

# EVALUATING ABSTRACTS

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Published abstracts are a boon to researchers. One advantage of using abstracts is that the abstractor becomes very familiar with the handwriting of the clerk and therefore makes fewer errors than we would in reading the documents. The abstractor also becomes familiar with the names of people and places for the locality of the abstract. The every-name index of a publication is invaluable in finding key records in which the ancestor appears only as a stray name.

I know one abstractor, for example, who worked with records in awful handwriting and almost total bleed-through. I could read almost nothing on the page when looking at the microfilm and even less when faced with a photocopy. She, on the other hand, would study the microfilm intently for a while, and then suddenly her fingers would begin flying across the keyboard. Truly amazing.

However, the canned genealogical advice is “Ya gotta use the original.” This can be very expensive and time consuming. In reality, most good, conscientious professionals rely on abstracts when appropriate. When is that? I use several criteria in deciding if the abstract is sufficient or if I need to obtain the original.

## KNOW THE ABSTRACTOR

Many abstractors have published multiple volumes. Some are respected professionals themselves. As a fellow professional, I trust their expertise. As I work in a locality, I learn from experience about abstractors with whom I am not personally acquainted and mentally assign a thumbs up or thumbs down to their work.

## KNOW THE RECORDS

Does the abstract contain everything? A first indication that they might not is if the information is presented in a very structured format. Unless the information was originally entered on a preprinted form, it is unlikely that every entry will be identical. Structured publications may not include all the elements of the records, let alone stray comments.

For example, a marriage publication may give only the date of the license and the name of the bride and groom, but not the date of the return, name of the minister, residences of the couple, or parental permissions. A birth publication may give the date of birth and names of parents, but omit the baptismal date and names of sponsors. A will publication may give the names of all the heirs, but not what each one received. In these cases, although what is abstracted may be highly accurate, there is more information (sometimes very valuable information) to be gleaned from the full record.

Usually you can tell from your general knowledge of records if an abstract might be abbreviated, but you should also read the introduction to the publication. The abstractor may indicate that the records didn't contain certain information or if he or she chose to omit certain information. If you aren't familiar with a particular record group, it is a good idea to examine the original.

## DOES IT FIT?

As you research, you collect records. If you research everyone of the surname in the locality—which you should—you collect many, many records. Using the records together allows you to construct an extended, connected family. Or, as we sometimes find to our surprise, several unconnected families instead.

There were an annoying large number of persons with the same name. One of the surest tests that we have assigned a record to the correct individual in the correct family is that everything fits. For any abstracted record that does not fit comfortably into your compilation, you should examine the original to determine where the problem lies.

## IS THE DOCUMENT CRUCIAL?

There is one condition that overrides the above considerations. For a record that provides lineage linkage, you should always get a copy of the original for your files. This is just too important to trust to an abstract, no matter how good it may be.