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# Being a historical detective

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# Being a historical detective

## **Abstract**

Steps involved in being a historical detective and conducting an investigation (historical research). Like any good TV detective you should proceed through a number of steps while conducting your investigation (historical research). You will then be able to solve the historical mystery. These steps are: 1. What is a historical detective? 2. What is historical research? 3. What has to be done in historical research? 4. Plan of action 5. What time and resources will be needed to undertake the research (including costs)? 6. Conduct background research. 7. Gather evidence. 8. Evaluate the evidence. 9. Analyse the evidence. 10. Conduct periodic revue of the research process. 11. Present the evidence. 12. Acknowledge the sources of the evidence. 13. Conclusion. These steps outline a journey ( a voyage of discovery) you can undertake while conducting an historical investigation. These steps are only a guide and other detective (researchers) may take a different approach. There are many paths to the 'truth' and 'enlightenment'. Which one are you going to going to take? Description of each stage of the historical investigation

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Some stories of place, Camden NSW

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## Being a Historical Detective

camdenhistorynotes / February 19, 2016



A 1915 view of Commercial Banking Co building at corner of Argyle and John Street Camden

## Be a Historical Detective Conducting Historical Research

### Overview

Steps involved in being a historical detective and conducting an investigation (historical research).

Like any good TV detective you should proceed through a number of steps while conducting your investigation (historical research). You will then be able to solve the historical mystery. These steps are:

1. What is a historical detective?
2. What is historical research?
3. What has to be done in historical research?
4. Plan of action
5. What time and resources will be needed to undertake the research (including costs)?
6. Conduct background research.
7. Gather evidence.
8. Evaluate the evidence.
9. Analyse the evidence.
10. Conduct periodic revue of the research process.
11. Present the evidence.
12. Acknowledge the sources of the evidence.
13. Conclusion.

These steps outline a journey ( a voyage of discovery) you can undertake while conducting an historical investigation.

These steps are only a guide and other detective (researchers) may take a different approach.

There are many paths to the 'truth' and 'enlightenment'. Which one are you going to going to take?

Description of each stage of the historical investigation

### 1. What is a historical detective?

The proposition that I want you to imagine is that you are a detective and that you are going to go on a voyage of discovery.

To be a historical detective assumes that there is a historical mystery of some sort.

History is full of good mysteries.

What is a historical mystery? A historical mystery is a secret, hidden story or an inexplicable matter that happened in the past. For example, there have always been stories and mysteries about Grandad, Aunt Ethyl and cousin Gertrude.

Exercise:

Consider a historical mystery you might investigate.

What is your historical mystery?

.....  
.....

## 2. What is historical research?

You will solve your historical mystery by conducting an investigation (historical research) and discovering what is involved in unravelling the mystery's secrets.

During your investigation you will collect lots of information (eg, facts, statistics). This is the evidence. You will use the evidence to build a picture that will, hopefully, solve your mystery.

While undertaking your investigation you will be involved in finding out lots of stories.

Which story is the 'truth'. Your version of the 'truth' may be different from someone else's version of the 'truth'.

## 3. What are you trying to find out?

Before you start your investigation you should know (at least have an idea about) the question you are trying to answer.

The starting point for your research will involve asking simple questions about the mystery:

- What is it (event)?
- When did it happen (time)?
- Where is it (location)?
- Who is involved (participants, suspects)?
- What are the circumstances (events)?

Then moving to more complex questions:

- Why did it happen (motivation)?
- How did it happen (modus operandi)?

Exercise:

What is the question you are trying to answer?

.....  
.....

## 4. Plan of action

Before you start your investigation you should draw up a plan of attack.

You should make a time line with the steps involved in the investigation.

This is the modus operandi for your research.

This may involve questions like:

- Why am I undertaking this journey in the first place? (motivation)
- Where am I going to start?
- Where am I doing this research project?
- What resources do I need to undertake the research?
- How long will my journey of discovery take me (man-hours)?
- What am I going to do along the way?
- Where am I likely to finish up?

A well planned investigation will help you from retracing your steps or leaving something out. Do not leave any stone unturned in your investigation.

Exercise:

Where are you going to start your research?

.....  
.....

How long it your investigation going to take?

.....

Once you have estimated the time needed to complete the research. You might find it useful to set a number of small goals or mileposts. You can tick off each mileposts as you reach that particular point in your research.

Exercise:

What are your mileposts?

.....

.....

Once you have estimated how long the research will take and the steps involved, you need to ensure that you stick to your timetable as much as possible.

## 5. What time and resources will be needed to undertake the research (including costs)?

You will need to make a list of the resources that are required for your investigation.

These resources could include:

- Administration and office expenses
- Research expenses
- Travel expenses
- Research fees
- Computer hardware and software

## 6. Conduct background research.

Before you start your investigation you should find out has anyone else been there before you. If there has been previous research you need to know:

- What did they find out?
  - Are you re-inventing the wheel?
  - Are you actually doing something new?
  - Are you simply re-hashing old material? If so you might be wasting you time and energy. Find another historical mystery to solve.
- There are lots around.

A good historical detective could examine the physical scene of the mystery and obtain the 'lay of the land'. This could involve a field trip to a site or local study area. You could make observations of the scene (location) and record your observations. It helps you 'get the feel' of the investigation.

## 7. Gather evidence

You should gather the evidence in a number of forms:

- Written evidence from a variety of sources,(eg, libraries, museums, archives, organisational records, newspapers); or making a field trip and recording your observations (eg, memorials, cemeteries, artefacts, objects)
- Oral evidence by interviewing the participants.
- Pictorial evidence, eg, photographs, illustrations, 'mud maps'.

## 8. Evaluate the evidence

This part of your research involves deciding:

(a) Firstly, the type of evidence that you have gathered to solve the mystery.

This will be either primary or secondary evidence (sources)

(i) Primary evidence (sources)

This is evidence drawn from the time of the mystery.

This can include:

Diaries  
 Letters  
 Posters  
 Official records – government records (eg: birth certificates, death certificates)  
 Newspapers Memoirs Personal records  
 Maps Sketches Paintings

Photographs Artefacts Objects  
 Site Anecdotes Ephemera  
 Songs Poems Cartoons  
 Advertisements Human remains – skeletons Oral testimony – interviews

(ii) Secondary evidence (sources)

This is evidence that is reconstructed by others about the mystery.

This can include:

- Books,
- TV programs,
- Reports.

(b) Secondly, evaluation involves the validation and verification of evidence.

(i) Validation is confirming the details of the evidence. Is it correct?

(ii) Verification will involve cross-checking evidence.

## 9. Analyse the evidence.

Now you have all the evidence, what are you going to do with it? You will have to:

Organise and arrange all of the evidence. To do this you will need to summarise the evidence. This could be achieved by:

- Completing a time line (date order of events), a table, maps, lists, tables, mind maps, charts, story boards.
- Completing a profile of suspects (participants) involved in the mystery.
- Reconstruct scenarios of the mystery and answer questions like:
  - Why were the participants involved, that is, what was their motivation?
  - Why did these events occur?
  - How did these things happen?
- Taking an empathetic approach to help gain an appreciation of what the situation was like in the past to assist solving the mystery.

## 10. Conduct periodic review of research process.

Every now and then you need to pause and re-assess your progress. You need to ask yourself a number of questions. These could include:

- Are you sticking to your timetable?
- Are you staying to your budget?
- Are you getting side-tracked?
- Are you running up to many dead-ends?

You may be forced to take a step back and make some critical judgements about the progress of your research. If you are not achieving your goals, why not?

Be flexible. Take advantage of the unexpected. Adjust to dead ends. Follow unanticipated leads.

## 11. Presentation of the research.

Once you completed your investigation (gathered all your evidence and you have organised it, verified its authenticity and validated it) you will have to present it.

The results of your investigation could be presented in a number of ways:

(a) Written:

- Reports
- Essays
- Poems
- Newspaper articles

(b) Audio-visual

- Charts
- Graphics

- TV documentary
- Film
- Drawings
- Photographs
- Poster

(c ) Oral

- Speech
- Play

Within each of these types of presentation there are different alternatives. For example, you could consider presenting the written component of your research by using any number of different text types:

- Description – to describe a person, place, object or event.
- Recount – to retell past events, usually in date order.
- Explanation – tells how (process) and why (reason) something occurred.
- Exposition – present one side of an issue.
- Information Report – to present information in a general rather than specific subject.
- Discussion – to give both sides of the issue (for/against).

## 12. Acknowledge the sources of the evidence.

When you have used material and ideas that are not your own you must acknowledge them. If you do not this it is theft and is called plagiarism. Plagiarism is theft of another person's ideas or intellectual property.

Acknowledgement of sources may involve using:

- Footnotes
- Endnotes
- Bibliography
- Reference List
- Further reading

Acknowledgement will involve using a referencing system of some type, for example:

- Oxford
- Cambridge
- Chicago
- Harvard
- MLA (Modern Language Association of America)

The referencing system you chose will depend on your audience and other considerations. Most publications will put their requirements in a style guide.

## 13. Conclusion.

Finally, at the end of your investigation (historical research): did you find out the 'truth'?

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