

Recording and Citing Your Genealogical Sources: A Beginner's Guide

Special Collections Division
Akron-Summit County Public Library
60 S. High Street, Akron, Ohio 44326
speccollections@akronlibrary.org

Most genealogists agree that it is important to “cite your sources.” That means to record them, attach them to your research, and pass them on to others. Genealogy is history, and every detail comes from a specific source: a book, a vital record, a database or Web site, or even your own memory. Beginning family historians often don't think of this, and start collecting information without recording where it came from. Even if you're just getting started and you're keeping your research to yourself, it's important to know where you found it. You'll forget, and at some point you'll want to recall the source.

It's especially important to cite your sources when you're sharing your information with others. They will want to know where your knowledge came from. Keeping track of your sources also helps when you begin to find conflicting information, and that will happen quickly. Genealogists want to get to the best information they can, and knowing the source is important in judging its reliability and authenticity. Some sources are given greater weight than others, and comparing sources is part of genealogical study.

So how do you cite your sources? You may remember writing papers in school that required a list of sources such as a bibliography, footnotes or endnotes. These are citations. The same basic process can be used for genealogy research. Genealogy uses standard types of historical sources such as books and newspapers, but it's also full of odd types of sources and formats that many family historians find hard to describe. Visits to cemeteries, family Bibles, email from distant cousins, digital images of original records online, and archival records are just a few of these. But these can also be cited with a little thought, effort, and helpful examples.

Many genealogy software programs offer source citation templates which create footnotes or endnotes in printed charts and forms. If you're using paper charts and forms, you can still create your own footnote system by attaching numbers to each fact, and recording your citations corresponding to each number on the same or an attached sheet of paper. There are several official citation styles used by professional historians and genealogists in their published works. You may not want to take the time to be so detail oriented, but it's helpful to consult citation style manuals to get an idea of how it's done. Try to use something similar to these styles, and find a way that works for you. The exact format of a citation, or the way you write it, is not the most important consideration. What's most important is describing your source completely and accurately. Think critically about the source, understand where it's coming from, and consider all the information you'll need to remember it yourself and pass it on to others. Write it down, photocopy it, or save it electronically. You won't regret doing this. It's far more likely that you'll regret not doing it.

Here are a few examples of what to consider when recording basic sources:

Books: Title, author, publisher, publication year, and page number. If you make a photocopy of the page, you can write this information on it. Better yet, consider photocopying the book's title

page and/or other pages that include the book's identifying information. You may also want to photocopy forewords, introductions, and keys to abbreviations. These often give explanations of the information in the book which can be very useful.

Magazine or journal articles: Title of article, author, title of magazine or journal, volume/issue number or month/year, and page number.

Obituaries and newspaper articles: Title of article, author, title of newspaper, date, and page number. If the newspaper page is arranged in columns, you can even include a column number. These numbers are not given on the page. You simply count columns left to right.

Databases (such as Ancestry or World Vital Records): Keep in mind that these large databases are often collections of smaller databases. For example, Ancestry has a database titled *Ohio Deaths, 1908-1932, 1938-1944, and 1958-2007*. When you note that information came from Ancestry, for example, include the smaller database's title as well. This will make it easier for you, and others, to locate and evaluate the source.

Web sites: These are tricky because they can change at any time. Think of a Web site as a book, and the separate pages as chapters or articles. What is its title? Who created it or is responsible for it? When was it created or what is the copyright date? When was it last updated? These aren't always obvious, but try to get a sense of them. A Web site's "page number" (Web address or URL) is very important to record, but don't just rely on that. Remember, it may change. If that happens, all your other identifying information may be the only way you'll be able to track it down. Also, consider recording when you saw the site. If it disappears or changes the next time you look, you'll at least know when you last saw it.

Information from relatives: At the very least, record the name of your relative who gave you the information. Other important and helpful data include your relative's contact information, the relationship of your relative to you and/or to the people about whom they're sharing the information, and when you received it.

Vital records (birth/marriage/death): Civil vital records are generally created by government authorities and agencies. What authority or agency created yours? Look for volume numbers, page or certificate numbers, and other identifying numbers. If it's on microfilm, where is that microfilm found? If it's online, which Web site or database has it? If you visited a courthouse or health department to get a copy of the document, or had a copy sent to you, take note of the name and location of the agency. If your vital record is not a civil record but was created by a church or other religious organization, much of the same analysis applies. Look for titles, series/volume/page numbers, and consider where the record is located.

Recording the repository: Many genealogical software programs offer a way to record the repository where you found the source. Most commonly, these are libraries, archives, and courthouses or government agencies. Should you record the repository for everything? It is important to record the repository if the document you found is a unique source and can only be found there. It's also a good idea if the repository is one of just a few places the record may be found. If others try to track it down, they will know where to look. If the source may be found in many places, it is not as important. For example, genealogical books and journals may be found in many libraries. If you're not sure about the difference, there's no harm in recording the repository. More information than you need is better than none at all.

For more information on how to cite your sources and specific formats and styles you can use, consult the following books and Web sites. Note that this list is a bibliography and is based on the *Chicago Manual of Style* format.

The Chicago Manual of Style. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

University of Chicago Press. *The Chicago Manual of Style Online* (<http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html>), 2010, accessed 29 March 2011.

Note: The online version has a few free resources, but requires a subscription for full access.

Croom, Emily Anne. "Genealogists' Guide to Documentation and Citing Sources." *Unpuzzling Your Past* (<http://www.unpuzzling.com/Guide%20to%20Documentation.pdf>), 2008, accessed 29 March 2011.

Howells, Cyndi. "Citing Sources." *Cyndi's List* (<http://www.cyndislist.com/citing.htm>), last updated 11 September 2010, accessed 29 March 2011.

Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2009.

MacEntee, Thomas/High Definition Genealogy. "Genealogy Source Citations Quick Reference." *GeneaBloggers* (http://www.geneabloggers.com/Citations_Quick_Reference.pdf), 2010, accessed 29 March 2011.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence! Citation & Analysis for the Family Historian*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1997.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2007.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Quicksheet: Citing Ancestry.com Databases and Images Evidence! Style*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2010.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Quicksheet: Citing Online African-American Historical Resources*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2010.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Quicksheet: Citing Online Historical Sources*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2007.

Wylie, John. "How to Cite Sources." *Genealogy.com* (http://www.genealogy.com/genealogy/19_wylie.html), 2011, accessed 29 March 2011.