

When Details Disagree: 8 Ways to Resolve Conflicts

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Conflicting Details Are Inevitable

Every genealogist encounters conflicting information as research progresses. While some conflicts are easier to resolve than others are, researchers should *never* leave a conflict unexamined. Following the **Genealogical Proof Standard**, established by the Board for Certification of Genealogists provides a clear pathway for successful research (for professionals and non-professionals alike). If you have not already done so, ensure you have acquired a copy of the most recent edition of *Genealogy Standards*, published by the Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG).

Please note: A new edition including standards relating to DNA usage is scheduled to be release in March 2019 (for further details visit BCG at <https://bcgcertification.org/>).

*“Genealogical proofs – like accepted conclusions
in any research field—never are final.”*

Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*
(Washington, DC: Board for Certification of Genealogists, 2014), page 3.

Method 1: Follow the most logical and reasonable path.

Conflicts can often be resolved by looking at the most likely (or reasonable) solution. Understanding the context of an ancestor’s life (including their residence, occupation, economics, beliefs, etc.) can assist in developing a logical resolution to the conflict.

For example...

Is it more likely that a farmer married the daughter of a fellow farmer who lived next-door OR the daughter of a wealthy nobleman?

Would an ancestor suddenly move 2,000 miles with their family, have a child and then return to their original place of residence? If so, how and why?

Method 2: Understand the source(s) that create the conflict.

Each source you encounter should not be treated the same. **Every source contains some sort of bias**, as they depend upon numerous factors, including their creator, their informant, and the purpose for the record's creation.

Consider...

A discrepancy between a birth listed in a family bible and an officially registered birth record could easily occur, depending upon how (and when) the information was provided.

The spelling of a surname was not readily standardized in the 1700s and 1800s. What does this mean for the records we uncover?

Who *is* the individual that actually created the record, and what were the requirements (legal or otherwise) that had to be followed?

Method 3: Always find (and follow) the original.

While online sources are terrific, many databases and abstracts provide only limited information from an original record. Even digitized record sets might contain abstracts or summaries of information from original materials.

Remember...

There might be multiple registrations of an individual's birth, marriage, or death (depending upon the statutes that regular the recording of vital statistics).

Digital images of microfilmed materials are not always a direct substitute or replication of the original material.

Method 4: Test a conclusion and attempt to disprove rather than “prove.”

The concept of “proof” in genealogy is not always as straightforward as one would hope. Rather than trying to “prove” something, look for pieces of evidence that might disprove your theory.

Remember...

Knowing who the five other men with the same name as your ancestor are helps you to identify them when looking at various records.

A single record rarely exists that affirms all the details relating to your research question, instead you might have to eliminate all other possibilities in order to refine and test a theory.

Method 5: Look for patterns, inconsistencies, and other discrepancies on a broader scale.

Take some time to step outside of the immediate conflict you are attempting to resolve and look at the broader landscape. A pattern within a specific family, locality, or record set can help to answer questions and resolve conflicts.

For example...

A series of conflicts in marriage dates for a large number of individuals within a specific town or county might indicate an issue with the entire record set, not just the information on your specific family.

Multiple conflicts in a published source allows you to follow a pattern that might reveal inaccurate or poor research techniques in the source itself.

Method 6: Write it up and analyze.

Even though your research might not be “finished,” take time to write and analyze what has been found thus far. Sharing the results of your research (even if unfinished) can provide feedback and insights as others evaluate the results.

You might want to...

Publish your findings online for others to examine, carefully citing each source and detailing the conflicts you have uncovered.

Submit an article to a genealogical society newsletter or quarterly, ensuring that each fact is carefully documented and unconfirmed information is noted as such.

Method 7: Clearly outline and compare the facts.

It is easy to become overwhelmed when a conflict in your family history arises. One conflict might lead to another, creating a confusing and discouraging situation. Take time and carefully outline the conflict (timelines can be a tremendous tool) and separate "facts" from those that might be assumed to those supported by proper documentation.

Remember...

You (or someone else) might have made an assumption early in your research that has somehow turned into a "fact."

Always work from the most recent generation backwards.

Method 8: Accept a non-resolution if necessary.

Some conflicts cannot be successfully resolved with available records. It is key to evaluate (and understand) the importance of resolving the conflict. Depending upon the situation, a difference in a month of birth can be a different from discrepancies in an individual's name or occupation.

Consider...

How many times was an ancestor born in 1750 asked to record their date and place of birth?

Advances in genealogy (and specifically genetic genealogy) are frequently occurring; who knows what former conclusions will be undone in the future.