



USING ONLINE DATABASES IN FAMILY HISTORY

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Millions of sources for family history are made available online every day. The providers of these sources often gather them into collections or databases, to help people like us access them. Unfortunately, the ease of accessing databases can fool us into thinking we can use them quickly and not spend time analysing them.

Anyone can place a database of family history sources on the internet, without peer review or quality control. Some repositories have considerable funds to manage their databases, while others are managed by individuals. This means that the quality of databases varies considerably, as does the method by which they make them available.

Context and provenance

The first step with any source is to examine the context and provenance. For an online database this means we ask questions such as: Where is the database hosted? Who created the website? Who created the database? Why did they create it, when and how? Who is the audience? Does the website clearly identify which sources are contained in the database and where they came from?

To find out more about an online database, read any available bios about the creator(s), descriptions of the database, introductions and explanatory notes, and lists of abbreviations. If this information is not available, you will need to be more cautious when using the database as it will be more difficult to assess the reliability of the information.

Sources

Databases contain sources, but each database is unique in content and format. They also change over time, so this analysis may need to be conducted more than once.

After identifying the types of sources in the database (for example, birth records, baptism records), there are two more critical steps. First you need to establish whether they are complete sources, image extracts of the sources, or information that has been transcribed from the sources.



George William Saywell in the Australia, Birth Index, 1788-1922



No record image

Detail	Source
Name: George William Saywell	
Birth Date: 9 Sep 1919	
Birth Place: Queensland	
Registration Year: 1919	
Registration Place: Queensland, Australia	
Father: Norman Philip Saywell	
Mother: Alexenia Maud McLaughlin	
Registration Number: 007916	

Save

[Add or update information](#)

[Report a problem](#)

An entry with transcribed information (Ancestry.com)

George William Saywell in the Australia, Electoral Rolls, 1903-1980



Detail	Source
Name: George William Saywell	
Gender: Male	
Electoral Date: 1943	
Electoral Place: Jundah, Maranoa, Queensland, Australia	

Save

[Add or update information](#)

[Report a problem](#)

Entry with image of the source (Ancestry.com)

Next you need to determine the sources on which the database is based – I call these the ‘originating sources’. Sources in online databases may be based on original sources (the first version of a source), derivative sources (sources derived from other sources), or a mixture of both.

Source Information

FreeBMD. *England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837-1915* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006.
 Original data: General Register Office. *England and Wales Civil Registration Indexes*. London, England: General Register Office. © Crown copyright. Published by permission of the Controller of HMSO and the Office for National Statistics. You must not copy on, transfer or reproduce records without the prior permission of ONS. Database Copyright © 1998-2003 Graham Hart, Ben Laurie, Camilla von Massenbach and David Mayall.

Information about the originating source(s) may be included with the suggested source citation

Source Information

Ancestry.com. *Australia, Birth Index, 1788-1922* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.
 Original data: Compiled from publicly available sources.

A less useful description of the originating sources



Next, examine the coverage of the database. Which places are included, which time periods and are there some categories excluded?



RYERSON INDEX

Coverage Details

- [The 2020 Newspaper Purge](#)
- [Newspapers with Problems](#)
- [Finding a published notice \(UPDATED\)](#)

RANGE OF NOTICES INDEXED

Note - some individual dates within each range may not yet have been indexed. Click on the Dates Indexed button above for precise details.

Death Notices	From 1 January 1969 to 4 December 2021	85,044
Funeral Notices	From 6 January 1969 to 4 December 2021	10,514
Obituaries	From 2 April 1970 to 2 November 2020	2,177
Legal Notices	From 10 January 1977 to 1 October 2020	15,688
Other Notices	From 17 March 1969 to 20 November 2021	420

Ryerson Index to death notices and obituaries in Australian newspapers

Do not just rely on the title of the database for this information. For example, a collection called 'Australian Birth Records Index 1788-1922' is misleading. Civil registration did not commence until 1856 in New South Wales (and on other dates in the other states), so there cannot possibly be any 1788 birth records in the database. In addition, just because a database title or description says that it includes a particular date range, it does not mean that it actually includes all the sources for that date range. A good quality online repository will provide specific information about the coverage if you make the effort to read the description or explanatory notes.

About Australia, Birth Index, 1788-1922

Vital records—records of births, marriage, and death—are the basic building blocks of family history research, and this database features some of the most comprehensive indexes available of historical Australian birth records. These indexes were created by Australian registrar's offices after civil registration of births, marriages, and deaths became law in the mid-19th century. Exactly when civil registration took effect varied by colony or territory as follows:

- Tasmania — 1838
- Western Australia — 1841
- South Australia — 1842
- Victoria — 1853
- New South Wales — 1856
- Queensland — 1856 (before 1856, see NSW)
- Northern Territory — 1870 (1856–1863, see NSW; 1863–1870 see SA)

However, these dates do not reflect the earliest dates for Australian birth records. Church records predate civil registration, and as registrar's offices assumed responsibility for registration, they requested copies of earlier church records to incorporate into their collections. Thus, this database includes indexes that may go back even further for the following colonies:

- New South Wales — 1788
- Tasmania — 1803
- Queensland — 1829
- Victoria — 1836

Extract from a database description on Ancestry.com which clarifies the coverage



Another thing to check for is whether the repository is updating and adding to the collection. If that is the case, it is worth checking back again later to search the database again.

Card Catalogue

Searchable listing of all record collections

Results 1-25 of 281 Sort By Date Updated ▾

Title	Category	Records	Activity
 Australia and New Zealand, Find a Grave Index, 1800s-Current	Birth, Marriage & Death	9,528,642	UPDATED
 Australia, Newspapers.com Marriage Index, 1800s-current	Birth, Marriage & Death	672,360	NEW
 Australia, Newspapers.com Obituary Index, 1800s-current	Birth, Marriage & Death	5,756,110	NEW
 Australia, Army Militia Service Records, 1901-1940	Military	67,781	UPDATED
 Australia and New Zealand, Obituary Index, 2004-Current	Birth, Marriage & Death	2,017,735	UPDATED
 South Australia, Australia, Police Inquest Registers, 1885-1953	Convict, Criminal, Land & Wills	6,227	NEW

If the coverage of a database does not meet your needs, always check other repositories for similar collections as they may have a wider coverage.

Welcome to Staffordshire Name Indexes

Brought to you by Staffordshire & Stoke On Trent Archive Service

This website allows free access to the indexes listed below

- Calendar of Prisoners at Staffordshire Quarter Session, 1779-1921

The database for the Calendar of Prisoners on Ancestry commences 1868, but a similar collection on this site commences 1779

Indexes

Many databases have been indexed and some databases are comprised solely of an index without copies of the actual sources. This is what I was alluding to above when I suggested you check if the database contains information that has been transcribed from the sources. Some genealogists suggest that an index is just a finding aid, not a source and that it should never be cited. I disagree. If you extract information from it then it is a source and you should cite it. How else are you or another researcher going to track down the originating source if you do not do so? However, I do agree that an index is not the best source and you should always endeavour to track down the originating source and use that.



View Record	Name	Registration or Birth Year	Registration or Birth Location	Parents
 Note: To get better results, add more information such as First Name, Birth Info, Death Info or Location –even a guess will help. Edit your search or learn more .				
View Record	George william Saywell	1919	Queensland	Norman philip Saywell, Alexenia maud Mclaughlin
View Record	Clement H Saywell	1908	Ashfield	Elias J Saywell, Anna A Saywell
View Record	Elizabeth V Saywell	1889	Rockdale	George W Saywell, Elizabeth G Saywell
View Record	Frank A Saywell	1901	Smithfield	Arthur J Saywell, Gertrude M Saywell

Extract from an index

Information and evidence

Now you can examine the information within the source and the evidence it provides. The approach to doing so is the same as for any other source. Key questions: What information is provided, how is it expressed and how is it formatted? Are there gaps in the information? Are there any explanatory notes, what do the headings mean, do you understand all the terminology and abbreviations? Who were the informants, is the information primary or secondary, what is the quality? Does the information provide direct, indirect or negative evidence?

The key thing to remember for online databases is that this information may not necessarily be visible when you are viewing the source or entry – you may have to go searching elsewhere for it, either within that database, elsewhere on the website or even in another place.

Using the source

There are different ways to extract information from an online database. Usually this involves taking a copy, transcribing the information or attaching the source to your online family tree. There are a few things to watch out for here.

If you are making a copy or transcribing the information, you should also create a source citation and make a copy of the description of the database as these will be helpful for your analysis. If available, it is a good idea to make copies of the cover pages and any explanatory pages.

Check for any copyright or usage conditions that may apply, which will largely be dependent on whether you are planning to publish or just using the information for your own research. If you are transcribing the information, it is a good idea to make an image copy as well, in case you make errors in your transcription.

Do not just examine the entry that came up in your search. Always look at the surrounding entries in the database and you may wish to make copies of those as well. You might find related entries or entries with additional information that will assist you in the interpretation of your entry.



When you find an entry within a database, some sites provide hints to other entries or other databases for a person with the same or similar name. These can be useful research leads but take care to analyse the other entry carefully to establish for yourself whether they are actually the same person.

Not all online databases can be searched. With some you need to browse the entries. Browsing can also be useful for searchable databases, because the effectiveness of searching is limited by the search engine and the search criteria that you enter.

Browse this collection

To browse this image set, select from the options below.

Year Range

Quarter

First Letter of Last Name

Citing online databases

You must cite the source that you used, which means the database. Do not just cite the website where you found the database, as that will not help you or others find it again; nor will it help anyone evaluate the reliability of the information extracted from the database. However, the website does need to be mentioned in the citation.

As our purpose of citing a source includes tracking down the originating sources, information about the originating source(s) needs to be included as well.

Format:

Website, name of database, website address, date accessed, description of entry; details to help you find it again; originating source

Example:

FamilySearch, "England Bishop's transcripts" database (www.FamilySearch.org: accessed 21 Jun 2016), entry for Frances, daughter of Peter & Frances Hawkins; St Nicholas Church, Brighton, Sussex, FHL film no. 1,468,821, page 186, no. 1481; citing West Sussex Record Office, Chichester, no.: EP II/16/27A-M.

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