

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

April Meeting Highlights

 Please fill out the survey!

The survey link was emailed to all attendees at the end of the meeting. If you can't find it, check your spam folder or email us at ai_sig@nwsgs.org.

Why your feedback matters:

- We read *every single response* — seriously, every one
- Your suggestions directly shape future topics (April's research strategy focus came from YOUR survey responses!)
- Your questions help us know what's working and what needs more explanation
- It takes just 3-5 minutes and makes a real difference

We want to hear:

- What worked well in this meeting?
- What would you like us to do more of (or less of)?
- What topics do you want to see in future meetings?
- What's still confusing or what do you want to explore deeper?

Thank you for helping us make these meetings better for everyone! 🙏

Focus: From Puzzle to Plan — Research Questions & Research Plans

This month we tackled how to transform a messy research problem into a GPS-grounded research question and then into an actionable research plan. Three NWSGS members (Bev, Diane, and Elda) generously submitted real brick walls, and we walked through a four-step chain prompting process that works across different types of genealogical puzzles.

The key insight: The quality of your research plan depends entirely on the quality of your research question. Vague question → vague plan. GPS-grounded question → focused, actionable research.

THE FOUR-PROMPT CHAIN

This is the framework we used for every demo today. Copy it, adapt it, and use it on your own research challenges.

PROMPT 1: Ground the AI in the GPS

Run this FIRST, before you give the AI your research puzzle. It sets the standard.

I am a genealogist working to develop a focused research question following the BCG Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS).

A well-formed genealogical research question should:

- Name a specific individual with known characteristics (approximate dates, location, family connections)
- Identify exactly ONE fact to be proven (parentage, birth date, marriage, death, migration, etc.)
- Define a geographic and time scope narrow enough to drive a reasonably exhaustive search (GPS element 1)
- Be answerable through documentary evidence

Please keep this standard in mind. I will now give you a research puzzle. Your job is to help me write a focused research question that meets these criteria.

PROMPT 2: Give It Your Research Puzzle

Now describe your brick wall. Include:

- Who you're researching (name, approximate dates, location)
- What you know
- What you've already tried
- What's blocking you

- Conflicting evidence or competing theories

Example structure:

[Paste your research puzzle here - the more specific, the better]

Based on the GPS standard we just discussed, please help me write a focused research question for this puzzle.

PROMPT 3: Push Back (This Is Critical!)

The first research question is a **draft**, not the final answer. Push back at least once.

If the question seems too broad:

This question feels too broad. Can you narrow it further to focus on [specific aspect]?

If the question missed something important:

I forgot to mention [key detail]. How does that change the research question?

If you have new evidence (like DNA):

I also have [new evidence]. Can you revise the research question to incorporate this?

PROMPT 4: Ask for the Research Plan

Once you have a solid research question:

Based on this research question, please create a prioritized research plan with specific steps and record types I should search.

Then add:

For each step in the research plan, please suggest specific resources, archives, databases, or collections I should check.

Prompt 4 is easy to forget but worth asking for — it often surfaces archives and collections you didn't know existed.

What we learned from today's demos

Demo 1: Bev's Indiana Parentage Puzzle

Question: Who is the father of Rachel Ann Perkins Smith?

The challenge: Two competing candidates (Jesse Perkins and Ira Perkins, uncle and nephew, both married to women named Charlotte). Recycled family names. No direct evidence.

What the AI did well:

- Kept the research question tightly focused on what could actually be proven
- Built a plan that treated both candidates equally (didn't pick a winner)
- Suggested building blocks: marriage records, land records, probate, wills, Rachel's children's records

The learning: AI doesn't pick your theory for you. It keeps all doors visible so you decide.

Demo 2: Diane's Missing Lithuanian Immigrant

Question: What happened to John Kasimer Norvill (b. July 4, 1900, Chicago, disappeared by 1920)?

The challenge: Missing between censuses. Difficult father. Recent DNA evidence suggests living descendants. Theories: left home, relocated, changed name, went to war.

What the AI did first: Produced a research question focused on finding John in traditional records.

What changed after push-back: When Diane mentioned the DNA evidence and name-change theory, the AI **completely rewrote** the research question to incorporate both angles and built a much stronger plan.

The learning: The first answer is a draft. One follow-up prompt can transform the result — **always push back at least once.**

Demo 3: Elda's German Multi-Theory Mystery

Question: What happened to Friedrich Moritz Rost (b. ~1835, Saxony)?

The challenge: Competing evidence across three continents. Children's marriage records say "died in America" (two records) and "died in China/Amoy" (two later records). Family memoir says political prisoner in Germany. Family notes say gambler sent to New Orleans, died of yellow fever.

What the AI did:

- Held **all three theories open** without picking one
- Built a research plan that addressed each thread
- **The big reveal:** Prompt 4 surfaced specific German political prisoner archives, Chinese port records, New Orleans yellow fever death records, Buenos Aires immigration records

The learning: For complex brick walls with multiple theories, AI keeps them all visible. The resources step (Prompt 4) can open doors you didn't know existed.

Key takeaways

1. Ground the AI before you give it the puzzle.

Tell it what standard you're working to. Prompt 1 sets the GPS criteria — skip it and you get a generic answer.

2. A GPS-grounded research question drives everything downstream.

Garbage question → garbage plan. Specific question → actionable research.

3. The first answer is a draft — push back.

One follow-up prompt often produces a dramatically better research question. This is not failure; this is how the process works.

4. AI keeps all theories open.

It doesn't pick a winner. That's your job as the genealogist.

5. Prompt 4 (resources) is always worth asking for.

It surfaces archives, databases, and collections you might not have known to look for.

6. You are still the genealogist.

AI helps you form the question and draft the plan. You evaluate, analyze, prioritize, and decide.

SIDEBAR: WHY CHAIN PROMPTING?

The comic we showed: Human → AI → output = slop. But **Human → AI → Human → AI → output = good work.**

Chain prompting means breaking one big question into smaller, sequential steps and building on each response. Each prompt in the chain does one job well:

1. Set the standard
2. Form the question
3. Refine the question (push back!)
4. Build the plan
5. Add resources

Think of it as a conversation, not a one-shot command. The iteration is where the quality comes from.

Members helping members

Gemini for Research

A member had asked about using Google Gemini. Janet demonstrated all three demos in Gemini today — it performed well and handled the GPS grounding prompt without issues. **Worth trying** if you're already in the Google ecosystem.

Special mention: NotebookLM (Google's Gemini-based tool) — lets you create a project and upload your own documents (family narratives, research notes, drafts). You can then ask questions and get answers grounded in what you've provided, not what's on the internet. Recommended for organizing and querying your own research.

Organizing Your Chats

Several members asked about managing chat history across multiple LLMs. Suggestions:

- Use browser bookmarks to organize chats by topic
- Keep a Word doc or OneNote page with successful prompts
- Use the search function in each LLM — surprisingly good at finding old conversations
- The challenge: remembering which LLM you used for which conversation!

Old Photographs and AI

Question raised: Can AI identify people in old photographs?

Current state: Facebook's tagging feature can be accurate for known people. For genealogy-specific photo identification (unknown ancestors), the technology isn't reliable yet — but it's improving. Stay tuned.

Catherine Schober's Translation Warning

A member mentioned professional genealogist Catherine Schober's blog post about AI translation failures — specifically, an AI confidently translating a German marriage record as a birth record and inventing a name that wasn't there.

The reminder: AI gives you a starting point, not a final answer. Always verify translations against the original document, especially for foreign language records. Use Transkribus to transcribe first, then DeepL or ChatGPT to translate — and check the work.

Your April Challenge

Try the four-prompt chain on your own brick wall.

The steps:

1. Copy the grounding prompt (Prompt 1) from this handout and paste it into ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini

2. Write up your research puzzle — who, what you know, what you've tried, what's blocking you
3. Ask for a research question
4. **Push back at least once** to sharpen the question
5. Ask for a research plan
6. Ask for suggested resources

Come back in May with:

- Your research question
- Your research plan
- One thing that surprised you

Bonus: If the AI suggests a resource or archive you've never heard of, look it up — you might discover something new.

Upcoming Meeting

Next Meeting: May 6, 2026 — 4:00 PM CT

Topic: Your AI Toolkit — Choosing & Using the Right Tools

ChatGPT? Claude? Gemini? Perplexity? Which one for which task? We'll compare tools side-by-side, cover privacy settings, and help you build a workflow that works for YOU.

Send your questions by April 28 to ai_sig@nwsgs.org:

- Which AI tools have you tried?
- What do you use each one for?
- Where are you still confused about which tool to use?
- What workflow frustrations do you have?

No prior AI experience required — we'll review as we go!

Register here: <https://us06web.zoom.us/meeting/register/cayOwMN2Qn-N1vuukNgSrg>

Resources

BCG Standards

- **BCG on Planning Effective Research:**
<https://www.bcgcertification.org/skillbuilding-planning-effective-research>

- **Genealogical Proof Standard:**

<https://www.bcgcertification.org/resources/standards>

AI Tools (Free Tier)

- [ChatGPT](#), [Claude](#), [Gemini](#), [Transkribus](#)

Genealogy-Focused Tools

- **FamilySearch Full-Text Search:** <https://www.familysearch.org> (free, AI-powered)

Learning Resources

- **Steve Little — Crafting Better Research Prompts:** <https://aigenealogyinsights.com>
- **Family Tree Webinars AI Library:** <https://familytreewebinars.com> (some free)
- **CRAIG — Coalition for Responsible AI in Genealogy:** <https://craigen.org>
- [RootsTech 2026 AI sessions](#) – make sure to click all three days

NWSGS Resources

- **Handouts:** <https://nwsgenealogy.org/sig-meetings-handouts/>
- **Recordings:** <https://nwsgenealogy.org/sig-meeting-video-archive/>

REMEMBER

- ✓ **Ground the AI first** — tell it the GPS standard before you give it the puzzle
- ✓ **Push back on the first answer** — one follow-up transforms the result
- ✓ **AI keeps all theories open** — you choose which door to open first
- ✓ **Prompt 4 (resources) is always worth asking for**
- ✓ **You are still the genealogist** — AI drafts, you decide
- ✓ **Questions are always welcome**

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