



# AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL  
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

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## Get organised

When doing family history, you'll probably need a system for keeping track of things. If you don't, you will find yourself with piles of photocopies, certificates, computer printouts and scribbled notes.

An organised approach will help you to keep track of:

- what information you have for each ancestor
- what information you are missing for each ancestor
- what sources you have checked and what you found out from them
- which documents and photographs you have as originals and which ones are copies and where they all came from.
- who you have contacted (e.g. family members or archives) and the responses you received.

There are lots of options for organising your research. You can use:

- paper files stored in folders, display books or ring binders
- electronic documents arranged in folders on your computer (e.g. Microsoft Word)
- genealogy software (e.g. Brothers Keeper, Legacy Family Tree)
- family history websites (e.g. Find My Past, Ancestry).

## What will work best for you?

**Paper – simple and cheap.** The simplest and cheapest option is a paper-based filing system. All you need is printouts of your worksheets, a notebook and some document wallets or ring binders and plastic pockets. This is a good way to start, even if you later decide to use genealogy software or electronic files on your computer.

**Paper and computers.** Many family historians use a combination of paper-based and computer systems. Genealogy software has the advantage of being easily updated and printed out, but you will probably still need some sort of system for organising your paper documents, printouts, handwritten notes, letters, emails and texts.



**Taking care of original documents.** Keep the originals of any old family documents and photographs separately from your research notes. These include things like birth, marriage and death certificates, family letters, diaries and old newspaper cuttings. You should make a copy of these to keep with your research notes. If possible store the precious originals in acid-free storage files or archive boxes. Read more about [preserving your family collections](#) in the “How to” guides on the State Library of Queensland’s website. You can also find this kind of information on other Library and/or historical society websites.

## Charts and worksheets

Charts and worksheets can help you to organise and see the results of your family history research. They are good for:

- seeing your family history as a picture
- pinpointing gaps in what you know
- seeing patterns and connections to people, places and names
- keeping track of where you are so you don’t double up.

### **TIP – working copies**

*You can keep two copies of charts – a working copy and a final copy where you record information once it is confirmed.*

## Family history toolkit

We have developed a range of checklists and worksheets that you can download and print. They are Microsoft Word documents so you can add to them and change them to fit your own needs.

- **Research plan** – this worksheet will help you to think through what you want to do and how to do it
- **Sources at home** – a checklist that will help you to find information you and/or family members might have at home
- **Family member information** – a worksheet to help you gather and record information about each person in your family tree
- **Biographical outline** – a worksheet to help you organise information about a person in your family tree as a timeline
- **Records checklist** – a checklist to help you plan your research and think about the many places where you might find information

- **Contacts log** – a worksheet for keeping track of who you have asked for information
- **Research log** – a worksheet for keeping track of what you are doing
- **Planning a visit checklist** – a checklist that will help you plan a physical visit to an organisation like an archives or AIATSIS

***TIP: Be consistent in how you write people's names and dates:***

- Write surnames in capital letters to avoid confusion – a name written George Stacey could be read as either Stacey GEORGE or George STACEY.
- Refer to women by their maiden name or at least put their maiden name in brackets – Iris STACEY (nee LONG)
- Always write out the name of the month and the full year – use 8 October (or Oct) 1899 not 8/10/99.

These are just suggestions and tools that might be helpful. In the end, you'll need to find a system that works for you.

## Filing

Family history research creates stacks of papers and (if you decide not to use the piles of papers on the kitchen table approach) you will need to figure out how to file them. Here are some suggestions:

- If you have computer folders as well as physical folders, use the same filing system and label your folders in the same way. Writing surnames in capital letters helps you scan folder names quickly (e.g. MILLER Annie).
- Make a folder for each family line (many people start with four such ancestral lines, one for each of their grandparents)
- Make a folder for each couple
- Make a folder for each surname
- Make folders by record type (birth records, electoral rolls, protection records)
- Label your folders clearly so that you can find material quickly.

## Keeping track of your sources

A source is where you found information about the past. Some types of historical sources are birth, death and marriage certificates, divorce papers, wills, photographs and other pictures, oral histories, family interviews, sound recordings, books, maps, objects and buildings.

Historians divide historical sources into two categories: primary sources and secondary sources.

- **Primary sources** were created at or around the time an event took place. Someone with direct and personal knowledge of the event or time period created the record. Examples of primary sources are: birth certificates, diaries, newspaper articles, photographs, military service records. Primary sources are the most reliable sources, but they might still be incomplete, biased or inaccurate.
- **Secondary sources** were not created at the time that an event occurred. They were created by someone who did not experience the event or time period you are studying. They include published and unpublished histories (including family histories), indexes and databases. Secondary sources can provide you with good background information and clues for further research.
- **Family histories and biographies** are a special type of secondary source for people doing Indigenous family history research. A family history or life story written by someone whose family lived at the same places and times as your family could be very useful to you. Their history might mention members of your family, they may have photographs of significant places and they may point you to obscure sources.

It's important to keep track of your sources, make sure you write down:

- who wrote it – the organisation or author (NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages)
- what it is called – the title (Marriage Certificate)
- when it was created – the date (16 May 1951)
- where it can be found – the library or archive if it's unpublished, the publisher and date if it's published (NSW Registry of BDM, registration number xxxvcbcv)
- where you found the particular piece of information – the page number (if relevant).

These details might be hard to work out, especially for old documents held by archives or material you find on the web. For example, who is the author and what is the title and date of an old register of births kept over many decades by a church mission? Or how do you cite a memoir you found online on a distant cousin's website?

***TIP: The key is to write down enough information so that you or someone else is able to locate the information and the source again at a later time.***

Archives and libraries usually have a particular number that identifies the source in their catalogue or collection database. And they often have a fact sheet on 'How to cite' their material.

- if possible make a photocopy or digital photo, or print it out or save a copy if it's digitised
- If it is a record in an archive or library and you are allowed to take a digital photo or photocopy, take one of the cover of the file or book with the title of the file or book on it, as well as the page(s) you need so you can keep them together and always have a record of where the images or copies came from
- always write down the source of your information at the time you find it, not later
- If you print something off from a web page, record the name and details of the website and the date that you found it on the internet. Websites constantly change and/or are updated so it's good to know when you found something in case it later disappears or is moved.
- print out or copy information about the source from library or archives catalogues
- keep track of the searches you've done and the records you've looked at, even if you find nothing (you won't want to do the same search again in six months)
- be very clear about your sources when you write up your family history or when you share information with others. If you clearly reference where you found something, it makes it possible for others to find it too.