

A Key to Research Success: Avoiding Fallacies in Family History

© 2018, 2023-24 - J. W. Hibben
(no audio or video recording permitted
without prior authorization)

Prepared and Presented by Jean Wilcox Hibben – PhD, MA
Riverside County, California
circlemending@gmail.com
Cell: 909-994-6114
<www.circlemending.org>; <www.circlemending.blogspot.com>

- *Deduction: Generalizing from the whole to a single representative of the whole*

EXAMPLE: Everyone in this room is interested in family history.

I am in this room, therefore I am interested in family history.

- *Induction: Generalizing from a single entity to the group the entity belongs to*

EXAMPLE: I am interested in family history and volunteer at the Family History Center.

All people who are interested in family history also volunteer at Family History Centers.

Obviously, this last statement is a fallacy (the fallacy of Hasty Generalization). When we identify the errors in reasoning, we have a chance of correcting research before it gets posted on the web or published, passed on to family, or otherwise disseminated.

Avoid Fallacies

Fallacies are errors in reasoning, often used to convince people of particular claims. Sometimes people use fallacies, knowing that the reasoning is flawed but hoping that the public will not be aware of the weakness in the argument. Sometimes people use fallacies without being aware that the argument (or family story) is fallacious.

Some common deductive fallacies found in genealogical research

- False Authority
- Argument from Ignorance
- Unknowable Fact
- Traditional Wisdom
- Positioning
- Ad Hominem
- Dismissal
- Begging the Question

Genealogy problems can be considered arguments: We are either arguing for or against accepting data as applicable to our Family History.

Some common inductive fallacies found in genealogical research

- Either/Or
- Hasty Conclusion/Generalization
- False Cause
- Oversimplification

In spite of the problems with inductive reasoning, it is not, by itself, fallacious. We use inductive reasoning, applying it to many documents or pieces of evidence, about the same “fact” to make a “Reasonably Exhaustive Search” and fulfill a major requirement of the Genealogical Proof Standard. If four or five pieces of inductive evidence lead to a particular conclusion, there is a greater probability of that conclusion being accurate (however, each piece of evidence must be carefully scrutinized for validity).

Family Historians need to be

- Critical Thinkers
- Analysts
- Investigators

References & Resources

Akert, Robert U. & Daniel Klein. *Family Tales, Family Wisdom: How to Gather the Stories of a Lifetime and Share Them with Your Family*. New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1991.

Alessi, Jean & Jan Miller. *Once Upon a Memory*. White Hall, VA: Betterway Pub., 1987.

Board of Certification of Genealogists. *The BCG Genealogical Standards Manual*. Washington, D.C.: Ancestry Pub., 2000.

Bormann, Ernest G. “Symbolic Convergence: Organizational Communication and Culture.” In L. L. Putnam & M. E. Pacanowsky (Eds.), *Communication and Organizations: An Interpretive Approach* (pp. 99-122). Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983.

Botkin, B. A. *The Treasury of American Folklore*. New York: Crown Pub., 1944.

Browne, M. Neil & Stuart M. Keeley. *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1986.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Power of Myth, with Bill Moyers*. New York: Anchor Books, 1991.

Copi, Irving M. *Introduction to Logic, 6th ed.* New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1982.

Drake, Paul. *What did they Mean by That? A Dictionary of Historical and Genealogical Terms Old and New*. Bowie MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 2003.

Fischer, David Hackett. *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989.

Fisher, Walter R. *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. Columbia, S.C.: Univ. of So. Carolina Press, 1987.

Goldrup, Lawrence. P. *Writing the Family Narrative*. Salt Lake City: Ancestry Pub., 1987.

Govier, Trudy. *A Practical Study of Argument, 6th ed.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2005.

Hatcher, Patricia Law. *Producing a Quality Family History*. Salt Lake City: Ancestry Pub., 1996.

Hoolihan, Thomas A. & Kevin T. Baaske. *Arguments and Arguing: The Products and Process of Human Decision Making*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.

Imber-Black, Evan. *The Secret Life of Families: Truth-Telling, Privacy, and Reconciliation in a Tell-All Society*. New York: Bantam Books, 1998.

Isay, Dave, Ed. *Listening is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life from the Storycorps Project*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2007.

Lunsford, Andrea A. & John J. Ruskiewicz. *Everything's an Argument*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.

Mead, George Herbert. *Mind, Self, & Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1934.

Miller, Ilene. *Publishing Your Family History with a Computer: A Five-Step Guide*. Garden Grove, CA: Shumway Family History Services, 1998.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Pub. Co., 2007 (or most current edition)

Mokotoff, Gary, Ed. *Every Family Has a Story: Tales from the Pages of AVOTAYNU*. Bergenfield, NJ, 2008.

Moore, Brooke Noel. *Making Your Case: Critical Thinking and the Argumentative Essay*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Pub. Co., 1995.

Pfeiffer, Laura Szucs. *Hidden Sources: Family History in Unlikely Places*. Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 2000.

Portelli, Alessandro. *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*. Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

Pratt, Michael W. & Barbara H. Fiese. *Family Stories and the Life Course: Across Time and Generations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc, Publishers, 2004.

Quine, W. V. & J. S. Ullian. *The Web of Belief, 2nd Ed.* New York: Random House, 1978.

- Rawlins, Maggie & Lyle. *Set the Record Straight! A Guide on Preserving and Sharing Personal & Family Histories*. Corona, CA: 1993.
- Rose, Christine. *Genealogical Proof Standard: Building a Solid Case, 3rd Ed.* San Jose, CA: CR Publications, 2009.
- Sims, Martha C. *Living Folklore: An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions*. Logan, UT: Utah State Univ. Press, 2005.
- Stone, Elizabeth. *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us*. Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004.
- Sturdevant, Katherine Scott. *Bringing your Family History to Life through Social History*. Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2000.
- Toulmin, Steven, Richard Rieke, & Allen Janik. *An Introduction to Reasoning*. New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., Inc., 1984.
- Underhill, Tom. *Dead Men Tell No Tales: How to Record your Family's Oral History*. Placentia, CA: Creative Continuum, 2002.
- Underhill, Tom. *Family History Publishing: Basics*. Placentia, CA: Creative Continuum, 2001.
- Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
- Weitzman, David. *Underfoot: An Everyday Guide to Exploring the American Past*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976.
- Zeitlin, Steven J., Amy J. Kotkin, & Holly Cutting Baker. *A Celebration of American Family Folklore*. Cambridge, MA: Yellow Moon Press, 1982.
- Zumwalt, Rosemary Lévy. *American Folklore Scholarship*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988.