Maximize Your Research Time

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It can be easy to lose track of time when you are excited about a research project. Before you know it, the day is over and you have yet to answer that nagging research question. One way genealogists can work more efficiently and maximize their research time is by articulating a clear vision of what they want to accomplish. By remaining focused on this vision, genealogists will avoid pitfalls, rabbit holes, and chasing the wrong ancestor, all of which suck away their valuable time without moving a project forward.

Objectives

This presentation will address how to:
- Write a SMART, focused research goal that directly relates to achieving your vision.
- Create a solid research plan using the best records for completing your goal.
- Thoroughly read and analyze the records you locate, resolving conflicting evidence.
- Accurately and completely record your research with logs, timelines, tables, charts, and forms.
- Draw conclusions based on your analysis and share your research to encourage collaboration and accuracy.

Finding Your Vision

A vision is:
- What future success looks like for you.
- The really big picture.

If you can see it, you can be it (or do it).
- Write down your vision and refer back to it often!
- Post your vision on the wall in your office or make it into a graphic for your computer screensaver.

Writing SMART Goals

If reaching your ultimate vision is like climbing a staircase, each step represents a separate goal to get you to the top. The key to writing effective goals that will make the most of your time is to make sure they are SMART.

SMART is an acronym that stands for:

- Specific: The goal is detailed enough that you know exactly for what you are looking.
- Measurable: The goal is one you can tell is complete.
- Attainable: The goal is one that can reasonably be achieved.
- Relevant: The goal ties directly back to your vision.
- Timely or time-centered: The goal is one with a deadline OR one which logically follows the one before it. In genealogy, it can also be focused on a particular time period.

Keep your goals simple. Remember they are single steps, not leaps and bounds. Reach your vision by climbing steadily, not trying to race to the top. When writing a goal, ask yourself these questions:
- What do you already know?
- What do you want to learn?
- What is the next step?

Create a solid research plan

Plans are the roadmaps to our goals. They include the who, what, where, when, why, and how we will achieve success. Achieving a goal requires planning and preparation.
- Work on one goal at a time to help you stay focused. Write your goal on a sticky note and post it on your computer monitor or your notebook.
- Outline a clear action strategy. What does your path to success look like?
- Use the best sources. The Record Finder tables on the FamilySearch Wiki can be very helpful. Over 300 of these tables are available for research around the world.
    - United States Record Finder:
      https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Record_Finder
        - Vital Events
        - Maiden Names and Family Members
        - Immigration and Country of Origin
        - Residences and Locations
        - Personal Details and Affiliations
    - Other Record Finder Tables:
      https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Category:Record_Finder
- Pay attention to jurisdictional and boundary changes.
    - Your ancestor could have lived in the same house for 50 years, but resided in four different counties! You will need to search records for each jurisdiction in which your ancestors lived, including city, township, county, state, and country.

Plan your searches in advance to stay focused on your goal.

Evaluate the evidence

Thoroughly evaluating the evidence you find will save countless hours of research time. Genealogists may want to skim over a record looking for a particular piece of evidence, disregarding other clues.

- Thoroughly read and analyze each record. Do not skip any columns, notations, or other items you might not understand.
- Transcribe, abstract, or extract the records. This will force you to slow down and notice all the details. It will also help you more quickly locate particular clues in your notes.
- Look at the records before and after those of your ancestor(s). Often there is additional information that can help answer your research questions.
- When evaluating a record, try asking yourself these questions:
  - To whom does this apply?
  - What does it mean?
  - Does this evidence fit with what I know?
  - Is there conflicting data?
  - Can I trust this information?
  - What clues does this give me for future research?

Pay attention to the type of source, information, and evidence you find:

- Original vs. derivative sources:
  - An original source is more desirable than a derivative source. It is one that was first created.
  - A derivative source is a source made from an original, such as an index, a transcription, an abstract, or an extract. A photocopy or microfilm is also a derivative source, but in most cases these are considered to be nearly as good as an original (unless the copier forgot to copy the back of the document or something else equally important).
- Primary vs. secondary information
  - Primary information is first-hand information, or a description of something by an eye-witness.
  - Secondary information is second-hand information, or information from someone who heard it from an eye-witness (or someone else). If you have ever played the game "telephone," you know the importance of getting primary information!
- Direct vs. indirect evidence
  - Direct evidence is that which states a "fact" (even if it is incorrect), such as a document which says, "John Smith was Robert Smith's father."
  - Indirect evidence states information from which you can try to infer a fact. An example of this could be a household in the 1870 U.S. census where Robert Smith is listed as the head of household and John Smith is a child in that household, but no relationships are listed. Indirect evidence always

needs additional supportive evidence. Be careful evaluating your evidence! Depending on the source, indirect evidence can be more reliable than direct evidence.

Resolve all conflicting evidence:
- Decide which source is the most reliable.
- Does the evidence make sense?
- Do all sources with the same information come from the same informant? (If so, they could ALL be wrong.)
- Choose what makes the most sense based on all the evidence and be able to explain why you came to that conclusion.

Accurately and Completely Record Your Research

Keep a research log. This is an easy-to-read map of where you have been and where you are going. It should include the following information:
- Date of search.
- Purpose of search (this helps keep you focused).
- Source, including full source citation with name of repository, collection, file, database, name of ancestor, type of document, volume, page number, etc. Writing "Ancestry.com" or "FamilySearch.org" is not sufficient.
- Notes. This includes transcriptions, abstracts, or extracts of the records. Don't forget to record negative searches, too!
- Record or document number to coordinate your files.
- There are many types of research logs. The best one is the one you will use!
- More forms here:
  https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Use_Appropriate_Forms
  See also this wiki page with links for recording research results:
  https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Category:Recording_Research_Results

Create timelines. Timelines help you "see" your ancestor's life and where you have gaps in information
- Example of using timelines:
  https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Timeline_Grids

Use Pedigree Charts and Family Group Records. Pedigree Charts help organize generations. Family Group Records organize nuclear families.

- Each individual on your pedigree chart should be represented on at least two different family group records – one as a child with parents and one as a parent with children.

- As you record the information, be sure to include source citations and be consistent with place names and other details. You should be able to copy your source information from your research logs.
- Look here for examples and links:
    - https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Family_group_record:_roadmap_for_researchers
    - https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Category:Charts_and_Forms

Use extraction forms. Extraction forms help you efficiently gather all the information from certain records.
- Many extraction tables can be found online for census and other records.
- Look here for examples and links:
    - National Archives and Records Administration
      https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/charts-forms
    - FamilySearch.org
      https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Forms
    - Ancestry.com
      https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/Free-Charts-and-Forms?language=en_US

Draw Conclusions and Share Your Research

All the research you do is only as good as the conclusions to which it leads. These conclusions should always be written down. A proof statement, proof summary, or proof argument will tie everything together.

Writing a research report will not only summarize what you have researched, it will remind you of your research goal, the starting point of your research, why you searched particular records, what you found, what the evidence means, how realiable it is, where it leads, and what you can conclude. It also gives you a starting point for your next research goal.

A simple research report has five parts:
1. Research objective or goal
2. Background information
3. New evidence and analysis
4. Conclusion
5. Suggestions for future research

The process of writing a research report will illuminate any gaps in your research or places where you may have jumped to a conclusion without sufficient evidence.

Sharing with others encourages collaboration and high-quality research, sparks new ideas, and brings new information to light.

Ways to share can include:
- Family reunions
- Social media
- Newsletters or journals
- Blogs
- Public trees or websites

Summary

In order to maximize your research time, it is essential to begin with a clear vision of what you want to accomplish in the sphere of genealogy and family history. This will help you articulate SMART goals that will help you reach your vision in the most efficient manner possible. Some have asked, "How do you eat an elephant?" Achieving a vision is like eating an elephant. It is a very big project and not something you can accomplish in an hour or two. The answer is, "One bite at a time." The bites are the goals you set. If your goals don't pertain to your vision, then why are you pursuing them?

Once you have decided on a SMART, focused research goal, you need to create a solid research plan using the best records for completing that goal. Record-finder tables can help in this regard by guiding you to the records most likely to answer your research questions. This way, you will be following the most direct path to success.

After finding the records, you need to thoroughly read and analyze them, resolving all conflicting evidence by choosing which records are the most reliable. Make sure you are also accurately and completely recording your research using logs, timelines, tables, charts, and forms. Always cite every source.

Finally, draw logical conclusions based on your analysis and share your research to encourage collaboration and accuracy. Writing a research report is a great way to bring all of your research together and it also makes it easy to share in a succinct manner. The report can also guide you in starting your next research project without wasting time trying to remember where you were and where you were going.

Following these steps can help reduce unnecessary work in the research process and will allow you to maximize your time, efficiently solving your research problems.