

Why the Genealogical Proof Standard Matters

A plain-language guide for Ancestry researchers ready to go deeper

You've been doing genealogy. So why does GPS exist?

If you've spent two years on Ancestry, you already know the basic rhythm: search for a name, find a record, click the green leaf, add the person to your tree. It works. Trees grow. Dates and places fill in. It feels like progress—and mostly it is.

But at some point you hit a wall, or a contradiction, or a nagging doubt. Two census records put the same man in two different states in the same year. A death certificate says your great-grandmother was born in Bavaria; her marriage record says Prussia. Your cousin's tree says the family came over in 1882; the ship manifest you found says 1889. Which is right? How do you decide?

The **Genealogical Proof Standard**—GPS for short—is the field's answer to that question. It isn't a bureaucratic checklist invented to make research feel like homework. It's a distillation of what careful historians have always done when they needed to be *sure* rather than merely *pretty confident*. Learning it doesn't mean starting over. It means understanding why some of what you've already built is solid and some of it deserves a second look.

What GPS actually says

GPS has five elements. Meeting all five is what it takes before a genealogical conclusion is considered proven. None of the five is exotic. Taken individually, each one is common sense. The value comes from applying all five together, consistently.

1. A reasonably exhaustive search

You can't just find one record and stop. A proven conclusion rests on having looked—seriously looked—everywhere a relevant record might exist. That doesn't mean you must find everything; sometimes records are lost. It means you must look for them and account for what you didn't find.

In practice this means asking: what records would have been created for this person at this time and place? A man born in rural Kentucky in 1855 probably has a baptismal record, a series of census appearances, a Civil War draft registration, a marriage record, land deeds, tax lists, and a death certificate or obituary. If you've only checked the census and found him twice, your search isn't exhaustive yet.

This element is the one Ancestry trees most often skip. The platform makes it easy to accept what's in front of you and move on. GPS asks you to pause and ask what else should be there.

2. Complete and accurate citations

A citation isn't just a link. It's a precise description of *where* you found something, *what* the source actually is, and *when* you accessed it. The goal is that someone else—or you, two years from now—could find the same record and verify your reading of it.

Ancestry auto-fills citations when you save records, but those citations are often incomplete or vague. “1880 U.S. Census” is not a citation. “1880 U.S. Federal Census, Madison County, Kentucky, Berea township, ED 68, sheet 14B, household of James Perkins, NARA microfilm T9, roll 428; digital image, Ancestry.com” is.

This matters because a bare link can rot or change. A complete citation survives even if the website doesn't.

3. Analysis of each source, information, and evidence

This is the element most researchers haven't encountered before, and it's probably the most intellectually interesting one. GPS asks you to think critically about every record on three levels:

- [object Object]: What kind of document is this? An original record? A transcription? A published index? Each type has its own reliability profile. An original document is generally more trustworthy than a digital transcription of a microfilm copy of an index.
- [object Object]: Who supplied the facts in this record, and when? A birth certificate filled out by the attending physician hours after the birth is strong evidence for the birth date. The same certificate's claim about the mother's birthplace—supplied by a possibly exhausted new mother or her husband—is weaker. Primary information comes from someone with firsthand knowledge; secondary information does not.
- [object Object]: How does this piece of information bear on the question you're trying to answer? Direct evidence states the answer outright. Indirect evidence requires an inference. Negative evidence is the meaningful absence of a record. All three types count; they just carry different weight.

Running through this analysis for each record sounds slow. In practice it becomes fast and instinctive, and it changes how you read documents—you stop treating every source as equally trustworthy and start seeing the grain of each one.

4. Resolution of conflicting evidence

Real research turns up contradictions. GPS doesn't pretend otherwise; it requires you to acknowledge conflicts and explain how you resolved them. You can't simply ignore the census that disagrees with your preferred conclusion.

Resolution doesn't always mean one record is right and one is wrong. Sometimes both records are partially correct, or one contains a transcription error, or the conflict dissolves once you understand how a particular record type was created. The point is that the conflict must be addressed explicitly, not swept under the rug.

This element is where GPS pays its biggest dividends. The researchers who get facts wrong most often are not the ones who found bad records—they're the ones who found conflicting records and ignored the inconvenient one.

5. A soundly reasoned, written conclusion

The final element requires you to write down your reasoning. Not a list of records. Not a collection of dates. A narrative argument: here is the question, here is what I found, here is what each piece of evidence means, here is how I resolved the conflict, and therefore here is my conclusion and how confident I am in it.

Writing forces clarity. Gaps that seem minor in your head become obvious on the page. An argument you thought was airtight sometimes turns out to rest on a single shaky assumption once you try to put it in words. The written conclusion is also the thing you can hand to another researcher (or a future version of yourself) so they don't have to reconstruct your reasoning from scratch.

What GPS is not

GPS is sometimes misread as a credential system, something you do to earn the right to call yourself a real genealogist. That's not it. It's a quality standard, the same way a doctor ordering a differential diagnosis isn't doing extra paperwork for its own sake—they're doing it because it leads to fewer mistakes.

GPS doesn't require you to be a professional. It doesn't require access to archives or expensive databases. It doesn't require you to throw out your existing Ancestry tree. It requires you to be honest with yourself about what you know, what you've inferred, and what you've assumed.

And it scales. You don't apply it to every twig on your tree. You apply it to the questions that matter—contested parentage, immigration origins, the brick wall you've been circling for six months. For the easy stuff—a well-documented 20th-century ancestor with three census records, a birth certificate, and a death certificate all agreeing—you may already satisfy GPS without realizing it.

What changes once you start thinking this way

The practical effect of GPS isn't that your research becomes slower. It's that it becomes more reliable and, in a strange way, more satisfying. When you do reach a conclusion under GPS, you actually know what you know. You can defend it. You can explain the confidence level. You can tell someone else what would change your mind.

You also start reading other people's trees differently. Many Ancestry trees—even very large ones—are chains of inferences that were never examined. Copied from tree to tree, with no citations, no source analysis, no acknowledgment of conflicts. Knowing GPS means knowing when to trust borrowed conclusions and when to go back to the records yourself.

You'll also find that GPS gives you a useful vocabulary for the moments when you're stuck. Instead of "I can't find any more records," you can say: "The search is reasonably exhaustive; what I'm missing is a primary-information source for the birth year, and the indirect evidence from the 1870 and 1880 censuses is internally consistent but conflicts with the 1900 census by seven years." That's a research problem you can actually make progress on.

Where to go from here

The best single introduction to GPS is **Mastering Genealogical Proof** by Thomas W. Jones (2013, National Genealogical Society). It's short—under 200 pages—and works through the standard with worked examples. Elizabeth Shown Mills' **Evidence Explained** is the authoritative citation guide, more reference than reading; you don't read it cover to cover, but you'll reach for it every time you encounter an unfamiliar record type.

The National Genealogical Society Quarterly publishes GPS-compliant research articles, which are excellent models. Reading one or two is more instructive than any amount of abstract discussion: you see exactly what a proof argument looks like when written out by someone who knows what they're doing.

The Association of Professional Genealogists and the Board for Certification of Genealogists both publish free resources online. Neither requires you to pursue certification, the resources are useful regardless.

Two years in, you've already done the hard part: you know how to find records. GPS is the framework that tells you what to do with them once you've found them.