

## Beginning Genealogy Step 2: Decide What You Want to Learn

by Lois Abromitis Mackin

*Editor's note:* In the Summer 2010 issue of *Minnesota Genealogist*, the author outlined five steps that the MGS Beginning Genealogy course is built on. In our last issue, she presented Step 1: Write down and organize what you know. In this issue, she takes us through Step 2.

In the MGS Beginning Genealogy Course, we encourage students to work through five steps:

1. Write down and organize what you know.
2. Decide what you want to learn.
3. Locate a useful source.
4. Learn from the source.
5. Use what you learned.

This column focuses on Step 2: Decide what you want to learn. Here's where you develop focus and objectives for your research.

Many genealogists opportunistically pursue whatever shiny nuggets of information present themselves— new data collections on the Internet, communications from cousins, message board postings, facts that show up in Google searches. Opportunism results in occasional great finds, but is no substitute for a focused approach to family history research.

Writing down and organizing what you know (Step 1) lets you identify gaps in your knowledge of an ancestor or an ancestral family. Do you know the basic genealogical facts—birth, marriage and death dates and places—for your ancestors and their families? Do you have original sources supporting these facts or are you relying on derivative sources? Do you know when your ancestors moved from one place to another? Have you examined all the different kinds of records that may have been generated by or about your ancestors, or only a few?

Once you've identified the gaps in your knowledge and previous research, you're ready to consider which ones to pursue filling. Here are some principles to keep in mind:

- Wise genealogists work methodically from what they know with certainty toward what they don't know (and want to find out).
  - *Corollary:* Don't skip generations! You may find that you're researching someone else's ancestors and you may miss important clues in the records you've ignored.

- Wise genealogists consider their present level of knowledge. This includes what you know about ancestors' lives, as well as your familiarity with the genealogical records needed to answer specific research questions. It may also include knowledge of ancestral languages or legal terms or processes. Do you know everything you need to know in order to pursue a line of research? If not, your first step might be to put together a learning plan or find a researcher experienced in that field or get a reliable translator. You might read how-to books and articles, attend classes, or view Internet tutorials. (*Ancestry.com's* Learning Center and *FamilySearch's* online classes at <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)> are great resources.)

- Sometimes the most fruitful projects are small ones—for example, filling gaps in a family's census history, accumulating a complete set of vital records or finding missing obituaries.

Use the SMART test for any project you are considering. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely. Here's how to determine whether your potential research project is a SMART choice:

- Specific projects are well defined. Objectives like "learning about grandma's family" aren't specific. Narrow down your objective — "learning where Grandma's family lived in 1910."
- Measurable projects have ways to tell how you are progressing and when you're finished. "Look for grandma's birth record" is not a measurable project. "Look for grandma's birth record in the microfilmed Mower County birth registers at the Minnesota Historical Society" is.
- Attainable projects are ones for which you have the knowledge (records, languages, legal terms), skills (interpreting legal documents, plotting land descriptions) and access to the records you need to answer your research question.

- Realistic projects are ones you are willing and able to perform. You must have the time (and, if necessary, money) to pursue them now.
- Timely projects have a reasonable work timeline and completion date.

you have a project that meets the SMART test. Big problems are often solved by a series of smaller SMART projects.

Lois welcomes questions or suggestions for future topics! Contact her at [LoisMackin@aol.com](mailto:LoisMackin@aol.com).

Remember, you can always break big problems into smaller chunks. Keep narrowing the inquiry until

*Original sources are material in its first oral or recorded form—e.g., a vital record, church record, or census record—or an image copy of such a record. (Typically, an image copy is a photographic reproduction, produced either digitally or on film.)*

*Derivative sources are material produced by copying an original or otherwise manipulating information from it. Examples are notes, extracts, abstracts, compilations, indexes, transcriptions, or translations. Get to know Elizabeth Shown Mills' Evidence series for more about these concepts.*



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MGS has a new logo. We also have a new-look website, which is your best source for news about what is happening at MGS. Click on the "Events" and "Education" tabs to learn about upcoming educational events and classes. You will also find information on how to order the colorful, multi-ethnic MGS cookbook – a great gift for children, parents, grandparents or cousins!

If you encounter website problems or have suggestions for improving our website, contact Sandy Stadtherr at [jimstadt@earthlink.net](mailto:jimstadt@earthlink.net).