

The Research Process: The WANDER Method

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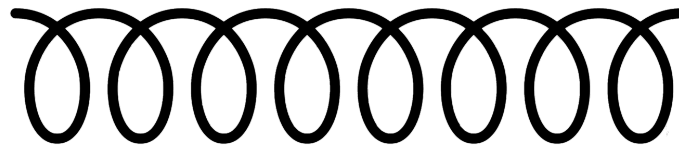
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Research isn't just gathering records and filling in the blanks. What we need is a good process to follow. It isn't a straight line, but following the process is the best way to make more discoveries.

What is the genealogy research process?

Research is often thought of as a straight line. Gather records, fill in blanks. When we think of research as a straight line, we can become frustrated when our research doesn't move forward. In actuality, research is more like a spiral or a coil:



It isn't a straight line, but the curves set us up to make more forward progress in the long term. *It's important to follow it through.*

The WANDER Method

One of the definitions of "wander" is "to follow a winding course." That sounds a lot like our research process! I developed the WANDER acronym to describe that process:

What are you trying to find?
Analyze what you already have
Note what is missing
Discover new records
Evaluate everything
Repeat as necessary

What Do You Want to Find?

Having a specific research question helps you narrow your focus and helps you identify the records you'd like to find first.



Tip: Even having long-term goals can help your research process. Are you focusing right now on just your American ancestors? If so, you might want to consider if you really need an Ancestry “world” subscription or if just the US subscription will do. It will help you focus more and save you some money.

If you've identified William's mother as Mary and you want to find her maiden name, looking at William's land records likely won't help. On the other hand, finding his birth record, death record, all of his marriage records, and the vital records of his siblings are likely to help answer that question.

Analyze What You Already Have

Do you have some of the records already and just overlooked the information? What about the quality of the records that you have?

Note What Is Missing

What gaps exist in the records you have? Do you have his birth record? Do you have the record of William's first marriage, but not his second or third?

These notes become your to-do list. How you compile it is up to you. Some options:

- Maintain a document such as a Word or Google doc or a spreadsheet
- Make notes in your genealogy software
- Paper and pen
- Task/project management software such as Trello

Discover New Records

You've identified the gaps, now go find some records to fill them! Start with the records you noted earlier.



Tip: Keep an eye out for alternative/complementary records. If you find where an ancestor was buried, look for cemetery records. Married by a minister? Look for the church marriage record in addition to the civil marriage record.

Become familiar with the area and the time period in which you're researching. Utilize resources like the FamilySearch Wiki https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main_Page to help determine what records should exist. (For example, if your ancestor was born in

Indiana in 1820, there is no sense looking for a birth record at the courthouse because Indiana didn't keep civil birth records until 1882.) Also use the Wiki to determine what gaps in the records exist due to record loss (fire, flood, etc.)

Don't rely just on the mega websites like Ancestry, FamilySearch, etc. Make sure to cover the bases with:

- The FamilySearch catalog
- Genealogy societies
- Public libraries
- State archives, libraries, and historical societies

These repositories might not have the record online, but they will let you know the kinds of records that exist — records you might not have known about before.

Evaluate Everything

Every source you find needs to be evaluated. However, you can't evaluate it just on its own. How does it fit into the other records that you've found or already had?

Let's say that William's death record and a family history list his mother as Mary (no surname). However, the birth record that you just found lists her as Abigail Johnson. How do you reconcile that?

Repeat as Necessary

Research is rarely a straight line. We usually need to go back to any point in the process.

In our earlier example:

- Death record: Mary
- Family history: Mary
- Birth record: Abigail Johnson

We could go back to "Analyze what you already have." Do we know who gave the information in the death record or family history? Do we have other information that might refute that the birth record we found isn't the right William?

If that doesn't solve the problem, we could go back to "What are you trying to find?" Perhaps we have a theory that Abigail Johnson is the mother and Mary is actually his stepmother. We could ask the question, "Was William's father previously married?" and continue our research with that question in mind.

We could also go back to our notes. One of the things we thought to do was to get the vital records for William's siblings. That could take us back to "Discover new records."

Perhaps we don't know who William's siblings are or we're missing their dates of birth, death, and marriage. That takes us back to "What are you trying to find?"

WANDER-ing

If we think of the research process as being more like a winding trail rather than a city sidewalk, we can be less frustrated when we don't find things.



Tip: Don't skip steps. Don't go from asking a question to searching for new records. (And certainly don't skip "Evaluate Everything!")

With any research problem, consider where you are in the process. What do you need to do next?

Let the process be your guide and you can WANDER into some wonderful discoveries.

Amy Johnson Crow is the founder and lead educator at [Generations Café Circle](https://www.generationscafe.com) and the host of the Generations Café podcast (available on all podcast apps). She's the author of *31 Days to Better Genealogy*, a practical guide for improving your research (available on Amazon). You can find more of her genealogy tips and resources at [AmyJohnsonCrow.com](https://www.AmyJohnsonCrow.com).

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