

Evidence Analysis: How to Become a Genealogist Detective

BYU Webinar Handout

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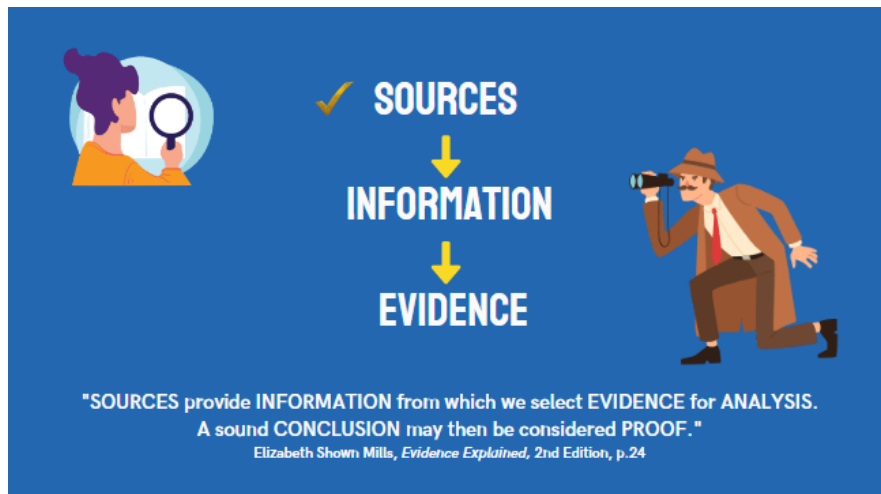
by Laura Lefler, AG®

“Accuracy is fundamental to genealogical research.
Without it, a family’s history would be fiction.”

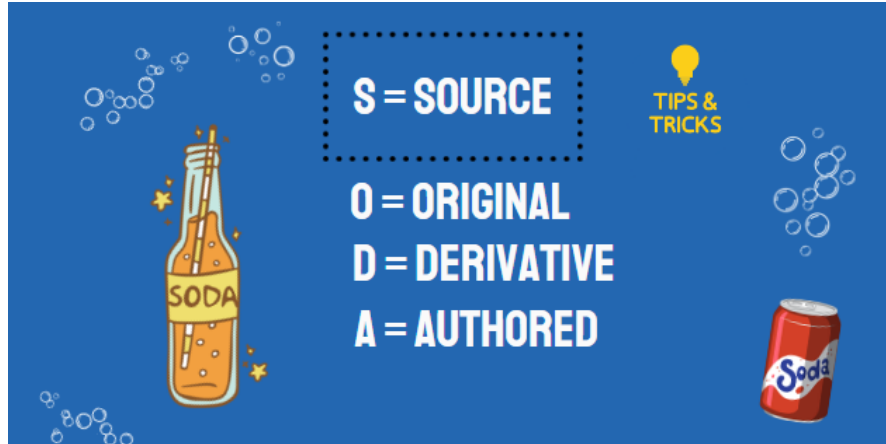
Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd Edition

Family historians use concepts from the field of law as guidelines when researching. Like detectives trying to solve a crime, genealogists gather evidence, seek for information from reliable sources, look for patterns, make connections, ask lots of questions, determine what evidence is valuable and relevant, all in an effort to prove a relationship or solve a research problem in the family tree.

This process of evidence analysis is part of the Genealogical Proof Standard developed by the Board for Certification of Genealogists to create sound conclusions that can be considered proof in a research project.



First, analyze the source. Ask yourself, “Is this source original, derivative, or authored?”
Use the acronym “SODA” to help remember what you analyze in a source.



A **source** is the person or thing you go to, to find information: people you interview, diaries, family histories, history books, cemeteries, Bibles, school records, land records, vital records, DNA reports, etc.

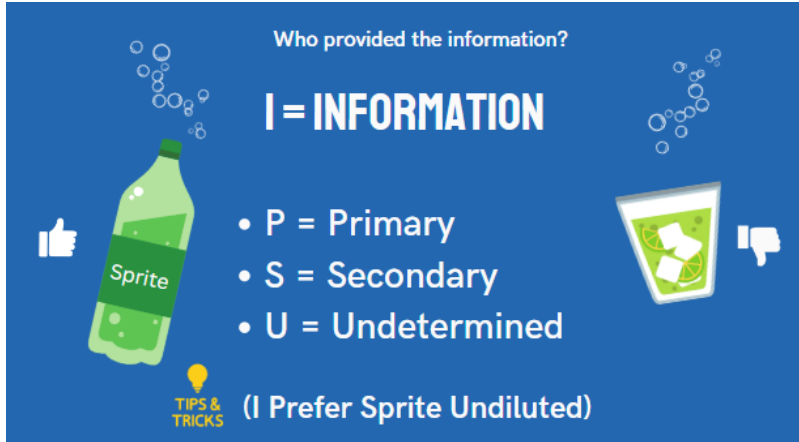
1. Original Sources: It is the actual record that is not based on anything else. It can be a digital reproduction of the original source. (Example: an original source digitally reproduced on Ancestry or FamilySearch like a marriage record or land deed).

2. Derivative Sources: Derivative means the source was derived from a prior record. (Examples: indexes, abstracts/summaries, etc. taken from the original source).

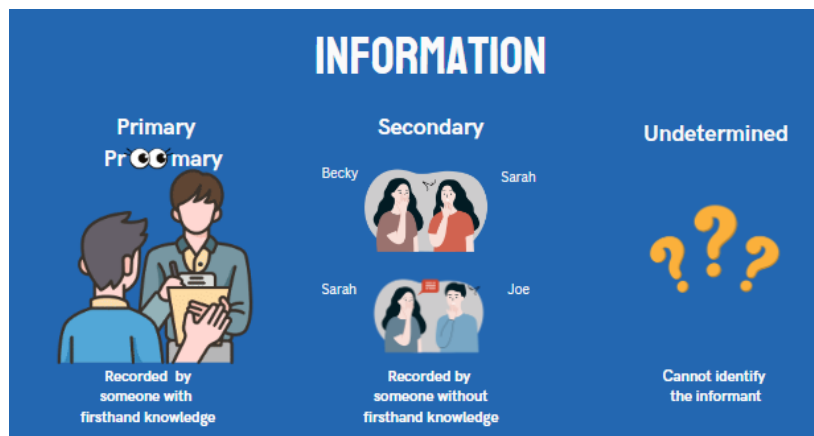
3. Authored Sources: An authored narrative has an author. It was written by someone who gathered information together from original and derivative sources and includes the writer's conclusions. (Example: compiled family histories, research reports, online trees, Ancestry ThruLines, MyHeritage Theory of Relativity).

Secondly, analyze the information provided by the source. Ask "Who gave the information for this source?"

Here is an acronym to help you remember what to analyze when looking at information.



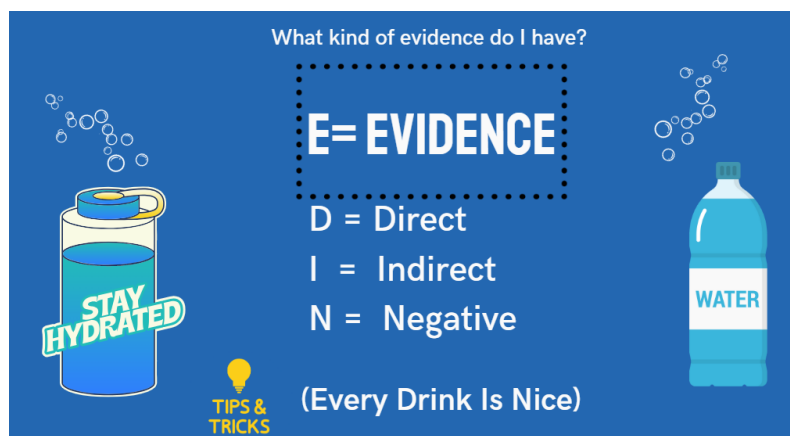
1. **Primary Information:** If it was recorded by someone who was an eyewitness to an event, it's called primary information. (Examples: birth certificate, pension records, immigration records, church records, marriage records, divorce records, land records, court records, employment records, oral interviews from eyewitnesses, death information on a death certificate, DNA reports, etc.)
2. **Secondary Information:** Information from someone that was NOT an eyewitness. (Examples: published genealogies, local histories, periodicals, biographies, indexes, family histories, etc.)
3. **Undetermined Information:** You have no idea who the information came from. (Examples: all census records (except for the 1940 census), obituaries, many website articles, tombstones, etc.)



Thirdly, analyze the evidence from the information in the source. Does the evidence answer your research question? Examples of a research question:

- Who are the parents of Samuel Eward Tipton who was born 22 June about 1873 in Georgia and died in Florida?
- When did Captain Robert Bean die? He was born about 1750 in Virginia and lived in Hawkins County, Tennessee.


1. **Direct Evidence:** Answers the research question explicitly and directly.
2. **Indirect Evidence:** Does NOT answer the research question explicitly or directly. It takes several pieces of corroborating information to answer the research question. (Example: In trying to prove the parentage of an ancestor, you had to correlate evidence from census records, maps, local and family histories, family Bibles, and track the family, associates, and neighbors to prove the parentage).
3. **Negative Evidence:** When you look for information where you expect it to be, but it is not there. (Example: Your ancestor appeared in the same census from 1880-1930 and then disappeared. You think he should be there, but it is probable that he moved or died. Or your mother insists that she is part Cherokee, but her DNA doesn't show it, nor do her siblings or cousins show any Native American DNA in their test results.)



In conclusion, your job is to analyze the sources, information, and evidence you find to help prove a relationship or solve a research problem. You question what you find like a detective. If you do, you have a much better chance that your evidence is reliable and what you have in your family tree is accurate. You will become a genealogist detective.

"SOURCES provide INFORMATION from which we select EVIDENCE for ANALYSIS.
A sound CONCLUSION may then be considered PROOF."
Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained*, 2nd Edition, p.24

S = SOURCE	I = INFORMATION	E = EVIDENCE
O = ORIGINAL	P = PRIMARY	D = DIRECT
D = DERIVATIVE	S = SECONDARY	I = INDIRECT
A = AUTHORED	U = UNDETERMINED	N = NEGATIVE



- Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd Edition (Washington, DC : Ancestry.com, 2019).
- Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, 2nd Edition (Baltimore, MD : Genealogical Publishing Company, 2012) p. 24.
- Nicole Dyer, "Analyze Your Sources & DNA Matches," (webinar from Research Like a Pro with DNA, Family Locket, 2023).