

Source Citation of Online Information and the Characteristics of Evidence

Although genealogists often refer to a source citation as the entire bibliographical reference about a source, computerized genealogy programs usually split source information into three components (citation, source, and repository). Together, these three components comprise the source information needed to document your findings:

- **Citation:** refers to specific information, or evidence about a fact or event and which helps others retrace your steps to find the same information. Example: Year: 1930; Census Place: Idaho, Gooding County, Wendell Precinct; NARA publication: T626; Roll: 399; Sheet: 7A; Enumeration District: 24-8; lines: 24-28; Digital Image: 1062.0.
- **Source:** the document, index, book, person, or other material (including its corresponding publication information) in which you found the information related to a fact or event. Example: 1930 U.S. Federal Census, published online by Ancestry.com, 2002, Provo, Utah, USA; Index by Ancestry.com from microfilm of the 1930 U.S. Federal Decennial Census. Images from National Archives and Records Administration, T626, Washington, D.C.
- **Repository:** the library or location where the source was found. Example: NYC Public Library or Ancestry.com.

Are some sources better than others? Not all sources are created equal. There are two types of sources: original or derivative. As a rule, original sources are considered more reliable than derivative sources, although exceptions do exist.

- **Original source:** the original document or record related to an event or a legible image of that original document viewed online, CD-ROM, or microfilm/microfiche. Example: An ancestor's will written or signed in their own hand.
- **Derivative source:** a copy, compilation, or other derivation from an original source may not retain the same value as the original because errors can be introduced. Example: A transcribed copy of a will or a published abstract of the will.

The information provided by a source can be classified as either primary or secondary information. Primary information is typically more reliable than secondary information.

- **Primary information:** information provided from first-hand knowledge of the recorder or the informant. Example: A death certificate could provide the doctor's primary information about the decedent's death.
- **Secondary information:** information that was not provided by someone with first-hand knowledge. Example: A death certificate would usually provide secondary information about the decedent's birth, unless the informant was a parent or someone else present at the birth.

We gather information from sources, and we use it to compile evidence. Evidence is classified as either direct or indirect.

- **Direct evidence:** the information is relevant and directly answers the question. Example: A birth certificate provides a date of birth for your grandfather.
- **Indirect evidence:** the information is relevant, but implies an answer to the question—may need additional supporting evidence to form a conclusion. Example: A birth certificate could provide the date of birth for your grandfather and the full names of his parents, but the parents may not have named the baby at that point, so the certificate could read "Baby Boy Jones." You may also have a dated marriage license application, from the same county, in which your grandfather tells his age, his birth location, and that his parents have the same names as those on the birth certificate. Neither document gives you direct evidence that your grandfather was born on a certain day or direct evidence of his mother's maiden name. However, taking the two together, you have indirect evidence for your grandfather birth date and his mother's maiden name.

We analyze the evidence to draw a conclusion. The better the sources and information, the stronger the evidence which leads to a reliable conclusion.

Information adapted from Ancestry.com (<http://trees.ancestry.com/pi/learnmore/sources.aspx?tid=1714302&pid=-1899563873>)