

# Researching Who Your DNA Matches Are (Cyber Detective Work 101)

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Oftentimes we find a great DNA match, but the match doesn't have a full name or a tree. Keep in mind that oftentimes there can be a lag between when a new DNA tester's DNA results appear and when they post a tree. Thus, it is important to check back for a tree, or to send a message to them, if they have one.

If that fails, this presentation provides ideas, tips, and tools for figuring out who your match is, reaching out to them, and (if all else fails), building a tree for them. Building trees for matches is oftentimes worth it. Oftentimes it shows how we're related.

## Asking Your Match

When you reach out to a match, a well-written message can be key to getting a response. Here's what to say. Tell them who you are (name, location, your parents—but don't overwhelm them).

Also tell them whose kit you match. This is because oftentimes one person administers multiple kits. If you just say, "I match you," they might not have time to follow up to see which of their kits you match.

Say how you think you're related, for example, "I think we could be related through the Jones family from Lancashire."

Tell them where they can find your tree. Ask them if they have a family tree, and if not, who are their four grandparents.

You can also ask a specific question. Just don't say, "How are we related?" because chances are they're not going to respond to that broad of a question.

## Consider How Much DNA You Share with Your Unknown DNA Match

On Ancestry, open their window to see your possible relationships. For other sites, use the Shared cM Project Tool from DNA Painter.

<https://dnapainter.com/tools/sharedcmv4>

## Using DNA Testing Companies for Researching Your Matches

DNA testing companies show you common matches for one given match. Knowing who your common matches are help you figure out how you might be related. For example, maybe the unknown match has common matches to other matches that you've identified as being on your maternal grandfather's side. Now you have something to tell

them when you reach out. Again, if that doesn't work, that information will help you investigate them.

Each company uses different terms for common matches:

- Ancestry: Shared Matches
- FamilyTreeDNA: In-Common With
- 23andMe: relatives in common
- My Heritage: Shared DNA matches

On Ancestry, use their Shared Matches feature by clicking on one match in your match list. Then click on the Shared Matches (SMs) button. Review the SMs to see if you know something about them.

At FamilyTreeDNA, click on one match. Then click on the "In-common with" button.

Both 23andMe and My Heritage show common matches in each match's page. Just scroll down until you get to them. Both of them show you your relationship to the match, as well as your match's relationship. This can be helpful in figuring out who they are and possible ways they might be related to you.

### ***Tips for Ancestry:***

- Check for an administrator of the DNA match on Ancestry. Sometimes that person will have a more complete name than the DNA match themselves.
- On Ancestry, check out the **Profile** of your match or the administrator of your match. Sometimes there's lots of information in a profile.
- Another great tip for Ancestry is that even if they have a **locked tree**, if you run a **surname search**, their tree will be listed if that surname is there. For example, if you think they might be related to you via one of your great-grandparents (because they share DNA the right amount of DNA to be your 2nd cousin), you do a surname search using your great-grandparents names one by one to see if the person with the locked tree comes up. If they come up, then also try searching for the spouse of the ancestor that initially pulled them up.
- You can also search for **Private Pictures/Photos** on Ancestry. In the search function, select the category "Pictures." Enter your ancestral surnames in the blanks. Even if your match has a Private Member Photo, it will be shown in your results. The Ancestry member will also be shown, which gives you further evidence of how you're related.
- Ancestry now shows **Unlinked Trees** for people who have a tree, but they haven't linked their DNA results to the tree. Sometimes they have more than one tree, and you'll have to do some detective work to figure out which one (if any) is correct.

### ***Tips for 23andMe:***

- On a match's page there are usually clues about who they are. They can list the **birth places** of their grandparents and other ancestors, as well as whether they believe they have Ashkenazi Jewish heritage. Their **ethnicities/heritages** are also usually shown, along with the percentages, which can be helpful.
- They can also list **ancestral surnames**. Keep in mind the following "rules" of thumb. This isn't always going to be the case, but it's the first thing I consider.
  - If four surnames are listed, it's probably their four grandparents, and typically their father's father, father's mother, mother's father, and mother's mother. This is how most people list their grandparents.
  - If eight surnames are listed, it's probably their eight great-grandparents.

### ***Tips for FamilyTreeDNA:***

- In your match list at FamilyTreeDNA (FTDNA), on the far right is a list of **ancestral surnames**. In the past, these had to be manually entered. However, recently these will be extracted if the user uploads a family tree to the site. The names in bold are the names in common with your ancestral surnames.
- FTDNA has a **Family Matching Tool** that identifies maternal/paternal matches. It requires linking of at least one match to your uploaded tree. Once that's done, red maternal icon and blue paternal icons are attached to other matches.

### **Free Websites:**

Use your favorite **search engine** to look up you match's name, alias, or email address (whatever you have on them). Sometimes switching browsers gets different search results. Also, if you know that your match is part of one line of your family, try adding that to an Internet search to find obituaries and other relevant articles or websites.

There are **free search websites**, including [Whitepages.com](http://Whitepages.com), [Zabasearch.com](http://Zabasearch.com), and [Spokeo.com](http://Spokeo.com).

[LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/) and [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/) are also good place to search for people. I've had very good luck reaching out to people on Facebook, saying that I'm a DNA match on Ancestry (or wherever). Somehow it doesn't seem to upset people that I've tracked them down.

NewspaperArchive is free through libraries, although mine recently seems to be limited to only my state.

FultonSearch.org is a collection of newspapers from northwestern United States.

For searching Canadian matches, **Canada411.ca** is a free site for people searching.

There are also **paid websites** where you can pay either on a look-up by look-up basis or with a subscription. My favorite is [BeenVerified.com](http://BeenVerified.com). It's about \$60 twice a year. It provides contact info and oftentimes the match's parents' names and addresses. Other

sites include Spokeo & other's paid version of their sites. A lot of people like GenealogyBank.com for looking up obituaries and articles about ancestors. I have mixed results with GenealogyBank.com. Another one that I recently started using is Newspapers.com.

### **Email Addresses:**

Some DNA testing companies provide an email address for your match: FTDNA and GEDMatch (which is a 3rd party DNA site that doesn't do their own DNA testing, but instead accepts results from DNA testing companies). Look up your match's email address on BeenVerified (paid) or simply Google it to see if you can find a name associated with that email address. Once you have a name, look for their parents to build a tree for them.

### **What to Do with That Information:**

You can contact your match. Oftentimes you'll be more successful in reaching a match if you use email rather than going through a DNA testing companies' messaging system. It's always nice to give them a clue of how you're possibly connected, so your research might provide this information.

See more information above under "Asking Your Match" for reaching out to your match.

You can also build a tree for them to see how you're related. If you're building a tree for them, I prefer to do that in my main tree. I start with a new branch that's not connected to my tree. This can be done by adding them to any part of your tree, and then editing the relationships to disconnect them. Now they'll be there by themselves. Try to add their parents. I usually find parent through Facebook, Whitepages.com, or BeenVerified.com. From there, add in their grandparents, etc.

How far back should you build their trees to connect them into your family tree? That depends on the type of cousin they are. The amount of DNA shared with them will guide you on the type of cousin, e.g., a 2<sup>nd</sup> cousin (2C). If that's true, then you would build the tree at least to their great-grandparents—since that's what 2Cs share.

Now you can see if those great-grandparents are also yours (in your tree). If so, then you then can connect them to those shared ancestors in your tree.

If it's an **adoption or unknown parentage situation**, this might require more delicacy. Check out Letter to a Birth Parent at <https://thednageek.com/letter-to-a-birth-parent/>. I like this letter. I also encourage people to describe themselves as being nice people and financially secure, for example, "I'm a grandmother, former school board member, and retired business owner." Add whatever is relevant in your life to show that you're a good person and you're not doing this for money, which oftentimes people fear.

There is also a book by Brianne Kirkpatrick and Shannon Combs-Bennett, "The DNA Guide for Adoptees: How to use genealogy and genetics to uncover your roots, connect with your biological family, and better understand your medical history."