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Chapter 7

GPS Element 5: The Written Conclusion

A proved conclusion's written form depends on where that conclusion fits on a continuum of genealogical proof situations, ranging from extremely straightforward to extremely complex. We use the approach that best fits our evidence and its support for the conclusion we wish to present as proved.

We have assembled our evidence, resolved any conflicts, and established a conclusion. We may believe we have proved that conclusion. Proof exists, however, only in writing. It requires a written and documented fact, statement, or explanation showing why we and consumers of our research should believe a conclusion is proved. It does not need to show *how* we executed the research that led to the conclusion.

Demonstrating proof in writing may be easy or difficult, or it may fall somewhere between these extremes. In the simplest situations source citations make proof self-evident. In contrast, the most complex situations may require many pages of documented explanation, enhanced and clarified with timelines, tables, and illustrations. Such challenging situations, though perhaps more interesting and important, are less common than straightforward proof contexts.

Regardless of a case's simplicity or complexity, its written conclusion—the GPS's fifth element—must reflect the GPS's first three elements:

- *GPS element 1—thorough research.* Source citations may adequately show our research scope. If information beyond what the citations show is needed to show research scope, we add it to our footnotes or narrative.
- *GPS element 2—source citations.* Footnotes attached to our narrative contain citations identifying sources supporting our conclusion.
- *GPS element 3—analysis and correlation of information and evidence.* Source citations may adequately reflect our analysis and correlation. If information beyond what the citations show is needed to demonstrate appropriate analysis and correlation, we add it to our footnotes or narrative.

If evidence offers conflicting answers to our research question, the written conclusion must address not only the GPS's first three elements but also the fourth:

- *GPS element 4—resolution of any evidence conflicting with the conclusion.* If no information or evidence conflicts with our proposed answer to the research question, we bypass this GPS element. If any evidence does conflict with that answer, our written conclusion shows how we resolved the conflict.

A written conclusion's form depends on where that conclusion fits on a continuum of genealogical proof situations, ranging from obviously self-evident to extremely complex. We have three options for presenting a conclusion as proved. We select the option that best fits our evidence and how it supports our conclusion:

- *Proof statement* (a data item or sentence in a broader context)
- *Proof summary* (one or a few pages focused on proof)
- *Proof argument* (several or many pages focused on proof)

Proof statements

A proof statement may be a documented data item or sentence stating or showing a conclusion within a documented genealogical article, chapter, chart, report, table, or other printed or online work. A written conclusion meeting the GPS may be this simple, if direct evidence items from credible sources agree perfectly with the statement and no known source conflicts with it.

A footnote containing at least one or two citations accompanies the item or sentence comprising the proof statement. In the context of a larger documented work, this one footnote may be adequate for genealogical proof—for meeting the GPS—if the citations show six characteristics:

1. They are clear, complete, and accurate.
2. Citations in the footnote, the proof statement's context, or both identify at least two independent sources, each specifying the conclusion.
3. They cite sources that competent genealogists would consult to support the conclusion. (For example, if the statement concerns a marriage, one citation might reference the original marriage record containing an eyewitness account.)
4. They cite at least one original record that supports the conclusion.
5. They refer to at least one primary information item used as direct, indirect, or negative evidence of the conclusion.
6. They cite no authored work, derivative record, or secondary information that could be replaced by a corresponding original record or primary information.

When citations with these characteristics accompany proof statements in a larger documented context, the proof statement may meet four GPS elements:

- Citations in the single footnote and the proof statement's context will reflect GPS elements 2 (clear and accurate source citations) and 3 (analysis and correlation of evidence).
- Citations within the work containing the proof statement will show the research scope, demonstrating GPS element 1 (reasonably exhaustive research). They also are likely to add support to the proof statement.
- The proof statement itself will demonstrate GPS element 5 (clearly written conclusion).

Proof statements cannot handle GPS element 4—resolution of conflicting evidence. Resolution of conflicting evidence requires explanation—more than a single documented data item or statement. Consequently, if evidence conflicts with our proposed conclusion, our written explanation must be in the form of a proof summary or proof argument, not a proof statement.

Table 8 shows seven related proof statements meeting the GPS. Although some of the five footnotes do not contain two citations, their context

Table 8

Seven Related Proof Statements in Context

Three days later, in Kansas City, Missouri, "Miss Clara D. Kinaman" of Sedgwick County, Kansas—just north of Sumner—married Richard Y. Ford.³³ In 1887–88 and 1892 the Fords lived in Wichita, in Sedgwick County.³⁴ Ford's "habitual drunkenness" caused Clara to leave him in November 1892 and return to Conway Springs. On 30 November 1894 she filed for divorce, granted on 23 January 1896.³⁵ In 1898 Clara Ford, "wid. [of] Richard," resided in Kansas City, Missouri.³⁶ Quite alive, Richard was treated for the "liquor habit" in Wichita in 1901. He died, apparently childless, in Pittsburg, Kansas, on 9 March 1909.³⁷

33. Jackson Co., Mo., Marriage Record 7:463, Ford-Kinnaman; Recorder of Deeds, Kansas City, Mo.; FHL microfilm 1,016,666. For Ford's first name, see *Annual Directory of the City of Wichita* (Wichita: F. A. North, 1888), 170.

34. *Annual Directory of the City of Wichita* (1887), 139; (1888), 170; and (1892), 132.

35. Clara D. Ford, Petition, 30 November 1894; Sumner Co., case file no. 8124, Ford v. Ford.

36. *Hoye's City Directory of Kansas City, Mo.* (Kansas City: Hoye, 1898), 271, for "Ford Clara D wid Richard r 1424 Grand av." Also, "Death of a Pioneer," *Quincy Daily Herald*, 4 November 1898, page 1, col. 2. Adam was "survived by his wife and two daughters, one in Colorado and the other in Kansas City."

37. "He Was Rescued," *Wichita City Eagle*, 15 May 1901, page 2, col. 6. Also, "Dick Ford Dead," *Pittsburg Headlight*, evening edition, Pittsburg, Kans., 8 March 1909, sixth unnumbered page, col. 3. The author thanks Evie Bresette, CG, for research on Richard Ford.

Note: Excerpted from Thomas W. Jones, "Misleading Records Debunked: The Surprising Case of George Wellington Edison Jr.," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 100 (June 2012): 133–56 at p. 138.

contains corroborating documentation for each statement. For example, the divorce file corroborates the marriage. The last footnote documents the extract's last two statements.

Proof summaries

Proof summaries are documented lists or narratives stating facts that support or lead to a proved conclusion. Unlike proof statements, which require a broader context, proof summaries may stand alone. A proof summary might, for example, comprise a report for a client or personal files, or it might accompany a lineage-society application. Proof summaries also, however, may appear as parts of articles, blogs, case studies, chapters, reports, and other documented genealogical works.

A combination of two circumstances indicates when a proof summary is the best choice for a written conclusion meeting the GPS:

- The written conclusion requires more than one documented fact or statement and footnote to explain the conclusion and show the documentation supporting it.
- The written conclusion does not involve a complicated question of identity or difficult-to-resolve conflicting evidence, enabling the genealogist to fully explain the rationale for proof, including the resolution of any conflicting evidence, within a few paragraphs or pages.

Footnotes accompanying a proof summary cite all the sources supporting or documenting the conclusion. Effective citations will collectively show eight characteristics:

1. They are clear, complete, and accurate.
2. They show that the genealogist bypassed no likely relevant source.
3. They document all statements.
4. They cite at least two independent sources supporting the conclusion.
5. They cite all the sources that competent genealogists would consult to support the conclusion.
6. They cite at least one original record providing information that directly, indirectly, or negatively supports the conclusion.
7. They refer to at least one primary information item used directly, indirectly, or negatively as evidence of the conclusion.
8. They cite no authored work, derivative source, or secondary information that could be replaced by a corresponding original record and primary information.

When citations with these characteristics accompany a proof summary it will meet all five GPS elements:

- The proof summary's citations will reflect GPS elements 1 (thorough research) and 2 (clear and accurate source citations).
- Those citations will at least partially demonstrate GPS element 3 (analysis and correlation of evidence). Explanations within the proof summary's paragraphs or list items may further reflect GPS element 3.
- If evidence conflicts with the conclusion, the proof summary's paragraphs or list items will address GPS element 4 (explanation of the resolution of conflicting evidence).
- The proof summary itself will demonstrate GPS element 5 (clearly written conclusion).

Proof summaries typically begin or end with a statement of the conclusion being proved:

- If we state the conclusion first, we enumerate the points explaining why we consider that conclusion proved. This may be a list, likely with a footnote attached to each list item. Alternatively, we may provide the explanation in a documented narrative format.
- If we end with a statement of the conclusion, we begin with the research question. We continue with a list or narrative to develop the rationale for a proved answer.

Table 5 (under chapter 5) shows a proof summary in a list format with the conclusion stated first. For proof summaries in a narrative format, see the article in appendix A. Each of the seven "Supporting Conclusion" sections is a proof summary in narrative format, enhanced with lists, tables, and figures. (The entire article, however, is a proof argument.)

Proof arguments

Proof arguments are documented narratives in which genealogists explain why the answer to a complex genealogical problem should be considered proved. Proof arguments may be stand-alone documents, like articles, case studies, reports, and monographs, or they could be part of a chapter, family history, report, or other documented genealogical work.

Differences between proof arguments and proof summaries

Proof summaries and arguments represent a division between two parts of a continuum:

- We use *proof summaries* for less complex cases, those where questions of identity and conflicting evidence can be resolved without serious difficulty. These cases usually can be explained in a few pages or less. Proof summaries typically overarch proof statements, which, when combined, support the case for proof.

- We use *proof arguments* for more complex cases, those where questions of identity or conflicting evidence are difficult to resolve. They usually require more than a few pages of explanation. Proof arguments typically overarch proof statements and proof summaries, which, when combined, support the case for proof.

Like proof summaries, proof arguments are thoroughly documented. Citations for proof arguments should show the same eight characteristics as those for proof summaries. Proof arguments also demonstrate the GPS's five elements in the same way as proof summaries.

Divisions within proof arguments

Proof arguments typically have three major sections:

- *Beginning.* More than an introduction, the argument's opening section explains the research question, identifies the starting-point persons of interest, and describes any relevant contextual information, including prior research on the same family or question and challenges related to the geographic area, time period, family, or other factors. Depending on the best choice for unfolding the proof argument, the genealogist might state the proved conclusion in the proof argument's beginning. For an example, see the first five pages of the article in appendix B.
- *Middle.* The proof argument's longest section describes the rationale for proof. It lays out the evidence, interprets it, resolves conflicting evidence, and explains why the resulting evidence composite supports the conclusion. The argument's middle section may use charts, figures (including maps), lists (including timelines), and tables to present the research results and demonstrate patterns within them. This section leads up to and states or restates the conclusion—the answer to the research question presented in the argument's opening section.
- *End.* The proof argument's shortest section briefly recapitulates the main points showing the conclusion is proved. It may restate the conclusion and place it in relevant historical, genealogical, methodological, or other contexts. For an example, see the last three pages of the article in appendix B.

Developing the argument

Some approaches to organizing a proof argument's middle section may be ineffective or hard to follow. We should avoid, for example, writing about the sequence in which we undertook the research. We also should avoid grouping by source categories (first the census data, then the deed data, and so forth). Instead, the argument should unfold logically, in a sequence designed to explain—one point at a time—the rationale for considering the conclusion proved.

The organization of a proof argument's middle section depends on how we conceptualize each problem, what relevant evidence shows, and the clearest, most efficient way to explain the conclusion. Those circumstances, not preference, guide our choice. Four approaches are common, and proof arguments often incorporate more than one or all of them:

- *Single hypothesis.* We state the conclusion and discuss its supporting evidence.
- *Alternative hypotheses.* We propose two or more competing hypothetical answers to a research question and discuss the evidence for each hypothesis, pro and con, convincingly eliminating all the hypotheses but one, the last to be discussed.
- *Building blocks.* We organize the argument around the points supporting the conclusion. Proceeding from what was initially known about the research subject, we finish with the answer to the research question. We sequence the points so each builds on the one before, with little or no backtracking, repetition, or cross-referencing. If the points are independent, we begin with the major points and end with the minor points.
- *Syllogisms.* "If-then" statements are syllogisms—for example, *if Minerva Tucker's brothers were Pierces, then Minerva's maiden name was Pierce.* A syllogism's "if" portion is a "proposition," and its "then" portion is a "premise." Many genealogical conclusions involve syllogisms, often a series of them, one leading to the next. Sometimes genealogists' syllogisms are complex, with several premises establishing one proposition or containing some negative premises ("if no Moses Fox paid taxes in 1803 and Moses Fox sold land in 1804, then. . . ." We may organize a proof argument's middle portion following a sequence of syllogisms, propositions, or premises, building up to the conclusion that all the syllogisms support.

Like many complex proof arguments, the article in appendix A uses all four approaches:

- Its overall structure is that of a *single hypothesis*. The top of the article's third page states the hypothesis that Philip's parents were Lewis and Mary (Lattimore) Pritchett. The article then establishes the points supporting that relationship as a proved conclusion.
- The top half of the article's last page considers three *alternative hypotheses* for Philip's parents, and it then eliminates two of them. .
- The article uses *building blocks* organization to present and discuss the data. Each of its seven "Supporting Conclusion" sections represents a major point or building block. One leads to the next and eventually to the answer to the research question "Who were Philip's parents?"
- Several of the article's sections use *syllogisms*. For example, if Philip lived in Fairfax County, he was related to Lewis; if Lewis came from Stafford County, so did Philip; and if Philip was not the Fairfax County Lewis's son, he was someone else's son.

Clear writing

Proof statements, summaries, and arguments are “clearly written.” Clear writing for proof statements, summaries, and arguments includes twelve points concerning words, sentences, paragraphs, overall structure, and tone:

- We choose words that communicate precisely what we mean. We avoid vague and needless words.
- Our sentences are well formed, grammatical, and direct. Varying in length, they avoid complex structures, trite expressions, mismatches or confusion between pronouns and the nouns they refer back to, and unnecessary passive-voice constructions.
- Present-tense verbs refer to extant sources and living people. Past-tense verbs refer to no-longer-extant materials and deceased people. (Consequently, much genealogical writing is in the past tense.)
- Where possible, we avoid using complicated tenses and mixing tenses within a sentence or paragraph.
- Our narrative focuses on our research subjects and the evidence of their lives and relationships—they are the subjects of most of our sentences. We discuss sources to a lesser extent, because most information about sources belongs in the citations and footnotes.
- Letting the evidence speak for itself, we keep ourselves in the background.
- We avoid digressions—points that do not advance our case for proof.
- We do not speculate about possibilities lacking adequate evidence.
- We arrange narrative proof summaries and proof arguments in paragraphs with topic sentences. The paragraphs are neither too long nor too short—typically more than two sentences and less than a page.
- Transitions move the narrative from one paragraph or section to the next. Besides wording, transitions often include subheadings reflecting the essay’s outline and “announcing” changes in focus.
- The tone of a proof argument or summary is that of a “defense” in the academic sense. We write to show readers that a conclusion is proved.
- The genre is more that of technical writing—precise, objective, and focused—than that of literary writing, which may be more descriptive, personal, subjective, and wide ranging.

A persuasive tone and technical-writing style may be consistent within articles, case studies, and reports that consist mostly of a proof summary or argument. Tone and style may vary, however, in narrative biographies and family histories, which often include proof summaries and arguments,

