

OPERATION GRANNY FILES

The Spit Test Field Guide

DNA Testing for Genealogy Beginners

Field Guide & Quick Reference

Mission 11 | DNA Testing & Genetic Genealogy

BEGINNER CLEARANCE GRANTED

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Why DNA Belongs in Your Genealogy Toolkit

You've been doing good work. Census pages, vital records, newspaper archives -- you've built a document-based family tree the right way. Now it's time to add a second layer of evidence: the kind you were born with.

DNA genealogy testing doesn't replace your document research. It extends it. A well-matched DNA result can confirm a paper trail you weren't sure about, open a branch of the family you didn't know existed, or shine a light on a brick wall you've been staring at for years. Think of it as another record set -- one that's molecular instead of microfilmed.

This guide covers everything you need to get started: which test to take, what the results actually mean, and how to connect your DNA data back to the document work you've already done.

What Are You Actually Testing?

Commercial DNA tests fall into three categories. Most beginners will only ever need one of them -- but knowing all three prevents confusion when someone at the family reunion starts talking about the Y test.

- **Autosomal DNA** is the standard consumer test -- analyzes DNA from both sides of your family. Everyone can take it. The result is an ethnicity estimate and a list of DNA matches. For beginners, this is the only test you need.
- **Y-DNA** tests the direct paternal line only -- father to grandfather to great-grandfather. Only men can take it directly. A specialist tool for surname research, not a beginner's starting point.
- **Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA)** traces the direct maternal line. Anyone can take it. Excellent for deep ancestral research, but changes so slowly it's less useful for identifying recent relatives.

The takeaway: Buy an autosomal test. Come back for Y-DNA or mtDNA later, if at all.

Which Kit Should You Buy?

Service	Database	Best For	Specialty	~Cost
AncestryDNA	25M+ tested	Beginners -- largest database, best tree integration	Tree-building, record linking	~\$99 (sales: \$59-\$79)
MyHeritage DNA	~9.3M tested	European/international; raw uploads free	Strong Eastern Europe, Scandinavia	Less than Ancestry
FamilyTreeDNA	Smaller pool	Y-DNA and mtDNA specialists; raw upload free	Y-DNA, mtDNA	Varies
23andMe	Large (see note)	See 2026 note before purchasing	Health + ancestry	~\$99+

23andMe -- A Note for 2026: 23andMe filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in March 2025 following a data breach in 2023. The company was restructured under new ownership. The service continues to operate, but long-term stability remains uncertain. Review their current privacy policy carefully before purchasing. For pure genealogy research, AncestryDNA is the lower-risk, higher-match-volume choice right now.

Granny's Recommendation: Start with AncestryDNA. The database is the largest in the world -- and in DNA genealogy, database size is everything. Watch for sales (Black Friday, Prime Day, genealogy conference season). You can always upload your raw DNA to MyHeritage or FamilyTreeDNA for free later.

The Kit-to-Results Process

QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY

Order → Spit → Register → Mail → Wait → Log in.
Plan for 3-8 weeks between mailing and results.

1. **Step 1 -- Order your kit online.** Go directly to the testing company's website. Ships to your door in a few days. No appointment, no needle, no lab visit.
2. **Step 2 -- Register your kit before you spit.** Log into the company's website and register the kit barcode to your account. Do this before collecting your sample -- unregistered kits can be discarded.
3. **Step 3 -- Collect your saliva sample.** Spit into the provided tube. No food, drink, or tobacco for 30 minutes before. Cap, seal, done.
4. **Step 4 -- Mail it back.** The prepaid return envelope is included.
5. **Step 5 -- Wait.** Typical processing: 3-8 weeks. You'll receive an email when results are ready.
6. **Step 6 -- Log in and explore.** Your ethnicity estimate appears first. DNA matches populate as the company compares your sample to new people who test.

Ethnicity Estimates: These percentages are statistical estimates, not certified facts. The same company may give you different percentages six months from now; different companies will give different percentages for the same DNA. Take them as directional guidance, not a birth certificate.

DNA Matches: This is where genealogy work happens. Your match list shows living people who share DNA with you, grouped by estimated relationship. A match with a family tree attached can instantly verify a document trail -- or open a branch you didn't know existed.

DNA Is Another Record Set -- A Wet One

The best genealogy work happens when DNA and documents talk to each other. Neither is complete on its own.

- **Confirm a paper trail.** If your documents show a great-grandparent from County Cork, a DNA match whose tree also traces there is corroborating evidence. It doesn't replace the document - it supports it.
- **Break a brick wall.** A match who has research on the same family line, or a shared match connecting you both to a common ancestor, can open a door your documents couldn't.
- **Apply the FAN Club principle.** Your ancestor's Friends, Associates, and Neighbors may appear in your DNA match list. If you recognize a surname from your document research in a match's tree, investigate.
- **Use shared matches.** Most platforms show which DNA matches you and another match share. This helps figure out which branch a particular match belongs to, even without a tree.

GRANNY PRO TIP

Before your DNA results arrive, make a list of your biggest brick walls -- the ancestors you can't trace past a certain point. Then, when your matches come in, you'll know exactly what you're hoping to solve.

A focused researcher is a faster researcher.

What You Should Know Before You Test

Your DNA data is stored by the testing company. Most services allow you to opt out of contributing to research programs while still using the genealogy features. Review the opt-out settings in your account after activating your kit.

For any testing service, it's worth reading the current privacy policy -- specifically: who owns your data, whether it can be sold or transferred, and how to request deletion if you choose to opt out entirely.

None of this means you should avoid testing. It means you should test as an informed adult who has read the terms.

Checklist before you submit your sample:

- Registered kit to your account online
- Opted out of research participation (if desired) -- find in Account Settings
- Read the company's current privacy policy (look for the "Genetic Data" section)
- Noted where to request data deletion if you change your mind later

Mission 11 Field Assignment

Before your results arrive -- or right now, if you haven't ordered yet -- write down three things:

1. **1. Your biggest document brick wall.** The ancestor whose trail goes cold. Write their name, approximate birth year, and the last place you can document them. This is your DNA search target.
2. **2. The surnames you're hoping to find in your match list.** These are the family lines you want to extend or confirm. Even a short list of five surnames will help you recognize a relevant match immediately.
3. **3. One family question that documents haven't answered.** A rumored ethnic origin, a story that doesn't fit the records, a relative who appeared out of nowhere. DNA may not answer it -- but it's more likely to help if you know what you're asking.

Keep this paper beside you when your results come in.

GRANNY SAYS

"The paper trail told us who they were. The spit test tells us where they came from.

"Between the two of you, you might just figure out the whole story.

"Now go order your kit -- and write down those brick walls first."

Notes

Use this space for personal notes and discoveries.
