

Ten Commandments of Genealogy



In the course of my work as a librarian, I get to see a lot of genealogy information. Much of what I see is on the Web, although some information is either in books or in e-mail. Still other information is brought to me by patrons seeking my help. Some of what I see is high-quality research. However, much of it is much less than that. Even the shoddiest genealogy work could be so much more if the compiler had simply spent a bit of time thinking about what he or she was doing.

Creating a first-class genealogy work is not difficult. In fact, it is expected. It should be the norm. Please consider the following "rules." If you follow these guidelines, you, too, can produce high-quality genealogy reports that will be useful to others:

1. Never accept someone else's opinion as "fact." Be suspicious. Always check for yourself!
2. Always verify primary sources; never accept a secondary source as factual until you have personally verified the information.
3. Cite your sources! Every time you refer to a person's name, date and/or place of an event, always tell where you found the information. If you are not certain how to do this, get yourself a copy of *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace* by Elizabeth Shown Mills. This excellent book shows both the correct form of source citation and the sound analysis of evidence. Also useful are Mills' *Quick Sheets: Citing Online Historical Resources* and *Citing Ancestry.com Databases & Images*.
4. If you use the works of others, always give credit. Never claim someone else's research as your own.
5. Assumptions and "educated guesses" are acceptable in genealogy as long as they are clearly labeled as such. Never offer your theories as facts.
6. Be open to corrections. The greatest genealogy experts of all time made occasional errors. So will you. Accept this as fact. When someone points out a possible error in your work, always thank that person for his or her assistance and then seek to re-verify your original statement(s). Again, check primary sources.
7. Respect the privacy of living individuals. Never reveal personal details about living individuals without their permission. Do not reveal their names or any dates or locations.
8. Keep "family secrets." Not everyone wants the information about a court record or a birth out of wedlock to be posted on the Internet or written in books. The family historian records "family secrets" as facts but does not publish them publicly.
9. Protect original documents. Handle all documents with care, and always return them to their rightful storage locations.
10. Be prepared to reimburse others for reasonable expenses incurred on your behalf. If someone travels to a records repository and makes photocopies for you, always offer to reimburse the expenses.

The above "commandments" apply to online data as well as to printed information. Following the above "commandments" will increase the value of your work and make it valuable to others.