

10 Common Genealogy Mistakes

Jacky Gamble outlines ten common mistakes and how to avoid them when doing genealogy research

Beginning your genealogy can be an exciting and interesting journey. Through census records, birth and death certificates, military documents, and many other historical records, you are able to locate information on ancestors you had never even heard of before. This leads you to wanting to find more information, and even more after that. And before you know it, you have a chaotic mass of information and documents and no clue where any of it is, where you got it, or where to go from here. This confusion is often caused by several mistakes commonly made by new genealogists, but is completely avoidable given a little organization and a few tips from an experienced genealogist who was once in your shoes.

1. Don't Neglect to Document Your Sources

Documenting your sources may take a few extra moments now, but will save you time in the future. You will have a reference to look back at if there is ever a question about conflicting information, or if you realize that you didn't get all the information from a particular source. You also provide credibility to your research by letting others know where you obtained the information.

2. Don't Believe Everything You See

Just because a family history is published in a book, or online, does not mean that it is accurate. There are likely to be a few (or many) transcription errors, typos, or missing information in any compiled genealogy. It is also common that genealogical records found on the Internet contain transcription errors. Avoid making the same mistakes in your genealogy by always verifying the accuracy of information yourself through other documented sources.

3. Don't Limit Yourself to Just One Spelling

For various reasons, the spellings of names may change over time or between records. Illiteracy was quite common during the 18th and 19th centuries, due to limited education or language barriers among immigrants. For this reason, persons filling out documents often misspelled names. It was also common for immigrants to change their surnames to sound "more American," or to adopt the English translation of their foreign name. If you are experiencing difficulties in locating a document for a particular ancestor or family, write down any possible spellings of their names, listing common mispronunciations, alternate spellings, or language translations.

4. Keep a Research Log

Research logs assist you in tracking repositories where you have obtained information. These timesaving charts can keep you from accidentally looking for records in the same place twice, while also allowing you to recall where information came from should you later question it. Your research log should, at the very least, list the repository's name, type of record found, and the ancestor who the record was about. You may also want to include a transcription of the document if you are not making photocopies.

5. Don't Accept Family Legends As Fact

Virtually every family has a few legends that have been passed down through the generations, such as great grandma being a full-blooded Indian or an ancestor who traveled on the Mayflower. While old family stories are fun to share and reminisce about, as a genealogist, you need to be able to separate truth from fiction. Be aware, that through your research, you will likely uncover stories that have become distorted through the passage of time, or some which may not hold any truth whatsoever. Be open to

discovering these facts, but be cautious when sharing your findings with other family members who may become upset to learn that their beloved stories and legends were falsified or exaggerated.

6. Organize, Organize, Organize!

As you become more and more involved in your genealogy, you will accumulate lots of notes, documents, genealogical publications (such as the one you are reading now), correspondence, and more. The sooner you create a system of organizing that works for you, the less stress you will cause yourself down the road. There are several ways to organize your genealogy findings: computer software programs, online family tree programs, file folders, 3-ring binders, or anything else that you can come up with to help you easily and efficiently keep your genealogical information in order. Charts and forms, such as pedigree charts, family data sheets, and the research logs discussed above, make organizing information neat and simple.

7. Start Small and Expand Later

Researching your genealogy can become overwhelming and chaotic if you attempt to do everything all at once. When you are first starting in genealogy, it is often best to focus your goals on one side of your family. You may also want to focus on obtaining information for your direct ancestors (grandparents, great grandparents, 2nd-great grandparents, and so on). As you progress in your research, you can include other lineages and collateral ancestors (aunts, uncles, and cousins).

8. Don't Become a Name & Date Collector

Genealogy is more than simply collecting a list of names and dates. Your ancestors likely left behind wonderful stories and life experiences that should be remembered and preserved. Look for these memories in newspapers, diaries, military records, old letters, and town history books. If you enjoy writing, you may want to consider compiling some of this information into ancestral biographies. And if you are a history buff in general, you may also find it interesting to research the history of your ancestor's hometowns.

9. Don't Forget Your Living Relatives

Genealogists often become so absorbed in researching their deceased ancestors that they forget a very important piece of doing genealogy: interviewing their living relatives. Living relatives, especially elderly relatives, often contain a wealth of knowledge about your family's history. Make time to ask them about their childhood memories, their parents and grandparents, cousins and siblings, how they met and married their spouse, and any other information they are comfortable providing. With their permission, it is a good idea to record your conversations in case you have any questions about what was said later on. If you cannot meet with a relative in person, send them a letter that explains what you are doing, and ask them if they are willing to share any memories with you.

10. Don't Publicly Publish Information About Living People

The Internet is filled with wonderful genealogy websites, including some that allow users to upload their family trees for sharing with other genealogists. These sites can be a valuable resource, especially to genealogists who wish to connect with long-lost relatives. However, it is important that you leave out information regarding living relatives when publishing your genealogy online. Not only does this cause a breach in a person's privacy, but can also jeopardize their safety.

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