

"The Professional's Voice"

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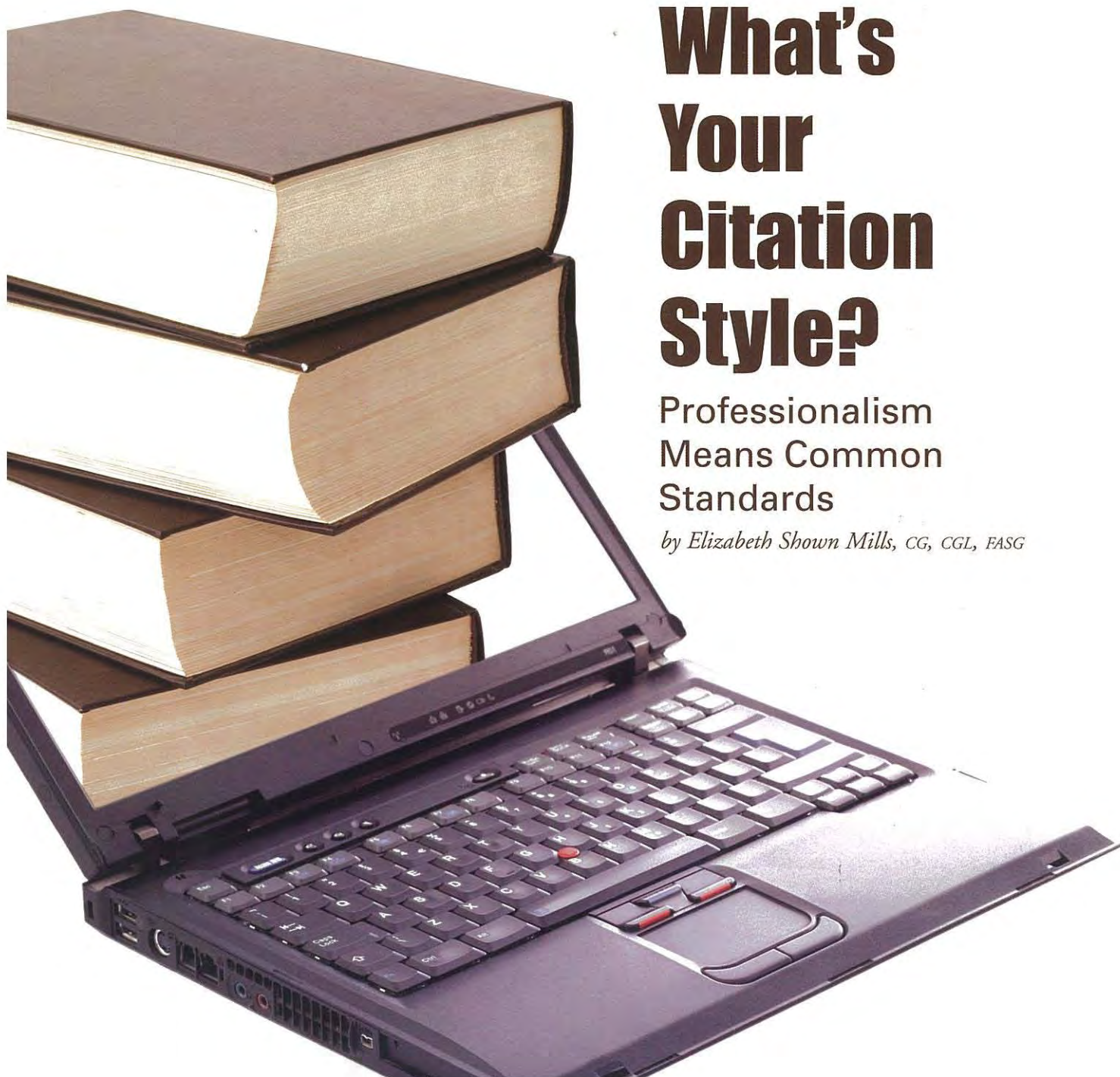
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What's Your Citation Style?

Professionalism
Means Common
Standards

by Elizabeth Shown Mills, CG, CGL, FASG



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Professionalism Means Common Standards

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Citation is a language in which we communicate our source data. Effective communication cannot occur in a community if each person insists upon defining and pronouncing words in his or her own way.

Most professional genealogists come into the field as a second career, one we chose as we matured intellectually and honed our entrepreneurial skills. Within our ranks, we find former attorneys and biologists; corporate CEOs and educators; engineers and historians; librarians and physicists; publicists and reporters—all of whom learned to write and to identify their sources by the practices of their respective disciplines.

Now, we are all *genealogists*. We recognize that genealogy has its own parameters and that certain standards differ from (and may be more stringent than) those in the other professions for which we trained. Yet most of us possess a conflicting trait common to successful entrepreneurs: a streak of intellectual independence.

That trait serves us well in the research and analysis aspects of our work. It prompts us to question what others take for granted, and it encourages us to form our own conclusions. In another regard, however, our insistence upon doing things the way *we*, individually, prefer does leave other professionals wondering whether genealogy is yet a “real field” with definable standards.

Polar Views—Common Thread

Amid a recent Association of Professional Genealogists List discussion of documentation and source citation, several list subscribers wrote private messages to me that took strikingly polar positions. Yet their candid comments contained a common thread. Speaking for one extreme, a colleague wrote:

The so-called “journal standards” for citing sources are absurd. Some of their footnotes are longer than Halle Berry’s legs. Other journals don’t even tell us where to find the church records they used or what census schedule supplied their data. I ask you, how can there be any such thing as “journal standards” when the journals can’t get their act together and give us one set of rules to follow?

Frankly, I’ve quit trying to follow any of their dictates.

If they all can “do their own thing,” so can I. I know the records I deal with. I know what works best for me. My style’s as good as theirs, as far as I’m concerned.

Another APG member who has published extensively in journals of both genealogy and other fields took a radically different tack:

Source citations in genealogy are symptomatic of the immaturity of genealogy as a profession. In contrast to all the idiosyncratic forms we see in genealogy, mature professions and all their publications follow one set of citation and publication guidelines. Personal preference is not an option.

Neither authors nor editors are free to pick and choose what they agree with. Authors learn to cite the same sources identically in all venues from undergraduate papers to scholarly articles to books and everything in between. Those professions value consistency.

The variety of genealogical sources makes such perfect consistency impossible, but advocacy for variability in genealogical citations boggles the mind.

The Problem

Both writers make valid points. “I’ve gotta be me” was an old song in genealogy long before Sammy Davis Jr. etched it in vinyl. It is a mindset rooted in the *hobby* of genealogy, where practitioners are self-taught, but it also thrives within our professional community for several reasons:

- As a field, we have traditionally followed the practices of law and history, but those fields offer little help in citing the grassroots-level records we use daily. Their style manuals focus upon published sources and authored manuscripts rather than the infinitely varied forms of raw records.¹

¹ In history, two manuals are standard. Graduate students typically follow Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, var. editions, 1937 to date). Mature writers typically follow the more comprehensive *Chicago Manual of Style*, now in its 15th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). In American law, the traditional guide is *The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation*, 17th ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Law Review Association, 2000).

- Those of us who were trained to write in other professions are naturally grounded in the styles of those fields.
- Those of us who were not writers in our earlier careers have developed our own citation habits, by trial and error, as we explored new things and observed the work of others.
- Most of us specialize in certain areas, where basic records have common traits. In using those materials, our predecessors often developed certain “economies of citation” (aka *shortcuts*) that we have adopted.
- Our respected journals have traditions—some a century or more old—that reflect regional practices; and genealogy, perhaps more than any other field, appreciates tradition.

Habits are hard to break, and customs are not easily abandoned. Still, the problem is obvious. Whether we act out of habit, tradition, or intellectual independence, most of us approach source citation from the perspective of what works for what we personally do. What our field has lacked is an overarching framework—a set of fundamental rules we can learn and then apply to all the unique situations we encounter, regardless of our specialization.

Early Efforts

The year APG was founded (1979) appears to have marked the first effort toward creating a citation framework for genealogy. As a fairly new professional, grounded in history, I sought a guide for the field and found none. Writing one of our major journals for guidance, I was told that none existed for genealogy and that I could just pick a style manual from some other field—whatever I preferred. That advice, at least, explained one point I had noticed in studying genealogical periodicals: the tremendous variation in the amount of source information provided from one article to the next, even in the same publication. The primary criteria did, indeed, seem to be whatever the author felt like doing.

Challenged, I took an idea elsewhere, to what some would consider the least likely periodical to be concerned about source citation: the hobbyist-oriented *Genealogical Helper*. The result was an article, coauthored with my husband, that covered the most basic source types used for family history.² Being history majors (he a newly minted Ph.D. and I still a student), we chose to pattern our genealogical models on the classic style for history students, Turabian’s *Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*.

That modest effort soon sparked a better one. Two fellows of the American Society of Genealogists whom I occasionally encountered at genealogical events proposed a book on the subject—a project bigger than Gary and I could take on, given

that he had just received a grant for another project and I was his research assistant.

One of those fellows, Richard Lackey, CG, followed through and developed the groundbreaking *Cite Your Sources*, published in 1980 by Polyanthos, the press owned by his FASG colleague, Winston DeVille.³ Like the *Helper* article, *Cite Your Sources* followed Turabian’s style for published sources and her generalizations for unpublished materials.

The untimely demise of both Lackey and Polyanthos stalled the development of what promised to become the structural framework for genealogical source citations. By the mid-90s, the principal advocates for documentation standards (the Board for Certification of Genealogists, the National Genealogical Society, and the software developers Palladium and Wholly Genes) were fielding numerous “complaints” by constituents because the only guide they could recommend did not address many broad-ranging sources that had become commonplace in genealogy.

That need prompted a new effort, launched initially under the auspices of BCG. The objective was not only to provide a current guide but also to develop some consensus on the particulars of source citation among those who were our major writers, editors, and lecturers on the subject of documentation. Developing basic ground rules was simple enough; most good genealogists agree on the same fundamental principles and standards. As usual, though, the devil lay in the details.

The resulting manual, *Evidence!*,⁴ has been rightly criticized on at least one point. While its patterns for published works adhere to the models set forth in 1937 by Kate Turabian (and followed for seventy years since then by six editions of her work and fifteen editions of its publishers’ *Chicago Manual of Style*), the “consensus” reached by those who contributed to *Evidence!* falls short of a systematic framework for citing *unpublished* sources critical to genealogy.

For each type of unpublished record, what *Evidence!* does present is the majority view among those who assisted with the compilation. The underlying problem has remained: citation formats developed higgledy-piggledy across time, as needs arose—and typically among groups of people working in isolation of other groups using similar sources.

A New Effort

The latest addition to the *Evidence* series, *Evidence Explained*⁵—a “desktop reference” manual radically different from the original “briefcase edition”—is rooted in all these issues. Its 885

²Richard S. Lackey, *Cite Your Sources: A Manual for Documenting Family Histories and Genealogical Records* (New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1980).

³Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence! Citation & Analysis for the Family Historian* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1997).

⁴Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2007).

⁵Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary B. Mills, “How to Properly Document Your Research Notes,” *The Genealogical Helper* 33 (September–October 1979): 7–11.

pages offer, as the title suggests, considerable discussions of the records themselves. The book's principal focus, however, is the conceptual framework of source citation. As noted by the much-published writer quoted on page 171, "The variety of genealogical sources makes... perfect consistency impossible." Within this limitation, the 1997 policy of basing models upon the "most-favored practice" for each particular source type has been replaced by a ten-year effort to achieve some measure of consistency in citations across the full panoply of records.

Colleagues who feel that "advocacy for variability in genealogical citations boggles the mind" may still be disappointed—and colleagues who prefer choices among citation styles may be somewhat gratified. The reality is that the very nature of historical research and writing means that there are diverse ways to approach the organization of files, databases, and bibliographies. With some records, organization is more efficient when approached geographically or chronologically (censuses being an obvious example). With some research projects, efficiency dictates organization by subject matter or other criteria.

Both the original *Evidence!* and the recent *Evidence Explained* emphasize one point: *Citation is an art, not a science*. There are no rigid formulas that must *always* be followed in every jot and tittle. That is not to say, however, that rules do not exist. *Evidence Explained*, at section 2.1, describes the intersection of artistic license and professional responsibilities this way:

Citation is an art, not a science. As budding artists, we learn the principles—from color and form to shape and texture. Once we have mastered the basics, we are free to improvise. Through that improvisation, we capture the uniqueness of each subject or setting.

As historians, we use words to paint our interpretations of past societies and their surviving records. In order to portray those records, we learn certain principles of citation—principles that broadly apply to various types of historical materials. Yet records and artifacts are like all else in the universe: each can be unique in its own way. Therefore, once we have learned the principles of citation, we have both an artistic license and a researcher's responsibility to adapt those principles to fit *materials that do not match any standard model*.

Note, particularly, the last eight words of this passage. In no professional field—as the much-published writer previously noted—do we have the license to alter just anything or everything, simply because we personally do not see a need for some part of it. Standard models exist *because* they are standards that fill most needs of most people. The fact that our research has not yet acquainted us with some of those needs does not justify our assuming they do not exist. To argue that different

standards should exist for different researchers is to create a field that has no standards at all.

For genealogical professionals who value consistency and "common standards," *Evidence Explained* provides more than 1,100 models; all built upon the principles set forth in chapters 1 and 2. Where the nature of certain records require deviances from those principles, the deviances are explained. In areas that justify alternatives, options are offered.

Figure 1 illustrates one such situation, with a passage from chapter 3 that lays the ground rules for citing archived manuscripts. This example recognizes the fact that our citation to a document may validly emphasize the author, the document itself, or the collection in which we found the document. All these approaches are appropriate in one set of circumstances or another.

In numerous other ways, adaptation is necessary. *Evidence Explained*, for example, presents many different records that exist in a variety of formats: original manuscripts, facsimile books, microfilm or microfiche images, CD- or DVD-rom, online digitizations made from the originals or any other format. Derivatives of the same records may take the form of abstracts, card files, databases, translations, or transcripts.

To present every type of record in every conceivable format would be impractical. An already hefty volume would have grown to a four- or five-volume set. Consequently, a typical research situation might present the following options for us:

Situation 1:

We obtain a Civil War widow's pension application from the National Archives and Record Administration series known as Case Files of Approved Pension Applications, 1861–1934. *Evidence Explained* (p. 604) provides a model for citing the claimant's deposition—exactly what we need.

Situation 2:

We use a claimant's deposition from the NARA microfilm publication M1279, *Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Widows and Other Dependents of Civil War and Later Navy Veterans (Navy Widows' Certificates), 1861–1910*. Turning to *Evidence Explained*, we find no model for that particular microfilm publication. However, page 605 provides a model for a similar set of microfilm, M1785, *Index to Pension Application Files of Remarried Widows Based on Service in the Civil War*. Knowing the basic principles of citation, we know that an index entry is not cited the same as a document from an original file. So we adapt the two models on pages 604 and 605 to create the one we need. That is,

- we use the portion of the microfilm model that demonstrates how to cite microfilm publications—substituting the particular details of the film we consulted; and

Figure 1

3.7 Author, Creator, Compiler, Etc., as Lead Element in Source List

If you use a record with a named author—especially if it is the only document you access from the collection—you may want your Source List to place the entry alphabetically under that author's name. (For more on the MSS number in the example below, see 3.10.)

Source List Entry

Ball, John, to Thomas Massie. Letter, 14 April 1792. Massie Papers, MSS 1M3855c. Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

First Reference Note

1. John Ball to Thomas Massie, letter, 14 April 1792; Massie Papers, MSS 1M3855c; Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

Subsequent Note

11. John Ball to Thomas Massie, letter, 14 April 1792.

3.8 Collection as Lead Element in Source List

If you use multiple items from one archival collection, you may prefer to emphasize the collection by making it the lead element of your Source List Entry. In that case, the specific document and/or its writer will still be the lead element(s) in the First Reference Note. (See also 3.10 for “MSS vs. MS.”)

Source List Entry

Massie Papers, MSS 1M3855c. Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

First Reference Note

1. John Ball to Thomas Massie, letter, 14 April 1792; Massie Papers, MSS 1M3855c; Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

Subsequent Note

11. John Ball to Thomas Massie, 14 April 1792, Massie Papers.

3.9 Document as Lead Element in Source List

See QuickCheck Model for ARCHIVED MATERIAL: MANUSCRIPT (Document)

If you use only one item from one archival collection and it has no named author, you may prefer to emphasize the document in your Source List by making it the lead element of your Source List Entry. For example, the military roll from the Draper Manuscripts treated at 3.1 might be handled as follows:

Source List Entry

“Muster Roll of Captain [Joseph] Martin’s Company of Pittsylvania Militia in 1774.” Series XX, Tennessee Papers. Draper Manuscripts. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

First Reference Note

1. “Muster Roll of Captain [Joseph] Martin’s Company of Pittsylvania Militia in 1774,” Series XX, Tennessee Papers, vol. 1, p. 6; Draper Manuscripts; Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

Subsequent Note

11. “Muster Roll of Captain [Joseph] Martin’s Company of Pittsylvania Militia in 1774,” Draper Manuscripts, Series XX, 1:6.

- we use the portion of the original-record model that demonstrates how to identify the actual deposition.

The Importance of Flexibility

Adaptation is essential in genealogical citation—but it works only if we understand when, where, and why adaptation is justified. Within our ranks there seem to be two extremes. For all those colleagues who insist upon citing sources “their way,” we find others who would be more comfortable in a very literal world where a model existed for every source and where every aspect of a model—from wording to punctuation to font choices—had to be followed exactly. The first extreme is considered unprofessional in every field. The second is unrealistically dogmatic.

Whatever the endeavor, a finely tuned yin-yang exists between professionalism and individuality. Professional quality requires us to understand the principles involved, and it calls for a commitment to those principles, at the expense of individuality. Even so, every project we launch provides us with the opportunity to express our individuality. In our research, writing, marketing, and presentations, we have ample opportunity to showcase our creativity.

In every profession there are areas that require conformity. In genealogy, there is no issue more vital than a standard platform for providing data in a manner that fills the informational needs of all our constituents, in a common format all can understand. Providing clear, complete, and unambiguous data is the purpose of all the citations we construct.

Citation is a language in which we communicate our source data. Effective communication cannot occur in a community if each person insists upon defining and pronouncing words in his or her own way.

Elizabeth Shown Mills declares that she hates writing about footnotes and would much rather spend her time solving tough genealogical problems. But, she asks, how can we actually solve tough genealogical problems without a thorough identification and analysis of each source used for each fact with which we build our solutions? The need, she laments, has created the nerd. Mills is a past president of both the American Society of Genealogists and the Board for Certification of Genealogists.

