A Client's Family Brought to Life:

Incorporating Social History

"Reasonably Exhaustive"
in the Real World

by Paul K. Graham, AG, CG, CGL

Measuring the daily work of genealogy against standards tests all practitioners. When projects do not reach an obvious completion, it is easy to get trapped into thinking the standards cannot be fully met consistently. Frustration only increases when the work is judged without consideration of our real-world limitations, an obvious concern when doing timed research for paying clients. We might be criticized (by ourselves or others) for not meeting the expectation of solving a problem, provoking self-doubt even when those expectations are unreasonable considering time and financial constraints. Acknowledging the boundaries that exist outside the standards allows us to measure ourselves against more reasonable expectations.

Genealogy Standards

Our discussion begins with the Genealogical Proof Standard. We are asked to conduct "reasonably exhaustive research . . . for all evidence that might answer a genealogist's question."[1] The language within the standard is contradictory when it asks us to find

---

1. Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG), *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed. rev. (Nashville, TN: Ancestry, 2021), 1.

> Appropriate expectations and feedback concerning standards need to respect the researcher's time and financial commitment to the goal.

"all evidence" but calls that request *reasonable*. A more measured approach appears in Standard 19: "Genealogists attempt to collect all information potentially relevant . . ." to the research question.[2] Built into the word "attempt" is recognition of real-world limitations like time and money.

Asking the Right Question

When discussing a genealogical problem, someone may ask, "Did you conduct reasonably exhaustive research?" Or, they may say the Genealogical Proof Standard has not been met because more research needs to be done. While intended to provide support or motivation, the concern can come across as condescending when it omits the context of time or financial limits. If one person is judging results based on a ten-hour limit, but another is imagining one hundred hours, the disparity can lead the first person to give up on further discussion.

The statement "this is not reasonably exhaustive research" includes an unspoken assumption about the researcher's resources. The statement may not be a valid critique if it stands alone with no context. Appropriate expectations and feedback concerning standards need to respect the researcher's time and financial commitment to the goal.

Defining Reasonably Exhaustive

Six concepts enumerated by the Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG) help define *reasonably exhaustive* further. They offer a framework for assessing the first element of the Genealogical

Proof Standard prior to incorporating real-world considerations. Internalizing these standards maximizes our research results, even when under time constraints.

Scope. Consider a variety of sources, expand beyond the primary individual, and incorporate broader historical events and trends. *Reasonably exhaustive research* involves depth and context. It seeks not merely to generate a list of sources but also to bring clarity to the research question.[3]

Reliability. Information collected immediately following an event is more reliable than any recorded later. Sources created in an open forum like a court are less likely to contain biases that might affect conclusions. However, we can still use unreliable and biased evidence if we understand and acknowledge its meaning.[4]

Discrimination. Every source should have a justification for its use. Irrelevant sources should be omitted, and we must be able to articulate the reason.[5]

Independence. Evidence items derived from a single originating source are not unique contributions to the research effort.[6]

Details. Research is not reasonably exhaustive unless we have mined all possible information from each source to develop multiple evidence items. Leaving information unexamined creates gaps that limit the correlation and conflict resolution process.[7]

Correlation. Strong conclusions are based on evidence derived from multiple independent sources. We not only seek agreement between information items but also try to uncover conflicts and inconsistencies in evidence that need to be resolved—all of which strengthens our argument.[8]

Defining Limits of Time and Money

BCG offers guidance for assessing whether research is reasonably exhaustive, but it does not speak to real-world constraints. When researching for clients, professional genealogists are limited by a simple formula. We charge an hourly rate, our clients define their expendable funds, and the combination defines the hours we can work on a project.

Total Funds / Hourly Rate = Number of Hours

With hours defined, we can proactively assess expectations. Before research even starts, what do we expect as the likely outcome?

---

2. *Genealogy Standards*, 16, Standard 19.

3. *Genealogy Standards*, 25, Standard 41.

4. *Genealogy Standards*, 26, Standard 44.

5. *Genealogy Standards*, 25, Standard 42.

6. *Genealogy Standards*, 27, Standard 46.

7. *Genealogy Standards*, 24, Standard 40.
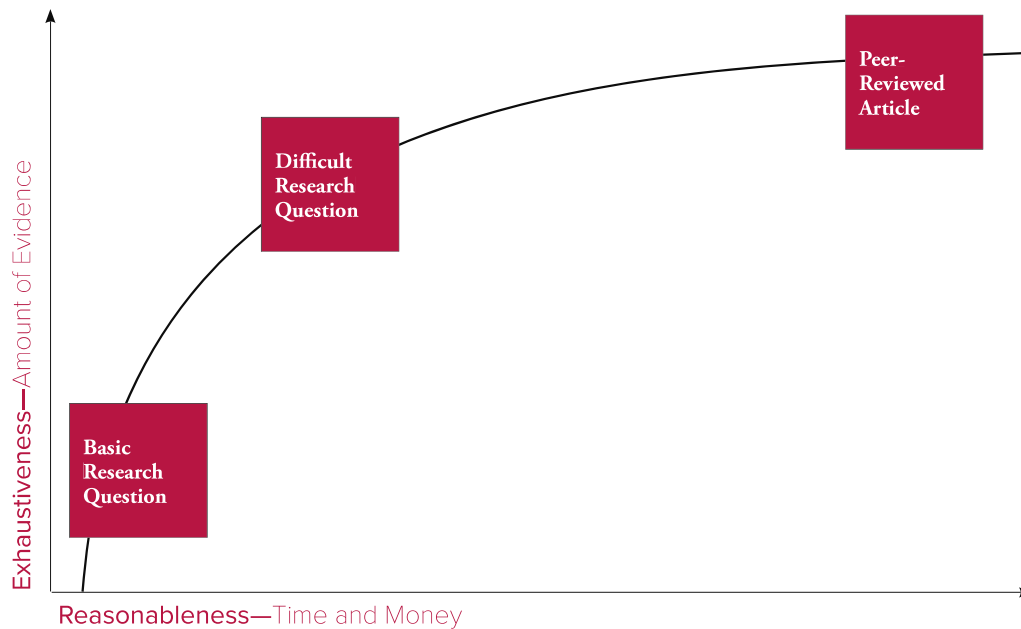
8. *Genealogy Standards*, 27, Standard 47.

Figure 1

1. Best-case scenario: Reach an answer within the hours that meets the highest and best definition of reasonably exhaustive.
2. Real-world scenario: Answer the question with a more limited expectation of reasonably exhaustive based on time and financial constraints.
3. Insufficient scenario: Acknowledge that meeting the reasonably exhaustive standard is not feasible (and propose additional research time to get closer to the standard).

Scale of Reasonableness

Visualize the relationship between reasonableness (time and money) and exhaustiveness (amount of evidence) with the Scale of Reasonableness (figure 1). In a straightforward research question, we can use a limited amount of evidence that does not take much time to collect. When projects are new, there is a lot of evidence waiting to be gathered in a small amount of time. When we push the limit, we reach a point where developing incrementally more evidence takes a significant amount of time.

Maximizing Research Results Despite Limits

The hard limits of time and finances are difficult to change, but we can improve our own abilities to maximize results. A framework of efficiency and effectiveness provides structure for developing our skills.

Efficiency

Time is money. Working inefficiently limits what we can accomplish and whether we can meet the reasonably exhaustive research standard. It might even leave us second-guessing whether we should charge all our time to the client. Consider the many ways we can improve efficiency.

RESEARCH PLANS

Developing research plans can feel like a waste of time. Why write out the steps when you could be doing them? However, this skill is required for conducting the most efficient research. A plan requires you to proactively identify the existence of each source and justify the time needed to obtain and incorporate it into the research.

Use your body of knowledge to predict answers, judge the usefulness of sources, and determine the breadth of context required for each research question. Briefly deciding whether to use a source is more cost-effective than doing the research and later determining that the source is not relevant. In addition to a list of sources, make notes to yourself (physical or mental) estimating the length of time each source may take for collection, analysis, correlation, writing, and processing for delivery. The process will help determine how the plan aligns with the budget.

BUDGET

Budgeting is not easy. No matter how much experience we have, inevitably, we end up in situations that challenge the budget process. But, the more experienced we become, the more we understand the amount of time it takes to find and analyze any particular record.

> Prioritize direct evidence but develop abilities to formulate and write indirect and negative evidence arguments when those would be more cost-effective when considering time constraints.

Proactively break down the elements of each project and the time they will take. Divide total project time into broad categories of research, writing, administration, and delivery. Research is then subdivided using the plan, adjusting either the plan or the time as needed. Budgeting writing time may be the most challenging thing we do as genealogists. Remember that writing time is thinking time, and thinking is valuable. Allow for more time than you initially expect. Include the time needed to create deliverables and communicate with the client within the project budget.

RESEARCH

Practicing the mechanics of research improves efficiency within the process. These are many of the things we traditionally focus on in our genealogical education, such as:

- **Finding Aids.** What are the indexes and publications available for your problem? How confident are you using them?
- **Search Queries.** How good are you at forming search queries in databases? Can you construct a flexible but specific search (Rob*s?n = Robinson, Robertson, Robeson, Robison)? Do you know where to find information about each website's wildcards and other search functions?
- **Paleography.** The more you struggle to read documents, the slower your process will be. This impacts researchers at all levels, not just beginners. You may have difficulty because an individual records is hard to read or the language or style is different from that with which you are familiar.

- **Record Access Choices.** Be deliberate about how you access records. The amount of time it can take to gather and process easy-to-access sources can far exceed the time needed to order and wait for delivery of a single high-quality record.

TECHNOLOGY

Genealogists work with various technologies to document research results, write reports, capture images, analyze geographic information, and complete many other tasks. How confident are you working with computers, scanners, images, databases, and the many software applications that help us do our jobs better? In addition to specific genealogical education, we should seek out opportunities to strengthen skills that speed up the process of creating our work product.

WRITING

Research means nothing if we don't put it in writing, but doing it efficiently frustrates many of us. Maximize time by writing simply and comfortably. Learn from others but develop your personal style and voice. Choose a time, place, and ambiance most conducive to getting your words on the page.

Keep real-world expectations in mind when looking for models of client reports. The great examples of genealogical writing appear in journals, which are thorough and precise. However, we should not compare our research reports to thoroughly vetted articles that have been through multiple revisions before publication. Even though you want to write reports as well as possible, comparing them to published articles is inappropriate considering the wide disparity in the time invested in each. The more you write and edit, the more the process will settle in your brain and writing will take less time in each iteration.

Effectiveness

In client research with goals tied to an amount of time, we need to cover as much ground as possible. This does not mean looking at all possible documents. Instead, it means addressing as many relevant aspects of the research problem as possible. Effective research means we gather a representative sample of high-quality sources that allow us to achieve the goal in as few steps as possible.

Even though it does not address real-world limits directly, the language of the BCG standards for sources, information, and evidence provides a framework for anticipating timed research needs. The most important is the standard for *discrimination* (i.e., justification).[9] Justify the sources you include *and omit* from your research. Make sure your choices maximize the time at your disposal. Incorporating justification into your work product

---

9. *Genealogy Standards*, 25, Standard 42.

strengthens your message. It teaches the client about the process and gives them confidence in your abilities. Plus it gives you confidence that you're reaching the right conclusions.

Being judicious expands beyond individual sources to the entire research goal. If the expectation is to investigate multiple ancestors, but we only research one in our time, we have not approached the situation correctly. We may have met what we consider the reasonably exhaustive standard for that one ancestor, but the client will be disappointed that we did not consider the entire research goal. We have not considered what is reasonable for each ancestor given the time constraints.

Think about the types of sources, information, and evidence being used. In general, the flow of research begins with a foundation in authored works, then utilizes derivative sources to identify key original documents that can be obtained within the time limit.[10] Consider three examples with unique pitfalls:

1. When all sources are authored, the client may not consider our work to be substantive research.
2. When all sources are derivative, we can end up with abstracts or index entries for far more individual documents than is reasonable to analyze, correlate, and reconcile within the time limit.
3. When all sources are original, it takes longer to locate and process each one, and we do not get as far in the research process as we might when using a balanced approach.

Similar considerations should be placed on information and evidence. We should prioritize primary information, but this does not mean avoiding secondary information.[11] When using secondary information in a client report, note the reason and explain what needs to be done to find primary information in the future. Prioritize direct evidence but develop abilities to formulate and write indirect and negative evidence arguments when those would be more cost-effective when considering time constraints.[12]

Differences between projects leave us to make determinations of the most reasonable approach for developing proof. Think about the client's expectations (or better yet, ask them). If they asked for documentation of their ancestors, a balance among source types would prioritize original sources for direct ancestors and use derivative or authored sources for aunts, uncles, and cousins. In this way, we lean toward the *reasonable* and avoid the pitfalls of trying to perform *exhaustive* research but still working within standard.

Stopping Research

Performing research within limits means accepting that research must stop. We feel: "How can I quit now if I haven't answered the research question?" The direct answer is: "You stop work when you stop getting paid." The lack of funding is justification for stopping. Working unpaid hours means we are making much less per hour. Without discipline, we do not develop good strategies for working within time and financial limits while retaining our value as professionals.

To help stop research, our secret weapon is the report's Future Research section. Our brain does not stop at a time limit; it keeps pushing us to do more. Instead of putting that mental energy into more research time, write a list of things you wish you could do. This is a useful exercise—not just cathartic—because the result becomes a sales pitch and research plan for the next round of research.

Conclusion

The Genealogical Proof Standard is not a magic formula. It is the framework for conducting thorough and well-reasoned research. Any assessment of work against standards—particularly the request for *reasonably exhaustive research*—must be balanced with consideration of the real-world limitations imposed on the project. Recognize the impact of time and money on the work and develop skills to maximize output within those boundaries.

Being comfortable with real-world flexibility is not an excuse to reduce quality. Instead, it allows us to properly assess results and their relation to standards without misguided expectations. Defining *reasonably exhaustive* appropriately provides confidence in a sea of constraints.

Paul K. Graham, AG, CG, CGL, is a research manager at AncestryProGenealogists, where for more than a decade he has adhered to genealogical standards within a high-volume corporate research business. His research expertise spans the English-speaking world, with a particular focus on the US South. Paul holds a master's degree in public history and has authored and co-authored numerous books and articles, most pertaining to families and records from the state of Georgia.

---

10. *Genealogy Standards*, 23–24, Standard 38.

11. *Genealogy Standards*, 24, Standard 39.

12. *Genealogy Standards*, 24–25, Standard 40.