

Master Your Family Tree Research

A course by Dr. Sophie Kay, www.khronicle.co.uk ♦ Autumn 2025 ♦ **Week 2: Research Questions**



Welcome to Week 2 of your course! Most of us jump into our family history research sessions with at least a general sense of direction in mind for the family or person we're researching. Yet that's a very different thing from having a written research question – and in fact the process of deciding on what question we're actually tackling can lay the groundwork for success.

Image left c/o Getty Images, licensed via Unsplash+

Your Week 2 Challenges...

Whether you're an experienced hand or are relatively new to family history, here are the three challenges from the close of today's session. Delve into as much family history as you can over the coming days, and try these tasks alongside your Worksheet exercises to develop your skills further:

ONE Add an entry to your research log relating to reflection upon a research question.

TWO: Refine your research question for your brick-wall problem. What is your 'garlic bulb'? What is your 'garlic clove'?

THREE: Update your **roadmap** from Week 1. Where do research questions sit in YOUR workflow?

Your Starting Point: the historical record

Establish what you KNOW and be explicit about what you DON'T KNOW.

Have some tools to hand to help you in interpreting the historical details. Here are just two examples for when you're interpreting historical monetary sums:

- The **historical currency converter** at the National Archives (TNA) covers pounds sterling, shillings and pence (where relevant) over the period 1270 – 2017: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#>
- The John Gray Centre in East Lothian has a **webpage and research guide** for old Scottish money: <https://www.johngraycentre.org/about/archives/old-scottish-money-research-guide-7/>

SMART Goals

SMART Goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) are not the same thing as a research question, nor are all the SMART criteria necessarily appropriate to a research question.

Nonetheless, having a research question in the first place does suggest that we have some sort of a goal which we're working towards, so some of the SMART Goal literature can be helpful when you're mulling over how your research question might work in practice! Here are a couple of useful articles if this is something you'd like to read more about:

© **Sophie Kay, 2025**. Third party links and products are provided as suggestions only and do not constitute official endorsements. Always check the terms of any sites or products prior to purchase, to ensure they meet your needs.

The author accepts no liability for the use of any sites or products detailed in this handout.

How To Utilise SMART Goals To Trace Your Family Tree – an article and video short from Natalie Pithers at Genealogy Stories: <https://genealogystories.co.uk/how-to-utilise-smart-goals-to-trace-your-family-tree/>

Outline sheet from the University of California on setting and following SMART Goals (downloads as PDF): https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.ucop.edu/local-human-resources/_files/performance-appraisal/How%2Bto%2Bwrite%2BSMART%2BGoals%2Bv2.pdf

Useful methods for specific question words

Here are just some ideas to get you started with linking your question word to your methodological approach. Don't ever restrict yourself to particular methods (for instance, timelines and maps can be used in ANY research) – but some methods may be particularly well suited to a given question word, and it may help to lean into that.

WHO – people focused: seek out name-rich sources which delineate connections and relationships.

WHERE – location focused: use maps and indeed any other resource (e.g. historical newspapers and trade directories, wider secondary reading) which builds your knowledge of the locality.

- **Scotland boundaries viewer** at the National Library of Scotland: <https://maps.nls.uk/geo/boundaries/>
- **England Jurisdictions 1851** at FamilySearch (includes Wales): <https://www.familysearch.org/en/mapp/>
- **Ordnance Survey maps** (and many others too!) at the National Library of Scotland: <https://maps.nls.uk/>
- **David Rumsey Historical Maps Collection:** <https://www.davidrumsey.com/>
- **History of Cartography:** <https://www.maphistory.info/webimages.html> This is a portal site, so although it does not offer any maps directly, it links to a wealth of other websites which do.

WHEN – time focused. Find ways of thinking about the timescales involved in the research narrative.

Andrew Todd's **topping and tailing method** is outlined in his book *Family History Nuts and Bolts: problem solving through family reconstitution techniques*: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/27866293-family-history-nuts-and-bolts-problem-solving-through-family-reconstitu>

Sophie Kay's **Negative Space method** for research gaps

- **Negative Space: Making Your Genealogy Gaps Work For You** (and your family tree): <https://parchmentrustler.com/family-history/negative-space/>
- **Mind the Gap!** <https://parchmentrustler.com/family-history/mind-the-gap/>

Timelines are an invaluable support. *Inside the Guide: Creating Ancestral Timelines* by Rachel Carter: <https://www.thefhguide.com/blog/inside-the-guide-creating-ancestral-timelines/>

The next three question words can be difficult to tackle in practice and may sometimes simply not be answerable. They may be viable as 'garlic bulb', bigger-picture aims in some cases.

WHAT – substance focused: any evidence of material culture, land or property. Physical artefacts in the family; probate records (England, Wales and many other countries) or confirmation records (Scotland); cadastral (land ownership) maps, estate records...

HOW – behaviour focused: timelines, evidence walls...

Any tools which can help you check the viability of a particular situation or journey may help here. Here's one example from CAMPOP:

Travel in Times at CAMPOP: <https://www.travelintimes.org> Use this interactive map to find out the likely journey time and route for historical journeys

WHY – cause focused: eyewitness accounts, personal writings, oral histories, diaries... See whether your family’s personal papers (if such things exist for you!), or the relevant local archive, have anything to offer on this front. Here are a few other organisations which might be of interest – and carry out your own investigations once you’re developing a Research Plan (Week 3 of our course!) to identify any other possible sources of information.

- **Oral History Society:** <https://www.ohs.org.uk/>
- **Oral History Association:** <https://oralhistory.org/>
- **Irish History Online** maintains a list of published diaries and personal writings: https://www.iho.ie/index.php?iho_function=2&iho_field=specific&iho_other_parameter=subject_classification&iho_searchterm=Diaries%20and%20Autobiographies
- Explore **The Great Diary Project**, which rescues vintage diaries from a range of eras: <https://thegreatdiaryproject.co.uk/>

Some final thoughts

Your research question should prompt **ACTION**, giving you **DIRECTION, STRUCTURE** and **REFLECTION**.

Your research question might be a simple, single ‘**garlic clove**’ – or you might have a more complex ‘**garlic bulb**’ in play, containing several smaller, actionable garlic cloves.

Don’t be afraid to **reappraise** your question further down the line if needed, as the research unfolds.

Continue to return to your research question regularly – and be sure to do this if you hit a ‘brick wall’ challenge. Sometimes we get stuck simply because we’re asking the wrong question.

My Session Notes

Your Week 2 Worksheet (provided separately) includes space for responding to the various exercises during and after the session. The space below provides an additional area to add your notes and thoughts.