrong county courthouse in the US.

To complicate matters further, certain jurisdictions do not follow these administrative borders. The classic example is probate jurisdictions in England and Wales prior to 1858. Before that date the church was responsible for overseeing the probate of a deceased estate. And it was a complicated system. Looking at Buckinghamshire, most of the county was in the jurisdiction of the Archdeaconry of Buckingham, which was in the Diocese of Lincoln. But two areas in the middle of the county, containing a total of four parishes, were under the jurisdiction of the Archdeaconry of St Albans, which is in the Diocese of London. To further complicate matters there are no less than eight Peculiars in the county. Each of these separate jurisdictions had separate probate courts, and separate archives now hold their records.

Probate jurisdictions for England, Wales & Scotland are published in *The Phillimore Atlas & Index of Parish Registers* by Cecil R. Humphery-Smith. Those for England alone are available online at <https://www.familysearch.org/mapp/>.

A New Genealogical Atlas of Ireland by Brian Mitchell, includes all manner of maps of Ireland. The Dioceses of Ireland were responsible for proving wills before 1858 and the Probate Districts after that date. Neither of these conform to county boundaries, but maps of them are shown in this publication.



The book also includes maps the civil parishes of each county, which largely conform to the Church of Ireland Parishes, and the Roman Catholic parishes of each county. The latter are much smaller in number than the former, and generally larger in size. It is important to be aware of these differences.

8. Not “killing off” your ancestors

By “killing off” your ancestors I mean finding the death of each of them. Because the IGI (International Genealogical Index) originally only included baptisms and marriages extracted from parish registers, genealogists often constructed trees without dates or death or burial. Granted, we should have all consulted the original parish records each time, but in our eagerness to build up our trees we often failed to do this for every parish of interest.

The consequence of this was that we sometimes slotted a person into our trees when the dates looked feasible, only to find later when the parish registers were finally consulted that the person we had decided was our ancestor had died as an infant or child. This meant that they could not have been our ancestor.

“Killing off” your ancestors by finding details of their death and/or burial is a vital step in producing a valid and accurate family tree.

9. Worrying about one particular document

Some brickwalls are caused because people are looking for a document (such as one particular birth certificate) which might not exist. But it may be the case that they don’t really need that document, what they really need is the information it contains.

Using a birth certificate as an example, the types of information it contains include date of birth, place of birth and names of parents. But that information may be available from numerous other sources. Some of these are baptismal records, family bibles, death certificates, military attestations, census records, headstones and newspaper announcements.

By all means continue to look for that birth certificate, but don’t let a failure to find it stop you growing your family tree.

10. Not recording source information

I’m not saying anything here that you haven’t heard before. Yes, recording your sources will help give others confidence in your tree and give them the ability to check the sources of the information in it and the conclusions you have drawn.

But it will also help YOU. When new information turns up that contradicts information already in your tree you need to be able to evaluate the two pieces of data to try and decide which is correct. And if you haven’t looked at the person concerned for a while then there is a high probability that you won’t be able to remember where the original information came from.

So make sure to record enough information for each source to enable you to find it again in the future.

In conclusion

I hope this has helped you realise some of the things you may be doing wrong and that it has inspired you to correct them.

