

# Incorporating Evidence Analysis in a Research Report

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## Evidence Analysis Strengthens a Research Report

When a researcher merely presents research findings in a research report without analyzing the evidence, the responsibility of analyzing the data and drawing conclusions is placed on the reader, not the researcher who actually examined the records and formulated a hypothesis. When research findings are presented but no analysis or discussion about the evidence is provided, the researcher has in essence performed a look-up service. Most clients expect more.

A genealogist's proper analysis and presentation of data offers the reader an understanding of the research process - why each step was taken, what was learned, and how the collected information led to the stated conclusion. Proper analysis of evidence should lead the reader to the same conclusion reached by the researcher. Competent analysis of evidence increases confidence in the researcher's stated conclusions.

Incorporating evidence analysis in a research report is usually necessary when building a case that uses multiple pieces of indirect evidence to prove a relationship.

## Building a Case with Evidence

Assembling evidence to support or prove a genealogical conclusion is sometimes called "building a case." To build a case, the genealogist takes the following steps:

- Assembles evidence
- Analyzes and weighs the evidence
- Resolves conflicts
- Presents the evidence, analysis, and conclusion properly

### Analyze and Weigh Evidence

To analyze and weigh evidence, the genealogist breaks down a source into the different pieces of evidence it provides and determines the quality of each piece of evidence. Each piece of evidence is weighed according to its accuracy against other pieces of evidence. When evaluating evidence, the genealogist should ask the following types of questions:

- Is the information reliable and free of obvious errors?
- When was the evidence created—at or near the time of the event, or much later?
- What interest did the person or entity have in the record?
- Who was the informant? Was the informant of sound mind and memory?

- Does this evidence agree with other evidence from independent sources?
- Is there conflicting evidence? Can it be resolved through logical and practical reasoning?
- How much “weight” should be given this evidence over other evidence?

A genealogist should not accept something as fact based on one piece of circumstantial evidence. Evidence used to draw conclusions should be as close to the original source as possible.

### **Resolve Conflicting Evidence**

To resolve conflicting evidence, the genealogist must first recognize where the evidence agrees and disagrees. The conflicting evidence is presented fully and accurately in the research report and is evaluated and weighed. A lone conflicting source can be combated with the greater weight of multiple high quality sources. A credible explanation may be given that supports one side of the conflict over the other. All final conclusions stated in the report should be consistent with the evidence presented in the report.

### **Present Evidence and an Analysis of that Evidence**

Begin the report by explaining the genealogical problem. Present the research findings (the evidence) clearly and concisely. If evidence is lengthy, detailed, or complex, consider placing it in a table, graph, timeline, chart, or other format rather than use a narrative form. Include some abstracts or transcriptions of data in the report.

Evaluate of the quality of the evidence that is presented and state your analysis of the evidence. If the evidence is self-evident, no analysis is needed. But most evidence requires analysis. Incorporating evidence analysis becomes easier when broken down into the following four components:

- State the reason why a source was searched
  - Explaining why you chose to search a particular source tells the reader what you were looking for and how that source supports the research objective
- Present the evidence that was found
  - Present the evidence clearly and completely so that the reader will understand
  - Present evidence in a narrative form, bullet list, table or graph, abstract or transcription, etc.
- Evaluate the evidence
  - How did you rate the evidence?
  - How reliable is the evidence?
  - How does it compare with other evidence?
  - Is there any conflicting evidence?
- State conclusions about the evidence
  - State your conclusion about the evidence immediately after your analysis or,
  - Wait until after you have presented all of the evidence

Evidence found in one record may lead to the examination of another record and the cycle begins again. An explanation of how evidence found in one record instigated a search of another record makes a natural transition between the discussion of different sources.

When you need to present and analyze evidence in a research report, incorporate two or more of these four components.

# Becoming an Accredited Genealogist

## The ICAPGen Written Exam

### Evidence Analysis

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One of the hallmarks of a professional genealogist is the ability to quickly and correctly analyze documents. In order to do this we must first understand some terms.

#### Analysis of Sources & Evidence

##### Basic Terms

Genealogists extract evidence from sources, analyze that evidence, and make conclusions based on that evidence in order to prove relationships and correctly link one generation to another.

**Source** - any means through which a genealogist acquires information, including books, documents, images, artifacts, DNA profiles, websites, personal knowledge, etc.

**Evidence** – “information, or an inference from information, used to address a genealogical question” (Source: Thomas W. Jones, “Evidence Analysis Principles for Complex-Evidence Case Studies,” Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy, January 2010).

**Analysis** - the process of studying the nature of a source or determining its essential features and relationship to the problem.

**Proof** - evidence sufficient to establish a thing as true, or to produce belief in its truth.

##### Original and Derivative Sources

Sources are classified as to whether they are originals or derivatives. An original source is a record that has not been copied, abstracted, extracted, or transcribed from any other source. It is the original. A derivative source is obtained from another source in some manner. A derivative source may be an abstract, an extract, a transcription, or a copy of another source. It is not the original source. Copies which have not been altered in any way, such as records that were microfilmed exactly as they appeared in their original state, are usually considered to be equivalent to original sources. Original sources are typically considered to be more reliable than derivative sources.

## **Primary and Secondary Information**

Three criteria must be met for information to be considered as primary information:

1. The facts must directly relate to the event
2. The facts must have been recorded by someone with firsthand knowledge or who had responsibility for recording the event
3. The facts must have been recorded at the time of the event or shortly thereafter

Secondary information is information that was recorded sometime after an event, or was recorded by someone who did not actually witness the event. Primary information is usually considered to be more accurate than secondary information.

## **Direct and Indirect Evidence**

Evidence found in a source may be classified as direct evidence or indirect evidence. Direct evidence supports the existence of a fact without question. Indirect evidence is information that requires additional documentation or analysis to draw a conclusion. Indirect evidence provides clues that may help answer the question, but is insufficient to answer the question by itself.

Also the ability to analyze a research problem and create a successful research plan is another important skill. The first step is to understand the research goal, or in other words, what is the scope of the research problem you are being asked to solve. Begin by creating a research objective.

## **Analysis of a Research Problem**

**Research Objective** – A research objective needs to include complete names, event dates, locations of these and other events and any relationships that would uniquely identify this person or persons. Any personal identifiers specific to the above named individuals should also be stated here. This research objective should then guide all research. The research objective is the first item in the research report to the client. When writing this research report, the conclusion of the report should address the original research objective and state whether or not this objective was achieved.

Once the research objective is clearly stated the next step is to analyze the research problem.

Basic analysis questions are:

- Does the information appear to be reliable and free of obvious errors?
- Are there any clues in the stated facts that would suggest items for a research plan?

- Consider locations, time periods and historical events that may influence the records you will want to search.

**Background** – A professional will consider several things before planning a research strategy. First an understanding of the jurisdictions in which events took place. This usually requires maps and an understanding of both civil and religious boundaries. It's important to know exactly where events took place in order to locate the correct records for a location and time period. Another consideration would be the time period in which these events took place. What records would have been created in this time period. The third item necessary is the availability and access to these records.

Jurisdiction & History Resources:

Wiki.FamilySearch.org – This is a helpful website for background information about a locality.

AniMap – Software by Gold Bug that shows US county boundary changes over the years.

Map Guide to the U.S. Federal Censuses, 1790 – 1920. By William Thorndale and William Dollarhide.

Record Availability Resources: FamilySearch.org – Catalog, FamilySearch.org – Historical Records, National Archives, regional Archives, State Archives, Local Archives & Libraries, Genealogical & Historical Societies

**Research Planning** - Itemize each research suggestion in a research calendar or a research log. A good research calendar/log will contain the following columns: Repository (library or website), call number, source/collection name (be specific), search (what specifically are you searching for and under what terms), results (including condition or records and transcription of records). Rows in the research calendar/log are created for each new item or any additional revised search.

Review the items listed in the Research calendar/log. Will the items listed help the researcher to achieve the research objective? If not then revise the research plan to accomplish the research objective.