

Beginning Genealogy Step 4: Learn from the Source

by Lois Mackin

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, and
5. Use what you learned.

Step 4 is where you glean all the possible information and clues from the source you found in Step 3. Here are seven Dos and Don'ts to help you learn from your source.

1. **Do** read the whole source carefully. If it's a form (like a vital records certificate), read all the column headings and labels as well as the entry. If it's a written document (like a will or a deed), read all the "boilerplate"—you may discover gems.

Don't skim for bits of information you are looking for (like the death date on a death certificate) and ignore the rest (like the occupation, marital status, address, spouse's name, or parents' names). You never know what you'll find in a source, and you need to glean everything that's there.

2. **Do** be sure you are reading handwriting correctly. Compare letters you can't read with similar letters on surrounding pages. Know if there are peculiarities associated with the handwriting of the place and time (e.g., the long s, the thorn—often transcribed as "ye" instead of "the," and methods for shortening commonly used words). Check the Resources below for handwriting help.

Don't bumble through the handwriting, ignoring words that don't make sense. The words you ignore might be critical to understanding the document and learning about your research subject!

3. **Do** look up archaic, occupational, legal and medical terms. Is the "infant" listed in your 17th-century ancestor's will a baby, or simply a person below the age of majority? If you know the usage of your ancestor's time, you will be less likely to make mistakes. Our 2010 North Star Conference speaker Tom Jones solved a case by correctly identifying carpenters' tools.¹

Don't ignore terms you don't understand, guess, or assume a meaning. Many terms used in the past had different meanings from today's usage. If you assume that the "infant" in the will is a baby, you'll create incorrect age estimates for the children in

the family you're researching. And if you think your homesteading ancestor's sulky plow was a horseracing vehicle used at the county fair, you're misreading his inventory.

4. **Do** understand the process that created your source. If you're working with census records, read about how censuses were taken. If you're looking at a marriage record, know whether it's a license application, a certificate or a return, and understand how they are different.

Don't look at sources outside the context of their place and time.

5. **Do** make note of who provided each piece of information in the source. Did that person have first-hand knowledge of the information he or she provided? Tip: A source may have more than one informant—for example, on a death certificate, a physician may have certified the date, time, place and cause of death, but a family member may have provided information about birth, occupation, spouse and parents.

Don't assign equal credibility to all the information in the source.

6. **Do** consider creating a word-for-word extract or transcription of the information. You'll be surprised at how much more you notice by doing this. Enter information from forms—census forms, registers or ledgers, for example—into spreadsheets, tables or forms created for the purpose. When you extract, copy the information exactly as you see it, including misspellings, errors and all. Transcribe the entirety of prose documents, such as letters or diary entries. Transcriptions are exact reproductions of what is written, errors and all. You might even want to reproduce the original line breaks to make it easier to verify your transcription against the original. This is particularly useful when transcribing a foreign language document before making a translation. If you need to correct something in your extract or transcription or add notes, enclose your additions in square brackets like this: []. The square brackets tell your readers that the material inside the brackets has been added by you and was not in the original. For example, if the document you are extracting or transcribing lists your research subject's birthplace as "Springfield," you may wish to transcribe the birthplace as "Springfield [Illinois]." Adding "Illinois" in square brackets gives your reader

clarifying information and indicates that it was not in the original document, but was added by you.

Don't grab just the information you want and go. Wills, deeds, affidavits, letters, census records and journals are complex documents. Not only handwriting but vocabulary, word order and sentence structure are important for comprehension. Reproducing the document by extraction or transcription ensures that you grapple with and understand the meaning of these elements.

7. **Do** make note of clues for further research. For example, if a census record says your research subject owned land, make a note to look for land records. If an informant is someone unknown to you, make a note to find out how that person related to your subject.

Don't assume you'll remember to do all these things—most likely, like most of us, you'll forget! So make a checklist.

Resources and Opportunities for More Learning

Reading handwriting

Bailey, Kent P., and Ransom B. True. *A Guide to Seventeenth-Century Virginia Court Handwriting*. Richmond: Virginia Genealogical Society, 2001.

Sperry, Kip. *Reading Early American Handwriting*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1998.

"United States Handwriting," *FamilySearch Wiki* (https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/United_States_Handwriting): accessed 28 September 2001). NOTE: The FamilySearch Wiki has numerous articles on handwriting in many countries. Find them using a keyword search for "handwriting."

Law dictionaries

Black, Henry Campbell, et al. *Black's Law Dictionary*. Look for the 1st (1891) or 2nd (1910) editions. *Black's* is available on CD-ROM from Archive CD Books.

Bouvier, John, et al. *Bouvier's Law Dictionary*. A transcription of the revised 6th edition (1856) is available online at (<http://www.constitution.org/bouv/bouvier.htm>).

Medical terms

Chorzempa, Rosemary. *Morbus: Why and How Our*

Ancestors Died: a Genealogist's Dictionary of Terms Found in Vital Records with Description of the Diseases as They Relate to Health of Our Ancestors. Chicago: Polish Genealogical Society of America, 1991.

See also "Medical and Medicine," *Cyndi's List*; website (<http://www.cyndislist.com/medical>).

Occupational and archaic terms

Drake, Paul. *What Did They Mean by That? A Dictionary of Historical and Genealogical Terms, Old and New*. Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, 1994.

Evans, Barbara J. *A to Zax: a Comprehensive Dictionary for Genealogists and Historians*. Alexandria, Virginia: Hearthside Press, 1995. Orem, Utah: Ancestry, 2000.

Sperry, Kip. *Abbreviations & Acronyms: a Guide for Family Historians*, revised 2nd edition.

The Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford: Oxford University Press, various editions, including an online edition. The OED is very expensive—look for it at large libraries. For example, Hennepin County Library subscribes to the OED online edition.

See also "Occupations," *Cyndi's List*; website (<http://www.cyndislist.com/occupations/>).

Blank census forms

Ancestry.com; website (<http://www.ancestry.com>)
Printable forms.

Census Tools; website (<http://censustools.com>).
Electronic spreadsheets, available for a modest cost.

See also "United States > U.S. Census > Printable Charts and Forms," *Cyndi's List*; website (<http://www.cyndislist.com/us/census/forms>).

Extracting, transcribing and abstracting

Bell, Mary McCampbell. "Transcripts and Abstracts," in Elizabeth Shown Mills, ed., *Professional Genealogy: a Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2001.

National Genealogical Society, *Transcribing, Extracting, and Abstracting Genealogical Records* (online course). Available at <http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/transcribing>.

Lois welcomes questions or suggestions for future topics! Contact her at LoisMackin@aol.com.

Source:

1. Thomas W. Jones, "The Three Identities of Charles D. McLain of Muskegon, Michigan," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 96 (June 2008): 101-120.