



AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

Family History Unit

Freecall: 1800 352 553

Fax: 02 6261 4287

Email: familyhistory@aiatsis.gov.au

Start with yourself

Family history research starts with **you and works backwards and outwards**.

First record what you know about yourself and your immediate family.

- What is your full name?
- When and where were you born?
- Who are your parents, including step-parents and adopted parents?
- Who are your siblings, including step-brothers and sisters?
- Who is your current spouse or partner?
- Who are your children, and your children's other parent?
- Who are your grandparents?
- Have you or your family members been known by different names, including nicknames?
- What are the dates and locations for important events for these family members – birth, adoption, marriage, divorce, death?
- Where have you lived during your life?

Write down everything you know.

Focus on writing down information you can remember or can find easily from documents you have at home. These documents include birth, death and marriage certificates, wills or court records, photographs and family letters.

After writing down what you already know, you can see what information is missing and what more you need to find out.

Ask your family

Your family are likely to be a great source of important information.

Start with the people closest to you, particularly older relatives whose memories might span four or five generations. Ask them for the same basic information about themselves that you've already recorded about you:

- full name and nicknames



- date and place of birth
- names of their parents, siblings, spouse or partner, children and grandparents
- dates and locations of important events such as births, marriages and deaths
- places they've lived.

At this early point in your research these conversations are fact-finding missions. You are looking for the names, dates and places that are held in your own memory and in the memories of family members or friends of the family who you can easily talk with. You may be surprised at how much information you are able to gather this way.

Write down everything you find out.

Your goal at this stage is to gather information that is fairly easy to get from home and family members. It won't be complete, but you will need these basics to begin the next stage of your research.

Ask your family members whether they have any old family documents and photographs, and whether you can have a copy. You can easily make a copy by taking a photo with a digital camera or smart phone.

Make sure you keep really good notes (or a sound or video recording) for each person you speak to. Also see if they can help you fill in information about other family members. You can also start to compare information you get from different sources.

Sensitivities about the past

Be aware that some family members might not want to talk about the past. It might bring up bad memories or touch on sensitive issues they'd rather forget. This can be frustrating for you as a researcher, but of course you will want to be respectful of their wishes. You can always try to talk to them again later, when you can show and tell them more about the research you've been doing.

Sources you might find at home

You probably have a lot of useful information and sources for tracing your family history sitting around the house – birth, death or marriage certificates, wills, old family photos, newspaper clippings or family letters, for example.

Have a look around your own house. Look especially for things that have been passed down through the family. They might be photographs, documents or objects, like household items, jewellery or even furniture.

Ask relatives if they have anything that might be useful. Older relatives might have already written down some of the family history or begun compiling a family tree or created a slideshow for a family reunion or a commemoration. Ask to make copies or use your phone to photograph items they have.

If relatives start to see you as the 'family historian', they might be happy to give material to you. People may be happy to know someone is going to put the things they have been saving to good use.

Of course, you won't want all these sources! But you might find just the piece of information you need. For example, one of your grandfathers or great grandfathers may have served in World War 1. No one in the family has ever mentioned this to you, but once you start asking questions people will tell you many useful details.

See: Sources at home.

Toolkit

The Toolkit contains a number of worksheets and checklists that you might find useful for organising your research.