



AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

Family History Unit

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Family History Kit – Research step-by-step – contents

- Research step-by-step
- Develop your research plan
- Get organised
- Start with yourself
- Background reading
- Search for records
- Put it all together





Research step-by-step

The steps outlined here provide tips and advice on how to do Indigenous family history research. Some steps and sources will apply to your research, some won't.

Indigenous family history research in seven steps

Preparation

- **Before you start** – Read our information sheets on some of the challenges of Indigenous family history research. See [Before you start](#).
- **Develop your research plan** – The first step is to be very clear about what you want to know and why you want to know it. Then plan how you are going to achieve it. Update the Research plan as you go along. See [Develop your research plan and Toolkit](#).
- **Get organised** – Most people end up with piles of notes, photocopies and other papers. If you decide at the beginning how you are going to keep track of things, it will be easier in the long run. See [Get organised and Toolkit](#).

Close to home – yourself and your family

- **Start with yourself** – Family history research always starts with yourself and works backwards. Write down everything you know as the starting point for your research. Then gather as much information as you can from family members or friends of the family and the sources they have including photographs, address books, birth, death and marriage certificates.. Sit down with family members and collect all the family stories you can. See [Start with yourself and Toolkit](#).

Further afield – tracking down the sources

- **Do some background reading** – Once you have a good idea of the places and dates that are important to your family, it may be useful to find out more about the history of the place. Look for family histories, biographies and the history of government legislation relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. See [Sources – background reading](#).



- **Search for records held by organisations** – Once you have gathered as much information as you can from the people you know, it's time to get information from organisations. Most of these will be government agencies – libraries, archives, records authorities, registries, although some may also be held by church and other non-government organisations. At this point go back to your research plan and decide where you are most likely to find more information. See:
 - Family history sources – information about the type of information you may find in the different types of sources
 - Where to get help – contact information by state and territory for key sources
 - Toolkit – worksheets and checklists that will help you plan, search and keep track

Finishing up – what do you do with your research?

- **Put it all together** – Once you've done the research you may want to share it in a family tree, timeline, scrapbook, biography or family history. See: Put it all together.

Do you have to use the internet?

These days the answer is probably, yes.

It is difficult to do research without using the internet. Many of the resources that will help you to do your family history research are now online. Some of them are only online.

You may need to go to your local library to use one of their computers. Many libraries have courses where you can learn how to search the Web or you can ask a librarian. If you have relatives or friends who use computers regularly, you might be able to ask them to help you. Libraries and community centres often run short courses in using computers and/or searching the internet.

Family History Kit

If you are reading this online, AIATSIS has collected all of the information on the Finding your family website into an easy to download Family History Kit. You can download the whole thing at once, or section by section, or page by page. It includes a Toolkit of worksheets and checklists. You can also print off the sections or the whole kit if you would like to.

See: Family History Kit



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Develop your research plan

The first step in family history research is to be clear about what you're doing. What do you want to find out about your family? Are you just curious, or is there something specific you want to know? Is there a particular ancestor you want to find out about?

Why do you want to know more about your family history? Perhaps you want to:

- know more about your ancestors and where they came from
- create a family tree
- have a family reunion
- write about your life story or that of a family member
- connect with your community, culture and country
- find a family member
- confirm your Aboriginality
- make a native title, land rights, compensation or repatriation claim.

Being clear about what you want to find out, and why, will help you work out the best approach. It might be as simple as getting a copy of your Nan's birth certificate or it might involve in-depth research in historical archives.

Every journey is different

Every research journey is different, but it's a good idea to focus on one research area at a time. For example:

- a specific family group – your mother's father's people
- one surname or family line – the Edwards family
- a question you want to answer – who were your mother's parents?
- A specific person – grandfather John Edwards who lived in Tennant Creek, NT in the 1920s.

Even if you want to know everything about everybody, break up your research into bite-sized pieces. For example, if you want to create a complete family tree for your children, the best way to do this is to focus on one branch at a time working your way back from yourself.



Use the Toolkit Research Plan worksheet to help you organise your research journey.

What's in a research plan?

Aim: What do you want to know?

- Clearly define the aim of your research. It can help to put this in the form of a question – What is the story of my mother's side of the family? Where were her parents from? What were their lives like?

Known facts: What do you already know, or what have you learned from previous research?

- Write down what you know and what records you've already searched, if any.
- Use concise statements or dot points to summarise this information. For example: My mother's birth certificate says she was born in Dubbo, NSW. Her name at birth was 'Susanne Smith'. Her mother's name was 'Mary Smith' and Mary was 16 at the time of Susanne's birth. Susanne's father's name is not on the birth certificate.

Possible sources: Where could you find out what you want to know?

- Identify records and other sources that might have the information you need. You might look for a marriage certificate or find out about how to access divorce papers. You might ask other family members. Bear in mind that you could be asking sensitive questions that may cause distress.
- Your possible sources will depend on the time period and location you are researching. For example, if your mother was born on a mission or managed reserve, there may be church and/or government records.
- You will need to become familiar with the range of family history sources and decide which ones are most likely to have the information you are seeking.

Tracking down the information: How will you find the sources you want?

- Make a list of sources starting with the ones most likely to answer your research question and/or the ones that are the easiest to get.
- Note where to find them – are they online? Can you get them from a local library or historical society? Can you ask for copies to be sent to you, or do you have to visit an archive?
- Write down your goal for each source.
- Work through the sources one-by-one and write down what you find out.
- Make a note of clues and random ideas for future research.

Reviewing your findings

It's important to step back from time to time and check how your research is going.

- Have you found what you wanted to know?
- What have you learned from the information you've found?
- Were you surprised at what you haven't found? What did you learn from this? Are there other places you might be able to find what you want to know?

If you get stuck

- Ask for help. Record holders, librarians, archivists, historians and genealogists are very good sources for advice on types of records and how to locate them.
- Discuss what you have found and what you can't find with friends or others who are researching their own families. They might be able to give you some new ideas.
- Choose a different research direction and follow this new trail.
- Go back to your notes and follow up some of your more 'outside of the square' ideas. These may or may not lead you to more information
- Do some more background reading. Reading other people's family histories may give you some fresh ideas. Always check if any new family or community histories have been published, or any recent books or journal articles relating to places that are important for your family's history.
- Sometimes you need to come back to a problem later after you've checked other sources.
- Unfortunately, you might have to accept that you'll never know the answer to a particular question.



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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.



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Start with yourself

Family history research starts with **you and works backwards and outwards**.

First record what you know about yourself and your immediate family.

- What is your full name?
- When and where were you born?
- Who are your parents, including step-parents and adopted parents?
- Who are your siblings, including step-brothers and sisters?
- Who is your current spouse or partner?
- Who are your children, and your children's other parent?
- Who are your grandparents?
- Have you or your family members been known by different names, including nicknames?
- What are the dates and locations for important events for these family members – birth, adoption, marriage, divorce, death?
- Where have you lived during your life?

Write down everything you know.

Focus on writing down information you can remember or can find from documents you have at home. These documents might include birth, death and marriage certificates, wills, family photographs, newspaper clippings and family letters. Look especially for things that you own that have been passed down through the family. As well as documents and photographs, these could be objects such as household items, books, jewellery or even furniture. Sometimes objects have names, dates and/or places written on them which may provide you with information about family members.

After writing down what you already know, you can see what information is missing and what more you need to find out.



Ask your family

Your family are likely to be a great source of important information.

Start with the people closest to you, particularly older relatives whose memories might span four or five generations. Ask them for the same basic information about themselves that you've already recorded about you:

- full name and nicknames
- date and place of birth
- names of their parents, siblings, spouse or partner, children and grandparents
- dates and locations of important events such as births, marriages and deaths
- places they've lived.

At this early point in your research these conversations are fact-finding missions. You are looking for the names, dates and places that are held in your own memory and in the memories of family members or friends of the family who you can easily talk with. You may be surprised at how much information you are able to gather this way. If you find that a family member has many family stories you might ask them whether you could record an oral history interview with them.

Sensitivities about the past

Be aware that some family members might not want to talk about the past. It might bring up difficult memories or touch on sensitive issues they'd rather forget. This can be frustrating for you as a researcher, but you need to be respectful of their wishes. You can always try to talk to them again later, when you can show and tell them more about the research you've been doing.

Write down everything you find out.

Your goal at this stage is to gather information that is fairly easy to get from home and family members. It won't be complete, but you will need these basics to begin the next stage of your research.

Ask your family members whether they have any old family documents and photographs, and whether you can have a copy. Older relatives might have already written down some of the family history or begun compiling a family tree or created a slideshow for a family reunion or a commemoration. You can easily make a copy of items by taking a photo with a digital camera or smart phone. If relatives start to see you as the 'family historian', they might be happy to give material to you. People may be happy to know someone is going to put the things they have been saving to good use.

Looking at family records and talking to your relatives you might find just the piece of information you need. For example, one of your grandfathers or great grandfathers may have served in World War 1. You might never have heard about this, but once you start asking questions people will tell you many useful details.

Make sure you keep really good notes (or a sound or video recording) for each person you speak to. Also see if they can help you fill in information about other family members. You can also start to compare information you get from different sources.

See: Sources at home checklist.



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Background reading

There are two main types of background reading that will be useful to your research:

- **Family and personal histories** – family, community histories and life stories or biographies are histories of individuals, families, communities, missions, reserves or other places
- **Administrative histories** – histories of the legislation and administration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Family and personal histories

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have written histories of their own lives, their families and of communities such as missions or reserves. These are mostly published books and should be available in public libraries.

AIATSIS has a comprehensive collection of writings by and about Indigenous people. Some of the collection is indexed by name in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Biographical Index (ABI).

Search strategies

Start your search for books and other material for background reading by searching and browsing the ABI and Mura® catalogue.

- **Search the ABI for family names.** If there are too many search results, limit the results by place (see the left-hand side of the search results).
- **Browse the Family History section of Mura®.** There may be recent family histories relevant to your research. To do this, go into Mura and then choose Family History from the list on the left hand side of the Mura Collections Catalogue Home page
- **Search the ABI by place.** If the place is relatively large (Northern Territory) you will need to try to narrow to a smaller place (Alice Springs). If your family name doesn't appear in the search results, you may find the names of other people associated with that place.
- **Search Mura® for names or places.** The search results list will include family and community histories.

Note that the search results will also give you some information about the language and the names of people or groups associated with places or names. See Thinking about place.



Other places to search for family histories:

- National Library catalogue
- State and Territory Library catalogues
- Catalogues of your local council library or local history collection. You may be surprised at what you might find.
- Google and Google books. In each of these you might include a family name, a place, the word 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal' and 'family history' in your search.

Administrative histories

The term 'administrative history' refers to histories of the government departments responsible for Aboriginal people. It also refers to historical information about the legislation enacted by governments for the 'protection' and 'welfare' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Each state and territory developed, passed and enforced its own laws, so it is valuable to understand what happened in the states/territories that are important to your family.

Why is it useful to read administrative histories?

You will find that some of the records that may be available about your family were created because of legislation. For example, under protection legislation in most parts of Australia individuals were permitted to apply for an 'exemption' from the Act (Act meaning the legislation controlling Aboriginal people at the time). An exemption or 'dog tag' as it was often referred to, meant that an Aboriginal person wasn't treated as Aboriginal for the purpose of the Act. For example, they were permitted to move around and work in similar ways to a non-Aboriginal person. If a family member was exempted, there should be a file held by among government records with the exemption application and other related paperwork.

It is also useful to know the names of the departments that were responsible for Aboriginal Affairs and Child Protection at different times in Australia's history because you then know who might have been creating records about your family members.

Aboriginal Family History Research guides

Each state, territory and commonwealth archive holds government records related to Aboriginal protection and welfare. These archives have developed research guides to help people trying to find records about themselves or their families. Most guides include a short history of the protection/welfare regime and information about the kinds of records that were created. State and Territory Libraries also have research guides which can lead you to many different kinds of resources for Aboriginal Family History research and offer other ideas on approaches to family history. Below are some links to Research Guides in State/Territory Archives and Libraries.

New South Wales

- Research guides related to Aboriginal people - State Records of NSW
<https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/archives/collections-and-research/guides-and-indexes/aboriginal-people/guides>
- Aboriginal Australians family history – State Library of NSW:
<http://guides.sl.nsw.gov.au/aboriginal-australians>

Northern Territory

- Researching your Aboriginal family history – Northern Territory Archives Service:
<https://dtc.nt.gov.au/arts-and-museums/northern-territory-archives-service/archives-information-leaflets>
- Tracking family: A guide to Aboriginal records relating to the Northern Territory – National Archives of Australia:
<http://guides.naa.gov.au/tracking-family/>

Queensland

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family history – State Library of Queensland: www.slq.qld.gov.au/resources/family-history/atsi
- Queensland State Archives
<https://www.qld.gov.au/dsiti/qsqa>
<https://www.qld.gov.au/recreation/arts/heritage/archives/collection>
- Queensland Government links for Aboriginal Family and Personal history
<https://www.qld.gov.au/atsi/cultural-awareness-heritage-arts>

South Australia

- Aboriginal family history – State Library of South Australia:
http://guides.slsa.sa.gov.au/Aboriginal_FH
- Aboriginal services – State Records of South Australia:
<https://www.archives.sa.gov.au/content/aboriginal-services-guides>

Tasmania

- Records on Tasmanian Aboriginal people – LINC Tasmania:
<https://libraries.tas.gov.au/family-history/Pages/default.aspx>

Victoria

- Aboriginal people and family history – State Library of Victoria:
guides.slv.vic.gov.au/aboriginalfamilyhistory
- walata tyamateetj: A guide to government records about Aboriginal people in Victoria:
<https://prov.vic.gov.au/walata-tyamateetj-research-guide>
- Finding your mob: Researching Aboriginal family history at the Victorian Archives Centre
<https://prov.vic.gov.au/finding-your-mob>
- Finding your story: Resource manual to the records of the Stolen Generations in Victoria: <https://www.prov.vic.gov.au/koorie-services/finding-your-story>

Western Australia

- Indigenous family history – State Library of Western Australia:
<https://www.slwa.wa.gov.au/explore-discover/indigenous-wa/family-history/wa-indigenous-family-history-resources>
- State Records Office of Western Australia:
www.sro.wa.gov.au/archive-collection/collection/aboriginal-records/aboriginal-family-history
- Looking west: A guide to Aboriginal records in Western Australia – Department for Child Protection:
www.dcp.wa.gov.au/SupportingIndividualsAndFamilies/Documents/LookingWest.pdf (PDF 385kb)
- Signposts: A guide for children and young people in care in WA from 1920 – Department for Child Protection: signposts.cpfs.wa.gov.au

See also: Aboriginal protection and welfare records

AIATSIS online exhibition: To remove and protect

This online resource includes digital copies of legislation relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and some of the protector's reports submitted to state governments.

See: aiatsis.gov.au/collections/collections-online/digitised-collections/remove-and-protect



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Search for records

Searching for records held by government organisations such as archives, registries and libraries is at the heart of family history research.

You have already ...

1. Read the information in Before you start.
2. Developed a Research plan.
3. Written down the information you know. See Start with yourself.
4. Written down the information your family knows. See Start with yourself.
5. Collected all of the certificates and documents that you and your family have. See Sources at home.
6. Organised your information and identified the gaps. See Toolkit.
7. Done some Background reading – especially checking whether there are any family histories or life stories that might be useful to you and looking at Research Guides on library and archive websites. See Background reading

TIP: It really helps to narrow your focus into small chunks.

Birth, death and marriage [BDM] records

If you have a good look at your own birth certificate, you will find information on it which can help you apply for access to the birth, death and marriage certificates of your ancestors. If you don't have a copy of your own birth certificate, your first step would be to apply for one.

- For living relatives or certificates that are not historical you will need permission from the person, or to prove your relationship to them. For this reason you will also need your own birth certificate and identity documents.
- You could ask other family members to help you get them or if you are eligible you might be able to become a client of a service – such as Link-Up - who may be able to apply on your behalf. Note that most BDM certificates cost \$30–\$50.
- You can also search for historical BDMs if you know the names of your ancestors and apply for the certificates.

Each BDM certificate you receive will set off a new round of requests – each new certificate will give you additional names and dates. It will also suggest places that were significant in your ancestor's lives.

See Birth, death and marriage records and Where to get help – contact information by state.

TIP: Don't forget to keep track of your searches and requests.

Aboriginal protection and welfare records

Once you have found and applied for access to BDM records, you should try to track down records made by the various government agencies responsible for Aboriginal 'welfare' and 'protection' in the past. See Where to get help guides for each State and Territory in this Kit.

Quick searches – name indexes

- **Aboriginal Biographical Index [ABI]**. It's worth doing a quick search in AIATSIS's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Index to see if your ancestors are mentioned in any of the missionary or protection board publications. If you find someone, this will not only give you direct information about them, you will also know that there are likely to be records about them. Search ABI index.
- **Centre for Indigenous Family History Studies [CIFHS]**. It is also worth searching the CIFHS website. You may find direct information about your ancestors and references to some government records. Some CIFHS documents include file numbers so you can track down where the original records are held. To search CIFHS, you need to type the phrase "site:cifhs" and the name you are searching in "quote marks" into Google to do a search of the documents on the CIFHS site.
- **National Archives of Australia [NAA]**. If you think any of the people you are looking for (or their partners) might have done military service, search the National Archives RecordSearch database. Military records are a rich source of family history information. See Military service records.

TIP: Don't forget to note down what you have tried so you can keep track of your searches.

Contact Aboriginal records assistance teams

Since the Bringing Them Home report on the Stolen Generations, governments have staffed specific departments – most of these have a number of Indigenous staff – to help Indigenous people find records about themselves and their families.

Records made by protection and welfare boards have very personal information and very strict access conditions. The staff will guide you through their process for accessing records.

See Where to get help – contact information by state

Other types of records

Once you've completed the research suggested above you can start to search other types of records. You can see from our list of Family history sources that there is a lot to choose from and everyone will follow different pathways.

It is worth remembering that some Indigenous people went to great lengths to avoid contact with officials – this means they also avoided leaving traces of themselves in the records.

The key to making the decision about what pathway to follow is making your best guess about the kinds of officials who might have made records about your ancestor and then searching to see what you can find.

- Use the Records checklist in the Toolkit to help you choose which records might be useful.
- Then find out more about the records in Family history sources.
- Then find out where to get them in Where to get help.
- It is also worth returning to the Background reading and searching for any new names that have come up so far.

Family history research is slow, circular and methodical

It would be great if were easy to do family history research – but it isn't. It's slow, sometimes tedious and often circular.

Each new piece of information you get – like in a jigsaw puzzle – will add to the whole picture. However in family history it is like doing the puzzle without the picture on the box lid to guide you. Often new information will raise more questions than it answers.

It is really worthwhile to keep revisiting and updating your Research plan. It will help you to track your progress and plan the next steps.

It is also useful to return to the Toolkit periodically. At the beginning the amount of information and advice in the Toolkit may be overwhelming. But as you start collecting information and planning what to do next, you may find the tools more useful.



AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

Family History Unit

Freecall: 1800 352 553

Fax: 02 6261 4287

Email: familyhistory@aiatsis.gov.au

Put it all together

Once you have gathered a good amount of information about your family, you may want to share what you've discovered with others. Family history projects can take many forms. Which one is right for you depends on your time, interests, the reasons you started your research and who you want to share it with.

It's a good idea to start small. Finishing a smaller project is great for your self-confidence. You can also show what you've done to your family – it might encourage reluctant relatives to help you or to share family stories, photographs and documents with you. You can always turn shorter pieces of writing into chapters in a bigger book later.

Whatever form your project takes, the family history you prepare will be most useful for future generations (and other family researchers today) if you ensure that your sources are clearly referenced and that other people can find them again.

Different ways of putting together a family history

Family tree: You might have already compiled a family tree or an ancestor chart when doing your research. Family trees are useful for sharing the outcomes of your research because they're simple and easy to understand. But while they help make sense of names and dates and places, they don't allow you enough space to tell the stories of your ancestors' lives in any depth. See Family tree in the Toolkit.

Timeline or chronology: Another way to make sense of all the information you've uncovered in your research is to compile a timeline or chronology. You could focus on the most important and interesting events in the life of one ancestor, one couple, or all those in one family line. Events might include births, marriages, deaths, divorces, moving house, changing jobs, deaths, funerals and so on. At the very least, for each event include the date, place and people involved, as well as the sources of your information.

Scrapbook: If you are creative, you might like to put together a scrapbook that tells your family's story. You could focus on one particular family line, or on your direct ancestors back three or four generations. Include copies (not originals) of family photographs and historical documents, as well as stories, descriptions and a family tree.



Biography or life sketch: Writing about one ancestor at a time is less daunting than writing about many generations of the family at once. At its simplest, a life sketch can spell out the major events in a person's life, such as their birth, marriage, work, where they lived, children they had, when and where they died and where they are buried. Or if you have gathered a lot of information about a particular part of your ancestor's life, you might like to write about it. To make it more colourful, include stories or anecdotes and copies of photographs. Putting together a timeline first can help you work out what happened in their life and when it happened.

Family history newsletter: If you have a big family keen to know about your research or if other relatives are also researching the family, you might like to put together a family history newsletter. It could include stories about interesting things you've uncovered, copies of family photographs, research mysteries, biographical sketches, and copies of interesting documents or newspaper articles you've found.

Blog: A blog can be a good way of writing regular small pieces about your family history research. You can make your blog public, to share with anyone, or private, so only your family and friends can see it. Blogs can be set up for free on sites like Blogger and Wordpress.com.

Video: You can make a video to share your research as well, even just using the video camera in your phone.

Family history book: Many family historians set out to write a book. This could be a 20-page story that you just print out at home, or it could be a 200-page book that you get professionally edited, designed and printed. Be realistic about what you are going to produce – your family would probably rather a shorter book now than something you might never find the time to finish.

Find out more

There are lots of websites and books with advice on writing and publishing a family history. Some useful resources, mostly Australian, are listed below:

- Hazel Edwards, *Writing a non-boring family history*, GHR Press, 2011
- Noeline Kyle, *Writing family history made very easy: A beginner's guide*, Allen & Unwin, 2007
- State Library of Victoria – Publish your family history
<https://guides.slv.vic.gov.au/publishing>
- State Library of South Australia -
<http://guides.slsa.sa.gov.au/familyhistorygettingstarted/writingfamilyhistory>
- Australian Copyright Council – Family histories and copyright
https://www.copyright.org.au/ACC_Prod/ACC/Information_Sheets/Family_Histories_Copyright.aspx

- Family Search – Create a family history
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Create a Family History](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Create_a_Family_History)

Some genealogical societies have special interest groups who support each other in writing family histories. For example Genealogy SA in South Australia has a group that meets once a month <https://www.genealogysa.org.au/membership-gsa/18-uncategorised/89-fh-writers-group.html>

When you have finished writing your family history, consider donating a copies to the local library and historical society where your family lived, to AIATSIS and to your state/territory library.

If you plan to distribute your family history outside the family, remember to check with living relatives about any sensitive information before you do so.

It is also important to check whether you need to get any copyright or moral rights clearances on photographs or documents.