Module 4 - Proof in a Narrative Structure

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Module 4: Proof in a Narrative Structure

November 24–30

Readings: BCG. *Genealogy Standards.* 2nd ed.

- Standards #10, 14, 17-19, 42, 45, 48-50
- Chapter 4, introductory paragraph on p. 33, and Standards 58-61, 64-66, 68-70

Johnson, Melissa A. “Mothers for Sophie (Kanetski) Howe of Scranton, Pennsylvania.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 103 (June 2015): 105-113. Available to read or download as a PDF at the BCG website.

Green, Shannon. "Parents for Cynthia (Parker) Wilcoxon of Ohio and West Virginia." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 105 (June 2017): 93-100. Available as PDF on the author’s website.

Discussion: **Discussion 6** postings end Monday, November 30 at 11:59 PM ET

Assessment: **Module 4: Examining a Proof Argument** due Monday, November 30 at 11:59 PM ET

Note: Access to discussion forums and assessment ends on Monday, December 7.

Overview and Objectives

Our fourth week of the course has just one lesson wherein we’ll examine genealogical proof in a narrative structure. You’ll read two full articles from a major genealogical journal. We’ll dissect and analyze the first one together, and then you’ll apply what you’ve learned to the second one. Each article will also give you plenty of food for thought about research methodologies for overcoming stumbling blocks and brick walls.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this module you should be able to:

- Distinguish between:
  - written research results or proof discussion focused on evidence,
  - a narration of the researcher’s itinerary or sequence of proof construction, and explain the advantages of the first over the second.

- Identify active and passive voice in standard American English verbs
- Convert sentences with passive voice verbs to grammatically-correct ones with active voice verbs
- List a source's information items that should be noted for constructing a full and accurate citation
- Recognize those source identifiers in well-written citations in a published article
- Examine a written genealogical proof argument for the five GPS elements, and explain where and how it does or does not meet them

Elements of Genealogical Proof

Last week we examined a short article, "Who Was Aunt Mary? A Brief Case Study in Identification and Kinship 'Correction'," and looked at how it might (or might not!) meet the Genealogical Proof Standard. This week we'll dig into two longer and more complex articles, look at the structure of their written proof arguments, and evaluate whether they meet the GPS. The published articles, both by members of this course's teaching staff, are:

Johnson, Melissa A. "Mothers for Sophie (Kanetski) Howe of Scranton, Pennsylvania." *National Genealogical Quarterly* 103 (June 2015): 105-13.

Green, Shannon. "Parents for Cynthia (Parker) Wilcoxon of Ohio and West Virginia." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 105 (June 2017): 93-100.

We'll look at grammar and vocabulary choices, complexity of argument, the possible organizational structures for a long and multi-part proof argument, and packaging it all in a narrative format.

Review

The glossary items for evidence, direct evidence, indirect evidence, and negative evidence in *Standards*.

Read

"Mothers for Sophie Howe." You will be reading this article, or sections of it, multiple times; start by reading it all the way through now. Sketch out a family tree or a timeline if it helps you—it need not be elaborate. Note that the cast of characters includes a "Sophie" and a "Sophia" (aka Zofia); you'll want to keep them straight.

Whether or not you check the footnotes as you read the article, take time to skim them all by themselves and notice the types of sources that Johnson drew on in the course of her research. Occasionally choose a citation to read closely: can you tell exactly what the source is and where it can be accessed? How does Johnson express, *in a citation*, "I looked for a particular piece of information and didn't find it"?

Notice that Johnson never actually says "I" in the entire article. She as the researcher and author is not part of the story.

Presenting a proof argument in a narrative

The proof argument—the assemblage of evidence and discussion of its quality—is the meat of the article. But the author needs to ease the

reader into the argument and then wrap up everything neatly at the end.

Examine the introduction:

1. What is the question for which an answer was being sought?
2. Does the author present the research goal in the form of a question, or in a statement (or series of statements) about the goal? Is it clearly presented? How far into the text does the reader have to go before understanding what the research goal was?
3. Who is the person of interest? How does the author introduce that person so they are uniquely identified and cannot be confused with a possible other person of the same name and location? What other information needs to be provided as context?
4. What was the stumbling block that complicated the research—why couldn't the researcher find an easy answer?
5. Where does the introductory material end and the discussion of sources, evidence, and analysis begin?

Examine the ending of the article:

1. Where does the discussion of sources, evidence, and analysis end? Where is the last item of information introduced (where is the last citation)?
2. Does the author summarize the argument, does she provide a conclusion (an answer to the research question) without a summary, or are the two blended?
3. Does the concluding material hark back to the introductory material, providing a sense of resolution to the reader?

Conventions in Narrative Writing

Review

BCG Standard #70.

Following certain conventions can help our reader easily move through our descriptions and explanations, as well as ensure consistency in style throughout a narrative.

Verbs

Just as genealogists have specialized terminology to describe categories of sources, information, and evidence, grammarians have precise terms for describing nouns, adjectives, verbs, and so on. Two properties of verbs, tense and voice, are of particular interest in good narrative writing, and it's worth reviewing what the terms mean and looking at examples.

Most of us can identify the **tense** of any given verb—that is, whether it is present tense (she eats), past (she ate), or future (she will eat). In everyday speech and writing we have no problem choosing a verb tense that is appropriate to what we are describing. But historians and genealogists, who use records that exist in the present to discuss events and persons in the past, sometimes struggle in choosing between the present and past tenses of verbs when writing. The rule of thumb is:

- when discussing the source that exists today, use the present tense: "She appears in two different Iowa households in the 1930 census." (You the researcher, in the present day, are viewing her entry in two census records.)
- when discussing events and persons in the past, use the past tense: "She lived in Iowa in 1930," or "She was living in Iowa in 1930," but *not* "She is living in Iowa in 1930."

When proofreading your genealogical report or narrative, watch for present-tense verbs; make sure that each is being used appropriately and correct the tense if not.[1]

Quick-Check Activity

Skim the first several pages of Melissa Johnson's article about Sophie Howe (you can skip the

footnotes); note or mark or circle every instance of a verb in the present tense. In what way(s) are these sentences different from all the past-tense sentences?

Another property of verbs is called "**voice,**" and English verbs are in one of two voices, "active" or "passive."[2] It's a common mistake to think that the difference between "active" and "passive" voices is tied to a verb's meaning. Consider for example, the sentence "The house was battered by fierce winds while we slept soundly inside." If we don't understand the concept of voice we might think 'was battered' is an active verb and 'slept' is passive. But the reverse is true.

The grammatical distinctions are these:

- The grammatical subject of an *active-voice verb* is the actor: "He wrote the book in less than a year." "She batted the ball out of the ballpark." "Sophie Howe named two women as her mother."
- The grammatical subject of a *passive-voice verb* is the person or thing being acted *upon*: "The book was written [by him] in less than a year." "The ball was batted out of the ballpark [by her]." "Two women were named by Sophie as her mother." The construction of the verb in the passive voice is a form of "be" (such as: is/was/is being/has been) plus the past participle of the verb (usually ending in -ed: is loved, were named, was written, was sold, will be destroyed, has been recorded).

Passive verbs are usually less-desirable for narrative writing. They tend to make sentences longer than those with active verbs, and perhaps more importantly they shift the focus away from the actors.

- Sometimes we use a type of passive construction to generalize or anonymize the actor or reporter: "*It was reported that* the family successfully reached Utah." Who reported it?—we're not told. Keep the focus on the actors of your narrative by making them the grammatical subjects of active-voice verbs: "The family sent word back East that they had successfully reached Utah," or simply, "The family successfully reached Utah."

That said, use of the passive voice for a verb can be an appropriate choice: "Roman Kanetski and his wife Sophia were buried in the parish cemetery." Here the passive form of the verb keeps the reader's attention on Roman and Sophia: they're not the actors in this sentence, but they are its focus. Trying to use the active-voice form of "bury" here, just on the principle of avoiding the passive voice, would have awkward results.

Quick-Check Activity

As in the activity above, skim the first several pages of Melissa Johnson's article about Sophie Howe; note or circle every instance of a passive-voice verb. Can you reason out why the author might have deliberately chosen the passive voice in those cases?

Vocabulary: Synonyms

The English language is rich in words from multiple other languages. We love to draw from these other languages for synonyms to express nuance and variety in our speech and our writing. Repetition of a word, unless used purposefully such as for emphasis or for technical terminology, seems to us less elegant, less interesting. Writing for genealogical purposes can be challenging in this regard—how many times in one report do we need to express vital events, and how many different ways can we say each? "She married" might alternate with "they wed," or "named" alternate with "identified as," to reduce repetition. Study vocabulary and phrasing choices as you read genealogical articles and reports, with an eye to expanding your own choices when you write.

Quick-Check Activity

We frequently need to express "saying," "telling," and "knowing" in our genealogical writing. Skim Johnson's article for these words and their synonyms, starting with "Sophie Howe claimed" in the very

first line. Don't overlook expressions for *not* knowing and *not* saying. How long is your list?

Vocabulary: Qualifiers

In writing about persons and events of the past, we sometimes have to acknowledge that a fact or a motivation is not entirely certain or proven, or not *yet* proven. Our choice of words must reflect as best as possible our level of certainty or uncertainty:

- using adverbs and adjectives: likely, probable, probably, apparently, perhaps; unlikely, improbable, etc.
- using verbs: suggests, implies, may have [done something], is consistent with

Style Guides

Style guides (also called manuals of style) provide us with the rules and conventions of writing. They answer our questions about punctuation, when and where abbreviations are acceptable, how to compose and format citations, placement of footnotes, and so much more. Our field follows the current (now 17th) edition of *Chicago Manual of Style* for writing in general. For citations, many genealogists rely on *Evidence Explained*, third edition revised; it is based on *Chicago Manual of Style* but covers the nuances of citing unique records in far greater detail.

Use of a style guide ensures consistency in a writer's work and forestalls common mistakes. Use of a style guide is an aid to a polished and professional appearance in one's final product.

[1]See Michael Hait's short blog post, "Historical Writing and When to Use Present Tense," 28 April 2013, *Planting the Seeds: Genealogy as a Profession* (https://michaelhait.wordpress.com/2013/04/28/historical-present/ : accessed 31 January 2018). Hait's link to a post in the *Lingua Franca* blog explores the topic further.

[2]Just one of many resources on this topic: *Purdue Online Writing Lab* at https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/1/

Types of Proof

We have three different options for presenting proof, depending on the complexity of the evidence—the amount and type—that we need to employ.

Genealogy Standards defines "proof" as "a documented *statement*, *summary*, or *argument* that explains or shows why a conclusion is proved; also, a description of a genealogical conclusion that is acceptable because it meets the Genealogical Proof Standard's five components."[1]

Review

BCG Standard #60, "Selection of appropriate options" and the glossary entry for each.

Proof Statement

"Proof statements are source-cited sentences and data items in thoroughly documented contexts demonstrating adequate research scope."

Example

"In 1916 Roman Kanetski and his wife Sophia purchased a home in Scranton [Pennsylvania] at 918 Acker Avenue."[2]

This is one of many statements that support the author's implication that she is following the correct family throughout her larger proof argument. To support her statement she cites a deed here, a type of source that is usually of high reliability. Her next sentence (the family "lived there for decades") and

its sources (three census records for the family at that same address, each indicating ownership of the home) further support the statement of purchase. Additionally, the purchase of the home in 1916 fits into the larger family timeline—that "thoroughly documented context." Lastly, no information conflicts with the statement.

Proof Summary

> "Proof summaries are relatively straightforward narratives or lists with documentation. Genealogists use proof summaries when the evidence is direct and any conflicts are minor."

Example

"Roman Kanoski and Roman Kanetski were one man:

- [eight bulleted and source-cited proof statements about coincidences of residence, age, etc.]

The foregoing suggests that Roman Konoski, living with Annie and Sophia in 1910, was the man [Roman Kanetski] who would marry Sophia Dyda in 1913."[3]

The author builds a brief case, correlating information from a variety of records in a series of proof statements, contending that there are no records supporting a Roman Kanoski and a Roman Kanetski simultaneously living in Scranton, and that the timeline suggests simply a change in spelling of surname.

Proof Argument

> "Proof arguments are extensive documented narratives…. Genealogists often use proof arguments to explain challenging cases, especially those where thorough research reveals significant conflicts between evidence items or an absence of direct evidence."

A genealogical proof argument is **not** a family history or a biographical sketch. Nor is it a travelogue describing visits to courthouses and libraries, interactions with archivists, disappointments and unexpected finds, and arrangements made to interview elderly relatives.

Johnson's research goal was to resolve the conflicting information provided by Sophie Howe about the identity of her birth mother. Multiple subsidiary questions needed to be addressed. Previously unknown information (when did Roman and Sophia marry?), possible conflicts (were Roman Kanoski and Roman Kanetski the names of two men or one?), and contradictory statements by Anna (number of marriages, number of children, date of child's birth) each had to be researched and their separate conclusions fitted together to solve the larger puzzle.

Summary

Notice that none of our options, not even the simplest, allows us to rest "proof" on one sole information item from one source. No source on its own is guaranteed to be without errors.

[1]BCG, *Standards,* pp. 82-83.

[2]Johnson, "Mothers for Sophie (Kanetski) Howe," 106.

[3]Johnson, "Mothers for Sophie (Kanetski) Howe," 107-09.

Organizing the Argument

Review

BCG Standards #17, 19, 42, 45, 65, 66, 68, and 69.

Discussion of evidence in a given proof should be structured in a logical fashion. There are a variety of options including:

1. Syllogism (if/then), either explicitly stated or implied: If “my daughter Sarah” was named by Samuel F. in his will, and some years later a Jerome R. “and Sarah his wife” sold land “which belonged to her honoured father Samuel F. deceased,” then Sarah wife of Jerome R. = Sarah daughter of Samuel F.
2. Hypothesis: An answer to a question is proposed and the supporting evidence detailed.
3. Alternative hypotheses: Different scenarios (answers to the research question) which each seem to be supported by the evidence are closely examined; explanations for discarding one (or more!) are presented.
4. Building blocks: The structure is of several separate discussions of evidence which might be logically arranged in a linear fashion: “block” A leads to block B, which then leads to block C (C being dependent on the previous evidence of blocks A and B), and so on. Or, if the evidence doesn’t depend on a linear development, there is more flexibility in the arrangement of the blocks; a late section in the narrative gathers the supporting points proven and states a conclusion to the overall research question.

A proof argument usually is composed of some number of subsidiary proofs; or to word it a little differently, addressing the research question often involves answering some number of subsidiary research questions. Each subsidiary proof will be handled in its own way—the writer might use a syllogism as the approach for one but use a hypothesis for another.

The collection of all the subsidiary sections might be organized such that the solution of one subsidiary question feeds into the next, each clearing an evidentiary hurdle along a straight path to a conclusion. Or, subsidiary sections might be handled as individual puzzle pieces that are connected two or three at a time, and only assembled into a whole and the conclusion solidified near the end of the greater proof argument.

The one organizational style that is discouraged is the travelogue. Discussing evidence in the order in which it was found is seldom effective and has the effect of shifting the focus from the subjects of the research to the researcher and her process.

> “If discovering the documents in a different order would have led you to a different conclusion, then the research path is relevant. If not, then please don’t make me read the travelogue.”[1]

[1]Barbara Jean Mathews, “Revisiting the Genealogical Travelogue,” 27 September 2011, *The Demanding Genealogist* (http://blog.demandinggenealogist.com/2011/09/revisiting-genealogical-travelogue.html : accessed 11 February 2018).

Video: Looking at the Structure

You’ve examined various aspects of the assigned article “Mothers for Sophie (Kanetski) Howe” as you proceeded through the previous sections of this unit. If you haven’t yet read the article in its entirety, please do so before watching the following video. Can you identify discrete sections —often subsidiary questions and their conclusions—within the article? Some of these will correspond to the titled sections of the article, but others might make up a smaller part of a section. How does each section contribute to the answer for the over-arching question of the whole article?

Melissa A. Johnson, “Mothers for Sophie (Kanetski) Howe of Scranton, Pennsylvania,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 103 (June 2015), 105-113. **Available via XanEdu**

CPE_GEN_Michutka_Looking_at_the_Structure_edited video cannot be displayed here

Proceed next to the discussion board “Meeting the GPS,” where we’ll discuss Johnson’s article further.

Also begin reading and dissecting the following article, which you’ll use for your upcoming assessment M4 “Examining a Proof Argument.”

Shannon Green, "Parents for Cynthia (Parker) Wilcoxon of Ohio and West Virginia," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 105 (June 2017), 93-100.

Discussion 6: Meeting the GPS

Go to the discussion board and comment on these questions.

Discussion 6: Meeting the GPS

Use this discussion board to continue the examination of and conversation about Johnson’s “Sophie Howe” article, begun in the video lesson “Looking at the Structure.” Topics we'd like you to address:

1. Focus on one of the five components of the GPS: how does Johnson convey to her readers that her proof meets that component? or do you think her proof does *not* meet it? Be specific.
2. Choose one of the standards in our textbook *Genealogy Standards* and explain how Johnson does or does not meet that standard in her article.
3. The video lesson focused, in part, on the structure of Johnson’s article. Expand upon, disagree with, or supply additional thoughts about the structure.

Comment on a posting by a classmate (please be more specific than simply “I agree”): expand upon a point made, ask a question about it, or offer an alternative perspective.

Watch for further engaging questions posted by your facilitator.

Test Yourself: Voice and Tense

1 of 10: Select the correct version of the sentence below.

Johanna then **leaves**/**left** the U.S. sometime in 1909, and **attempts**/**attempted** to return in September 1911. (A 1911 ship’s manifest is cited to support the facts stated in the sentence.)

Johanna then **leaves** the U.S. sometime in 1909, and **attempted** to return in September 1911.

Johanna then **left** the U.S. sometime in 1909, and **attempted** to return in September 1911.

Johanna then **leaves** the U.S. sometime in 1909, and **attempts** to return in September 1911.

Johanna then **left** the U.S. sometime in 1909, and **attempts** to return in September 1911.

2 of 10: Select the correct version of the sentence below.

The earliest documented appearance of “Fillis” **is**/**was** in a 1749 deposition. (The deposition is cited, including the name of the repository at which it is held.)

The earliest documented appearance of “Fillis” **is** in a 1749 deposition.

The earliest documented appearance of “Fillis” **was** in a 1749 deposition.

3 of 10: Select the correct version of the sentence below.

By late 1920, Alfred’s mother Caroline, Alfred’s brother Thomas and his family, and the family of their maternal cousin Susan Wheelock **leave**/**had left** New Jersey for rural California. (1920 census entries are cited to support the facts stated in the sentence.)

By late 1920, Alfred’s mother Caroline, Alfred’s brother Thomas and his family, and the family of their maternal cousin Susan Wheelock **leave** New Jersey for rural California.

By late 1920, Alfred’s mother Caroline, Alfred’s brother Thomas and his family, and the family of their maternal cousin Susan Wheelock **had left** New Jersey for rural California.

4 of 10: Select the correct version of the sentence below.

Rachel too **is**/**was** working in 1930. She and her cousin’s wife Lizzie Sorenson both **have**/**had** jobs in the fur industry, Sophie as a “pointer,” plucking guard hairs from fur pelts. (Two 1930 census entries and an industry publication are cited to support the facts stated in the sentence.)

Rachel too **is** working in 1930. She and her cousin’s wife Lizzie Sorenson both **have** jobs in the fur industry, Sophie as a “pointer,” plucking guard hairs from fur pelts.

Rachel too **is** working in 1930. She and her cousin’s wife Lizzie Sorenson both **had** jobs in the fur industry, Sophie as a “pointer,” plucking guard hairs from fur pelts.

Rachel too **was** working in 1930. She and her cousin’s wife Lizzie Sorenson both **have** jobs in the fur industry, Sophie as a “pointer,” plucking guard hairs from fur pelts.

Rachel too **was** working in 1930. She and her cousin’s wife Lizzie Sorenson both **had** jobs in the fur industry, Sophie as a “pointer,” plucking guard hairs from fur pelts.

5 of 10: Select the correct version of the sentence below.

Mary’s 1902 baptismal record **shows**/**showed** signs of amendment and **implies**/**implied** that her godfather was also her biological father. (The entry in the parish baptismal register, still held at the parish office, is cited to support the facts stated in the sentence.)

Mary’s 1902 baptismal record **shows** signs of amendment and **implies** that her godfather was also her biological father.

Mary's 1902 baptismal record **shows** signs of amendment and **implied** that her godfather was also her biological father.

Mary's 1902 baptismal record **showed** signs of amendment and **implies** that her godfather was also her biological father.

Mary's 1902 baptismal record **showed** signs of amendment and **implied** that her godfather was also her biological father.

6 of 10: Select the best answer.

Statement supported by a census record:

It was indicated that Jane the eldest daughter is aged 12 years.

Jane was twelve years old.

7 of 10: Select the best answer.

Statement supported by a deed:

John obtained a ten thousand dollar mortgage to finance the purchase of his home.

To finance the purchase of his home, a mortgage of ten thousand dollars was obtained from the local bank.

8 of 10: Select the best answer.

Statement supported by census records:

His sisters were found living with different families in neighboring counties.

His sisters lived with different families in neighboring counties.

9 of 10: Select the best answer.

Statement supported by records from funeral home:

The bill for funeral and burial charges was paid for by her son Paul.

Her son Paul paid the funeral and burial charges.

10 of 10: Select the best answer.

Statement supported by a search of census records:

Josiah does not appear in the 1850 federal census returns for Pennsylvania.

A search was conducted in the 1850 census of Pennsylvania but Josiah was not found.

Summary and Further Resources

Summary

In this module, we looked at two complex proof arguments, examining the narrative structures upon which genealogists assemble their evidence to support a conclusion. Close attention to proof arguments published in journals is a good way to continue your genealogical education.

1. Read to learn what sources other researchers use in one of your areas of interest.
2. Read to learn workarounds for missing records.
3. Read to learn how to express degrees of confidence in a statement, how to construct an effective proof summary, and how to cite quirky sources.
4. Read outside your area of interest to expand your horizons.

In the next module you'll learn about still more resources and other written products for your research.

Further Resources

Chicago Manual of Style: The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors, and Publishers. 17th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Fox, Judy Kellar. "BCG 'Ten-Minute Methodology' Series," articles on proof. *BCG: Board for Certification of Genealogists.* https://bcgcertification.org/learning/skills/10minute/ : 2018.

Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof.* Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2013.

Kipfer, Barbara. *Roget's International Thesaurus.* 7th ed. New York: Collins Reference, 2010.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. 3rd ed., Rev. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 2017.

Stratton, Penelope L., and Henry B. Hoff. *Guide to Genealogical Writing: How to Write and Publish Your Family History.* Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2014.