

Researching Online: Best Practices and Avoiding Mistakes

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The web provides numerous places to locate information relevant to your family history search. In addition to subscription websites, materials from libraries, archives, and other organizations are just the beginning of the potential resources available. As you research online, here are a few tips to ensure your success.

First: Remember that less is often more.

When using search forms, inputting fewer details can often yield more robust results. While subscription websites like Ancestry will typically work to extrapolate a search (to produce more results), working within the confines of a search form enables users to explore a collection more fully. For example, you might:

- Only enter a first or last name (not both) alongside a known relative or location to identify potential transcription errors in names.
- Include characteristics of a family unit rather than names and dates.
- Enter the first letter of a first or last name to account for original records that only list an ancestor by an initial.
- Expand geographical locations to ensure that searches include records for towns, cities, counties, and other settlements that no longer exist.

Move past the global search where possible on subscription websites. Instead, focus on searching specific collections (particularly subscription sites), rather than simply browsing through millions of results from materials you have already explored.

In addition, be sure to spend time looking at how synonyms, alternate spellings, and abbreviations might impact your search. For example, consider the following research question:

"I am searching for the ancestors of Josiah Q. Brown, born about 1825, who died in 1909 in Cornwall, New York.

- Josiah Q. Brown = J.Q. Brown, Josiah Quimby Brown, Quimby Brown, J. Quimby Brown, Josiah Brown, Josiah Q. Brown
- New York = N.Y., NY
- Cornwall, New York = Cornwall, Orange County, New York, Cornwall, N.Y., Cornwall, NY

Second: When using a search engine, plan your search.

Take a few moments to plan your search and develop an online keyword strategy following these simple steps:

1. Write Down What You Want to Find

Remember that you are asking the search engine to answer a question. Therefore, clearly state and describe what you want to find in a sentence.

Examples:

- "I am searching for the ancestors of Josiah Q. Brown, born about 1825, who died in 1909 in Cornwall, New York.
- "I want to find out how to research my family from Buffalo, New York."
- "How many children did Franklin B. Smith have?"
- "When and where did John Shoup marry Mary E. Price."

2. Identify and Underline Keywords in Sentences

Look at the sentence describing what you want to find and highlight keywords and other information you believe is essential to retrieve the answer to your question. For example, names, dates, places, and objectives are generally good keywords to use.

Examples:

- "I am searching for the ancestors of Josiah Q. Brown, born about 1825, who died in 1909 in Cornwall, New York."
- "I want to find out how to research my family from Buffalo, New York."
- "How many children did Franklin B. Smith have?"
- "When and where did John Shoup marry Mary E. Price?"

3. Develop a Basic Search String

Remove words not identified as keywords in your sentences. These words will become the basis for your search string.

Examples:

- searching, ancestors, Josiah Q. Brown, 1825, 1909, Cornwall, New York
- research, family, how to, Buffalo, New York
- children, Franklin B. Smith
- John Shoup marry Mary E. Price

Third: Employ a few shortcuts when using search engines, such as Google.

Boolean Operations

- OR Combine similar words with OR, enclosed by parentheses.
ex: (marry OR married OR intention OR spouse OR bann)
- AND: Combine similar words with AND, enclosed by parentheses.
ex: (married AND date AND place)

- NOT: Use the word NOT to exclude certain words, enclosed by parenthesis
ex: (married NOT bann AND place)

Exclude Keywords

Use a dash "-" to remove any word from your search:

- Boston Massachusetts -revolution
- New York George -Washington
- Gun family -rifle

Parentheses and Quotation Marks

Use parentheses or quotation marks to search for an exact phrase:

- "Cornwall, New York" or (Cornwall, New York)
- "John W. Shoup" or (John W. Shoup)

Truncation

Place an asterisk (*) after a series of letters to search for multiple endings to the series:

- genealog* will return genealogy, genealogist, genealogies
- Thorn* will return Thorn, Throne, Thornapple

Blanks

An asterisk (*) may also be used as a wildcard for an entire term, when used with quotation marks:

- "Thomas * Allison"
- "Cornwall * New York"

Search a Site

Type the word "site" to limit your search to a specific site or domain:

- Shoup site:rootsweb.com
- Civil War site:nara.gov

Ranges

Typing two periods (without spaces) can fill in a range of dates or other numbers:

- Thomas Allison 1750..1760
- War of 1812..1816
- Washington Birth Records 1700..1800

Fourth: Use online family trees effectively

Begin by conducting a thorough search of all major family tree databases, not just one or two.

A select list of resources for online family trees include:

- Ancestry.com ([search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1030](https://www.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1030))
- FamilySearch (www.familysearch.org/tree)
- Findmypast (www.findmypast.com)

- MyHeritage (www.myheritage.com/research)
- WeRelate (www.werelate.org)
- WikiTree (www.wikitree.com)

Be sure to look at sources and other clues within the online tree. Ask yourself:

1. Is the information the same across multiple trees? If not, what are the differences?
2. What date(s) was the information last updated? How often does the user update the tree?
3. Is the tree specific to resources available on the website where it resides?
4. How were the citations created? Were they automated?
5. How many people are in the tree? How might this impact its reliability?
6. What type of materials are cited? Is it only material found on a specific website?
7. Does the citation format conform to an accepted style?
8. Does the citation indicate the user has examined the original document?

Then, go beyond the online tree. Take time to evaluate the creator of the online family tree. Search online for the username or email address if needed. Direct contact through an email or internal messaging system can also be beneficial.

Fifth: Always keep an online research log.

Keep a research log for every site you search—including subscription websites, search engines, or other resources. Once you have begun tracking these advanced categories and other websites on your research log, ensure you spent time examining your searches. Use your research log to become a more efficient online researcher—rather than merely using it as a way to avoid repeat searches. Consider the following elements for your online research log:

<u>Where and When</u>	<u>What</u>	<u>Results</u>
Site/Resource title	Objective	Quantity
Domain	Search parameters	Summary
Subscription level	Phrases or keywords	Reviewed
Date of search	Language settings	
	Techniques	
	Quotations or parentheses	
	Asterisks, wildcards, or truncation	

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