

Genealogy Basics A Beginner's Guide

Are you interested in learning more about genealogy, but don't know where to start? This 5-step guide will lead you through the exciting process of discovering more about your family history.

Step 1: Start with what you know (and write it down)

Consider everything you already know about your family, including names, dates, and places. Begin with yourself, then work back in time filling in details about your parents and grandparents. Work from the known to unknown. Pedigree charts and family group sheets are great ways to organize this information.

- [Pedigree Charts](#)¹ allow you to record basic vital information for several generations
- [Family Group Sheets](#)² organize data by family group (parents and children)
- Or even use blank notebook!
- Instructions for filling out charts can be found on the [National Genealogical Society website](#)³

Tip: Connect with relatives who can share family stories and may have documents, photos, heirlooms, bible records, and family history information to provide additional clues. Ask questions!

Step 2: Identify your research goals

Now that you have written down what you know, what information is missing from your notes?

- If you're not sure where to start, begin with:
 - Full names of direct ancestors (parents, grandparents, and great grandparents)
 - Females' maiden names
 - Dates and places of birth, marriage, and death
- Focus on more recent ancestors before researching older generations. *If you jump ahead, you may climb the wrong family tree!* Your discoveries will inform research of more distant ancestors.
- Write down your questions and work on one at a time, starting with most recent.

Tip: Let your curiosity be your guide! Fill in gaps in your charts or dig deeper into an ancestor that captures your interest.

Step 3: Familiarize yourself with the records

There are a variety of records that provide genealogical information:

- Vital records – birth certificates, marriage and divorce records, death records
- Newspapers – obituaries, local news articles, engagement announcements
- Census records (federal and state) – beginning in 1790 and available through 1940
- Wills and probate – last will and testament, papers from estate settlements
- Land and deed records – maps, land ownership, land grants, land sales and transfers
- Federal, state, and local government records – court, tax, naturalization and immigration records
- Church records and cemeteries – baptism/christening, marriage, burial, and membership records

Tip: Laws governing record keeping varied significantly by date and location. The [FamilySearch Wiki](#)⁴ is a great resource for determining where and if records are available for a specific state, county, etc.

Step 4: Research (and organizing your research)

Free online resources, both databases and websites, are a great place to start your search!

Databases you can explore from home ([additional databases](#)⁵ are accessible at library locations):

- [FamilySearch](#)⁶
- [HeritageQuest](#)⁷
- [MyHeritage](#)⁸
- [Newspaper Archive](#)⁹ and [Pikes Peak Newfinder](#)¹⁰ – Digitized newspapers (obituaries, etc.)

Websites to get you started (more website suggestions are available on [PPLD's website](#)¹¹):

- [Find A Grave](#)¹² and [BillionGraves](#)¹³ – Crowdsourced images and indexes of cemetery gravesites
- [FamilySearch Wiki](#)¹⁴ – Guide to locating relevant websites, records, resources (by location)
- [Cyndi's List](#)¹⁵ – Index of online genealogical resources
- [National Archives and Records Administration](#)¹⁶ – Census, military, government records
- [Library of Congress](#)¹⁷ – City directories, county histories, newspaper directories
- [Internet Archive](#)¹⁸ – Free digital library including thousands of genealogy books in public domain

Tip: Many records are only held in local libraries, archives, courthouses, etc. As you continue your genealogy journey you may need to use physical collections in another city or state!

Use the organizational tools below to document the information you find and where you found it.

- [Research Logs](#)¹⁹ help keep track of where you looked for information, what details you found, etc. Verifying your research from the beginning is key – a date or name without a source is hearsay.
- Genealogical software is another option to organize your research – check out this [comparison](#)²⁰.
- In addition to taking notes on paper, basic word processing software or note-taking software such as OneNote (PC), Notebook (Mac), and Evernote (PC/Mac) are helpful for organizing research
- For easy remote access, try cloud storage such as Google Drive, DropBox, OneDrive, or iCloud.

Tip: The [New England Historic Genealogical Society](#)²¹ has tips for organizing your research.

Step 5: Repeat!

Your genealogy journey is never truly over. It's all a matter of how deep you want to dig! Once you learn basic vital information of your immediate ancestors, you can reach further back to more distant relatives or continue searching for additional records to shed even more light on the life of your ancestors.

Tip: Build a community to support you and help push through brick walls – join a local genealogical society or [visit the library](#)²²!