



Getting It Right

Effective Research



Genealogical Proof Standard

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This is part of the "Effective Research" series. These notes should be read in conjunction with the accompanying video which can be found on the [NZSG website](#).

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Acknowledgements:

Sarah Hewitt
Gerry McGlinchy
Mary Wood
Gill Knox
Wellington Masonic Club, Inc.
NZSG Board

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Images from the Collection of Sarah
Hewitt
Music: [coelum by Kai Engel](#), August 2017



Genealogical Proof Standard

It's important that our research is correct. The Genealogical Proof Standard (or GPS) is a methodology that helps take a more critical look at our research to ensure we're on the right track.

The GPS was developed by the Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG) in the United States. It is a professional standard which, while primarily aimed at professional genealogists, is a good methodology for all genealogists to use.

In our [Where to Start](#) presentation, we mentioned the Genealogist's Job:

Start with a **question**

Then find **sources**

which provide **evidence**

that lead to **conclusions** about identities and relationships, and events

The GPS ensures that the conclusions that we make from our evidence are sound.

The GPS has 5 components which are discussed further below:

1. Reasonably exhaustive research.
2. Complete and accurate source citations.
3. Thorough analysis and correlation.
4. Resolution of conflicting evidence.
5. Soundly written conclusion based on the strongest evidence

Don't be scared by it. The language can be a little daunting. But try and follow it as it will make your research more robust and most importantly, more likely to be correct.

Board for Certification of Genealogists

bcgcertification.org/



Element of the GPS		Contribution to Credibility	Ask yourself
1	Reasonably exhaustive research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assumes examination of a wide range of high quality sources Minimizes the probability that undiscovered evidence will overturn a too-hasty conclusion 	<p>Have you done all the research you can?</p> <p>Are you aware that you haven't?</p>
2	Complete, accurate citations to the source or sources of each information item	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates the extent of the search and the quality of the sources Allows others to replicate the steps taken to reach the conclusion. (Inability to replicate the research casts doubt on the conclusion.) 	<p>Do you have proof to support your research?</p> <p>Have you written down where the proof came from?</p>
3	Tests—through processes of analysis and correlation—of all sources, information items, and evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitates sound interpretation of the data contributed by each source Ensures that the conclusion reflects all the evidence 	<p>Does it make sense? (when all put together)</p>
4	Resolution of conflicts among evidence items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Substantiates the conclusion's credibility. (If conflicting evidence is not resolved, a credible conclusion is not possible.) 	<p>Can you explain the parts that don't make sense?</p> <p>How reliable is the source?</p>
5	Soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eliminates the possibility that the conclusion is based on bias, preconception, or inadequate appreciation of the evidence Explains how the evidence led to the conclusion 	<p>Have you written down how you got to your conclusions?????</p>

1 - Exhaustive Research

Have you done all the research you can? Go find what records are out there. Don't make assumptions that the database is complete.

And equally importantly, are you aware if you haven't?!

To complicate matters, new sources appear all the time! What might have been exhaustive research last week, might not be this week.

It's important we're aware of the exhaustiveness of our research because we make conclusions based on the information we have. If we don't have all the facts, we won't make the right conclusions. This could mean we end up researching the wrong family!

Case Study

Jasper Pyne O'Callaghan was known to be a member of the Canterbury Yeomanry Cavalry (CYC) from family story and the GR MacDonald Dictionary of Canterbury Biography.

His brother Thomas Robert O'Callaghan was known to be a member of the CYC from a funeral notice dated 8 June 1874.

Both brothers arrived together on the Chrysolite in 1861, but neither married until 1872.

Is this enough research to prove they were in the CYC at the same time?

Answer:

No.

Exhaustive research would entail finding the records for the CYC, which are held at Archives NZ in Wellington.

Capitation rolls for the CYC show that Thomas joined on 13 December 1873. Jasper joined on 27 June 1874 - after his brother's death.

Note: as Jasper left no diaries or letters we can make no assumptions about **why** he joined the CYC after his brother's death



2 - Sources

There are two types of sources - original documents and transcripts.

Original documents (or digital/photo copies)

- Primary
 - Contemporary
- Secondary
 - Written later
 - May include analysis
 - Good ones will include list of Primary sources

Transcripts

The historical records we're searching for our sources originated in paper (or parchment) form. These needed to be transcribed into the computer so we can read them.

Transcripts include all indexes. See the NZSG presentation on [Searching](#) for more information on the problems transcribing can produce and how to work around them.

Citing your Sources

Write down **where** you got your sources from so you can find them again. They also give your research credibility.

Think back to those assignments in high school where you had to list your "references" or "bibliography". That is effectively what you are doing. So don't forget to include the name of the source, its date and place and its author. For example, New Zealand Birth Certificate, 1904, Wellington, New Zealand, Department of Internal Affairs. Barbara Wyley has put together a simple guide to sourcing. It's available on the NZSG website: genealogy.org.nz/Sources/11152/

"Evidence Explained" by Elizabeth Shown Mills is seen as the bible of how to cite your sources. She takes a very academic view of citing sources. Your local NZSG branch is likely to have a copy. www.evidenceexplained.com/

A list of links to help you can be found here:

www.cyndislist.com/citing/citations-in-genealogy/



3 - Tests

When taken as a whole, does all the information you've collected make sense?

Have you done enough research? How does the big picture look?

It might be perfect. Great!

It might be a bit impressionistic. This will happen if you're using indirect/circumstantial evidence.

If it's blurry or indecipherable, you might need to do more research.

Looking at the big picture may change the conclusions you have reached from your research. Or it may make your conclusion inconclusive and you'll need to do more research.

Case study

- taken from an online family tree

Thomas Blythe is born in Woolwich, Kent, England where he married and had some children.

Thomas commits a crime in Warwickshire, England and is transported to Tasmania without his family.

In Tasmania, he marries a second wife and proceeds to have children with both wives

- **at the same time!**

Does this make sense?

No. There will be more than one Thomas Blythe born in England around the time of these events. Only being able to find one means you need to do more research.



4 - Resolve Conflicting information

Most conflicting information is conflicting because it's wrong. So usually, those records are dismissed as part of the research process. (However, it can be worth noting if you find more than one person of the same name why you chose the one you did.)

There will be records that are the right person or family, but the details are wrong. These are usually wrong for one of these reasons:

- Recorded incorrectly
- Mistake
- Lie

When comparing information that is in conflict, ask yourself, how reliable is the source of the information? Some sources are less reliable than others. If you choose the more reliable source, you should then see if there is other information to corroborate your choice.

Examples of less reliable sources:

- Death certificates - information not from the deceased person.
- Newspapers - need to be backed up by official, original sources.
- Any family tree without sources - this can be online or on paper.



5 - Write your conclusions

You won't remember how you came to your conclusion(s) - write them down!

A example may be:

Greta's birth does not appear to have been registered in New Zealand. Family sources list 9 children to her parents and only 4 have been registered so this is not an anomaly (spelling variations have been checked). Newspaper sources show her father went bankrupt a number of times and so the family may not have been able to afford to register her and her siblings.

Greta's marriage certificate lists her parents. This is supported by a marriage notice in the newspaper. There are no records which suggest she is not their daughter.

Same name, different family

Sometimes there are sources that suggests a person is your family member, but they're not. Make sure to record this, so you don't start researching their family instead of your own.

For example, in the records of Sarah Jackson Webb (1783-1892)

There is a Sarah Jackson who married a William Webb in 1758. They aren't our Sarah's parents as her baptismal record clearly states her mother's name as Ann.



Glossary

Terms used in this presentation:

Citation - shows where your sources came from. Allows you to find that record again.

Conclusions - the outcome of your research - the answer to your question.

Evidence - a collection of sources that make "the big picture". There are 3 types:

Direct evidence - (usually) a single source which is conclusive.

Indirect/Circumstantial evidence - a collection of sources which make for a reasonable inference.

Negative evidence - sources we are expecting are not there.

Records - something that provides evidence about the past, kept in writing or some other permanent form.

Sources - records we find that are relevant to our research.

Where to next?

This is part of the *Effective Research* series in *Getting It Right*. Have a look at our other resources genealogy.org.nz/Getting-It-Right/10915/

Getting It Right:

- Starting Your Genealogical Journey
- Effective Research
 - Genealogical Proof Standard
 - Recording conventions
 - Getting Help
 - DNA Basics
 - Searching Newspapers
 - Other People's Trees
- Sharing Your Family History

