

“Looks Like We’re Cousins”: Tips for DNA Collaboration

Paul Woodbury • DNA Team Lead at Legacy Tree Genealogists

pwoodbury@legacytrees.com

Why is Collaboration in Genealogy Important?

Collaboration is a key principle of genealogy because of the very nature of genealogical investigation. When we attempt to reconstruct family relationships and rediscover family stories, we quickly recognize that information, stories, traditions and even records of our ancestors’ lives are distributed among many descendants and repositories – the heirs of their historical traces. Just as different descendants of an ancestor inherit different fragments of their story, so too different descendants of an ancestor inherit different portions of that individual’s DNA. Therefore, just as successful genealogy and family history research requires compilation and corroboration from multiple repositories, individuals and sources; effective genetic genealogy investigation requires collaboration with multiple heirs of an ancestor’s genetic legacy.

The focus of genetic genealogy collaboration can vary depending on the research context. For correspondence with genetic cousins, collaboration might focus on the identification and evaluation of their genealogical relationship. Alternatively, for genetic cousins whose genealogical relationship is already known, collaboration might center around sharing information and coordinating research on shared ancestors. For known relatives who have not yet performed DNA testing, genetic genealogy collaboration might consist of convincing them to perform DNA tests as part of a collaborative investigation. Regardless of the exact intent or context of genetic genealogy collaboration, basic principles of communication can improve your chances of success.

Principles of Communication: Working with Matches

Try your best to convince your genetic cousins that they really do want to work with you. Keep the following principles in mind to increase your chances of a response.

1. *Consider the Format:* Often your initial contact with genetic cousins will be through the company messaging systems. However, if at all possible, try email. Some people post their email addresses in their profiles. If you are contacting genetic cousins at Family Tree DNA, they provide their email for contact. If you must use the company messaging systems, consider providing your email address in the message or even in the subject line.
2. *Subject line:* Make your subject line descriptive and attention grabbing. New genetic cousins may be receiving a lot of messages from people interested in finding out how they are related. Make your message stand out above the rest.
3. *Know your audience:* Before drafting a communication, consider what you already know regarding your genetic match. This information may influence the choices you make in your communication. For example, the way that you communicate with an experienced genealogist may differ from the way you communicate with someone who took the test just for the ethnicity estimate. For the former, you might be able to use advanced terminology, while for the latter you may need to consider their motivation to respond. Based on what you know about your audience, tailor your communication. No one likes receiving a chain email with no personal touch. While you might use a general template, be sure to add personal touches to make it more meaningful. Some important pieces of information that you may want to consider, and which may influence your communication choices include the following:

- a. What information have they published on their member profile? Research interests, residence, age, religion, experience, profession, etc.
 - b. Do they have a family tree attached to their test results?
 - c. How long has it been since they last logged in?
 - d. Are their test results managed by another individual?
 - e. Are there other clues such as ethnicity, surname, shared matches, amount of shared DNA or family tree information which could help you estimate their potential relationship?
4. *Know your purpose:* Before communicating with a genetic cousin, develop an objective for your communication. What specifically do you want to achieve through collaboration? Why are you contacting them? Once you have identified an objective, be sure to state that objective near the beginning of your communication.
 5. *Be specific. Make specific requests. Ask specific questions:* Though you may not know it, some genetic cousins administer many DNA kits. When addressing your match, make sure you specify exactly who it is that you are matching and who you want more information on. Identify the specific things that your genetic cousin could do and the specific information they could share which might help you achieve your stated objective. Estimate which actions your genetic cousin would be most comfortable doing and select one or two specific requests to make in your communication. If you have several requests, prioritize which ones are the most important. While we often seek family trees from our genetic cousins, some of our relatives (particularly new genealogists) may not yet have family trees. Consider other information that they may be more willing or able to share which could still be helpful to you. Some common requests that can be helpful for determining a relationship include the following:
 - a. “Would you please share with me the names of your grandparents (or great-grandparents)?”¹
 - b. “I suspect you are related to me through my ancestor [name], does this sound at all familiar to you? If so, do you have ideas on how we are related?”
 - c. “I note you have a private family tree, could you please grant me access?”
 - d. “We share some common matches with each other. Do you know how you are related to any of the following individuals [list of matches]?”
 - e. “We share a close genetic cousin with each other. How much DNA do you share with [match name]?”
 - f. “You are a close genetic cousin to me, but we have no (or few) shared matches. Do you have any close matches with a known relationship through one of your ancestral lines?”²
 - g. “Would you be willing to share your DNA test results with me?”³
 6. *Establish credibility and trustworthiness:* Briefly introduce yourself, your research interests, your genealogical experience and your background within the body of your communication. However, try to avoid coming off as too formal or snobbish. Err on the side of informal and make sure that

¹ Most individuals are hesitant to share personal information regarding living individuals or even their parents. Remember that your goal is often to identify their relationship, not get access to their bank account. Grandparents are often far enough removed that they are more comfortable sharing this information. Grandparents are also recent enough ancestors that most individuals know the names of their grandparents. Also, this information is often sufficient to reconstruct a genetic cousin’s family tree if they have not been able to extend it themselves.

² Knowing the close matches you do not share in common can be extremely helpful for determining the nature of your relationship. For genetic cousins who share more than 100 cMs, it is very unlikely that a genetic cousin at the same level from the same ancestral line would not share DNA with you. Therefore, any close genetic cousins of your match including cousins, parents, grandparents, aunts and second cousins who do not match you can help narrow your research focus by process of elimination.

³ This request should ***NOT*** be made on the first contact. This should only be requested after you have already established some communication.

your tone makes you seem approachable. You want to achieve credibility, but you also want to achieve trust.

7. *Make specific offers:* Be aware of what you can offer in return to encourage collaboration. Make an offer to contribute and collaborate as part of your initial communication: “I would be happy to share what I discover regarding our shared ancestors,” or “I have photos of our shared ancestors, would you be willing to share your information in return?” Use your research, your knowledge and your information as collateral.
8. *Multiple forms of contact:* Make response to your message easy and comfortable for the recipient by providing multiples means of contact including telephone, email, the company messaging system, social media or mail. If they choose to respond via one of those other forms, pursue collaboration through that avenue and be open to multiple types of contact.
9. *Brevity:* Do not write a novel. Your message should be short and to the point. Lengthy communications can lose recipient interest, can weaken the strength of your message, or can mask your intent entirely. Your communication should fit onto a single screen. The optimal length of an initial message is about 120 words. Also, sentences should be simple, straightforward and to the point. This is particularly important for messages to individuals who you suspect may speak another language as it will help in accurate translation. Later communications might include slightly more content but should still be brief.
10. *Patience. Timeliness:* Though a genetic cousin may take months to respond to your message, if and when they do, write back within a few days. If you do not receive a response, consider reaching out through an alternative means of contact. However, be careful not to overwhelm. Wait at least three weeks to a month before trying other contact avenues. If they still do not respond, don’t continue to badger or pester. Occasional follow ups after several months or years might be appropriate. If they respond indicating that they want no additional contact, respect their wishes and be cordial.

Genetic genealogy collaboration can be difficult for several reasons. Many individuals perform DNA testing for the ethnicity estimates and little else. They may not log into their test results regularly, and as a result it may be several months before they even see your message. Some may not know much regarding their personal ancestry or may have recent brick walls themselves. Some test results may be administered or managed by a relative or friend, and yet others may have died since the time they took the test. For these and other reasons, some individuals will never respond to the messages you send through the company messaging systems. In these situations, it may be necessary to consider the motivation of your audience to collaborate and explore your shared heritage. You may also need to find other ways to contact or identify your genetic cousin. Another session in this institute will address strategies for identifying and locating contact information for genetic cousins using all of the clues that they provide in conjunction with their DNA test results.

Collaboration for Recruiting Testing Candidates

Another form of genetic genealogy collaboration is recruiting additional individuals to test as part of targeted plans. In these efforts, researcher’s goals frequently center around convincing relatives, some of whom they have never met, to perform DNA testing. Some strategies and principles to keep in mind in these efforts include the following:

1. *Contact relatives who might be most receptive:* Successfully recruiting a relative to perform DNA testing may require taking advantage of the relationships around that person. Consider that many of the prime testing candidates are older, may not be familiar with technology and DNA testing, and may be wary of out-of-the-blue contact. Other older testing candidates may not be capable of granting informed consent or may be in the care of other relatives or health professionals. If your

testing candidate is older than about 60, consider contacting their children first and stimulating their interest. If one of several testing candidates will do, consider researching those candidates who have already published family trees on genealogy websites or who appear to be active in genealogical pursuits. Consider contacting already tested individuals and using them as a more direct contact for recruiting their older relatives to test. If the requests for testing come from closer family members, the chances of successful recruiting increase.

2. *Highlight their importance:* With many testing candidates, they are the only ones or they are the best ones to test to address a research question. Showing that they are special and that you need their help encourages them to buy in and become a stakeholder in the success of your research. Indicate why you are contacting them specifically.
3. *Informed consent.* A hallmark of ethical genetic genealogy research is informed consent. According to the Genetic Genealogy Standards, “genealogists only obtain DNA for testing after receiving consent, written or oral, from the tester.” This consent should be informed and should be given with the understanding of what DNA can potentially reveal. Testing candidates should know what type of information these tests provide. They should know that they can reveal unexpected information like previously unknown family relationships. They should know that there is an option to include their results under a pseudonym but that complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. They should be aware and consent to any use of their test results including use or discussion in publications, analysis as part of research, transfers to third party tools, transfers to other testing companies, and information that might be shared with genetic cousins.
4. *They own their DNA.* Even if you may have paid for the test, the owner of DNA data is always the person who provided it. Therefore, anything you do with that information should be done with the consent and permission of the owner or their beneficiary. Even if they have granted you right to administer or manage their account, you should consult with them on the use of those results.
5. *No means no.* If a testing candidate refuses to test, do not push it and do not bully them into performing the test against their will. Leave room for them to change their mind, and keep the door open for future testing if they wish. Nevertheless, leave the decision up to them and do not pester, badger or bully them into reconsidering. Incessantly bringing it up is a form of bullying. Some people need time to eventually decide that they are willing to test. Others will never agree to test, and that is completely their right since they own their DNA.
6. *Use your collateral:* Frequently, genetic cousins will be willing to test, but only if you pay for it. In other cases, they may be willing to cover the cost of the test or part of the cost in return for your continued collaboration and updates. Many people are interested in learning about their genealogy but are not particularly interested in doing the work to uncover the story themselves. Consider that performing research for your recruited testing candidates is an effective form of collateral to encourage DNA testing.
7. *Clarify what you need from them upfront.* If you will need to access the test results of your candidate after the testing is complete, then they should know that upfront. Consider making that a condition of your collateral. Since they own their DNA test results, they are under no obligation to share the results with you or collaborate unless you make that agreement upfront.
8. *Keep them updated on the progress:* If you go through the effort of recruiting an individual to test and become a stakeholder in your research, then you have established a relationship of accountability. Keep participants updated on the results of their DNA, how their DNA has helped solve a problem, research insights and information about your family.
9. *Group projects:* If your research is going to involve the DNA test results of multiple individuals from many branches of a family line, consider taking advantage of some of the group project options at Family Tree DNA. These can help you administer projects with multiple participants and organize your research into these individuals while still respecting the rights of those who choose to participate or not.