

Genealogy Research Tips from Professional Researchers



HOW TO GET STARTED

You've begun your journey into family history and may have already started building your Ancestry® tree. You've covered the basics: beginning with your immediate family, collecting stories from older generations, and adding names, dates, and locations to your tree. Now, you might be asking yourself—what comes next? Christina Copland, a professional genealogist, and expert researcher, shares the following tips for taking your research further.

✓ **Be systematic**

It's tempting to try to dive into researching all your ancestral lines. Avoid getting overwhelmed or missing important details about your family by focusing on just one branch of your tree to start with. Those other lines will still be waiting for you when you are ready to tackle them.

✓ **Get the most from the records**

Indexes and databases are a great way to get started with your research. They only tell a fraction of the story, however. Always take a look at images of historical documents. Not only might these records help make sure you've found the right person, but these images will reveal a wealth of rich detail about your ancestor's life you won't find on an index.

✓ **Search strategically**

Be sure to get those search parameters right when searching the Ancestry® site. Name spellings often varied in the past and keeping that "exact search" box checked might mean you miss a key record. On the other hand, you want relevant results. Focus your searches geographically on the broad region your ancestors lived in, such as a specific county or state. Narrow your search settings to a ten or five-year period around the date you think an important event such as a birth, marriage, or death, took place.

✓ **Keep an open mind**

Maybe you aren't finding an ancestor where you "expect" to. They just seem to appear out of thin air, or perhaps something about their life just doesn't add up. Don't be discouraged: instead, think creatively. Your family member might have been born far away - maybe thousands of miles - from where they lived in later life; long-distance migration, for example, became an increasingly available option from the mid-nineteenth century. Your forebears might

have lived in a more complex family structure, with multiple spouses or stepparents. They might even have taken on a whole new identity, discarding their old names and jobs and started a new life entirely.

RECORDING ORAL HISTORIES: HOW TO GET A GREAT STORY

Collecting the oral histories and memories of loved ones is a powerful way to preserve and share your family's legacy. Erika Manternach, a professional writer and interviewer with AncestryProGenealogists®, offers these tips to help you get started:

✓ Focus on One Story at a Time

Choose a specific time period or theme in your family member's life. For example, ask them to share stories about their travels, military service, or life before you were born.

✓ Start with What You Know

Use any information you already have as a starting point for the conversation. Let the discussion unfold naturally while asking follow-up questions about the most captivating details.

✓ Ask Open-Ended Questions

Avoid yes-or-no questions, as they tend to lead to short answers. Instead, try phrases like "Can you tell me more about that?" or "Why do you think that happened?" to encourage deeper stories and insights.

✓ Create a Comfortable Atmosphere

Listen with empathy and ask non-judgmental questions. Make your family member feel at ease by maintaining relaxed body language and offering comfortable seating. A favorite snack or beverage can also help them open up and share more freely.

PLANNING A TRIP TO YOUR ANCESTRAL HOMELAND:

Visiting your ancestral homeland offers a unique opportunity to connect more deeply with your heritage. Heritage travel is not just about discovering your past—it deepens your understanding of who you are today. Kyle Betit, a professional genealogist and the manager of Ancestry's travel program, offers the following tips for making the most of an ancestral visit:

✓ Research Your Family History in Advance

Before you go, gather as much information as possible about your ancestors' lives and locations. Use genealogical records, family stories, and DNA results to pinpoint the towns, villages, or regions your family came from. The more details you have, the more meaningful and focused your visit will be.

✓ **Connect with Local Resources**

Reach out to local historical societies, genealogical groups, or archives in your ancestral region before your trip. They may provide access to records, local insights, or even connect you with living relatives. Professional genealogists can also assist with navigating language barriers and unfamiliar research methods.

✓ **Plan Visits to Key Locations**

Identify places with personal significance, such as ancestral homes, churches where your ancestors married, or cemeteries where they are buried. If available, look for old maps or photographs to compare past and present. Walking in your ancestors' footsteps can be a deeply emotional experience, so plan your itinerary with care.

✓ **Leave Room for Spontaneity and Exploration**

While it's essential to plan your visits to key locations, allow some time for exploration. Visiting local markets, meeting locals, or wandering the streets your ancestors may have walked can lead to unexpected discoveries and connections, enhancing your overall experience.

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR ANCESTRYDNA® RESULTS

Many people take a DNA test primarily for their ethnicity results, but can these results actually aid your genealogical research? The answer is, "it depends." Here are some tips from Angie Bush, a genetic genealogist from AncestryProGenealogists, on how to make the most of your DNA test results:

✓ **Connect Your Family Tree to Your DNA Test**

Linking your family tree to your DNA results allows Ancestry's algorithms to match you with close and distant relatives. These connections can help you overcome research challenges. Remember, genealogy is a team effort!

✓ **Test the Oldest Generation Possible**

If you can, test the DNA of older relatives. Testing two of my grandparents led to significant discoveries, as they had key matches I didn't have.

✓ **Use the "Shared Matches" Tool**

The "Shared Matches" feature helps you identify which of your DNA matches are related to you through specific family lines, such as your grandparents or great-grandparents. Use colored dots to label each group of shared matches. If you find matches that don't align with known cousins, these could be the keys to breaking through your genealogical roadblocks.

✓ Explore Your Ancestral Journeys

The “Ancestral Journeys” feature can indicate whether you have grandparents or great-grandparents from specific regions. Take advantage of the historical insights provided to learn more about migration patterns and historical context, which can lead to new records or a deeper understanding of your ancestors. For instance, discovering that many people from the East of England were non-conformists led me to find the marriage records of my second-great-grandparents in Methodist records rather than Anglican ones.

KNOWING WHEN TO ASK FOR HELP

Embarking on the journey of uncovering your family’s history is exciting and rewarding but can also be complex and time-consuming. If you’re feeling overwhelmed or hitting dead ends, it may be a good time to consider working with a professional genealogist. Here are some key areas where a professional can provide valuable assistance:

✓ Limited Time and Resources

If your schedule is tight or you lack access to certain records, hiring a professional genealogist can save you time. Prioritize your research goals and clearly outline what you hope to achieve, allowing the genealogist to focus their efforts more effectively.

✓ Breaking Through Brick Walls

Every genealogist faces roadblocks, or “brick walls,” during their research. These obstacles can be frustrating, especially when you’ve exhausted all known resources. Professional genealogists have advanced research skills and experience with difficult cases. Sometimes, the smallest clue can unlock a breakthrough. Collaborate with the genealogist, providing family stories or any hints that may lead to new research directions.

✓ Expertise and Knowledge

Genealogical research requires a deep understanding of historical contexts, record types, and specific research methods. Professional genealogists have developed these specialized skills over years of experience and stay updated on the latest research techniques and tools.

✓ Preserving Family Stories

Genealogy goes beyond tracing names and dates—it’s about preserving your family’s stories and heritage for future generations. Professional genealogists recognize the importance of capturing and documenting these narratives. Be sure to share family photographs, letters, and documents with a professional genealogist. These items can provide crucial clues, helping to build a fuller, more detailed picture of your family’s history.

✓ **Dual Citizenship**

If you're interested in exploring dual citizenship based on your ancestral heritage, professional genealogists can help. They can guide you through the often complex process of gathering necessary documents and working with relevant authorities in your ancestral country.

✓ **Heritage Travel**

Professional genealogists can also help you plan heritage travel, allowing you to visit the places where your ancestors lived. They can assist in uncovering local records, connecting with living relatives who may still reside in those areas, and creating a meaningful journey to connect with your ancestral roots.

AncestryProGenealogists is the professional research division of Ancestry®, the world leader in family history and consumer genomics. Our team consists of expert researchers, professional writers, and designers from across the globe, all dedicated to helping clients uncover their family histories. We conduct worldwide research using a combination of DNA analysis and traditional genealogical methods. We also plan heritage travel itineraries, create custom family books, and conduct oral history interviews to preserve your legacy.

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