



Genealogy 101

A Beginner's Guide to Starting Your Genealogy Research



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Genealogy research is the process of discovering and documenting your family's history. This guide will walk you through the basics step-by-step and introduce tools, records, and best practices to help you begin your research journey.

Step 1: Plan your research project

Identify your research goals. What would you like to discover and why? Common goals include researching a specific ancestor, charting your families' migration story, and mapping a complete family tree.

- Consider how you will organize your information. Some methods include:
 - Paper folders & notebooks
 - Spreadsheets
 - Computer programs and software
 - Online platforms such as *ancestry.com* and *familysearch.org*.
- Familiarize yourself with genealogy basics such as common terms, record types, and search strategies. Common genealogy terms are listed at the end of this handout. See our Genealogy Resource Guide for recommended how-to books, local organizations, and more.
- Identify local organizations and experts that may assist you. These can include genealogical societies, local libraries, and historical societies.

Step 2: Start with yourself

Genealogy always begins in the present with yourself and works backwards. Begin by identifying what you already know about your immediate family history. Gaps are expected at this stage. Your goal is to record known information and identify future research questions.

- Write down everything you already know about yourself and your family. Common facts genealogists research and record about their ancestors include:
 - Full names & possible name changes
 - Key life dates (birth, marriages, deaths, burials)
 - Key places (birth & death locations, residences, burial sites & graves)
 - Occupation, education, religion, personal histories, military service
- Ask immediate family members what they know. Begin opening the door for further

conversations.

- Begin looking for documents that your family already possesses including photos, letters, scrapbooks, religious items such as family bibles, etc.

Step 3: Begin a pedigree chart (family tree)

Use the information you've gathered from yourself and your family and organize it into a pedigree chart (colloquially known as a family tree). You will add to this document as you continue your research.

Tips:

- For more detail, consider filling out a family group sheet which details a single, nuclear family unit and includes more extensive information including siblings, locations lived, religion, etc.
- Many online options are available for pedigree charts & family group sheets. APL also offers free printouts of both documents.
- Always record women under their maiden names when known.

Step 4: Begin researching vital records

It is now time to begin researching! Focus on one ancestor at a time and move backward generation by generation. Start researching an ancestor by looking for their vital records both in physical and digital repositories. Note any research gaps and questions that you may want to return to in the future. Don't forget to add new ancestors to your pedigree chart!

Start by researching basic information such as:

- Birth, marriage, and death records
- Burial records and gravesites
- Obituaries

Places to search include:

- Ancestry.com and FamilySearch
- Local libraries and historical societies
- Government entities that hold vital records or court records

Be sure to cite your sources and record where you found any information. There are many ways to cite sources but be sure to include enough information that someone unfamiliar with your research could easily find the sources again. This saves you time and allows you or others to verify your work.

Tips:

- Vital records refer to documents such as birth & death certificates, marriage records, and obituaries that offer key information about your ancestor's life. Locating these is often the bread & butter of genealogy research.
- In today's era, there are both physical collections and digital repositories you can use to find and research your genealogy. Often, people start with online databases such as [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) or [familysearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) to begin their research. They then turn to physical collections to fill in gaps and deepen their research.
- Just because a document is not digitized does not mean it doesn't exist! They often are located in physical repositories such as your local library, county recorder's office, or historical society.

Step 5: Deepen your research & address research questions

Now that you have a general outline to your family tree, it is time to deepen your research and address specific gaps in your family history. This may include fleshing out your ancestors' life story, evaluating conflicting sources, or looking for specific vital records, obscure dates, unknown ancestors, and missing locations in your family history.

Additional record types to research include but are not limited to:

- Newspapers
- Military Records
- Court Records
- Immigration and Naturalization Records
- Church Records
- Land Deeds and Property Documents
- Family Oral Histories

Tips:

- As you continue researching you may run into more difficult research questions that require specialized knowledge. This includes adoptive histories, immigration records, finding sources from abroad, or other special situations. When this occurs, consider consulting genealogy guides and books, contacting your local librarian or genealogy group, and even using the internet to learn more about how to approach your specific research question.
- As you continue your research, consider moving beyond vital records and consider the broader historical and social contexts your ancestors lived in. What political, economic, and social changes and events were occurring at the time and how may they have affected your ancestors?
- Often sources will provide conflicting information. It is your job as the family historian to evaluate primary and secondary sources and, when possible, determine their accuracy.

Primary sources are first-hand accounts of an event written during the time period are considered the most accurate. Secondary sources are written after the event occurred and should be evaluated against primary sources when possible.

Step 6: Return to your living relatives and family documents

An optional but *highly* recommended step as you deepen your research is to continue having conversations with living relatives and preserving family materials. It would be beneficial to conduct oral history interviews with living and record it either using one's phone or specialized equipment.

Topics to discuss with family members:

- Relatives that you may have missed on your family tree
- Family stories
- Nicknames
- Immigration histories
- Family traditions

Family materials to document and preserve include family heirlooms, scrapbooks, photographs, religious documents (i.e., family bible), letters, diaries, and certificates.

Step 7: Preserve your research for future generations

Protect your work for future generations who may be interested in your family's history. This could be as simple as organizing your research and keeping it in a safe place or even publishing your own family history!

Preservation options to consider include:

- Digitizing and backing up research to cloud storage or external drives
- Digitizing and scanning key vital records, family trees, heirlooms, etc.
- Writing a family history narrative
- Donating a copy of your research to a local library or history organization.

Common Genealogy Terms

- Ancestor — A person you are directly descended from (parent, grandparent, great-grandparent, etc.).
- Descendant — A person who comes from a specific ancestor.
- Lineage — A line of descent from an ancestor.
- Pedigree Chart — A chart showing your direct ancestors across generations (often called a family tree).
- Family Group Sheet — A form that records details about one nuclear family (parents and

children).

- Vital Records — Birth, marriage, and death records.
- Census Record — Government population count listing households, ages, occupations, and birthplaces.
- Probate Record — Legal records created after death dealing with wills and estates.
- Obituary — A published death notice, often with biographical details and relatives' names.
- Naturalization Record — Documents created when an immigrant became a citizen.
- Passenger List — Ship or travel record of arriving immigrants.
- Church Record — Baptism, marriage, burial, or membership records kept by religious institutions.
- Primary Source — Created at or near the time of an event by someone with firsthand knowledge.

Example: birth certificate

- Secondary Source — Created later or based on secondhand information.

Example: obituary written years later

- Maiden Name — A woman's birth surname before marriage.

Further Readings

Finding Indiana Ancestors: A Guide to Historical Research by M. Teresa Baer (Copy available in Indiana Room - IND GEN 929.1772 F)

Unpuzzling Your Past: A Basic Guide to Genealogy by Emily Anne Croom

The Genealogist's Companion and Sourcebook by Emily Anne Croom (Copy available in APL general collection 929.1 C)

Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace by Elizabeth Shown Mills (Copy available in Indiana Room - IND GEN 929.1 M)

"Start Your Genealogy Research" by the National Archives
(<https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/start-research>)

"Indiana: Local History & Genealogy Resource Guide" by Library of Congress
(<https://guides.loc.gov/indiana-local-history-genealogy>)