

Evaluating the Evidence

Are Your Facts Proven?

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Source

A source is a record. It is the tangible form in which you find your information, such as a document, a book, a gravestone, a computer file, or a webpage. If you interview someone for information, your source is the person you interview.

Original Source: An original source is the form in which information is first recorded. It provides information that has not been copied or derived from an earlier record. An example is your ancestor's handwritten diary.

Derivative Source: A derivative source provides information that has been abstracted, indexed, transcribed, translated, copied, or otherwise repeated from a previously existing record. An example is a typewritten copy of your ancestor's diary, as transcribed by your cousin.



Information

Information is a statement of fact or knowledge. The accuracy of information is evaluated based on the informant's credibility and degree of participation in the event.



Primary Information: Primary information is a statement of fact or knowledge that is given by a person who was a participant in, or eyewitness to, an event. Primary information comes from someone with first-hand knowledge of the facts. An example is an entry in your ancestor's diary that reads, "September 26, 1866. Yesterday I gave birth to a daughter whom we named Sarah Jane." Primary information may be written by an official charged with creating an accurate record of the event from testimony given by a witness, as with a birth date on a birth certificate.

Secondary Information: Secondary information is a statement of fact or knowledge that is made by a person who was *not* a participant in, or eyewitness to, an event; rather, his or her knowledge comes from hearsay, oral tradition, or some recorded source. Secondary information is provided by someone with second-hand knowledge of the facts. An example is an entry in your ancestor's diary that reads, "January 4, 1868. Today I received a letter from mother and have learned that father has died on December 18, 1867."



Evidence

Evidence is information that has undergone analysis and correlation with other evidence to determine (a) its probable reliability and (b) its relevance to the question or problem to be solved.

Direct Evidence: Direct evidence explicitly states a fact or answers a question. It does not require additional information or deductive reasoning to determine its meaning. An example of direct evidence is the father's date of death as given in the diary entry that reads, "January 4, 1868. Today I received a letter from mother and have learned that father has died on December 18, 1867."

Indirect Evidence: Indirect evidence is information from which a fact can be inferred or a conclusion drawn through deductive reasoning. An example of indirect evidence is Sarah Jane's date of birth as given in the diary entry that reads, "September 26, 1866. Yesterday I gave birth to a daughter whom we named Sarah Jane." From this, we infer that Sarah Jane was born on September 25, 1866.

Evaluating the Evidence

There is no magic formula for evaluating the reliability of our evidence. The best genealogical evidence comes from original sources created near the time of the event, and containing primary information provided by credible witnesses. Two basic premises to keep in mind are:

Every time information is copied or repeated, the probability increases that errors have been introduced into it.

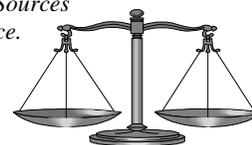
The more time that passes between the occurrence of an event and the recording of the facts of the event, the greater the chance that the facts are not accurately recorded.

Proof

Proof is a body of evidence that supports, or leads to, a conclusion. In genealogy, proof is never absolute. Often, our "facts" must be qualified with words such as *probably* and *possibly*. Direct evidence is preferable to indirect evidence because it provides proof that is easier to understand. However, an accumulation of indirect evidence can also provide convincing proof. The most reliable proof is composed of quality evidence drawn from multiple, independently created sources.

For Further Study

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Evidence Evaluation Worksheet



Fact to be Proven:

Name(s): _____

Event or Relationship: _____

Date or Place of Event: _____

Evaluation*

	Description of Source	Information Provided	Evidence Gleaned	Evaluation*		
				Source O/D	Info P/S	Evid D/I
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						

Conclusion: _____

*** Evaluation Codes:**

Source: Original (O) or Derivative (D)

Information: Primary (P) or Secondary (S)

Evidence: Direct (D) or Indirect (I)