

Our Mission

The AI Special Interest Group empowers NWSGS members to confidently integrate artificial intelligence into their genealogical practice through collaborative exploration and shared learning. We investigate both general-purpose AI tools (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Copilot, Perplexity) and genealogy-focused applications (Transkribus, FamilySearch Labs), discovering practical ways to accelerate research, overcome challenges, and preserve family histories. Grounded in ethical AI use and traditional genealogical standards, we build expertise together - making emerging technology accessible to all while ensuring our research remains accurate, documented, and verifiable.

How We Work

- **Monthly meetings:** First Wednesday at 4:00 PM CT
- **Format:** Zoom: Live demos, hands-on practice, group discussion
- **Philosophy:** Collaborative learning—we explore together

FEBRUARY MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

Focus: Prompt Tuning

This month we dove deep into the anatomy of effective prompts and practiced improving them together in real-time. The key insight: **small wording changes can lead to dramatically better results.**

Key Takeaways

- Good prompts have four essential elements
- Iterative refinement produces better results than trying to get it perfect the first time
- AI has infinite patience—you can keep refining and trying again
- Context matters enormously for quality output

The Four Parts of an Effective Prompt

Every strong prompt includes these elements:

1. CONTEXT: What AI is looking at

Tell the AI about the document type, location, time period, and any relevant background information.

Example: "This is a 1910 census record from Chicago, Illinois..."

2. TASK: What you want it to do

Be specific with action verbs. Don't just say "analyze this"—say exactly what analysis you want.

Example: "List each household member and their relationship to Richard."

3. FORMAT: How you want the output

Specify tables, bullet points, paragraphs, or other structures. This prevents overly wordy responses.

Example: "Create a table with columns for Name, Age, Birthplace."

4. CONSTRAINTS: Special requirements

Add any limitations, focus areas, or specific instructions.

Example: "Focus only on genealogically relevant information."

Live Tuning Session 1: Census Record Analysis

We analyzed a 1910 census record for Richard and Mary O'Brien in Chicago, progressively improving our prompts:

Progression of Prompts**Q1: What does this say?**

- Result: Basic transcription with some context
- Problem: Too general, verbose response

Q2: List each household member and their relationship to Richard.

- Result: Clear family structure identified
- Improvement: Specific task produced focused output

Q3: List each family member's name, age, and birthplace in a table.

- Result: Organized, scannable data
- Improvement: Format specification made information accessible

Q4: Summarize the places of birth for each family member.

- Result: Migration pattern analysis
- Member insight: AI identified that Richard and Mary were from different regions of Ireland—something not immediately obvious from the raw data

Member Contributions: Census Analysis

Question: "Could the model tell us anything about the neighborhood in which they live, the socioeconomics of the neighborhood?"

Answer: Yes! You can feed AI the entire census page (or multiple pages from Ancestry's index view) and ask it to analyze:

- Neighbor patterns
- Socioeconomic indicators (home values, rent/own status, occupations)
- Potential "fan club" members across multiple census years
- Connections in passenger lists

This builds FAN (Family, Associates, Neighbors) club research effectively.

Live Tuning Session 2: Research Strategy

Using the same census record, we asked for next research steps:

Progression of Prompts**Q1: What should I research next?**

- Result: Comprehensive 6-step research plan including:
 1. Lock down the marriage (1903 based on "married 7 years")
 2. Find birth/baptism records for children
 3. Research Richard's immigration and naturalization
 4. Find Mary's parents
 5. Follow the family forward in time

6. Explore land, work, and community records

Q2: Where do I find those records?

- Result: Detailed location guidance:
 - Cook County Clerk's office (online at FamilySearch and Ancestry)
 - Specific parish suggestions based on the address
 - Why baptismal records are valuable (mother's maiden name, godparents)
 - Naturalization record locations
- Member reaction: "This is gold right here."

Real-World Challenge: Street Name Changes

Member Question: "Is that address the same as it was in 1910? Streets in Chicago have been renamed and renumbered."

AI Response:

- Confirmed the concern was valid
- Provided specific resources:
 - Chicago History Museum street renumbering guides
 - Directory research techniques
 - Historic map overlays (Sanborn maps)
- Walked through the specific address conversion
- Noted that Congress Street became part of Congress Parkway, later absorbed into Ida B. Wells Drive
- Member noted the Eisenhower Expressway construction likely destroyed the original house

Key Learning: AI won't always have the answer but can suggest research paths and resources to find it yourself.

Common Prompting Problems & Solutions

Problem: Too Vague

Solution: Be specific with verbs, tasks, and format

- Not: "Tell me about this"
- Instead: "Extract names, dates, and places from this marriage record"

Problem: No Context

Solution: Tell AI about document type, location, time period

- Not: [paste document without explanation]
- Instead: "This is a 1900 census from Cook County, Illinois. Please..."

Problem: Multiple Unrelated Things

Solution: Chain prompting—go step by step

- Break complex questions into sequential prompts
- Build on previous responses
- AI has infinite patience for this approach

Problem: No Format Specified

Solution: Clarify output structure (table, bullets, etc.)

- "Give it to me in 5 bullets"
- "Create a table with columns for..."
- "Summarize in 2-3 sentences"

Problem: Expecting AI to Read Your Mind

Solution: Tell it what you know, what you've tried, what you want

- Share your research context
 - Explain what hasn't worked
 - Be explicit about desired outcomes
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Members Helping Members: February Discoveries

Handwriting Transcription Experience

Member: Transcribed father's hunting log in script using ChatGPT

- **Challenge:** AI misinterpreted some words (e.g., "hole" became "lake")
- **Solution:** Manual editing required, but correcting AI helps it learn
- **Recommendation:** Try **Transkribus** for handwriting—it's specifically trained for:
 - Multiple languages (English, German, Polish, etc.)
 - Historical handwriting styles
 - Old scripts (Middle English, Fraktur, etc.)

Missing Twin Research Challenge

Member Question: "Twins born in 1860s Wisconsin. One appears in 1870 census, disappears by 1880. No death record, no mortality schedule. Can AI help beyond a research plan?"

Group Discussion:

- General LLMs can't access records behind subscription walls
- AI provided excellent research suggestions:
 - Check 1865 state census
 - Look for Civil War records
 - Search newspapers and obituaries
 - Review land and probate records
 - Consider the twin might have joined a religious order (name change)
 - Young women sometimes lived with other families as helpers
- **Future hope:** When FamilySearch or Ancestry creates AI on their own data, this could change
- **Current tool:** FamilySearch's full-text search is finding records traditional indexes miss

Google AI Studio Attempt

Member: Tried uploading document to Google AI Studio

- **Challenge:** Got commentary but not actual transcription
- **Status:** Still troubleshooting—members encouraged to keep experimenting

Hike Training Plan

Member: Created personalized fitness plan for July vacation

- Provided medical conditions, current fitness level, vacation goals
 - AI generated progressive weekly plan through July
 - **Best part:** When life got busy, AI re-planned without judgment
 - **Key insight:** AI's patience and flexibility for iterative planning
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MEMBER QUESTIONS ABOUT AI FEATURES

Chat History & Organization

Questions about managing AI conversations:

Q: Can you delete old chats? A: Yes! You can delete conversations to keep your history manageable.

Q: Is chat history still there after you close the window? A: Yes, conversations persist in your chat history. You can return to them days or weeks later and continue where you left off.

Q: Do I need to print everything to remember it? A: No need to print! Options include:

- Save the conversation in your chat history
- Ask AI to "summarize in a short list with links"
- Ask to focus on just one goal at a time
- Copy/paste relevant sections into Word or other documents

Q: Does uploaded information get saved and used to train models? A: It depends on your settings:

- Default: ChatGPT saves conversations and uses them for training

- Option: Turn off in Settings → Data Controls
- Per-conversation: Use "Temporary chat" for sensitive information
- **Recommendation:** Use temporary chat or turn off saving when working with client data or private information

Privacy Considerations

Different AI tools have different privacy standards:

- **Microsoft Copilot:** Very strict privacy controls (preferred by many businesses)
 - **Perplexity:** Blocked by some companies due to privacy concerns
 - **ChatGPT:** Offers privacy settings but must be configured
 - **Best practice:** Always check and configure privacy settings before uploading sensitive genealogical information
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HOWARD'S AI VIDEO CREATION DEMO

Howard talked about how he used **HeyGen** to create the meeting announcement video:

Process

1. Started with the presentation slides deck
2. Uploaded to HeyGen
3. Selected an AI avatar and voice
4. Described desired background (library with computer monitors and genealogy books)
5. Generated professional video in ~10 minutes

Results

- Professional-quality announcement video
- Natural-sounding narration
- Custom visual background
- Total time investment: 10 minutes

Note: The [video](#) is available on the NWSGS Facebook group.

ROOTSTECH 2026 AI RESOURCES

Dates: March 5-7, 2026 **Cost:** FREE virtual attendance

- **AI Sessions:**

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/rootstech/schedule?f.tags=00000199-4dd5-dc15-abb9-edd534470000&day=2026-03-05>

Try It Yourself: February Challenge

Your Assignment

Write a good prompt that includes all four elements:

1. **Context:** What AI is looking at
2. **Task:** What you want it to do
3. **Format:** How you want the output
4. **Constraints:** Special requirements

Bring It Back!

Come to the March meeting prepared to share:

- Your most successful prompt
 - What worked well
 - What you learned through iteration
 - Questions that arose
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Resources for Prompt Engineering

General Prompting Guidance

Microsoft: AI Prompting 101 <https://aka.ms/bestaiprompts>

- Brief but excellent overview

- Shows the basics with clear examples

Steve Little: Crafting Better Research Prompts

<https://aigenealogyinsights.com/2025/11/03/crafting-better-research-prompts-a-complete-walk-through/>

- Genealogy-specific guidance
- Written by NGS AI Director and linguist
- Complete walkthrough with examples

Video Learning

Family Tree Webinars: AI Category <https://familytreewebinars.com/webinar-library/?category=technology&subcategory=ai>

- Multiple expert presenters
 - First week after posting: FREE
 - Subscription required after first week
 - Watch for new AI content regularly
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Upcoming Meetings

Next Meeting: March 4, 4:00 PM CT

Future Topics (Based on Member Input)

We're flexible and member-driven! Send topic suggestions to ai_sig@nwsgs.org

Potential topics include:

- Privacy and security best practices
- Translation tools and foreign language records
- Handwriting transcription deep dive (Transkribus)
- Brick wall strategies with AI
- Comparing AI tools: which one when?
- Document organization with AI assistance

Your voice matters! Email us ai_sig@nwsgs.org with:

- Topics you want to explore
 - Problems you're encountering
 - Discoveries you want to share
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Get Started Today

Your Action Plan

1. **Tonight:** Try creating one prompt with all four elements (Context, Task, Format, Constraints)
2. **This week:** Experiment with iterative refinement—take one prompt and improve it 3-4 times
3. **This month:** Apply prompt tuning to a real genealogy challenge
4. **March meeting:** Share your best success story

Need Help?

- **Recordings:** <https://nwsgenealogy.org/sig-meeting-video-archive/>
 - **Handouts:** <https://nwsgenealogy.org/sig-meetings-handouts/>
 - **Discussion groups:** <https://nwsgenealogy.org/2023/11/17/discussions-groups/> - Post questions and discoveries
 - **Monthly meetings:** <https://nwsgenealogy.org/meeting-2025-2026/> - Real-time help and collaboration
 - **Email:** ai_sig@nwsgs.org
 - **NWSGS AI:** <https://nwsgenealogy.org/artificial-intelligence/> - packed with information!
 - **Prompt scripting:** <https://nwsgenealogy.org/prompt-scripting/>
 - **AI Training:** <https://nwsgenealogy.org/ai-training/>
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REMEMBER

- ✓ **You can't break it**—experiment freely
 - ✓ **Weird answers?** Rephrase and try again
 - ✓ **Always verify** AI suggestions against sources
 - ✓ **Small changes** can create dramatically better results
 - ✓ **Iteration is normal**—even experts refine prompts multiple times
 - ✓ **We're learning together**
 - ✓ **Questions are always welcome**
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Key Insights from February

"This is gold right here." - Member reaction to AI's research strategy with specific repositories and resources

"I really needed to look because it put different words on what it thought my father had written." - Reminder that AI transcription needs verification

"AI has infinite patience." - You can keep refining, replanning, and trying again without judgment

"Just try it. You can't break it." - Encouragement to experiment without fear

AI is a tool, not a replacement. You are the genealogist. AI is your assistant.

Questions? Discoveries? ai_sig@nwsgs.org See you at the next meeting!

This handout generated with AI help and human oversight.

Howard Cameron and Janet Blake