

When Facts Don't Agree

[VIDEO LINK](#)

What do you do when facts don't agree in your genealogy? What do you do when your ancestors' names are spelled differently across different records? What do you do when you have different dates for events like birth, marriage, and death? Is this a problem? Let's dig in.



You may have multiple records that estimate the birth year that vary one, two, three, maybe as many as 10 years from record to record. This does not give us a great deal of confidence that the records we have are correct. This presents another problem.

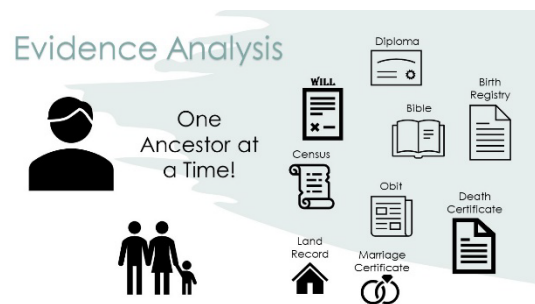
Finding the records is one skill that we're really *not* talking about today, but what we *are* talking about is **Evidence Analysis** and the **Correlation of Evidence** in records we have already found. Of course, you should have already completed your "**Reasonably Exhaustive Research**" (the first standard as set forth by the Board for Certification of Genealogists).

EVIDENCE ANALYSIS & CORRELATION OF EVIDENCE

When it comes down to examining and organizing the facts to determine what is the truth, it is **evidence analysis** and **correlation of evidence** combined to help us resolve conflicts. These are two different skills.

EVIDENCE ANALYSIS

Learning how to weigh evidence for its credibility, its accuracy, and or its plausibility is the key to **Evidence Analysis**. You see, a skilled researcher looks at the details in a record, image, or artifact, and analyzes each detail within each source to determine how likely that information is to be accurate.



Then learning how to *compare* that information found in *all* records (that we have discovered for the research question) and understanding the accuracy or weight given to each record, helps tip the scales in one direction to determine the best



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likely answer to our conflicting facts. This is called “**Correlation of Evidence.**” This is the other skill that works in tandem with “**Evidence Analysis.**”

In other words, we're **examining each record**, that's “**Evidence Analysis**” and then we're **comparing the facts** from each of the records found, which is “**Correlation of Evidence.**”

PRIMARY VS. SECONDARY EVIDENCE

Part of your analysis process is to determine if the document comes from a primary or secondary source. This will help you determine the weight of the document in your evaluation, but it is not everything nor is it the deciding factor.

Primary Evidence is typically original documents or when someone has witnessed the event, their testimony is primary evidence. Look for things like original signatures to help determine if the document is an original or a copy of another document.

Secondary Evidence is typically copies (a.k.a. derivatives) of the original documents. This could be things like registries, indexes, copies of originals, etc. The reason secondary evidence doesn't carry as much weight is because possible errors could be introduced during the transcription process.

In the [video](#) we determined that the secondary sources provided us the answer to our research question and the only primary document (the will) did not. The will only provided a date range for the death. However, collectively we could have confidence in the date provided on the death certificate was accurate.

Primary vs. Secondary Evidence

Primary



Probated Sep
1887

Just says
"deceased"
without a
death Date

Deceased Signature Dated
1st Day of March 1885

Secondary



Newspaper
Dated
14 Dec 1886
"died last
Saturday"



Death Date
11 Dec 1886

Note: While the death certificate, in this scenario, is a secondary source, the death date is primary evidence because the informant (the wife) witnessed the event. As the spouse she had firsthand knowledge of when her husband died.



However, if the research question was about his *birthdate*, then she would be a *secondary source* because she did not witness the birth event.

Are the facts really factual? You're the detective who will figure this out. This is what makes genealogy so fun. You get to solve the mystery.

Here's an exercise... a checklist to help you think it through.


PRE-EVALUATION CHECKLIST


- Think of an ancestor in which you have a conflict. Pick only one.
- Write down the conflict. Is it a birth, marriage, death, name, what is the conflict?
- Have you found all the records available? The more info the better. If not, stop here and research that one ancestor, looking for all records you can find.
- If necessary, transcribe documents.
- Abstract found records into a Research Notes document.
 - Add sources in footnotes, as you go.
 - Start with a date, then the item found, and the information about it.
 - Create a coversheet for documents or groups of images.


EVALUATION CHECKLIST (Per Document or Evidence)

- What was the Chain of Custody?
- What do you know about this document?
 - Who else is noted in these documents?
 - What is the age of the document?
 - Is there "front matter" (title pages) that helps date the book, folder, box, or document? Either way, copy the front matter for your source citation.
- Transcribe & Abstract into Your Research Notes.



Analyze

Bible 

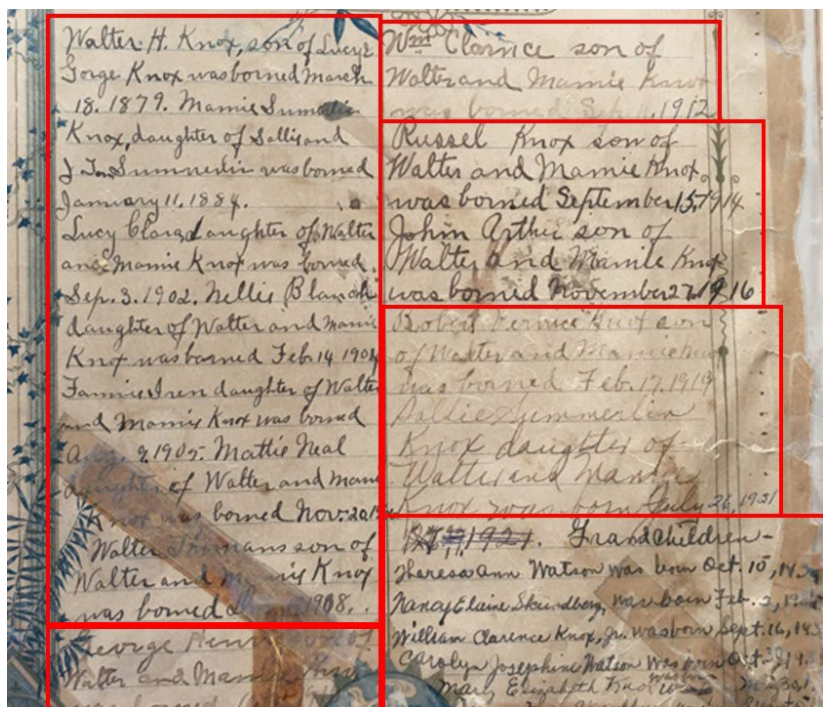
 Informant

 Create Notes for Each Document

1. What do we know about this bible?
2. Where did it come from?
3. Who was the Informant?
4. What do we see?
5. Is it in our possession or image?
6. Who has it now?
7. Transcribe it.
8. Abstract it into your Research Notes for each ancestor.
9. Front Matter

In the video we talked about analyzing a bible. Take note of the different handwriting, ink, pressure and color of ink, slant, etc. These changes indicate that the entries were created at different times.



Similar Ink Weight
& Handwriting

This means they
were written at
different times
and closer in
time to the
events.

Entries that have the same handwriting and ink were written at the same time. This is important because it means that the older information may not be as accurate as newer information, just because time has passed and memories fade.

Look for the last date of each entry. This is an indication of when that entry may have been written (often just after the last event).

As you start to document this information, you'll start to see patterns emerge, similarities, other conflicts, common people who thread through various documents. This is a good thing. Now it is time to organize these thoughts, facts, records, people, and dates into a logical visual comparison.

CORRELATION OF EVIDENCE

This can be done on a spreadsheet, or in columns in a document, and some do mind mapping. Researchers have various ways of doing this but often I find the easiest way is to create a spreadsheet. This can be done easily in Google Sheets or in MS Excel.

- Outline the documents in a grid with the facts that pertain to the research question for the conflict you are trying to solve.
- Examine the documents for confidence, or sometimes we call this weight, meaning we are weighing the evidence for our belief in its accuracy. Often this

comes down to the informants and whether they witnessed the event for which they are testifying.

- Birth certificates would carry a lot of weight because it is likely the parents who are reporting on the details.
 - Death certificates would not carry as much weight because the informant likely did not witness (other than the death event) about the facts they are reporting on like the birth, parents, etc. It is likely the informant is a spouse or a child of the deceased and would not have witnessed the birth or know the exact spelling of the deceased parents name... let alone the mother's maiden name.
- Review your comparison of documents. Which facts have more weight? Sometimes it is the secondary evidence that is the correct answer, so don't rely on primary vs. secondary as the automatic answer.
- Which facts weigh more, and do they agree? Not always.

Another tip: Records recorded closer to the event typically are more accurate. For example: A person is born in 1908. Which census record is likely to be more accurate for the birth date, 1910 or the 1940 census? Most likely it is the 1910 census is more accurate as the child would be only two years old in 1940. In the 1940 census the informant might be guessing as to the age of the person they are reporting about.

WRITE YOUR CONCLUSION

Write your conclusion and the reasons why you came to that conclusion into your **Research Notes**. You can also add them into the facts in online platforms like Ancestry, FamilySearch, or MyHeritage. **At minimum, add your conclusion into your Research Notes!**