

10 Easy Tips for Using Ancestry.com

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Not quite sure how or where to start your genealogical research? Follow these 10 easy tips for using Ancestry.com to get on course fast. This article includes a short Genealogy How-To Video about why errors occur on Ancestry.com and how to correct them.

When you first delve into Ancestry.com, the world's largest subscription collection of genealogy databases, it can be a bit mind-boggling. After all, Ancestry.com encompasses some 31,000 databases with more than 9 billion historical records. Subscribers can access all available US census records, from 1790 through the 1940 census, along with many Canadian, English and Welsh enumerations.

You'll find military records including databases of soldiers from the Revolutionary War, Civil War and both world wars. Vital records cover many US states, Canada and the United Kingdom, and immigration records range from passenger lists for most American ports to border-crossing files. Plus, you'll find more than 20,000 digitized family and local history books, along with city directories and yearbooks and scanned and searchable newspapers dating back to the 18th century.

Where's an overwhelmed genealogist to start?

To help jump-start your Ancestry.com experience, here are 10 suggestions for tasks you can perform on the site (not all of which even require paying for a subscription). As you work your way through these ideas, you'll uncover even more ways Ancestry.com can help you branch out and document your family tree.

1. Explore what's available for free.

Even though the core of Ancestry.com is its treasure trove of subscriber-only databases, the site also offers a surprising number of free data collections. If you're still debating whether to subscribe to Ancestry.com, trying out its free databases is a good way to get a feel for the site and how it works.

To find the free databases, select Card Catalog under Search on the home page; it's the last item in the drop-down list. Then type free in the keyword blank and click Search. You'll see nearly 800 databases you can explore even without paying for access.

Many of these databases, it's true, require a subscription to view full results or the scanned image of the original record. That's the case with most US census databases, although you can view the 1880 and 1940 enumerations in their entirety for free; you just need to register and create a free account. Yet even those "free" databases in which the complete records are hidden behind a pay wall can provide valuable information. Searching the 1861 English census, for example, will reveal not only whether an ancestor is listed, but also the person's year and city of birth as well as county of residence in 1861.

2. Create or upload your family tree.

There's no charge to create and share your own family tree files on Ancestry.com. You'll get the most out of this experience, though, by subscribing; your subscription will allow you to view the data matches Ancestry.com finds for you as well as see other subscribers' trees that overlap with yours. Ancestry.com hosts some 34 million family trees, containing 4 billion profiles of ancestors, plus more than 115 million photographs, scanned documents and written stories attached to those trees.

To begin, select Start a New Tree under the Family Trees link on the home page; you'll see a rudimentary pedigree chart where you can type in your data. Another option under Family Trees, Upload a GEDCOM, lets you share a GEDCOM file (the universal file format for family trees) you've exported from your genealogy software. Or from the same page, you can upload native file formats created by several genealogy programs: Family Tree Maker (FTW); Family Tree Maker backup file (FBK); Personal Ancestral File (PAF); and Legacy (FDB). You can also upload "zipped" GEDCOM and image files (GEDZ). Just browse to the file on your computer, select and upload it, and Ancestry.com will interpret the file and create your online tree.

3. Follow your hints.

Once you've created or uploaded one or more family trees, links to them appear in the Family Trees drop-down menu whenever you sign in to Ancestry.com. Click on one of your trees and you'll see a typical lines-and-boxes view, with each ancestor's name and relevant dates. You may see a leaf icon in the corner of an

ancestor's box; this indicates that Ancestry.com has a "hint" for you—data it's automatically found that may match that ancestor. (A box at the top of the page shows how many hints await your attention.)

To explore these hints, hover over one of your ancestors bearing a leaf icon. You'll see how many hints are available to review ("8 Ancestry hints"). Click this link for a list of the data matches Ancestry.com has identified. You can click on each data source to view that record, or select Review Hint to jump to a comparison between what Ancestry.com has found and what's in your tree. (If the data obviously doesn't apply to your ancestor, select Ignore Hint to dismiss it.) Check or uncheck these found facts, then pick Save to Your Tree to import the info you've checked.

4. Perform a global search.

Because Ancestry.com's wealth of data can be overwhelming, sometimes the best way to explore its databases is just to dive in and see everything it provides on a given ancestor. You can do this from the home page, where blanks invite you to fill in a first and last name, place an ancestor might have lived, and estimated birth year. You can click to add other life events, as well as other family members, to narrow your search.

If you know a little more about an ancestor, you'll get better results by clicking Show Advanced in the upper right portion of the home page. This links to a page with those options for other life events and family members, plus a drop-down for gender and blanks for race and keyword. (What might you try as a keyword? Consider groups your ancestor might have belonged to, such as Flying Tigers, Elks or Lutheran, as well as occupations and even place names that Ancestry.com doesn't recognize and automatically populate.) Here you can also prioritize or restrict your search by collection (such as English or Jewish) or select only certain types of records.

This advanced-search page also offers the option to search just for exact matches. Use this checkbox with caution, however; you can always choose to narrow your search once you see the results, using the Edit Search button or r hot key.

5. Search by category.

Despite the power of Ancestry.com's global search, sometimes you get better results by searching a single category—zooming in on your ancestor's military or passenger arrival records, for example. To search a single category, select it from the drop-down list under Search. For categories not shown there, such as Schools, Directories & Church Histories, pick Search All Records and then select the category (or subcategory) from the list on the right side of the [main search page](#).

Another reason to search by category is that these category-search pages present different options. The [Immigration & Travel search page](#), for example, lets you specify an ancestor's arrival and departure dates and place of origin—options not readily available on the main search page. (You can, however, add arrival and departure there as life events.) The [Military search page](#) has a date and location search box set specifically for military service.

6. Explore others' family trees.

The real benefit of sharing your family tree on Ancestry.com is the hope that others tracing your family will do likewise. Family trees are included in the site's global search, but you can focus on them by selecting Public Member Trees under Search. Results show the basics about an ancestor from each tree, a rating for how closely this person matches your search criteria, and how many sources and attachments accompany the data in the tree.

While unsourced info in others' family trees can provide clues for your own research, it's those with sources you'll want to zoom in on. Look particularly in the results list for those that not only have sources (which may be just somebody else's unverified family tree) but that show "attached records." These can be a research gold mine—everything from transcribed wills to pages from family histories. You may even find photos, indicated by a little camera icon.

You can also search just for Public Member Stories submitted along with family trees [here](#).

7. Connect with cousins.

What if you find someone researching your family, and you want to connect to share information? Toward the top of each family tree page is an Owner icon you can click to view more about the submitter.

Depending on the person's settings, you may be able to send an email via Ancestry.com by clicking Contact. You also can read about the person's research interests.

Under Collaborate/Recent Member Connect Activity, you can view other Ancestry.com subscribers' activities related to ancestors you may share. If someone's saved a record related to an ancestor in one of your trees, that'll show up—along with links to the record and the person's tree.

8. Find ancestors in the news.

Although other subscription sites now rival Ancestry.com's collection of historical newspapers, it's still a useful tool for beating your brick walls and learning about your ancestors' lives. (Ancestry.com has launched a bigger subscription-based site, Newspapers.com, that's available to Ancestry.com subscribers at a discounted rate.) To search only old newspapers, go to Search All Records and scroll down to Newspapers under Stories & Publications on the right.

Here it's often useful to filter your search by location, using the links at the upper right. Click on USA, for instance, and then select a state and possibly a city in the left-hand links on the page that appears. You also can filter by dates.

9. Scour message boards.

An often-overlooked resource is Ancestry.com's vast array of message boards—"the world's largest online genealogy community," with more than 17 million posts on more than 161,000 boards. This link is located under Collaborate, or you can go straight to boards.ancestry.com. These message boards are identical to those on the long-standing free RootsWeb site, which is why they represent such a rich resource. Why tackle a genealogy challenge from scratch when somebody may have already solved it here?

At the very least, it's worth checking the boards for all the surnames you're researching, as well as the ancestral places (typically by county) where your family has lived. You can also explore specialized boards devoted to everything from the Crimean War to Australian cemeteries. If you post, use a subject line such as "Harrison family in Ripley County, Ind." That way, other researchers surfing the boards will quickly know whether your most might pertain to their families..

10. Save your finds.

Once you've found facts about your ancestors on Ancestry.com, what should you do with these records? Ancestry.com provides several built-in ways to save "hits" related to your family history. First, of course, you can print the records you find—always a good backup. It's a good idea to print both the image of the original record, if available, and Ancestry.com's transcription of it, then staple these together.

It's also easy to save your finds digitally. When viewing a record, click the orange Save button in the upper right corner. This brings up a box where you can choose to attach the record to someone in your tree, store it in your Ancestry.com "shoebox" or save it to your computer's hard drive. (To return later to "shoebox" items, see the list of recent additions and the link to all items at the bottom of your Ancestry.com home page.) An advantage of attaching a record to an Ancestry.com tree is that you can then view it using Ancestry's free smartphone and tablet apps.

All these options are easy to use, and that's a good thing. Once you've tried all 10 suggestions for using Ancestry.com for your search, you'll have plenty of family history finds to save.