Ready-Set-Plan: Developing a One-Step Research Plan

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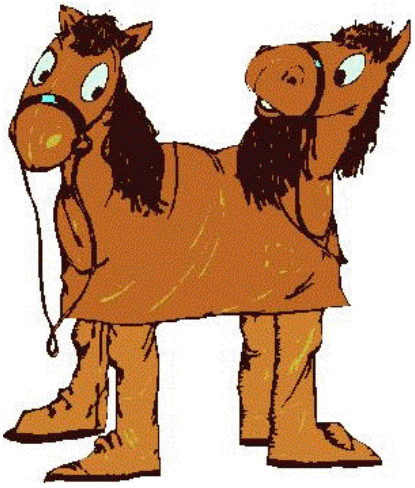
The probability of creating a successful research project is enhanced when we begin with a precise statement of the research goal and reason for the project. Once this is accomplished, the sequential steps necessary for preparing and executing the research plan are easier to identify and organize.

Generally, a research plan consists of two general areas: the research concepts (identification of the research problem and possible solutions) and research logistics (collection of data, analysis, and process). A well-planned research project will have clearly defined steps that integrate into the goals and purpose.

Research Concepts

Basic Research Focus/Previous Research



A strong basis of collected information is required for a solid research plan. It is essential that a researcher be familiar with the records and historical background related to the project. A researcher with experience and knowledge of this base will be more likely to develop a good plan. This lack of knowledge about the principal research subject is the most likely reason a genealogical research plan will fail. The quality and success of research are often a reflection of the time and effort invested in developing research ideas and concepts, a stage of planning that includes becoming familiar with the gaps in previous studies.

> It isn't that they can't see the solution.
> It is that they can't see the problem.
>
> G. K. Chesterton, 1874 - 1936
> Author, *Scandal of Father Brown*

Research Questions

After reviewing the Basic Research Focus, it is time to develop research questions or hypotheses to be tested. Developing targeted questions increases the probability of asking the right questions, and therefore, collecting the appropriate data and evidence as answers. No later effort will overcome the damage caused by a poorly developed question. Because our research questions determine what, where, when and why, these questions represent the link between the conceptual and logistic aspects of planning research.

Choosing a Directional Question

Frame your problem in the form of a question. Our brain loves questions. If the question is powerful and engaging, our brains will do everything within their reach to answer it. We just can't help it: Our brains will start working on the problem immediately and keep working in the background, even when we're not aware of it.

The primary research question is dependent on the context of the study. Determining the marriage date of a specific couple is quite different from a review of possible land transactions or

the reasons for desertion from military service. The research question should provide direction, but not force the research outside the context or purpose for the project.

Define the Problem

This is often where people struggle. They react to what they have seen before and assume the solution is the same. Instead, you should seek to understand more about the unique circumstances of this project.

In my experience, a consultation with a fellow researcher should be ongoing in the development of both the conceptual and logistic areas of a research plan. A conversation with a fellow researcher will bring a different viewpoint, improve research questions, and generate new ones. In addition, others may have experienced different logistical problems. These problems and possible solutions can be included in the plan as developed.

At this point a research plan should include a written research plan. This may reveal additional problems with research concepts and questions and will promote the integration of sequential steps towards the answer.

Once a list of questions is developed into the written plan, gaps in our information will be more evident. Although a well-crafted research plan can help us follow a wandering ancestor and his family from his original home to later destinations, our plan should include the appropriate questions and resources to find the answers and the thought process that lead us toward those questions. Albert Einstein is quoted as having said that if he had one hour to save the world, he would spend fifty-five minutes defining the problem and only five minutes finding the solution.

Only believe what you see with your own eyes and have your eyes examined regularly.

Eliminate possibilities.

We should keep our focus as limited as possible for the project within the time allowed. As we examine our evidence and plan, we may see that some areas should be eliminated from our research at this time.

We might often become so hurried in our efforts to collect and record bits of data that we skip the *basic elements* of research. Documentation is essential for the research process, whether the project is one undertaken by a professional or family researcher. If we intend to allow anyone to believe our work, we must strive to make it complete, comprehensive, accurate and well documented.

Documentation must also be based on the current standards of the genealogical community.

No matter if the reader is a member of our family or a distant researcher looking for another family, they might have questions about our work. As we look at family history research, we should ask the following questions:

From where did this information come?

What sources were used? Are the sources cited?

Is there a bibliography or other documentation?

Does the author provide clear indication why a source was or was not used?

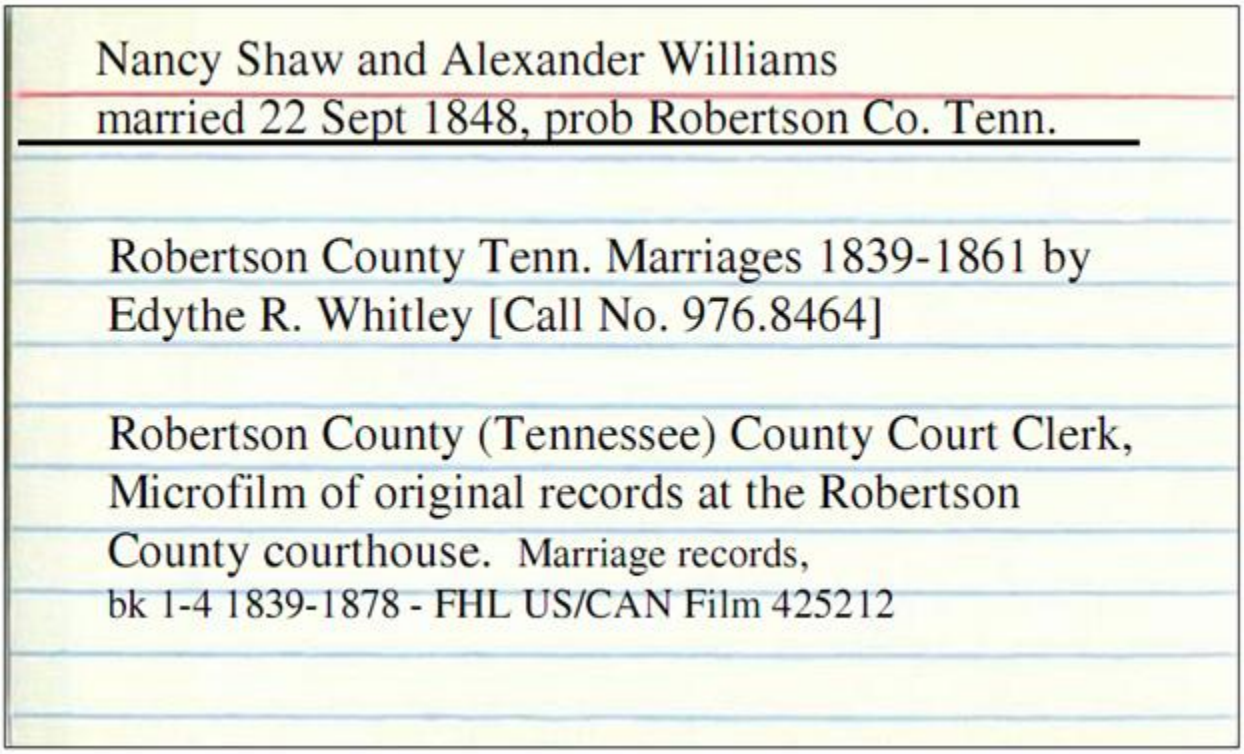
Avoid the Pitfalls.

The following list includes some of the reasons why researchers don't develop effective advancing research plans:

Not being methodical.
Lack of commitment to solving the problem.
Misinterpreting the problem.
Lack of knowledge of the techniques and processes.
Inability to use the techniques effectively.
Using a method inappropriate to the particular problem.
Insufficient or inaccurate information.
Inability to combine analytical and creative thinking.
Failure to effectively prepare implementation of plan.

An Advancing Research Plan

Contains a clear directional question.
Identifies reliable resources most likely to answer that question.
Identifies additional resources that support or provide related information.
Provides a reasonable timeline for completion.



Research Logistics

At this point, we will review and select the records/resources that are likely to provide more information about the question. In determining the likely resources, we should consider availability, ease of search, and content.

Develop sources and use them well. Many good sources of information are simple to use and are readily available. Keep of a file of good research resources and your experience with that resource. Develop a network of good research contacts. (other researchers, librarians, archivists,

historians, and attorneys) When appropriate, ask them about research resources and keep notes on their answers. Don't overlook or minimize routine sources of information. Researchers have been known to puzzle over a research problem for an extended period only to have the problem resolved by a simple resource in hand.

When selecting the approach, determine if this is the most likely way to solve the problem for the long term. Is this the most realistic approach for now? Are the resources available? Do you have enough time to implement this approach?

A Good Researcher

Builds knowledge of records in their area of expertise.
Tracks reliability of records and clerks.
Focuses on most reliable records first.
Records all details of the research process.

Six Steps to Becoming a Better Researcher

Have confidence in your ability to learn

Practice being methodical and using the appropriate techniques

Be patient with your progress

Analyze your mistakes and learn from them

If your working environment is not conducive to effective research, either try to change it or learn how to avoid its effects

Don't be afraid to ask for help in the form of advice or training

A Typical Research Approach

1. Describe the research problem.
2. Summarize the known details. (Include the names, dates, and relationships)
3. Identify fully all records and repositories included in the project.
4. Identify any limitations on the research. (time, inaccessible records, knowledge)
5. Present both positive and negative findings. Be sure to include the reasoning and details.
6. Summarize the findings.
7. Develop a work plan for continuing the research. This plan should be based on the findings of this part of the project.