

Incorporating Evidence Analysis in a Research Report

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Evidence Analysis Strengthens a Research Report

When a researcher merely presents research findings in a research report without analyzing the evidence, the responsibility of analyzing the data and drawing conclusions is placed on the reader, not the researcher who actually examined the records and formulated a hypothesis. When research findings are presented but no analysis or discussion about the evidence is provided, the researcher has in essence performed a look-up service. Most clients expect more.

A genealogist's proper analysis and presentation of data offers the reader an understanding of the research process - why each step was taken, what was learned, and how the collected information led to the stated conclusion. Proper analysis of evidence should lead the reader to the same conclusion reached by the researcher. Competent analysis of evidence increases confidence in the researcher's stated conclusions.

Incorporating evidence analysis in a research report is usually necessary when building a case that uses multiple pieces of indirect evidence to prove a relationship.

Building a Case with Evidence

Assembling evidence to support or prove a genealogical conclusion is sometimes called "building a case." To build a case, the genealogist takes the following steps:

- Assembles evidence
- Analyzes and weighs the evidence
- Resolves conflicts
- Presents the evidence, analysis, and conclusion properly

Analyze and Weigh Evidence

To analyze and weigh evidence, the genealogist breaks down a source into the different pieces of evidence it provides and determines the quality of each piece of evidence. Each piece of evidence is weighed according to its accuracy against other pieces of evidence. When evaluating evidence, the genealogist should ask the following types of questions:

- Is the information reliable and free of obvious errors?
- When was the evidence created—at or near the time of the event, or much later?
- What interest did the person or entity have in the record?
- Who was the informant? Was the informant of sound mind and memory?

- Does this evidence agree with other evidence from independent sources?
- Is there conflicting evidence? Can it be resolved through logical and practical reasoning?
- How much “weight” should be given this evidence over other evidence?

A genealogist should not accept something as fact based on one piece of circumstantial evidence. Evidence used to draw conclusions should be as close to the original source as possible.

Resolve Conflicting Evidence

To resolve conflicting evidence, the genealogist must first recognize where the evidence agrees and disagrees. The conflicting evidence is presented fully and accurately in the research report and is evaluated and weighed. A lone conflicting source can be combated with the greater weight of multiple high quality sources. A credible explanation may be given that supports one side of the conflict over the other. All final conclusions stated in the report should be consistent with the evidence presented in the report.

Present Evidence and an Analysis of that Evidence

Begin the report by explaining the genealogical problem. Present the research findings (the evidence) clearly and concisely. If evidence is lengthy, detailed, or complex, consider placing it in a table, graph, timeline, chart, or other format rather than use a narrative form. Include some abstracts or transcriptions of data in the report.

Evaluate of the quality of the evidence that is presented and state your analysis of the evidence. If the evidence is self-evident, no analysis is needed. But most evidence requires analysis. Incorporating evidence analysis becomes easier when broken down into the following four components:

- State the reason why a source was searched
 - Explaining why you chose to search a particular source tells the reader what you were looking for and how that source supports the research objective
- Present the evidence that was found
 - Present the evidence clearly and completely so that the reader will understand
 - Present evidence in a narrative form, bullet list, table or graph, abstract or transcription, etc.
- Evaluate the evidence
 - How did you rate the evidence?
 - How reliable is the evidence?
 - How does it compare with other evidence?
 - Is there any conflicting evidence?
- State conclusions about the evidence
 - State your conclusion about the evidence immediately after your analysis or,
 - Wait until after you have presented all of the evidence

Evidence found in one record may lead to the examination of another record and the cycle begins again. An explanation of how evidence found in one record instigated a search of another record makes a natural transition between the discussion of different sources.

When you need to present and analyze evidence in a research report, incorporate two or more of these four components.