

OPERATION GRANNY FILES

GPS Evidence Evaluator

Your Field Guide to Weighing the Evidence

QUICK-REFERENCE CARD | EVIDENCE ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

MISSION 19 — Weighing the Evidence

Clearance Level: ANALYST

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The Genealogical Proof Standard at a Glance

QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY

The Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS) is a five-element framework developed by the Board for Certification of Genealogists. It transforms a hunch into a defensible conclusion. Every element must be satisfied — skip one and your conclusion has a hole in it. Use the checklist below for every research question you try to answer.

The Five Elements — Checklist

| # | Element | The Question It Answers | ✓ |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| 1 | Reasonably Exhaustive Research | Have I checked every source type a competent researcher would check for this question, in this time and place? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 | Complete and Accurate Citations | Does every claim trace to a specific record — repository, collection, image number? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 | Skilled Analysis and Correlation | Have I examined each piece of evidence in context and compared records against each other? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 | Resolution of Conflicting Evidence | When sources disagree, have I explained which I trust more and why? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 | Soundly Reasoned Written Conclusion | Is my reasoning written down in plain language so someone else could follow it? | <input type="checkbox"/> |

GRANNY PRO TIP

"Reasonably exhaustive" doesn't mean "everything ever written." It means you've checked every source type that matters for this specific question in this specific time and place. A question about a 1910 Iowa birth calls for different sources than a question about an 1830 Virginia marriage. Let the question drive the search — not

the other way around.

The Evidence Hierarchy

Information → Evidence → Proof

| Term | Definition | Example |
|--------------------|--|---|
| Information | Raw data found in a source — a name, date, or place. It exists whether or not you need it. | A birth date listed on a census return. |
| Evidence | Information that becomes relevant to a specific research question you're trying to answer. | That same birth date, when you're determining if someone was old enough for military service. |
| Proof | A conclusion supported by evidence that meets all five GPS elements. | After checking census, military, and pension records, resolving a date conflict, and writing your reasoning — you've proven the birth year. |

Three Classes of Evidence

| Class | How It Works | Example |
|-----------------|---|---|
| Direct | Answers the question explicitly. No interpretation needed. | A marriage certificate stating "Thomas married Clara on 2 Feb 1915." |
| Indirect | Contributes to the answer only when combined with other evidence. | Family Bible says Clate was the 2nd child + county records show the 2nd child born 1898 = Clate's birth year. |
| Negative | The absence of expected information tells you something. | A marriage register that notes "guardian's consent" for minors — but this entry has no such notation. Both parties were of legal age. |

Source Evaluation Quick-Reference

Is the Source Original or Derivative?

| Original Source | Derivative Source |
|---|--|
| The actual record created at or near the time of the event. | A copy, transcription, index, or abstract of the original. |
| A church register recording a baptism in 1847. | An Ancestry.com index of that church register. |
| More reliable — fewer opportunities for error. | Use with caution — transcription errors are common. Always verify against the original when possible. |

Is the Information Primary or Secondary?

| Primary Information | Secondary Information |
|---|--|
| Provided by someone with firsthand knowledge of the event. | Provided by someone reporting what they heard, remembered, or assumed. |
| A mother reporting her child's birth date on a birth certificate. | A death certificate listing the deceased's birth date (the informant wasn't present at the birth). |
| Stronger — the informant was there. | Weaker — but not worthless. Evaluate who the informant was and what they could have known. |

GRANNY PRO TIP

A death certificate is an original source, but the birth date on it is usually secondary information. "Original" describes the source. "Primary" describes the information inside it. Don't confuse the two — that's the most common beginner mistake in evidence evaluation.

Conflict Resolution Workflow

When two sources disagree, work through these five steps:

| Step | Action | What to Record |
|------|----------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Identify the conflict | What specific fact do the sources disagree on? (Name, date, relationship, place?) |
| 2 | Evaluate source proximity | Which source was created closer to the event? Earlier isn't always better — but it's a factor. |
| 3 | Identify the informant | Who provided the information on each record? What could they have known firsthand? |
| 4 | Assess reliability | Is each source original or derivative? Is the conflicting information primary or secondary? |
| 5 | Explain your choice | Write 2–3 sentences explaining which source you trust for this specific claim and why. Don't just pick one — explain the conflict. |

BONUS INSIGHT

You can't resolve a conflict by ignoring the source you don't like. If you find two death certificates with different fathers listed, the one you don't use still exists. A future researcher will find it. Your job is to explain why one is more reliable than the other for this specific question — not to pretend the problem away.

Evidence Analysis Worksheet

Instructions: Use one worksheet per research question. List every source you consult. Classify each piece of evidence. Note conflicts. Use the GPS Checklist (Page 1) to verify your conclusion.

Research Question:

Ancestor / Subject:

Evidence Log

| # | Source (full citation) | Original or Derivative? | Information Found | Primary or Secondary? | Evidence Type | Supports or Contradicts? | Notes |
|---|---|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|--|
| 1 | Example: Smith County Death Certificate #4521, 1920, Smith County Clerk | Original | Father listed as "James Smith" | Secondary (informant: brother) | Direct | Supports | Brother had firsthand knowledge of parents |
| 2 | | | | | | | |
| 3 | | | | | | | |
| 4 | | | | | | | |
| 5 | | | | | | | |
| 6 | | | | | | | |
| 7 | | | | | | | |
| 8 | | | | | | | |

Conflicts Identified

| Conflict | Source A says... | Source B says... | Which do I trust for this claim? | Why? |
|----------|------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|------|
| 1 | | | | |
| 2 | | | | |
| 3 | | | | |

My Conclusion (GPS Element 5)

Write your reasoning in plain language. Explain what evidence supports your conclusion and how you resolved any conflicts.

GPS Checklist — Did I Meet the Standard?

| Element | Met? |
|--|------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reasonably exhaustive research | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Complete and accurate citations | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Skilled analysis and correlation | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Resolution of conflicting evidence | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Soundly reasoned written conclusion | |

GRANNY SAYS

A folder full of photocopies is a good start. A folder full of photocopies with this worksheet filled in — that's proof. The difference isn't how much you found. It's whether you thought about what it means.

Notes
