



Drew Smith, MLS

## 10 ways a search can go wrong

Each and every day, I'm searching for something. That may sound philosophical, but the reality is that, at some point during a typical day, I'm searching in a parking lot to see where I left my car, or at home to see where I left my glasses or my cell phone. My full-time job as an academic librarian means that I'm usually searching online for information needed by a student, instructor, researcher, or member of the public. At work or at home, I spend time searching for a particular e-mail message that I received or sent, or a file that I need to use or edit. I search online news for items of interest, and I sometimes search online stores for a technology gadget, office supplies, or a song for my iPod. But whether I'm looking for genealogical information or something else, not all of my searches turn out well, and when they don't, it's usually my own fault. So let me share a few of the lessons learned, in no particular order.

### 1 You put it where?

Unfortunately, each online database has its own peculiar search screen. To the best of my knowledge, there is no universal standard for the order in which specific search fields should appear, and some interfaces are "upgraded" from time to time, relocating a search field to a new location. For example, three of the search screens I find myself using quite often are the ones for [Ancestry.com](#), [Find A Grave](#), and the [Argali White & Yellow](#) telephone directory software. When entering a name, you put the first and middle names in the first box and the surname in the second box for Ancestry. But in Find A Grave, you put only the first name in the first box, the middle name in the second box, and the surname in the third box. With Argali software, you put the surname in the first box, and the first name in the second box.

If you're using all three of these services at the same time, switching back and forth among them while entering names, you can see where the problem is going to arise. It is very easy to switch the order of the names without intending to.

### 2 I used to know how to spell

Despite my having been a second-place winner in my county's spelling bee, and later being the fastest error-free typist in my high school class, I find that good spelling talents don't necessarily help with unusual surnames and place names, and I make my share of typos while entering any kind of information. Sadly, I may not notice this until after I have submitted a search (assuming that I notice it at all). Did I put one too many "L"s in "Sally"? Some kinds of typos are harder to catch than others. While Google and a few other search interfaces have helpfully added the feature "Did you mean...?" that comes into play when you make a typical spelling error, a genealogy database is less likely to proactively suggest that you may have typed something other than what you intended.

I'm especially likely to fail when I'm doing a census search in Ancestry.com, and I mistype the name of the county. (If anyone who can do something about this is listening, this is where I'm putting



in a request for counties to appear automatically via a drop-down box once you've chosen the state.)

### 3 Those hidden options

Real power users of databases love advanced search screens. If I'm searching for a book in a library catalog, an advanced screen may allow me to specify a range of publication dates. If I'm searching for a person in a genealogy database, an

advanced screen may allow me to specify the first name of the person's mother, or a state of birth.

The problem arises when I decide to do a brand-new search and look for an entirely different book, or an entirely different person. Did I remember to clear out those extra options that may appear at the bottom of the search screen or on a subsidiary screen? If not, I may have restricted my new search in ways I didn't intend.

The same situation can occur in reverse. There are times when you have set up some search options, and you assume that those options will stay in place for a later search. With any given search engine, it's difficult to predict which options it will remember (when you didn't want it to), and which options it will forget (when you didn't want it to). You will probably have to review the entire search screen, including any options, before pressing "Search."

### 4 The keys and the lamp post

In an old joke, a searcher attempts to justify looking for a lost set of car keys under a lamp post despite the fact that the keys were lost elsewhere, purely on the basis that at least there is light to see while searching. In genealogy, there are certainly some databases that are easier to search than others, but searching the wrong database isn't likely to produce good results.

For instance, if you are looking for a marriage record from 1962, but the database you are searching indexes marriages only through 1930, then you would be wasting your time in that database. Even so, this kind of mistake isn't difficult to make. Seeing a database labeled "Jones County Marriages" might make you jump to the conclusion that it is inclusive of all dates, but the scope of the database may be in smaller print elsewhere on the page. A database supposedly covering an entire state may in fact be missing a number of counties. Or a database may be under construction, and may not yet contain the dates or geographic areas you need. It is important to read the descriptive information for the database, to see if you're looking in the right place.



### 5 Know (and use) your limits

Many of us who engaged in genealogical research prior to the online age remember that we couldn't necessarily trust the printed census indexes, and besides, they didn't usually index anyone other than head of household. So we spent hours hunched over a microfilm reader, examining each and every image for the county of interest.

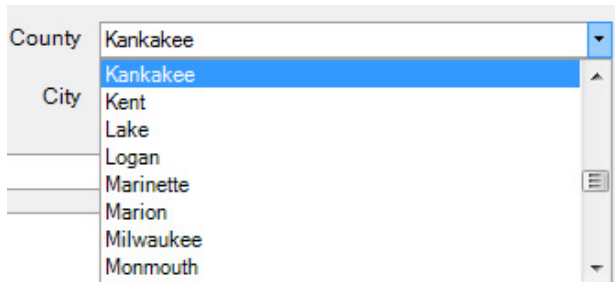
While the online indexing of images has done away with some of the backaches of microfilm searching, there are still times when the search results are overwhelming. Let's use my own father as an example. Imagine that I want to locate him in the 1920 census, and his name is "George Smith."

There are 20,260 George Smiths in the 1920 United States federal census. No problem, I know that Dad was in New Jersey. That helps. We're down to 743 men. OK, he was in Newark, which is part of Essex County. 149 hits. That's only three screens worth, so I could look at all of them. Maybe I'll add his birth year, too—1917—allowing for some variation of a few years. Only 15 hits. By using a good combination of search-screen limiting features, I may be able to find someone even with a common name.

## 6 There's many a slip twixt copy and paste

As you get better at searching, you realize that many errors (as previously mentioned) are caused by mistyping a name or place. But you also realize that it isn't all that necessary to re-key every word on a computer. In many cases, you can simply copy and paste from one screen to another. So I shouldn't have to worry about mistyping that long surname or that hard-to-spell county name.

But even copying and pasting is fraught with problems. Did you copy exactly the text you meant to copy, or did you



accidentally omit a letter at the beginning or end of a word? Did you include a punctuation mark accidentally? Did you even remember to use the copy shortcut after you selected the text, or are you instead about to paste in the results of the previous copying you did? In many cases, simply clicking twice within a word will select only that word, which you can then copy safely without having to worry that you selected less or more than you intended.

## 7 Drop-downs and wheel mice conspire against you

In most genealogy-related databases, there are a number of things you won't have to type in, but can choose instead from a drop-down menu. Examples of typical drop-down choices for genealogical searches are a country, a state, a person's race, or a relation to head of household. For some databases (but still not nearly enough), you may have the luxury of choosing a county from a drop-down menu.

Even so, it is far too easy to click above or below the item you want in the drop-down menu. And depending on the screen design, your wheel mouse may compound the problem. I've lost count of the times that I meant to scroll up and down a particular screen using the wheel on my mouse and found instead that I was scrolling through the choices in a drop-down menu, resulting in my selecting choices in a search interface that I didn't want.

## 8 Search engine quirks

To be honest, one of the reasons that you're not finding what you need isn't because you made a careless error while searching. It's because the person or persons who designed the search interface did a poor job. A few years ago, I used an online library catalog that failed to locate a book if you put the word "The" at the front of the book's title (even when the title actually began with the word "The"). What were the designers thinking?



If you're very lucky, some of these quirks will be documented somewhere in the search engine's Help facility. While this doesn't exactly excuse the designer, it does put a bit more burden upon you, the user, to become familiar with the quirks before using the search engine. Some of the things you'll want to become aware of are whether or not a search field has a minimum or a maximum number of characters that it can take, and which fields are required, and which are optional.

### 9 Indexers are only human (or only computers)

I've alluded to this one earlier, but one reason that you're not finding the information you need is that it wasn't entered correctly into the database to begin with. Both human error and computer error are to blame for this. Online databases are often created from data that wasn't digital to begin with. Handwritten censuses are read by human beings, who create the digital indexes. Old newspapers and books are scanned and interpreted by OCR software, which creates the digital text. In both cases, errors are frequently made.

To solve this problem, you'll have to adopt a number of coping strategies. Look for words or text associated with what you're really looking for, text that is less likely to have been digitized or indexed in error. For instance, an unusual surname is easy to mis-index, but you may be able to find a person by a combination of other information (first name, year of birth, location). In searching digitized text from an old newspaper or book, avoid searching for long phrases: One erroneous word in the middle of the phrase will cause your search to fail. Instead, look for several short phrases or key words.

### 10 It's simply not there

Logically, it's impossible to prove a negative. The information you seek may indeed be somewhere in that database and you just haven't hit on the right combination of search terms and features needed to find it. But you must keep in the back of your mind that the data may simply not exist. People were missed in the census. Birth, marriage, and death records were lost. If your search fails, it may have nothing to do with any mistake you made, but entirely to do with the fact that the data isn't there. As a general rule, I never give up hope, but sometimes I give up "for now." There are always more searches to be done for other things. Sometimes, it's time to move on to something new. **DG**

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Photo got you stumped?  
Ask The Photo Detective.

Maureen Taylor, author of  
*Uncovering Your Ancestry  
Through Family Photographs*,  
solves photo mysteries.

On the web at  
[www.photodetective.com](http://www.photodetective.com)