

5 Best AI Genealogy Research Prompts for Beginners

A Beginner's Copy-and-Paste Guide

Whether you've just started building your family tree or you've been at it for years, AI can be a remarkably helpful research companion. Think of it as having a knowledgeable friend available any time of day — one who never gets tired of your questions and is always happy to help you think through a puzzle.

The five prompts below are ready to use. Simply copy each one, paste it into your favorite AI chat tool (like Claude, ChatGPT, or Gemini), fill in the bracketed placeholders with your own details, and press send. No technical skill needed — just curiosity about your family!

Prompt 1 — Building a Research Plan

When you're just starting out — or picking up a new branch of the family — it can feel overwhelming to know where to begin. This prompt asks the AI to act as your personal research guide. Give it the basics you already know, and it will suggest a clear, step-by-step plan including which records to look for and where to find them. Think of it as your roadmap before you dive into the archives.

WHEN TO USE THIS PROMPT


Use this at the very start of researching a new ancestor, or any time you feel stuck and unsure what to do next.

THE PROMPT — COPY AND PASTE BELOW

You are an experienced genealogist helping a beginner plan their family history research. I want to learn more about my ancestor [ancestor's full name], who was born around [approximate birth year] in [city or region where ancestor was born] and later lived in [city or region where ancestor lived as an adult]. They were [ancestor's religion or ethnicity, e.g. Catholic, Jewish, Scandinavian Lutheran] and worked as [ancestor's known occupation, e.g. farmer, blacksmith, unknown]. Please create a clear, beginner-friendly research plan for me. Include:

1. The most important record types to search for this person
2. The best free or low-cost websites and archives where I can find those records
3. The order in which I should search (easiest or most likely first)
4. Two or three questions I should try to answer in my first round of research

Please use plain language and avoid genealogy jargon where possible.

 **Tip:** Replace every bracketed placeholder before sending. If you don't know a detail — like the occupation — just write 'unknown' and the AI will work around it.

Prompt 2 — Decoding an Old Record

Old documents — census pages, church registers, and immigration papers — can be genuinely difficult to read. The handwriting may be faded or loopy, the language might be old-fashioned, and the abbreviations can be baffling. This prompt helps you make sense of what you've found. Just describe or paste in the confusing text, and the AI will help you interpret what it likely means and why it matters to your research.

WHEN TO USE THIS PROMPT

Use this whenever you find a document that confuses you — an old certificate, a passenger list entry, a church record in Latin or another language, or a census line full of abbreviations.

THE PROMPT — COPY AND PASTE BELOW

I am researching my ancestor [ancestor's full name] and I have found an old [type of record, e.g. census page / marriage register / ship's passenger list / death certificate] from approximately [year of the record] in [country or region where the record was created].


Here is the text or description of the confusing part I need help with:

[Paste the text exactly as written, OR describe what you see, e.g. 'There is a column heading that says "Rel." and the entry says "B" – what does this mean?']

Please help me by:

1. Explaining what this record is and what information it typically contains
2. Translating or interpreting any old-fashioned language, Latin, or abbreviations
3. Telling me what each piece of information I've described likely means
4. Explaining what clues this record gives me for finding my next record

Please explain everything as if I am a complete beginner.

 **Tip:** You can paste messy text directly into the prompt — the AI is good at reading imperfect transcriptions. If the document is in another language, mention that too.

Prompt 3 — Breaking Through a Brick Wall

Every family historian hits a wall eventually — an ancestor who seems to vanish from the records, a name that keeps leading nowhere, or a family that moved and left no obvious trail. These frustrating dead ends are known as "brick walls," and they happen to everyone. This prompt invites the AI to think creatively with you about what might have happened and how you might find a way forward.

WHEN TO USE THIS PROMPT

Use this when you've searched the obvious records and can't find your ancestor — or when you find conflicting information that doesn't add up.


THE PROMPT — COPY AND PASTE BELOW

I am a beginner genealogist and I have hit a brick wall in my research. I am trying to trace my ancestor [ancestor's full name], and here is everything I currently know about them:

- Approximate birth year and place: [birth year and birthplace, or 'unknown']
- Approximate death year and place: [death year and place, or 'unknown']
- Known family members: [e.g. spouse's name, parents' names, children's names]
- Records I have already found: [list the records you've found, e.g. '1880 US Census, marriage certificate from 1872']
- Records I have already searched without success: [list what you've tried]
- The specific problem I am stuck on: [describe exactly what you can't find or what doesn't make sense, e.g. 'I can find them in 1870 but not in 1880']

Please suggest:

1. Reasons why this person might be hard to find (name changes, spelling variations, migration, etc.)
2. Records or sources I may not have thought of
3. Creative strategies for working around this gap
4. Ways to research through family members to get back to this person

 **Tip:** *The more detail you give about what you've already tried, the more targeted the suggestions will be. Don't worry if your list of records found is short — that's exactly the point!*

Prompt 4 — Tracing an Immigrant Ancestor

One of the most exciting — and challenging — parts of family history is tracing an ancestor's journey from the country they were born in to where your family eventually settled. Immigration records can unlock an entirely new chapter of your family's story, but knowing which records exist and where to find them requires knowing a fair bit of history. This prompt does that thinking for you.

WHEN TO USE THIS PROMPT

Use this when you have an ancestor who immigrated and you want to find records of their journey, identify their hometown in the old country, or understand what life was like for them during that period.


THE PROMPT — COPY AND PASTE BELOW

I am researching an immigrant ancestor and need help finding records of their journey and origins. Here is what I know:

- Ancestor's name: [ancestor's full name, including any name before immigration if known, e.g. 'Giuseppe Ferraro, possibly arrived as Joe Farrow']
- Country or region they came from: [e.g. 'southern Italy', 'County Cork Ireland', 'Bavaria Germany', 'unknown – possibly Eastern Europe']
- Country they moved to: [e.g. 'United States', 'Canada', 'Australia']
- Approximate year or decade of immigration: [e.g. '1890s' or 'around 1905']
- Any other details I know: [e.g. 'travelled with a brother', 'listed as a laborer', 'arrived at Ellis Island']

Please help me by:

1. Listing the key immigration and emigration records I should search, and where to find them
2. Explaining what information each record type typically contains
3. Suggesting how I might find the specific town or village they came from
4. Noting any naming conventions, historical context, or record gaps from this time and place that I should be aware of

 **Tip:** *Don't worry if you don't know the exact country — even a best guess helps. Mention any clues you have, like a language spoken at home or a religious tradition, as these can help narrow down the region.*

Prompt 5 — Understanding Your DNA Results

DNA testing has transformed genealogy, but the results can be genuinely puzzling — especially when you see a long list of "matches" (people you're related to) and have no idea what to do with them. This prompt helps you make sense of your ethnicity estimates and your DNA matches, and gives you a practical plan for turning those results into real family history discoveries.

WHEN TO USE THIS PROMPT

Use this after receiving your DNA results from a testing company (such as AncestryDNA, 23andMe, MyHeritage, or FamilyTreeDNA) and feeling unsure how to interpret them.


THE PROMPT — COPY AND PASTE BELOW

I have taken a genealogical DNA test and I need help understanding my results as a complete beginner. Here is my situation:

- Testing company I used: [e.g. AncestryDNA / 23andMe / MyHeritage / FamilyTreeDNA]
- My ethnicity estimate summary: [paste or summarize your results, e.g. '52% Ireland & Scotland, 31% England & Northwestern Europe, 12% Norway, 5% Germanic Europe']
- What I expected or hoped to learn: [e.g. 'I wanted to confirm a rumored Native American great-grandmother' or 'I want to find out where my Italian ancestors actually came from']
- My biggest DNA match (closest relative listed): [e.g. '1st cousin, 872 cM shared' or 'I have no idea what the numbers mean']
- What I already know about my family tree: [brief summary, e.g. '3 of my 4 grandparents were Irish immigrants; I know nothing about my paternal grandfather's family']

Please help me understand:

1. What my ethnicity results actually mean (and their limitations)
2. How to read and prioritize my DNA matches
3. A simple first step I can take this week using my DNA results
4. How DNA evidence and paper records work together in genealogy

 **Tip:** *You don't need to understand the numbers to use this prompt — just copy and paste whatever the testing website shows you. The AI will explain what the terms and figures mean.*

A few final tips before you get started

Always verify what the AI tells you against original records — AI is a brilliant thinking partner and brainstormer, but it can occasionally make mistakes, especially about specific local archives or record availability. Treat its responses as informed suggestions, not certainties.

Feel free to have a conversation! These prompts are starting points. After you receive a response, you can ask follow-up questions like "Can you explain that more simply?" or "What if I can't find that record?" The AI will happily keep the conversation going.

And most importantly — enjoy the journey. Every record you find is a small window into a real person's life. Happy researching!