

TEN COMMON RESEARCH MISTAKES AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

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Mistake # 10 – Failing to record information on standard genealogical forms

Regardless of the nature of the information you discover, always enter it onto a standard genealogical form. The purpose of these forms is to keep you organized. Many beginning genealogists write down information on napkins, scraps of paper, or the backs of envelopes, and then fail to transfer the information to its proper place on a standard form or software program. Standardized forms also provide something for others to work with after you have passed your research on to them. But remember, whether it is a five-generation pedigree chart, a family group record, or any other standard research form, these forms are only road maps to future research and not the finished project.

Mistake # 9 – Ignoring the siblings of the ancestors you are researching

Once beginners start using a five-generation chart for their data entry, many become too reliant on the form and overlook the collateral lines. In approaching research, these individuals can provide valuable clues. When researching a census, for example, you might find the parents of an ancestor living with one of their other children. Not only will this provide you with the names of the parents, it also places the parents in a location that can then lead to additional information.

Researching collateral lines may also lead to a previously unknown relative who is also doing research on the family. These distant cousins can often provide the big break you've been hoping for.

Mistake # 8 – Overlooking the maiden names of female ancestors

Many beginners simply forget to record a female's maiden or birth name in their research. It may be easy to think of our female ancestors and relatives by their married names, enter the information accordingly, and then ignore that entire line. Even if you are not including female lines in your project, you should still record the maiden names. This might provide a valuable clue for future research since some families use the mother's maiden name as a middle name for the oldest male child. This information could help identify the correct male ancestor when there are two or more candidates in the same place and time.

Mistake # 7 – Assuming you are related to a famous person who shares the same surname

It is tempting for people with a family name like Boone or Crockett or Lincoln to assume they are related to the famous person commonly associated with that name. Then, based upon that assumption, they begin their research from that point, trying to work from the famous person to themselves. This is not a good research approach. Remember to start with yourself, work backward in time, prove the connection between each generation, and record where the information was found. Then, if you prove the connection to that famous person, you'll really have something to brag about.

Mistake # 6 – Skipping a generation

In many families it is common for three or more generations of male ancestors to have the same name. A situation like this can lead the beginner to list a male as the father when he is really the grandfather. In such cases it is very easy to skip a generation. To avoid making this mistake, be careful to gather as many dates as possible and evaluate carefully the facts that are uncovered, such as dates and place names.

Mistake # 5 – Assuming a family name is only spelled one way

Beginners often have the notion that their names have always been spelled a particular way through the generations. In our own research we have seen the Willard name spelled several different ways: Willard, Wellard, Williard, Wilard, Wylarde, even Wilardo. If we are searching alphabetically through an index seeking this family name, we have learned to check each of these variations since information can be listed where we least expect it. One of the best exercises for beginning geologists is to spell the name being researched as many different ways as possible (phonetically). While searching all the variations of a family name can add extra time to research, the results will often make it all worthwhile.

Mistake # 4 – Jumping to conclusions based on insufficient evidence

Genealogy is all about proof. If you approach your research correctly, you should start with yourself and work backward, one generation at a time. The key to success is to prove conclusively the link between the generations. Like any good detective, you must gather the evidence, evaluate the evidence in context, and reach a conclusion based upon corroborating evidence. Reaching a conclusion based upon incomplete evidence can jeopardize the case. It may be easiest to develop a “working theory” first. When you are uncertain of a relationship—e.g., husband/wife, parent/child, sibling/sibling—form a theory or hypothesis first. But remember, no conclusion should be reached until proof is found to substantiate the theory.

Mistake # 3 – Researching the wrong family

Here, a researcher quickly accepts the incorrect assumption of a relationship between two people and continues his or her research from there. We have seen examples where as many as ten generations of research have been done and done well—but it was done on the wrong family line. That is a considerable amount of time and energy spent researching someone else’s family tree. Suggestion: do not proceed to the next generation of research unless you have concrete proof of a link between those generations.

Mistake # 2 – Relying on online data found in a family tree

While the Internet has been a fantastic aid to genealogical research by bringing billions of names to the fingertips of computer-savvy researchers, it has the potential to be a source of mis-information as well. Because of its reach, even just a little bit of incorrect information posted on an accessible website can quickly infect a number of research projects. While plenty of quality Internet sources exist for the genealogical researcher, it is always best to approach any unfamiliar source with a healthy dose of skepticism. Remember, just because the information is found on the Internet does not make it accurate.

Mistake # 1 – Failing to document your sources

The single greatest error in genealogical research is failing to document where you found your information. Our own individual research is not an end in itself, it is part of a much larger body of information. At some point our research will become part of an enormous database (if it hasn’t already). Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others will easily access our data in the decades ahead. We owe it to them to be accurate in our research and to document where we found our information so we don’t proliferate inaccuracies.