

A Beginner's Genealogy Vocabulary

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Genealogy often comes with its own unique set of terms and jargon. This vocabulary list is designed to help newcomers navigate the world of family history research more easily. Whether you're just starting your journey or looking to brush up on some key terms, this list will provide you with a solid foundation to better understand and explore your family's roots. Happy researching!

Ancestor - A person from whom you are directly descended, such as your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and so on.

Archive - A place where important historical documents, records, and other materials are stored and preserved. Archives can be physical places, like a library or museum, or digital collections you can access online.

Birth Certificate - An official document that records the details of a person's birth, such as their full name, date of birth, place of birth, and the names of their parents.

Brick Wall - A term used to describe a situation where you can't find any more information about an ancestor or a specific part of your family tree. It's like hitting a dead end in your research. This can happen when records are missing, names are common, or there's limited information available. Overcoming a brick wall often requires creativity, persistence, and sometimes, looking for clues in unexpected places.

Cemetery Records - Documents that provide important information about the people buried in a cemetery. These records often include names, birth and death dates, and sometimes details about family members or inscriptions on gravestones. In addition to these records, cemetery maps show the layout of the cemetery and where specific graves are located, while burial registers list the names of people buried there, often along with dates and plot numbers.

Census - An official count of the population that collects information about people, such as their names, ages, occupations, and where they live.

Collateral Line - Family members who are not your direct ancestors, but are still related to you, such as siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles of your ancestors. Collateral relatives can often be

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found in records that also mention your direct ancestors, helping you to piece together a more complete picture of your family's history.

Common Ancestor - A person from your family tree who is shared by two or more people as a direct ancestor. This means that you and someone else, like a cousin, both descend from the same person, such as a shared grandparent or great-grandparent. It is a key concept in building and understanding family trees, as it shows the point where two family lines come together.

Cousin - A relative who shares a common ancestor with you but is not your sibling. Cousins are typically the children of your aunts and uncles, and they are part of the collateral line. Cousins are classified by degree, such as first cousins, second cousins, etc.

Death Certificate - An official document that records the details of a person's death, including their name, date of death, place of death, and often the cause of death.

Descendant - Someone who comes from an earlier family member, like a child, grandchild, or great-grandchild.

DNA Testing - A scientific method used to learn about your family history by analyzing your genetic makeup. In family history, DNA testing can help you discover your ancestors, find distant relatives, and understand your ethnic background. The test usually involves sending a small sample, like saliva, to a lab, where they compare your DNA with others to find matches. DNA testing can reveal connections that might not be found in traditional records, making it a powerful tool for building your family tree.

Extended Family - Relatives beyond your immediate family, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and sometimes even more distant relatives like great-aunts and second cousins.

Family Group Sheet - A form used to record detailed information about a family, usually focusing on parents and their children. A family group sheet helps you organize important facts like names, birth dates, marriage details, and death dates for each family member.

Family Tree - A diagram that shows how different members of a family are related to each other. The tree usually starts with one person at the bottom and branches out to include parents, grandparents, and so on.

GEDCOM - Stands for Genealogical Data Communication. It is a computer file format used to store and share family history information. A GEDCOM file helps you organize and transfer your family tree data between different genealogy software programs. It includes details like names, dates, places, and relationships, making it easy to share your research with others or back up your work.

Genealogical Records - Documents that provide information about people and their family relationships, helping you trace your family history. Examples of genealogical records include birth certificates, marriage licenses, death certificates, census records, and church records.

Genealogist - A person who studies and researches family histories.

Genealogy - The study of family history and the tracing of family trees.

Generation - A group of people in a family who are born and live around the same time. In family history, a generation usually refers to the people at a similar level in a family tree, like parents, children, or grandparents.

Given Name - The first name a person is given at birth.

Immigration - The process of moving from one country to another to live permanently.

Immigration Records - Documents that provide information about people who have moved from one country to another to live permanently. Examples of immigration records include passenger lists from ships, naturalization papers (which show when someone became a citizen), border crossing records, and visa applications. These records often include details like names, ages, places of origin, and dates of arrival.

Lineage - The line of ancestors or descendants that connects you to your family through generations.

Lineage Society - Organizations for people who can prove they are descended from a specific ancestor or group of ancestors. Examples of lineage societies include the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), which is for women who can trace their ancestry to someone who fought in the American Revolution, the Sons of the Confederacy, for descendants of those who served in the Confederate military, and the Mayflower Society, for people who can prove they are descended from passengers on the Mayflower.

Maiden Name - The last name a woman has before she gets married. Knowing an ancestor's maiden name can be key to finding records about her early life, her family, and her connections before she became part of a new family line.

Marriage Certificate - An official document that records the details of a marriage, such as the names of the bride and groom, the date of the marriage, and the place where it took place.

Maternal Line - The line of ancestry that traces through your mother, her mother, and so on, going back through the women in your family.

mtDNA - Mitochondrial DNA is a type of DNA that is passed down from mother to child, unchanged, through the maternal line.

Naturalization - The process by which a person who was born in another country becomes a citizen of a new country. Naturalization records are important because they provide information about your ancestors who immigrated and chose to become citizens in their new homeland. They often include details like names, birthplaces, dates of arrival, and sometimes personal descriptions or the names of family members.

Oral History - A collection of family stories and traditions passed down verbally through generations.

Paternal Line - The line of ancestry that traces through your father, his father, and so on, going back through the men in your family.

Pedigree Chart - A diagram that shows your family tree, displaying your direct ancestors in a clear, organized way.

Primary Source - An original document or record created at the time an event occurred, providing firsthand evidence about a person, place, or event. Examples of primary sources include birth certificates, marriage licenses, diaries, letters, and photographs.

Probate Records - Legal documents created after a person's death to manage and distribute their estate. These records often include wills, estate inventories, letters of administration, and guardianship papers.

Research Log - A tool used to keep track of the steps you take and the sources you consult while researching your family history. A research log typically includes details like the date of your research, the sources you used (like books, websites, or archives), and what you discovered.

Secondary Source - A record or document created after an event by someone who wasn't there when it happened. Secondary sources are based on information from other sources rather than firsthand knowledge. Examples of secondary sources include family histories written by later generations, published genealogies, online family trees, historical books about a time period or location, and newspaper articles written after an event.

Sibling - A person who shares one or both parents with you, such as a brother or sister.

Source Citation - A detailed reference that shows where you found specific information in your family history research.

Spouse - A person's husband or wife, their partner in marriage.

Surnames - A family name passed down from generation to generation, usually used as the last name.

Tombstone/Gravestone - A marker placed at a grave that displays important information about the person buried there, such as their name, birth date, and death date. It can sometimes include additional information like a spouse's name, an epitaph, or religious symbols.

Transcription - A written copy of information taken from an original document, often used when the original is difficult to read or access. A transcription should be an exact copy of the original text, including any errors or unusual spellings, to preserve the accuracy of the information.

Vital Records - Official documents that record important life events, such as births, marriages, and deaths. Examples of vital records include birth certificates, marriage licenses, death certificates, and divorce records.

Y-DNA - A type of DNA that is passed down from father to son, unchanged, through the paternal line.