

Making the Most of Google in Family History Research

Online Research Workshop: Using Technology in Family History Research

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Today's genealogical research is most often spent working online. There are many different websites and methods of searching for your ancestors. It is important to keep in mind where you are searching (e.g., databases, general search sites) in order to get the most out of your time online.

Best Practices

Because you are usually researching in the comfort of your own home, searching for your ancestors online may not always be accomplished in the same methodical way you might search in a library or a courthouse.

It is important to avoid distractions—which isn't always easy when your family knows where to find you. And because you may get interrupted, it is even more important to use a *research log* when you are searching online. Additionally, it is too easy to end up down a rabbit hole after following a bunch of links and you may not be able to get back to a valuable site or remember what you were searching for in the first place.

Keep in mind that there are many different types of web sites, with some devoted to genealogy and others made available for many other reasons. Some of the sites most often used by genealogists include:

- Database websites
- Records websites
- Digital books
- Historical societies and archives
- Library websites
- General search engines

Understanding what each of these types of websites offers and how to search them effectively usually requires that you spend some time exploring the site.

Tip: Don't head straight for the database search box.

Spend some time reading a database description. What places are covered? Does it supply you with a set of years? In the case of a library or historical site does it offer you a catalog to search? If so, spend some time getting to know what they have. Also, find out what the purpose is of the society or archive. The more you know about the records they collect, the more you will understand what be useful to you.

Try to get a feel for the completeness of the records being offered. If you can browse the images of a site, take some time to work through some to see if the records are piece meal or a complete volume. Are their missing pages in the scans? Some sites will even tell you how complete a collection is.

When searching general search engines, keep in mind that they are in themselves vast catalogues of the internet and as such include a lot of information that is not necessarily genealogically helpful. Consider using quotation marks around a person's name to ensure you get that name and not anyone with the first name and anyone else with the last name. Consider limiting the search by including a place or a historical event to help narrow your search, especially for common names. Perhaps your ancestor had an unusual occupation. That might also help in narrowing the results.

When searching online databases such as Ancestry and FamilySearch remember that you may know more about your ancestor than the records that have been indexed. It is always best to start out with minimal search information and then, if necessary, add birth year, a place or some keyword, to narrow the search.

Because some of the information that is found online may be a transcript or an abstract, it is always best to try and find original records—likely digital images—to verify that the information in the transcript or the abstract is correct. And don't be afraid to jump into the original images and get a feel for how those records are arranged. Many times, when you type in the name of your ancestor and the link takes you to a document, you download that image and don't take a moment to see if perhaps there are more pages pertaining to an ancestor before moving on.

Tip: Work with a family you are already familiar with.

Hey Google...

If you consider Google to be not only a catalog of items on the Internet, but also a place to look at books, newspapers, maps and images, it may seem a bit overwhelming. However, if you take each of these items separately, using each when it is the most appropriate, and apply sound analysis and research, then you can find a wealth of information at your fingertips. Though you are typing, rather than perhaps talking to your computer, Google can find many things for you. The trick is all in how you search and what you ask for.

Tip: Search for more than a name.

Google is a search engine of many things on the Internet. As a result, researching the people on a family tree needs more than names. There needs to be a context to the search.

Some things to add to your search of an ancestor:

- A year of birth or death
- The town or county where he or she was living

- The name of the spouse or a parent

Looking for history of an area or trying to gather an understanding of the experiences of an ancestor in a given time and place are where Google really excels. And when trying to understand how your ancestor lived or what may have encouraged them to immigrate to a new country or migrate to a different area of a country, the vast resources of the Internet can assist you with your understanding or can point you to a resource you previously didn't know existed.

Keep in mind that the search terms may not always be together, unless you have insisted on a phrase through the use of quotation marks. And Google will sometimes alert you to the fact that one of your search terms was not found in a hit that is included.

Because of all the different things that Google can search, it is a good idea to look at hits from dissertations or theses. While the subject matter of these compilations may not be of interest to you in general, if it fits the time period in question, they may have used records or repositories that you need to be aware of.

The Tower of Babel

The Internet is not just something that exists in the United States. It is worldwide and allows researchers to find information around the world. Sometimes that is as simple as learning who to contact for a vital record, but you may also find a lot of information about a place and its history.

Tip: Search in the language of the country.

While Google can certainly find things from other countries for you if you search in English, searching in the foreign language of the country your ancestors came from brings some resources to that first page of hits.

Don't worry if you can't read the page that Google directs you to. Browsers offer translation options. Though keep in mind that the translation may not always make perfect sense. However, you can usually get the gist of what the site says.

It is also because of the way in which browsers, but more specifically Google, translates our search terms that using the foreign equivalent makes for a more accurate search.

Google Books vs. Google Play

The digitization of books offers researchers the opportunity to find information in books published from long ago up to present day. Often just learning that a book exists about a specific subject allows a researcher to find it either in the library, through a used book store, or to purchase it online.

Google Books are intermixed in the general hits revealed by Google, which are arranged in a ranked

system. However, it is possible to limit just to those hits in Google Books. When looking for what has been published—perhaps something on an occupation, or a minister, or the history of *Pays des Illinois* (Illinois Country)—limiting to just Google Books allows you to eliminate information from the web that may be less accurate or not documented and instead focus on books.

Tip: Don't ignore books that aren't on your specific subject.

When using Google Books, the overall title or topic of the book may not be of interest, but if your search terms appear, then it could be that the bibliography or notes in the book can lead you to valuable record sources and where they are found—especially in the case of manuscript materials.

Google Books has three types of entries:

- Read – this option is usually available for books that are outside of the copyright
- Preview – this option allows either certain pages or a certain number of pages to be viewed without having to purchase the book
- Snippet – this option only alerts you that the book exists and shows you a small rectangle with text in it, usually not enough to garner the information you were seeking.

Google Play is the equivalent to Kindle Reader or iBooks when it comes to purchasing digital books. Because digital books can be accessed on a computer or a smart phone or a tablet with internet access, it allows a researcher to take it with them wherever they are. Sometimes it can be a good idea to purchase the E-book, especially if there are sections of useful information.

The E-books are usually much less expensive than a hardback or paperback and can be purchased and then viewed immediately.

Google Scholar

Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.com/>) is yet another valuable resource available through Google. It offers a way to do some simple searches to find books and journal articles that could be pertinent to your genealogical research. While the articles may not offer information on your specific ancestor, they could lead you to collections in repositories. When available, Google Scholar offers links to online versions of the articles. In other situations, it may lead you to a library catalog entry.

Many universities have highlighted Google Scholar as an avenue for their students to use. For genealogy, it is an excellent way to find information on historical, occupational, religious, and other topics—not only to help you put your ancestors in context but also to lead you to collections of records that you may find your ancestors named in.

Newspapers

Google can point a researcher to some of the newspapers that are found in subscription sites like Newspapers.com and NewspaperArchive.com, but they also have their own cache of digitized newspapers, not all of which are searchable, but for which you may find newspapers for a location and period you need.

Unlike Google Books, where you can select Books from the pull down and limit to just that, finding the newspapers requires going to the following link:

<https://news.google.com/newspapers?hl=en>

The newspapers are arranged alphabetically by the title of the newspaper. You can certainly initially try doing a search in the archives, but to be assured that you have truly exhausted the resource, it may be best to go through the actual newspaper.

Tip: Pay attention to the dates and gaps in dates.

Not all of these newspapers are complete in their runs. It may be possible that some years have more issues than other years. However, if the goal is to try and find information about what was going on in the city or town when your ancestors was living there, then you can use any paper that is available. If the goal is to find a marriage notice or an obituary, certainly look for the possible editions, but they may not be available.

Google Tools

Two additional methods for controlling what you find when searching Google can be found by clicking on the Tools button. Unlike the obvious change in display that you see when you select Books, the Google Tools changes the number of hits to offer two choices with pull down menus:

- Any time – which can then be narrowed from *past hour* all the way up to *past year* as well as *custom range*. These dates pertain to when a page was added.
- All results – which can be narrowed down to *Verbatim* and can assist with some searches of more common words and eliminate those searches in which a search term is not included.

Review

To be effective with your research on Google, keep in mind:

- Create search terms that will give the best results (e.g., not just an ancestor's name)
- Choose to search in the foreign language of the country your ancestors were in
- Be open minded to broader subjects if your search terms are included
- Narrow your search through some of the specific categories such as Books, Tools, or invest in looking at the newspapers