

## If Sherlock Holmes were a Genealogist

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Learn the secrets used by Sherlock Holmes and become a first rate genealogist - investigator, researcher, problem-solver, and mystery buster. We will explore the main steps used by Sherlock to solve mysteries which include: 1. Observation 2. Search 3. Analysis and 4. Imagination.

### 1. Overview

Throughout Sherlock Holmes stories, there are four main steps followed for solving mysteries.

1. Observation - soaking up the facts
2. Search - getting to the nitty-gritty
3. Analysis - sorting through the jigsaw pieces
4. Imagination/Inspiration - the workshop of the mind

Much like Sherlock Holmes, genealogical research methods involve beginning with a general concept and moving toward a more specific conclusion. This is also referred to as deductive reasoning.

This process of reaching a conclusion is guaranteed to work, if

- The evidence provided is true.
- The reasoning used to reach the conclusion is correct.

Deductive reasoning involves

- Using a foundation of known information
- Analyzing it in such a way as to make valid, objective, educated arguments for a family ancestral connection. Making such a case requires
  - Multiple pieces of information, often with supplementary resources, which logically tie personal circumstances together.
  - Consider facts that would otherwise exclude or negate the relationships in question from being established.
- Deductive research is not a guessing game, a stab in the dark, or a linkage of names simply because you have found someone else with a family tree with the same surnames as yours.

### 1. Observation - soaking up the facts

**Principle 1 of Observation: Genealogy Observation Requires the “Eyes of a hawk.”**

Think of one of those beautiful, intense, icy glares from Sherlock Holmes as he pans a room taking in every detail.

*“You see, but you do not observe”. ..Sherlock Holmes from “A Scandal in Bohemia”*

*“The observer who has thoroughly understood one link in a series of incidents, should be able accurately to state all the other ones, both before and after.” ...Sherlock Homes from “The Five Orange Pips”*

As you research any record, hear the answers to family history questions, and/or read the writings of your ancestors, just allow what is there to present itself to you. Open up your senses. Really listen, let the sounds impact you. Notice the smells. And look with the eyes of a hawk.

- Sharp.
- Precise.
- Missing nothing.
- Be alert to every movement, every clue, anything that is out of the ordinary.

### **Principle 2 of Observation: Do Not Pre-judge the Situation**

When you first start out any research project, start with the understanding that you know nothing. For every genealogical problem you research, simply observe...

In looking, you are learning. When you see with fresh eyes, unclouded by what you think you know, your powers of observation become like that of a wild animal. You are far more alert. Your vision is sharper. There is no interference.

Sherlock Holmes stressed not pre-judging a situation before the facts have been observed and gathered.

*"It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts." ...Sherlock Holmes from "A Scandal in Bohemia."*

### **What are the types of evidence (sources) you can find?**

- Primary Evidence
- Secondary Evidence
- Collateral Evidence
- Circumstantial Evidence
- Reported Evidence

### **Principle 3 of Observation: View your research from many different angles.**

While one strives to be as objective as possible, the way a thing appears is always affected by the position from which it was viewed. To alleviate this flaw, try and observe research from as many different angles as possible.

*"I see no more than you, but I have trained myself to notice what I see."...Sherlock Homes from "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier"*

### **What types of resources can you find?**

### **Principle 4 of Observation: As you observe, gather the facts.**

You are looking to see the components of the situation or problem. Soak up everything. Ask questions of everything and everybody. Work with your senses: searching, seeking, and questioning. As you do this you, become receptive to the answers. You learn the

- What and why
- When and how
- Where and who to glean every bit of information.

*"There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact."...Sherlock Homes from "The Boscombe Valley Mystery"*

## What type of information/facts are you looking for?

### **Principal 5 of Observation: Keep Track of Your Observations**

As a genealogist you will use a number of different resources in your search. Research logs are essential tools for keeping it all straight so you don't duplicate your work later. Even if you don't see the need for a research log during the beginning stages, it's a good bet that eventually you will forget some of the early records you searched. You can prevent this by indicating important facts in a research log, such as:

- Where the search was conducted (library, archives, family papers, etc.).
- When the search was conducted (list the full date, including the year).
- The record or other research used.
- The information you did or did not find.

## **2. Search - getting to the nitty-gritty**

Sherlock Holmes, when he was on a case, was like a bloodhound. He'd be down on his knees peering at cracks in the floor boards, bounding through windows, over chairs, up to the ceiling. You can picture him now with magnifying glass in hand, and eyes sharply focused for clues.

*"He was out on the lawn, in through the window, round the room, and up into the bedroom, for all the world like a dashing foxhound drawing a cover."  
Sherlock Homes from "The Devil's Foot"*

This is the nitty-gritty, down in the dirt, aspect of problem solving. Don't be afraid of the minutiae. The solution lies in the details.

### **Principal 1 of Search: Search leads to clues. Clues lead to answers.**

In genealogy, you have to be willing to plunge into the details. Delve into the primary and secondary records and immerse yourself in the search for the answers.

### **Principal 2 of Search: Clues are found where you didn't look.**

When conducting genealogy research, it becomes paramount to consider all your options and simply ask yourself, where should I look?

*"Always look at the hands first, Watson. Then cuffs, trouser-knees, and boots." ...Sherlock Holmes from "The Adventure of The Creeping Man"*

## What are the common mistakes genealogists make in research?

### **Principal 3 of Search: See your ancestors through the time in which they lived.**

Genealogists often conduct research from the point of view of today, it is important to have knowledge of the history, geography, and social customs of the area and people being researched. Some knowledge of the history of the law and the language of an area and its people may also be necessary to understand the facts. When we take time to understand the world in which they lived, many clues will reveal themselves and open our eyes to understanding.

*In my profession all sorts of odd knowledge comes useful, and this room of yours is a storehouse of it."...Sherlock Homes from "The Adventure of The Three Garridebs"*

*Have a cigarette, Mr. McFarlane. Beyond obvious facts that you are an asthmatic, I know nothing whatever about you. Sherlock Homes from "The Adventure of The Norwood Builder"*

*"According to my experience it is not possible to reach the platform of a Metropolitan train without exhibiting one's ticket." ...Sherlock Holmes from The Adventure of Bruce-Partington Plans"*

#### **Principal 4 of Search: Change is Constant....Broune really is Brown**

Be aware that in your research you may come across what will be sources of trouble, but by being aware of these issues, it will create the opportunity for you to recognize the facts and clues that might be missed. For example:

**Vocabulary** - terms used in older wills and other documents may not match current practice. We accept "senior" and "junior" as referring to a father and son. However, years ago it could refer to any two men in one community who happened to have the same name.

#### **Names**

1. Family Name Spellings - May change if the spelling is not Anglo-Saxon origin and/or phonetic.

Personal Examples:

- YOUNG (JUNG)
- CORKUM (von GORCUM) GORKUM CORKAM
- HERMAN (HERMANN) HARMAN HARMON
- DEAL (THIEL) DIEL TEEL TEAL
- EISENHAUER EISENHAUR EISENOHR EISENER EISENOR EISNER ISENHAUER ISENHAUR ISENHOFFER ISENHOUR ISENOR ISNOR

2. Given Names - go by first or second name?

- Johannes Brahms
- Johann Sebastian BACH
- James Christopher Frederick YOUNG

3. Given Names - identical for two members of the same family after the untimely demise of the first; common with first born. This can be very confusing, especially until you know of the death of the first.

#### **Principal 4 of Search: Look under the Chair**

Don't forget items of common use, either. Antiques that are handed down from generation to generation can substantiate your research. A chair may have been a wedding present; a piece of jewelry could have been presented to a new mother by her husband to celebrate the birth of a child. Important clues are often found by simply turning the picture over and seeing what is written.

### **3. Analysis - sorting through the jigsaw pieces**

The brilliance of Sherlock Holmes often came in the analysis of putting the jigsaw puzzle of clues and facts together to solve the mystery.

When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."... Sherlock Holmes from "The Adventure of The Blanched Soldier"

Think of a jigsaw puzzle. When you have all the pieces, and they are all the right way up, you can then start to analyze where they go and how they fit together. The more pieces you have the easier it will be to infer what the big picture will be. So the more angles you have observed a problem from, and the more facts you have gathered about it, the more likely you are to be able to see the final solution.

How is this like in genealogy? You take the pieces of the jigsaw, the facts, and you begin to think about how they fit together, how they relate to one another, how one links to the other and what affect that has on the overall picture.

“Each fact is suggestive in itself. Together they have a cumulative force.” Sherlock Holmes in “...Sherlock Holmes from “The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans”

### **Principle 1 of Analysis: Study the merits of any information you receive**

To study the merits of information, try this:

- Actual Truth (proof is certain)
- Probable Truth (proof is probable, but not absolutely certain)
- Supposed Evidence (you suspect this is true, but you can't be sure). Give reasons why you suspect this is true.
- Absolutely Ridiculous (utter nonsense, but it can't be ignored)

*“It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important.” Sherlock Holmes from “A Case of Identity”*

*“One drawback of an active mind is that one can always conceive alternate explanations which would make our scent a false one.” Sherlock Homes from “The Problem of Thor Bridge”*

Use the 5 W's: Who - What - Where - When - Why method of analyzing and it can be applied to every document and source acquired.

### **Principle 2 of Analysis: Compare all the evidence**

It's relatively easy to compare data. Get your data together, arrange it in usable form (chronological or group), compare, and contrast the information. If there are differences, note them until you can prove the differences one way or another. Some people prefer to keep all of it... and make the appropriate notes such as: This is the family conclusion, but it was disproved by (and state the source).

*“Circumstantial evidence is a very tricky thing. It may seem to point very straight to one thing, but if you shift your own point of view a little, you may find it pointing in an equally uncompromising manner to something entirely different.” Sherlock Homes from “The Boscombe Valley Mystery”*

Research previously completed may contain more clues than you might think.

When one is new and starting research, they grab anything and everything they can find, and never look at it again. Many of the answers they are looking for now may be in those records and notes. One may be able to find materials previously missed.

Just remember when looking at the documents you so painstakingly acquired, to

- Use them
- Reuse them
- And then use them again.

### **Principle 3 of Analysis: Check for Warning Signs**

Research should be critically analyzed for accuracy and completeness at each phase of the search. As you analyze records and research, be aware of the warning signs that may denote that information is off the mark.

*“My dear Watson, you as a medical man are continually gaining light as to the tendencies of a child by the study of the parents. Don't you see that the converse is equally valid? I have*

*frequently gained my first real insight into the character of parents by studying their children.”  
Sherlock Homes from “The Adventure of The Copper Beeches”*

Example: warning signs seen in pedigree charts and family group sheets.

#### **Principle 4 of Analysis: Draw your conclusions**

Once you have done the above, you are ready to make a decision. This means you have found solid, indisputable proof that will extend your pedigree. Then there are the “maybes”... you need to work on these more, but perhaps they will prove to be true. And finally (this is my favorite), the “might be” category. You keep these and review them from time to time because they may fit in when you get additional information.

*“It is of the highest importance in the art of detection to be able to recognize out of a number of facts which are incidental and which vital. Otherwise your energy and attention must be dissipated instead of being concentrated.” Sherlock Holmes from “The Reigate”*

#### **4. Imagination/Inspiration - the workshop of the mind**

Sherlock Holmes often sought seclusion to help him solve a problem; he would remove himself right away from all disturbances so he could use his imagination to freely explore the problem from all angles.

As with Einstein, Holmes would take up the fiddle to help himself relax. While one part of his mind would be occupied with playing the violin, the greater part of his mind was able to roam free and form new ideas.

Holmes referred to the imagination as the mother of truth. In his times of reverie, he could allow the interplay of ideas to generate new insights into whatever case was taxing him at that time.

So there you have it. You are just as much a genius as Sherlock Holmes.

Above all else, don't forget to make research a matter of prayer. It will be through those quiet moments of contemplation that direction will come to guide you.