organize FAMILY HISTORY

Stay focused and happy while exploring your roots

The Imperfect Genealogist

Janine Adams

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What is a perfectionist?

According to Canadian time-management guru Harold L. Taylor,

A perfectionist is someone who spends a greater amount of time on a task than it merits.

How can perfectionism be a problem for genealogists?

‣ You can't decide on the perfect organizing system for your genealogy research, so you keep researching without organizing the results.
‣ You don't know how to properly cite a source so you simply don't do source citations.
‣ You're still researching how to create a perfect research log, so you don't use a research log.
‣ Your family-history research isn't perfect, so you won't share it with your family.
‣ You're perpetually on a quest for the perfect genealogy software so you don't buy any.

‣ There's so much to research and you don't know the right place to start. You become paralyzed and then go do something else.

Areas where good enough is good enough in genealogy

‣ **Source citations.** Citing a source for every fact is essential. But you can create a format that works for you, based on what's important to you.
‣ **Organizing systems.** There's no such thing as a perfect organizing system or one that is right for everyone. A good-enough organizing system that works with the way you think and allows you to find your information is all you need.
‣ **Research logs.** An imperfect research log is much better than no research log.
‣ **Genealogy software.** Find one that checks the most boxes for you and start using it before your backlog becomes overwhelming.
‣ **Note-taking platforms.** Evernote, OneNote, Trello, Word…use whatever works best with the way you think and just keep using it in the way that works for you. Typically with these platforms, the more you use one, the more useful it becomes for you.
‣ **Sharing.** You might not have time or resources to find the perfect means to share your research with your family members. Just choose some method of sharing; you can always improve on it later.

Real-life example: My simple digital organizing system

I organize my genealogy research digitally using a simple file-naming protocol that I can remember, and a folder structure that works for me. Is it perfect? No, but it's certainly good enough. In case it's helpful as a starting point for you, here's what I do. I download all online documents I find and name and file them this way:

‣ **File-naming protocol:** Year of Document Type of Document-Person-Location
  ‣ Example: 1938 Death Certificate-George W. Adams-Indianapolis Indiana

- **Folder structure:** Genealogy/Surnames/Surname/Last Name, First Name (YOB-YOD)
  - Example: Genealogy/Surnames/Adams/Adams, George W. (1845-1938)

Areas where good enough might NOT be good enough

- **Citing sources**. Source citations are essential. But their format can be good enough. (Did you notice that source citations made it into both lists?)
- **Source evaluation.** Some sources are not good enough to be included as evidence in your research. But they can be good-enough hints that lead you to good-enough sources.
- **Other people's research.** Someone's unsourced tree on Ancestry is not good enough for you to integrate into your own tree. Again, other people's research may provide some hints that can help you further your research.
- **Backing up your research.** If you keep your research digitally, as I do, "good enough" does not apply to backing up your computer. Because back ups can fail, use at least two different back up systems to ensure you won't lose your data. (For example, an online backup and backing up to an external drive.) And test your back ups periodically.
- **Relying on your memory.** When I started doing research, I thought I'd remember where I found information. I quickly learned I was wrong. That's why I write everything down in a searchable note-taking platform,

Ideas for letting go of perfectionism

In the podcast I co-host with life coach Shannon Wilkinson called Getting to Good Enough, we talk about ways people with perfectionistic tendencies can get more comfortable with good enough.

The theme we come back to over and over is this:

Get in touch with why something is important to you. That will help you determine when something is good enough.

This applies to any standards you want to create for your research. Know why you are citing your sources for example, and create a standard for source citations that meets your criteria.

Real-life example: My research log

I struggled with keeping a research log for years. I was overwhelmed by the robust spreadsheet templates I would find online and I resisted using them. But I wanted to be able to go back and see what I'd worked on and I wanted to be able to know where I'd left off when I was ready to start a new research session. I finally settled on a simple Evernote research log in which I write free form during and after each session. I don't necessarily capture everything. And I don't capture the same things each session. But it does let me know what I did in a session. (And it's searchable.) The one thing I'm consistent on is the "Next Actions" I write at the end of each session. That helps me know where to start the next session. With this imperfect research log, I accomplished what was important to me.

Another point that comes up in the podcast: it can be helpful to take note when you're spending more time on a task than it merits.

Just being aware of a tendency toward perfectionism in a given situation can help you shift your thinking if you're struggling with getting something implemented or finished.

Try to always keep in mind:

An imperfect system is better than no system at all.

Resources to learn more:
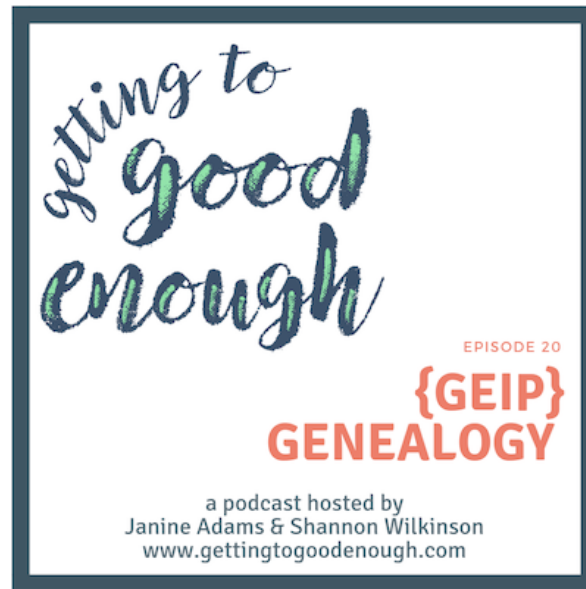
The **Getting to Good Enough podcast**, www.gettingtogoodenough.com. You might be particularly interested in Episode 20, which was about genealogy! I encourage you to give it a listen as my co-host Shannon Wilkinson and I discuss how perfectionism was getting in the way of her genealogy research. We talk about setting standards, creating checklists and getting in touch with what's important to you in your genealogy research.

Please check out my blog Organize Your Family History, www.organizeyourfamilyhistory.com, where I give advice about organizing your genealogy research, including details on my own good-enough systems.

You might also be interested in the Facebook group I administer, **Genealogy Research Loggers**, www.facebook.com/genealogyresearchloggers. We discuss various types of logs and can provide accountability for those seeking to establish the habit of logging their research.

Feel free to contact me at janine@organizeyourfamilyhistory.com.