
Why Do Family Historians Need a Proof Standard?

Presented by

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PROOF is “the cogency of evidence that compels acceptance by the mind of a truth or a fact [and] the process or an instance of establishing the validity of a statement especially by derivation from other statements in accordance with principles of reasoning.”

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 2003), s.v. “proof.”

THE GPS IS NOT—

- A checklist
- A process
- A long-range research-planning guide
- Applicable only to complex problems
- A sequence of proving
- A requirement for exhaustive research

THE GPS IS a standard of credibility—it describes the level careful family historians accept as adequate for proving relationships, events, or any aspect of identity. Genealogical results meet the standard when they pass five interrelated tests: Was the underlying research reasonably extensive? Did the researcher cite all relevant sources clearly and accurately? Did the researcher test the evidence by thoroughly analyzing it and noting parallels and contradictions? Did the researcher resolve all conflicting information? Did the researcher deduce a conclusion from the sum of the evidence and provide a written rationale explaining or showing the underlying research and reasoning?

A Sequence of Proving (Plus)

1. Questions	The researcher poses one or more genealogical questions.
2. Evidence	Sources provide possible answers to the research questions.
3. Hypothesis	The researcher subjects the evidence to tests of accuracy.
4. Conclusion	The tests indicate correct answers.
5. PROOF	The researcher states the conclusions in writing in a way that demonstrates all five GPS elements.
6. <i>Overkill</i>	The researcher applies more criteria than the GPS requires.

The GPS's Five Interrelated Elements

1. A reasonably exhaustive (thorough) search
2. Complete and accurate source citations
3. Analysis and correlation of relevant evidence
4. Resolution of conflicting evidence
5. Clear written explanation

Aspects of Genealogical Proof

- Proved conclusions meet an accepted standard.
- Proof cannot be partial—conclusions not meeting the standard are unproved.
- In genealogy, *as in most research fields*, proof is less than perfect certainty.
- Previously unknown evidence can overturn a proved conclusion

A Jigsaw-Puzzle Metaphor for Genealogical Proof

- Just as a picture emerges from assembled puzzle pieces, genealogical proof rests on the sum of evidence.
- Jigsaw puzzle pieces, usually contained in a box, may be found partly assembled. Valid genealogical evidence may be similarly easy to obtain and already partially connected. Sometimes, however, a puzzle's pieces and genealogical evidence items are scattered, intermingled with those of other puzzles or problems, difficult to locate, damaged, or irretrievably lost. The situation becomes complex, requiring researchers to hunt for pieces in all likely places and gather, examine, and sort them before they can assemble a recognizable picture or build a case answering a research question. Fortunately, many genealogical questions require much less effort.
- Some puzzle pieces may be set aside because they do not belong to the puzzle at hand. Genealogical proof resolves conflicting evidence by discarding unreliable or inapplicable information.
- Jigsaw puzzles range from about four pieces (for preschoolers) to thousands of pieces. The bits of evidence needed to prove an answer to a genealogical question can range from few to many.
- A clear picture or reliable answer may emerge when pieces are missing. Three or four pieces of a six-piece puzzle, for example, may suffice. When the pieces are assembled correctly, pieces found later will augment the picture, not change it. A completely assembled puzzle is not necessary to reveal the picture it shows. A completely exhaustive search is not necessary to achieve genealogical proof.
- One puzzle can have many pieces requiring much effort to reveal a picture, and another can have few pieces requiring little effort to assemble. One genealogical question can require many evidence items and much work to achieve an answer meeting the GPS, and another can require few evidence items and little work to meet the same standard.



GPS Element 1—A reasonably exhaustive search:

- Is reflected in source citations revealing the research's extent and coverage
- Meets six criteria—
 1. At least two independent sources in agreement
 2. All sources competent genealogists would examine (varies with time, place, and the research question and answer)
 3. Some primary information
 4. Some original sources
 5. Relevant derivative sources or secondary information replaced by findable corresponding originals and primary information
 6. All findable sources suggested by relevant sources, databases, and indexes

GPS Element 2—Complete and accurate source citations:

- Reveal the extent of the search for relevant sources
- Document all statements of fact
- In conjunction with narrative text, show consumers whether each source is original or derivative and whether relevant information items are primary, secondary, or both
- Enable backtracking facsimiles of sources viewed in media different from their original form
- Name each source's author, creator, or informant
- Show titles of each published source and its applicable part (if any) and specify its publication details
- Show each unpublished source's formal or descriptive title, identify its item of interest, name the unpublished source's repository, and identify the source's location within the repository
- Distinguish among the different kinds of published and unpublished sources

GPS Element 3—Analysis and correlation:

- Apply to (1) both direct and indirect evidence, (2) the information used for both kinds of evidence, and (3) the sources containing that information
- Apply analysis to one source or evidence or information item at a time and correlation to compare and contrast more than one source or information or evidence item
- Consider the characteristics and provenance of each source or information item
- If evident from source citations, need not always be discussed in narrative text—are discussed only when the discussion advances an argument or case
- Determine why each information item was created and establish its independence from other such items
- Identify each source as original or derivative and each information item as primary or secondary, thus showing whether or not a source or information item is error prone
- May cast doubt on a conclusion's validity by indicating further research is needed
- May resolve conflicting evidence
- Establish the time lapse between events a source reports and the source's creation
- Assess informant and recorder impartiality, potential for bias, and other aspects of reliability
- Consider whether the information was open to challenge, the source and information were protected against bias and fraud, published sources received prepublication vetting, unpublished sources were protected against tampering throughout their provenance, and any source shows a sign of alteration at any time in its history
- Compare and contrast information items from one or more sources (usually more than one)
- Reveal conflicting evidence
- May yield the “sum” of the evidence

GPS Element 4—Resolution of conflicting evidence:

- Addresses three kinds of conflicts (direct versus direct evidence, direct versus indirect evidence, and indirect versus indirect evidence)
- Uses one or more (usually more than one) bases for resolving conflicts
 1. Nonsubstantiation—only one source or evidence item supports one side of the conflict, while multiple sources or evidence items support the opposing side.
 2. Qualities of evidence supporting one side of the conflict suggest it is error prone, and qualities of evidence items supporting the opposing side suggest they are not vulnerable to error.
 3. A plausible rationale explains why the evidence differs and discounts the evidence supporting one side of the conflict.

GPS Element 5—A written conclusion:

- Depending on the complexity of the conclusion's rationale, may be in the form of a proof statement (one or a few sentences), proof summary (one or a few pages), or proof argument (several or many pages)
- May include one or more lists or tables or both, along with narrative
- Is thoroughly documented
- Is clearly written
- Explains the resolution of any significant conflicting evidence
- Provides a convincing rationale for why the conclusion is correct
- Focuses on *why* the conclusion is correct, not *how* the author found the evidence
- Reveals through citations and narrative text how all applicable GPS elements are met

Simple Cases

Uncomplicated conclusions require a clear statement, sources as close to the original as possible, and sometimes nothing more. If a documented statement's citations indicate straightforward evidence, adequate research breadth, and strong evidentiary qualities, knowledgeable consumers will see that it meets the GPS. In self-evident cases, discussion of evidence beyond what citations provide could be redundant.

Assessing Your Own and Others' Work Against the GPS

- Does it have a clear research question and answer? What are they?
- Does it cite all sources needed to answer the question?
- Do the citations and text indicate the supporting evidence is reliable?
- If the conclusion rests on any error-prone source, does the author justify its use?
- If analysis is needed beyond what the source citations reveal, does the author provide it?
- Is correlation of relevant evidence shown in narrative, notes, lists, tables, maps, or a combination?
- Is the conclusion based on correlated evidence?
- If evidence conflicts on significant points, is it resolved?
- Does the author convincingly explain or show *why* the conclusion is correct?

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