



# AIATSIS

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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 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 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 divorce papers. You might ask other family members unless you think they would find it distressing.
- 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 will be church or government records.
- You will need to become familiar with the range 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 or 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.

## Family history research is full of frustrations and dead ends

It's important to step back from time to time and check how it's 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?

### **If you get stuck**

- Pick a new thread and follow this new trail.
- Go back to your notes and look at the notes on random information that you weren't looking for -- now is the time to follow these up.
- Do some more background reading. Reading other people's family histories may give you some fresh ideas. Also, there may be new family histories, new community histories, new historical works on 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.
- Or, unfortunately, you might have to accept that you'll never know the answer to a particular question.

### **Stay flexible!**

- Ask for help
- Debrief with a friend

