

Smarter Search Strategies for Genealogy

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While most genealogists endeavor to perform a “reasonably exhaustive search” to prove Many genealogists begin their research online and are often frustrated with the lack of results. The cause might not be a lack of records at the specific site, but the manner in which you’re performing the search! While basic search techniques work on most genealogy sites, you need to power up your search skills to get the most out of niche genealogy websites and uncover those hidden record sets!

Basics of Online Searching

One of the most important elements of success when searching for genealogy records is this: ***let go of your assumptions about an ancestor and be flexible!*** I can’t tell you how often I’ve missed records because I was certain that a birth date was a specific year based on a family story, etc. If you go into a search situation using overly-specific information you are destined to be disappointed and frustrated.

Most sites like Ancestry allow you to use the EXACT feature which is NOT RECOMMENDED on your first search for a record. The general rule is to “go broad” or “cast a wide net” then to narrow down the results using the **Edit Search** feature. Slowly work to “refine” your search by adding or removing information from fields.

Uncovering the Secret Records for Online Genealogy Sites

Records on genealogy websites are not “secret” necessarily; it just seems that they can be difficult to locate or may not show up in a basic search.

- **Use the Ancestry Card Catalog feature.** Most professional genealogists who use Ancestry will tell you that their first stop is the [Ancestry Card Catalog](#). Searching via the Card Catalog is best if you are looking for a specific record within a specific database. Enter a term in the keywords field such as “New York” and you’ll find a list of Ancestry databases related to New York. Once you’ve located a database then search within those records.
- **Use the FamilySearch Catalog feature.** Similar to the Ancestry Card Catalog, the FamilySearch catalog will also help you locate a variety of records including digital books, microfilms and more.
- **Check other sites for a catalog listing of databases.** Don’t forget that sites like MyHeritage, Findmypast and others all have a catalog feature!
- **Use Google Search site search.** If you’re still having trouble finding a record database, consider using the site search function at Google. There are times when Google will do a better job of indexing information on a site, so use this search syntax in Google: **site:[site name] search term**. Example: **site:ancestry.com World War I draft cards** will get you to the [U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918](#) database on Ancestry.

Should You Track Your Searches?

When I first proposed the concept of “tracking” my searches and even creating “saved searches” many genealogy colleagues thought it was “unnecessary work” and just a waste of time. I understand that, yes, Ancestry and other sites could change their links and URLs. But for the most part, I’ve been successful in saving searches on sites like FamilySearch, Ancestry and then running the search again at a later time.

However, keep in mind that the major genealogy sites with records used for research have developed “hints” and “suggestions” that find similar records for you. So tracking searches may not be worth the effort.

And what about saving searches for sites like Google so you can see if there is any new information each week or each month? A better solution is to have [Google Alerts](#) “notify” you of new finds via email.

Creating Site-Specific Cheat Sheets for Searching

Once you’ve become accustomed to smart searching on a specific genealogy site, it can be difficult to remember all the little “tricks” you’ve used. Create a “cheat sheet” listing your search strategies for each site.

How to Leverage the Power of Wildcards

Ever play a card game where a certain card was “wild” and matched almost any other card? That’s how wildcard characters work with search engines and databases. The asterisk (*) and question mark (?) are the most common wildcards for searching. Use * for a range of characters and use ? for a specific character. Example: Use M*Entee to find **McEntee** and **MacEntee** and other variations. You could use **M??Entee** but you will only get results for two characters between M and Entee.

Tips and Tricks for Smarter Searching

Don’t continue to search blindly and take constant “stabs” at research! Put these power tips to use!

- **Use search tips for each database.** Did you know that Ancestry has a set of search tips for each of its databases? Scroll down to the bottom of the page and in the About section you will find a [Search Tips](#) link with helpful information. For the US World War I Draft Cards database at Ancestry, this tip is specific to the records database and helpful to researchers: “Men who resided in British territories sometimes listed themselves simply as British citizens without noting their origin in Canada, Australia, Ireland, Jamaica, etc.”
- **Switch middle and first name.** Again, just because you are “certain” about an ancestor’s name, be open to search variations. Swap the first and middle names. For some Catholic ancestors, the “confirmation” name was often adopted as a first name starting about age 13. Remember to check the **Search Tips** for each database to understand how data is indexed and made searchable.

- **Spelling and phonetic substitutions.** Many records were created based on enumeration, such as a census, and required an official to record what he or she was told. Many officials encountered difficulty understanding foreign languages and how names were written. Substitute different spellings during search attempts as well as different phonetic versions. Example: search for **Mower** instead of **Mauer** for a German surname.
- **Watch county boundaries!** Many states added or removed counties since added to the Union via statehood. You might think you are searching in the right county, but always check to see if that county actually existed for a specific date.
- **Are you in the right time period?** The default search for Ancestry is to use the EXACT feature for names, dates and locations. Remember to search “broad” first then drill down to more specific searching.
- **OCR is NOT your friend.** When working with historical newspapers or other records that have been scanned (or “OCRred” to convert image to text) remember there is usually an error rate as high as 20%. Review the record image and if the text interprets the letter “a” as “o” then change your search criteria when using keywords or surnames. In addition, hyphens and diacritical marks can be problematic; again, review the record image and determine if adding these marks will improve the search.
- **Check the period jargon.** For first and last names, there may have been abbreviated formats used to save space. Example: **Thos.** for **Thomas** and **M’Entee** for **MacEntee**. Same goes for occupations and medical conditions . . . the terms our ancestors used might be very different than present-day terminology. Again, review a sample page of the record set such as an edition of a newspaper to understand the “jargon” of the day.
- **Beware address and street name changes.** If you can’t find information related to a specific address or street, keep in mind many locales either changed street names over time OR instituted a new street numbering grid (like Chicago did in 1909!) Make sure you are using the correct information for the time period.
- **Online genealogy records databases can disappear or be inaccessible!** Don’t forget that most records sets on Ancestry and FamilySearch are “licensed” by the repository and access is granted to users of the website. Licenses expire over time and you may not realize it. In addition, Ancestry’s Library version and FamilySearch’s home access version may not allow for full access of a record set due to licensing restrictions.

Resources

- ***A Beginner's Guide to Searching Records – FamilySearch***
<https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/a-beginners-guide-to-searching-records/>
- **Ancestry Card Catalog**
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/catalog/>
- **ArchiveGrid**
<https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>
- **Atlas of Historical County Boundaries**
<http://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/>
- **FamilySearch Catalog**
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>
- **Glossary of Medical Terms Used in the 18th and 19th Centuries**
<https://www.thornber.net/medicine/html/medgloss.html>
- **Google Alerts**
<https://www.google.com/alerts>
- ***How to Search Ancestry – Ancestry***
<https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/How-to-Search-Ancestry>
- **List of Occupation Abbreviations – GenealogyInTime Magazine**
<http://www.genealogyintime.com/dictionary/list-of-occupation-abbreviations-page-a.html>
- **MyHeritage Collection Catalog**
<https://www.myheritage.com/research/catalog>
- ***Record Search Tips: Find Your Family – FamilySearch***
<https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/record-search-tips/>
- **Spelling Substitution Tables for the United States and Canada – Family Search**
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Spelling_Substitution_Tables_for_the_United_States_and_Canada
- **Street Name Changes**
<http://stevemorse.org/census/changes.html>
- ***What War Did My Ancestor Serve In? - Ancestry***
<https://blogs.ancestry.com/ancestry/2014/04/23/what-war-did-my-ancestor-serve-in/>
- **WorldCat**
<https://www.worldcat.org/>