

Document Analysis: Digging Into the Details

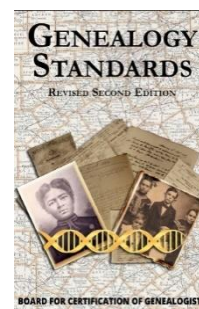
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Analyzing Documents

Analyzing documents for reliability, context, and information can help solve challenging research problems. In the initial phases of research, genealogists mine documents for clues to other records and use them for mapping out a research plan to advance their research.

Genealogists work to gain the knowledge and skills needed by study and practice. The evidence needed to answer a research question is often buried deep in the document. It may be missed if the source is not carefully analyzed and interpreted. Working carefully through each document genealogists work to discover details and understand the meaning of the information.

Genealogy Standards describes research as “an investigation designed to discover or interpret facts and thus to advance knowledge.”¹ The word “investigation” implies a systematic examination of the documents located. This involves taking time to study, analyze and record the information in each source. Too often, we jump from one document to the next. This “hunt” for documents is fun, but moving too quickly, we may never discover the evidence in the documents needed to solve challenging research problems.



Evaluating Sources, Information, and Evidence²

A **SOURCE** can be:

Original = written record made at the time of the event or soon afterward

Derivative = created from a prior record

Authored work = compiled from several sources

INFORMATION can be:

Primary = reported by an eyewitness or someone who participated in the event

Secondary = reported by someone who obtained the information from someone else

Undetermined = reported by an unknown informant

EVIDENCE can be:

Direct = directly answers the research question

Indirect = infers an answer but does not directly state it; it needs to be combined with other information to answer a question

Negative = absence of information that could have answered the research question

¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, revised second edition (Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry.com, 2021), 87.

² Elizabeth Shown Mills, “QuickLesson 17: The Evidence Analysis Process Map,” *Evidence Explained.com* (<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-17-evidence-analysis-process-map>).

Suggested Questions for Analyzing Documents

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Analyzing the Document or Source

- What type of document is this?
- Why was it created? What was the purpose?
- What is the legal or historical context for this document?
- Is the writing legible?
- What is peculiar about this document?
- Is there anything in the record that I do not understand?
- What assumptions do I have about the document that may affect my analysis?



Analyzing Documents for Reliability

- Is this an original or derivative record? Is it an authored work?
- If this is a record copy of an original document, does it appear to have any changes or alterations?
- What is the provenance of the record?
- Who is the informant for the information in the record? Is there more than one informant?
- Was the informant in a position to provide primary or firsthand information?
- Is the information secondary or second-hand?
- Does the informant show any bias?
- Was the document created or certified by an individual in his/her official line of work?
- Was the document created at the time of the event, or at a later time?

Analyzing Documents for Clues to Other Records

- What other records are there that could relate to this document?
- What clues in this document would lead to other records?
- If this record is a derivative, can you locate the original?
- Have you scrutinized the document for information regarding your research question? Are there any details you may have overlooked?
- What do you know about the people mentioned in the document? What could you learn?

Analyzing Documents for Evidence Regarding a Research Question

- Is there information that is relevant to the research question?
- Does the document provide direct evidence to answer the research question?
- Does the document contain indirect evidence relating to the research question?
- Does the evidence in this document change your research strategy?
- What other records does this document lead to that may provide evidence?

References for Further Study

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