

UNDERSTANDING NEEDS

NARROW FOCUS

Many researchers start off with too broad of a scope for their project.

Example (BAD): Suzy wants to find out everything she can about her grandmother.

This is too broad, we can never find out everything about an ancestor. We don't even remember everything about ourselves! If Suzy narrows the focus of her research she will get better results and will be less frustrated with doing research.

Suzy should narrow her focus to a specific aspect of her ancestor's life. Where she was born, for instance.

Example (GOOD): Suzy wants to find out where her grandmother was born.

SPECIFIC ANSWER

This is a great research question because not only is it narrow in focus, it has a specific answer. Her grandmother was born somewhere! And if there is a presumption that records exist for the time, place, and culture of her grandmother, she should be able to easily focus her research.

NOT DOCUMENT-BASED

The question is not tied to a specific document. When we pin our genealogical dreams on a specific document and cannot find it for whatever reason, we get frustrated and disappointed.

The next step for Suzy would be to learn more about how births were recorded for the time, place, and culture of her grandmother. Was there civil recording of births required by law? Would there be a baptismal record? Would there have been a birth announcement in a newspaper? Would someone else in the community have written about it in a journal? All of these are just some of the ways births can be recorded.

Let's say Suzy's grandmother lived in a time, place, and culture in which births weren't recorded. Is all lost? No! Maybe Suzy's grandmother immigrated, or applied for social security, or died at a time when there were civilly recorded deaths, all of these can help Suzy to build a case for finding out when and where her grandmother was born.

SUMMARY

To summarize, your research question should be (1) narrow in focus to (A2) have a specific answer, that is (3) not tied to a single document.