

5 Genealogy “Crimes” You Should Forgive Yourself For (Plus Some You Shouldn’t) Family Tree Magazine

None of us are safe from errors in our genealogy research. But you can take your family tree’s health into your own hands by knowing what issues to look for. Here are five common genealogy errors—and what you can do to prevent them.



You will be told

“You should always cite your sources. You should never accept a hint without checking it first. You should do this, you should do that, etc.”

The farther you get in genealogy, the more rules it seems like there are to follow! The longer you research, the more you hear about the “right” and “wrong” way to do things. Before long, it might feel like the “genealogy police” are at your door.

Nobody’s perfect. We all find genealogy errors in our trees from time to time. Learn how to prevent the most common.

Crimes to Forgive Yourself For

1. Not Having a Research Plan

In reality, most people do genealogy as a hobby and hobbyists aren't held to [strict research standards](#) like the professionals are. However, genealogy isn't done in a vacuum. Your actions can affect others' research, so it's important to follow certain codes of conduct. But for the casual researcher, how do you decide what's okay and what's not?

Here are a few genealogy “crimes” that you should be able to get away with. Plus, a few crimes where we'll let you off with a warning—this time!

But let's say you've been casually doing genealogy research for a while and you decide to take a beginner class. All of a sudden you start hearing about the necessity of creating a research plan. Yipes! You haven't been using a plan at

all, you've just been following where your research leads or the casual researcher, how do you decide what's okay and what's not? Relax.

Research plans are helpful and they can help make you a more effective, organized researcher. But they are absolutely not required and it doesn't mean all the research you've done up to this point is bad.

The same goes for research logs.

We here at *Family Tree* strongly recommend both research plans and logs, but you're not in trouble for not using them.

How many people have made a research log? Or have a research plan?

Does it help you? How ?

2. Believing Common Myths

There are a few [classic family history myths](#) that are very common. Take for example the tens of thousands of Americans who believe they have a “Cherokee princess” somewhere in the family tree.

Take some time to fact-check that family story. And try not to be too disappointed if you find out the story isn't true. Your real family history is valuable and interesting, because it's the truth!

3. Only Doing Direct Line Research

Direct line research means researching your direct ancestors backwards through time (parents, then grandparents, then great-grandparents, etc.)

Spend long enough in the genealogy world and eventually you'll start hearing that you *should* research your ancestor's FAN club (friends, associates, neighbors), otherwise known as [cluster research](#), or that you *should* be researching [collateral relatives](#) (siblings, in-laws, children, etc.)

All of these are good strategies but there's nothing wrong with sticking to direct line research, especially when you're just starting out. Methods like cluster and collateral research will come in handy down the line when you're filling out full family trees or trying to bust through brick walls.

4. Being Unorganized

There's not a genealogist in the world who isn't guilty of being a disorganized mess at one point or another! We all have piles of papers to file; notes we can't find and boxes of documents and photos that need to be digitized. Yes, [it is good to be organized](#) so you don't lose things or have to repeat your research. But as far as genealogy crimes go, let yourself off easy for this one!

5 Building Your Tree from DNA Matches

You are guilty of this crime if you've added DNA matches as relatives to your tree without doing the proper research. Often the crime scene in this scenario is [Ancestry's ThruLines](#), which is a tool that finds people in your tree who are also in your matches' linked trees.

The usual suspects in this crime are genealogy beginners who have taken a DNA test and don't understand the difference between their [genetic and their genealogical family trees](#).

Your genetic family tree contains people with whom you share a genetic relationship, measured in centimorgans (cM). However, you can have multiple different genealogical relationships with the same DNA match. For example, if you share 30 cM with a match, that person could be a fourth cousin, half-second cousin twice removed, or many more different kinds of relative.

By all means, use shared cMs and tools like ThruLines to estimate your relationships to your matches. Just remember that you can only [prove your genealogical relationship through the proper research.](#)

Crimes to Leave in the Past Copying from Others' Trees

We've all been guilty of this one at one point or another! The crime is following hints (usually on Ancestry) and copying from others' trees without [verifying the information.](#) It's easy and very tempting to do, but it really should be avoided. No one independently verifies information in online trees and **there's no guarantee that the other person's tree is accurate.** If a tree has thousands of ancestors and the only source mentioned is other Ancestry trees, that's a field full of red flags.

There is a small exception to this one. Let's say you want to throw together a "quick and dirty" tree to try and figure out how you're related to a DNA match. Then and only then we say go ahead and follow those hints. Just don't forget that to actually prove the relationship, you'll need to follow up with proper research.

Improperly Storing Documents

You are guilty of this crime if you have important items stored in a risky place (usually a box on the floor of the garage or basement). Again, this is a very common crime that usually doesn't have consequences but consider this: if anything were to happen (fire, water damage, bugs, etc.) those items are lost forever.

To get bailed out for this crime, you don't have to scan and store everything perfectly right away. Just move the items

to a safer place so they're out of harm's way. Off the floor in an interior, climate-controlled room is a good place to start!

Not Citing Sources

Source citations are tedious and boring, but they are an important part of solid genealogy research. Source citations give your research credibility and they leave a trail of breadcrumbs so that others can find the source in the future. You don't need to have a full bibliography for every source you use, but you should at least note [the who, what, when and where of each source](#). Use a [source citation template](#) to make it easy to fill in the information.

Not Educating Yourself

This is the crime of never taking the time to educate yourself on how to become a better researcher. You don't have to go out and get a bachelor's degree in

genealogy, nor do you need to bring your research to a halt. By all means, keep the search going. Just resolve to take some time to educate yourself about common mistakes, best practices and research methods that may help you. Browsing our collection of articles on [genealogy fundamentals](#) is a good place to start. Remember, you can't benefit from what you don't know!