

OPERATION GRANNY FILES

AI Research Assistant Rules of Engagement

Search. Locate. Read. Cite. Four steps that keep machine-read handwriting honest.

Field Guide & Quick-Reference

Mission 32: The Machine Reads the Handwriting

Clearance Level: Biscuit-Tin Operative

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QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY

Full-text search and AI handwriting recognition have changed what you can find alone. But finding it and trusting it are two different things. This one-page protocol keeps you safe: Search → Locate → Read → Cite. Four steps. Every time. No exceptions.

THE FOUR-STEP DISCIPLINE

Step 1: Search

Run your full-text search query — a name, an unusual phrase, a place name — through the platform's search field.

Remember: Every hit is a *lead*, not a fact. You are searching the AI's guess at what the page says, not the page itself. The transcription can be wrong, incomplete, or invented in places you cannot see.

Platforms to try:

- **FamilySearch Full-Text Search** (free, ~2 billion records, 1538–present, English/Spanish/Portuguese + 2026 expansions)
- **Ancestry Image Transcript or handwriting-recognition search** (subscription, U.S. focus, includes Revolutionary War pension files)
- **MyHeritage Scribe AI** (document-upload tool, interprets context as well as text)
- **Your own document image:** Ancestry or MyHeritage will transcribe a photo you upload

Step 2: Locate

Every legitimate hit must link back to a specific original image — a scanned page, a specific document, a known archive location.

Do not:

- Accept a search snippet as the final answer
- Trust a partial text preview
- Cite the platform's transcription as though it were the source

Do:

- Click through to the actual image (almost every hit will have an image link)
- Write down the archive, collection, and reference number
- Confirm the image covers the text the search result quoted

Step 3: Read

Read the actual handwriting on the actual image, line by line, using your own eyes and whatever paleography skill you have (refresher: see M29).

Specifically check:

- Names (especially unusual spellings or abbreviations)
- Dates (especially numerals — is that a “1” or a “7”?)

- Any word that looks uncertain in the transcription
- Handwritten annotations, marginalia, underlines, arrows, or cross-outs in the margin

Step 4: Cite

Your citation goes to the **original document** (archive, collection, record, page), **never** to “AI transcription” or to the platform's transcribed text layer as though it were the source itself.

Example citation (wrong):

“William Jones, found via FamilySearch Full-Text Search, 2026”

Example citation (right):

“Probate of James Jones, Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1785, probate packet 4521, folder 2, ‘List of Heirs,’ Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg.”

The full-text search helped you *find* the evidence. The evidence itself is the original record.

RED FLAGS: AI FAILURE MODES

Machines are confident even when they are wrong. Here are the specific traps documented in real research:

The Substitution Trap

AI misreads a similar-looking name or abbreviation and substitutes it without hesitation.

The classic example: “Wm.” (William) → “Ann.” — same letter shapes, different interpretation. A single misread abbreviation can redirect your research to the wrong person, the wrong sex, or a phantom family member who never existed.

Defense: Read names *very carefully* against the image. If it's an abbreviation, look at the original abbreviation marks and tail marks. “Wm” has a specific looped tail; “Ann” does not.

The Fill-in Trap

AI encounters a smudge, tear, faded ink, or ambiguous handwriting and *invents* a plausible-sounding word to fill the gap, rather than flagging it as unreadable.

Real example: A water-stained 1850 census page; the AI confidently transcribes an illegible name field as “Margaret,” which sounds reasonable — but the actual mark on the page is too faded to confirm any specific spelling.

Defense: Trust your eyes more than the transcription. If the original looks damaged, smudged, or illegible, assume the AI did its best guess, not a certain reading.

The Marginalia Miss

AI focuses on the main body text and misses or downplays handwritten notes in margins, between lines, or above/below the main entry — precisely the places clerks added corrections, amendments, or important secondary information.

Real example: A parish baptism register entry, corrected years later by the same clerk's notation in the margin. The AI transcribes the original entry but drops or downplays the correction, which may be the more accurate version.

Defense: Read the *entire page*, not just the main text block. Marginal notes, underlines, arrows, and cross-outs carry real information.

Confidence Without Uncertainty

Unlike human transcribers, AI systems rarely flag what they are unsure about. They just pick a letter shape and move on.

Example: A numeral that could be “0,” “8,” or “9”; a handwritten “s” that might be an “f”; an abbreviation you've never seen before. The AI transcribes it as a specific character and never tells you it was guessing.

Defense: When a word, date, or numeral looks uncertain to *you*, assume it may be uncertain to the AI too. Check extra carefully.

TOOL COMPARISON: WHICH PLATFORM FOR WHAT?

Tool / Platform	What It's Best For	Cost	Languages / Scripts	When NOT to Trust It	Verification Step
FamilySearch Full-Text Search	Free search across FamilySearch's massive record base; especially good for land, probate, church records	Free	English, Spanish, Portuguese; Chinese/French/German/Dutch/Italian in 2026	Do not assume every hit is accurate; AI transcription varies by record type	Open the image, read the line yourself
Ancestry Image Transcript	Upload your own documents; handwriting-recognition search across Ancestry collections	Subscription	English-language focus (check current coverage)	Early-stage technology; accuracy improving but still imperfect	Read the original image; do not trust the transcription alone
MyHeritage Scribe AI	Document upload with context interpretation; genealogy-friendly interface	Free (basic) or subscription (extended features)	English, with other languages in development	Document upload limits; accuracy improving	Read the interpretation against the original

Tool / Platform	What It's Best For	Cost	Languages / Scripts	When NOT to Trust It	Verification Step
Findmypast Full-Text Search	UK/Ireland/Australia/NZ record base	Subscription	English and non-English records (varies by collection)	Check current coverage; not all collections are fully indexed	Read original image
Transkribus	The go-to for archives and academic projects; you upload your own images	Free (basic) or subscription (handwriting recognition)	Multilingual; trained models for various languages and handwriting styles	Upload your own document; best for offline use	Read the transcription against the original every time

QUICK CHECKLIST: BEFORE YOU USE A HIT AS EVIDENCE

Use this checklist every single time:

- ☐ Search term was reasonable and not over-specific? (Avoid searching for exact phrases from bad handwriting)
- ☐ Hit links to a specific original image?
- ☐ Image opened and clearly visible?
- ☐ I read the actual handwriting on the image, not just the search snippet?
- ☐ The transcription I'm reading matches what I see on the page (or, if they differ, I went with what I see on the page)?
- ☐ I understand the archive, collection, and reference number?
- ☐ Any uncertain words or numbers triple-checked?
- ☐ I have not copied the AI transcription verbatim — I'm citing the original document with its own reference number?

If any answer is “no,” keep reading the original or find a second source. Do not cite the AI.

GRANNY SAYS

“A machine can read more handwriting faster than Granny ever could, and that is genuinely a gift. But gifts require care. The verification step — your own eyes on the page — is not optional. It is the step that makes full-text search trustworthy instead of reckless. You learned to read handwriting because evidence matters (M29). That discipline does not change because the machine can read too. The tool is new. The standard is not.”

Notes

Record your experience with full-text search here — what worked, what confused you, what you found.
