Strategies for Searching Ancestry.com

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Ancestry.com is a valuable tool for researching your family tree. Its search is the portal to billions of indexed names and digitized records. There is some overlap with records on FamilySearch, but with the latest partnership between the two of them and others, duplication of digitizing the same records will cease. Each company will film and digitize different records in an effort to get more of those valuable records into the hands of the family historian and genealogist.

It's important to know the search capabilities of the different record sets held by each company, so I have outlined the search methods used by Ancestry.com. Many of these tools will work with other company's databases, but there are some that are specific to each.

There is both a 'new' and an 'old' search on Ancestry. Most of this is applicable to both searches.

1. Searching methods – Each will provide different search results and will have different fields to search on
   a. Global - across all databases and categories
   b. Category – across groupings of similar type records, i.e. vital records, military, census
   c. Database – individually by a single database
2. Develop a goal and strategy to know what you are looking for. What is missing from your data?
3. Ancestry's format of Records
   a. Both images and indexed records
   b. Indexed records only
   c. Image records only
   d. OCR records – Optical Character recognition
   e. Member contributed records and images
4. Utilize all possible search options *
   a. Wildcards – symbols substituted for one or more letters
   b. Filters
   c. Alternate spellings
   d. Alternate meanings of names
   e. Alternate dates and locations
   f. Global search
   g. Category search
   h. Specific record type search
5. Begin with the Advanced Search under the SEARCH dropdown menu. Click on SEARCH or SEARCH ALL RECORDS.
   a. Begin by adding surname and location
   b. Great for a beginning point
   c. Finds the 'easy' records
   d. Finds the best possible matches bases on proximity
   e. Start with a little and add more data as needed
   f. Enter even just a name or partial name
   g. Do not mark the EXACT MATCH
   h. Providing too much info can give poor results
   i. If too many results are shown, add a little more info in your search

6. If your goal is to find a specific type of record then select the category from either the dropdown SEARCH menu or the headings on the right side of the ADVANCED SEARCH screen
   a. Select a category which displays different or additional search options
   b. Add a full name or just a surname, if unique
   c. Select title of record set
   d. For common names add more information in the search boxes
7. Types of filters on Advances Search **
   a. Restrict to exact
   b. Use default settings
      i. Phonetic matches
      ii. Names with similar meanings or spellings
      iii. Records where only initials are recorded
8. Limit search to a given location by clicking on a country or a state
9. Limit search to specific data set by location
10. Don't assume that the name was spelled the same way you do today
11. Utilize the card catalog, filter by

   a. Title
   b. Keyword(s)
   c. Filter by collection
   d. Popularity
   e. Database title
   f. Date updated
   g. Date added
   h. Record count
   i. Location
   j. Date range
   k. Language

THING OUTSIDE THE BOX!

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Search Options

Wild Cards

- (?) – A question mark is used somewhere in the word or name that represents an unknown single letter. A search for **Johns?n** will return both **Johnsen** and **Johnson**.
- (*) – An asterisk is used somewhere in the word or name that represents one or more letters. The query **Johann*** will search for **Johann** and **Johannes**. A query for **Smel*er** will search for **Smeltzer** and **Smelzer**, among others.
- You can now put a wild card first, such as ***son** or **?athew** to catch all spellings and variations.
- Either the first or last character must be a non-wild card character. For example, **Han*** and ***son** are okay, but not***anso***.
- Names must contain at least three non-wild card characters. For example, **Ha*n** is okay, but not **Ha***
- Wild cards also work with exact matches, and provide more flexibility

Keyword: *Results with the keyword will be prioritized as better matches. The keyword may be anywhere in the content or the title of the record.*

Gender: *Specifying the gender of a person will return results where that gender was indexed. It may exclude results where no gender was specified.*

Race/Nationality: *This can be especially useful when searching census records. As with gender, it may exclude results where no race or nationality was indexed.*

Collection Priority: *Changing the collection priority will allow you to choose which country you would like your results to be from. You can choose to simply prioritize results, or to only show results from that country.*

Restrict to: *There are four options here to help you narrow down the results that you receive. By default all four of the options are selected. Removing one of these four options will remove that group of records from your search results.*

**Definitions of filter settings:

Default First Name Settings

When you use default settings, we look through every first name we have recorded in our more than 29,000 data collections, and pull out any record where the first name is:

- *Exactly what you typed*
- *A phonetic match of what you typed*
- *A first name which has a similar meaning or spelling as the one you typed*
- *An initial that matches the name you typed*
- *We may also return records that do not match the first name you typed in as described in this list, but strongly match other criteria*

These records are also evaluated against the other criteria that you have given us, and are ordered based on how well all the elements in that record match your search.

First Name Search Options

Exact Matches: *Records that contain a first name that is exactly what you typed in will appear in your results.*

Phonetic Variations: *There are other name matching algorithms that we can use to help identify records to consider for your results. If you choose phonetic, we will identify appropriate algorithms that apply to specific data collections and if a record has one of those names, we will use it as a possible record for your results set.*

Similar Variations: *There are alternates and spelling variations that are commonly used, such as Will for William. If you choose this option we will look for records with these alternates and consider them as possible results for you to look at.*

Initial Variations: *Sometimes in records our ancestors were identified with just their first initials, or the initials of their given and middle names. By including this option, you allow us to examine and possibly include records that just have initials in the first name. So if you enter Mary, we will look at records that have M as the first name.*