

CWU Family History Handout: Historical Sources & Research Skills

Historical Sources

Historical sources are categorized as primary or secondary depending upon their distance from the event. Primary sources provide direct or first-hand evidence about an event. They are the original materials on which other research is based and enable researchers to get as close as possible to what actually happened. They might include;

- Autobiographies and memoirs
- Diaries, personal letters, and correspondence
- Books, magazine and newspaper articles etc. published at the time
- Interviews, surveys, and fieldwork
- Photographs, drawings, and posters
- Works of art and literature
- Original documents (birth certificates, property deeds, trial transcripts)
- Speeches, interviews and oral histories
- Research data, such as census statistics
- Government documents (reports, proclamations, hearings, etc.)

Secondary sources describe, interpret or analyse primary sources. A secondary source is generally one or more steps removed from, or written after, the event, such as;

- Biographical works, written by third parties
- Reference books, including dictionaries, encyclopaedias and atlases
- Books, magazine and newspaper articles etc. published after the event
- History books and other popular or scholarly books
- Literature reviews and review articles
- Indexes and abstracts
- Works of criticism and interpretation
- Textbooks
- Commentaries and treatises

While researching your family tree you will become very familiar with a range of primary resources. But don't forget the secondary resources. They can save you going through reams of original documents. They can guide you and provide good examples of research strategies, and they can help you position your search within the wider study of the subject.

Research Skills

Research is all about finding the answer to a question or a solution to a problem. So your first job is to define that question. The initial question might be quite broad, such as who was my great grandfather? But as you look deeper into their lives your questions will become more detailed; when and where was he born? Where did he live? What was his job? What was the neighbourhood like? What did this job entail? And so on.

To find the answers to these questions you will need to gather information relevant to the question. You will notice that some of the questions above are specific to my great grandfather; such as when and where he lived. Others are more general, such as information about the local area or descriptions of what a certain job entailed. You will find the answers to the personal questions in records such as birth and marriage certificates or census forms. But information about neighbourhoods or types of employment are more likely to be found in history books, journals or museums. Part of your research process is discovering where to look for the answers.

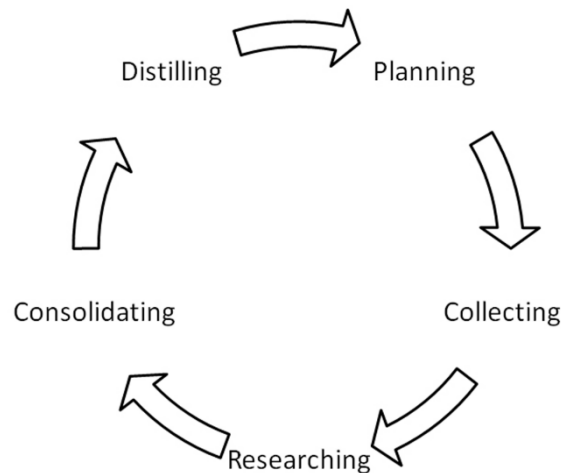
Another important aspect of research is the ability to review and analyse the evidence. Standards of evidence are very important and not all of it is of the same quality. Primary sources are generally taken to be fairly reliable sources as they will be personal recollections, official documents or reports from the time – but even these will not be wholly free of bias. Personal recollections may be tainted by the passage of time or the wish to hide embarrassment. Official documents are shaped by the biases and assumptions of the time and whoever is collecting the data. Reports may be shaped by the authors point of view, who commissioned them or how the evidence was selected.

These days, many local and amateur historians have websites and blogs that can be readily accessed online. Some can be excellent sources of specialised information – but others can be less reliable; repeating hearsay and dubious claims. A reputable historian should reference their sources so that the reader can either check their validity or look into them in more detail. If someone does not reference their sources or only uses a select few then this might be a sign that their research is not as rigorous as it might be. Do not just take references at face value. If a reference is particularly important to your argument, check it out to see that the evidence has been taken in context.

Articles in peer reviewed journals are good sources of information because their arguments have been tested by other historians but even here you will sometimes find contesting views. In such situations you need to read around the subject and appraise yourself of the different positions. You might end up being convinced by one side or the other or you might equally legitimately conclude that it is a contested area that needs more evidence for you to come to a definitive conclusion. Maintaining high standards of evidence is to treat our ancestors with the same respect afforded to kings, queens and politicians. It means finding as much supporting evidence as we can until we are confident that, on the balance of probability we have proven our theory to be correct. This really matters because many web-based genealogy sites will use the links you create to guide others. If you accept something on face-value it can find its way into the system and mislead others.

One thing all researchers need is plenty of patience. Sometimes the information almost falls into your lap, but at other times it can be hard to find, lead you up many false paths and twists and turns. You have to treat your genealogy as a puzzle and not be put off by these set-backs. We all have them. The most important thing is to thoroughly test your information.

- Does it stand up to scrutiny?
- Is it really related to the person in question?
- Check other relevant documents for information that either supports or contradicts your theories.
- Make this an ongoing process that you will review as you gather more information.



Planning

Find out where you want to start and how far you want to go back. Be realistic, setting yourself too tough a goal at the outset can be discouraging. Setting achievable goals will probably enable you to go back further in the long run.

Collecting

Collect together the information you already have, such as birth certificates, marriage certificates, old pictures, family letters, newspaper articles, death certificates and so on. This will enable you to build a basic family tree.

Researching

Once you have filled in the tree with the data at hand you can see where there are holes in your knowledge. This is where the research comes in. Using what you already know to guide you, start searching for your ancestors among the different information sources available.

Consolidating

Pull your researched information together and see just how much you can glean from it. Many documents will provide information on age, employment, family members and addresses, so make sure you study them carefully. And remember to save and back up whatever information you have discovered.

Distilling

Look at how this information fits with what you already know. Maybe it supports it – but maybe it contradicts it! This might mean that what you thought you knew was not quite right, or that the new information refers to someone else. You'll need to plan your next steps in the light of this new information and so the cycle starts again.

As you research you will keep going through these cycles, constantly improving your knowledge, testing what you think you know and making your research ever more reliable.