

How to Use Airtable for Tracking DNA Matches

Workshop

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Overview

Airtable is a hybrid between a spreadsheet and a database. This cloud-based program is perfect for tracking information about DNA matches and the many details related to a research project. Logging research, including evidence from DNA matches, can help you make progress in your research and find more answers to your research questions. Learn how to use the Research Like a Pro DNA research log Airtable template and start tracking DNA evidence.

Relational Databases

There are many tech tools out there that can be used for keeping a research log. Tools that allow you to set up a table or spreadsheet are good. A tool with the ability to sort data and manage multiple tables is better. Tools that can link records between tables to minimize duplicate data entry are even better. This means you will, at minimum, want to use a spreadsheet, but a database tool is best.

To reduce duplicate data entry and keep track of multiple data points described in several ways, consider using a relational database tool. A relational database “is a type of database that stores and provides access to data points that are related to one another.”¹ Data points are represented in tables. The rows in the tables can be linked to fields in other tables that describe the data point in a different way.

Keeping information in separate tables is called normalizing our data – “dividing the information into tables with the goal of having a place for everything, and everything in its place.”²

Relational databases are useful for organizing data points in genetic genealogy as well: test takers, kit access, match information, correspondence, and research to find the common ancestor are all useful details to track in a DNA project database. You may also want to set up a table for segment information, surnames, and other data associated with the genetic cousins you are analyzing.

Though many database options exist, Airtable is my favorite tool. It is user-friendly and easy to learn when compared with more advanced database tools that require knowledge of programming.

¹ “What is a Relational Database?” *Oracle*
(<https://www.oracle.com/database/what-is-a-relational-database/> : accessed 30 May 2020).

² “Relational Database Concepts for Beginners,” *Wofford College*
(https://webs.wofford.edu/whisnantdm/courses/cs101/pdf/database/Relational_database_concepts.pdf : accessed 1 June 2020).

Airtable – A Web-Based Database Tool

Airtable (<https://airtable.com>) is a web-based spreadsheet and database program that allows you to create links between tables, view your data in flexible ways, sort and group data, and create unique field types. In Airtable, a spreadsheet is called a base, and pages/sheets within the base are called tables. Within each table, rows are called records, and columns are called fields.

Airtable Universe –DNA Research Log Templates

To view Airtable research log templates that I have created, go to the following URL:

<https://airtable.com/universe/creator/usrsBSDhwHyLNnP4O/nicole-dyer>

For this workshop, we will use the following templates:

RLP with DNA 2023 Log -

<https://www.airtable.com/universe/expy4V9HzRUxtJLvh/rlp-with-dna-2022-research-log>.

RLP with DNA 2023 – Blank -

<https://www.airtable.com/universe/expj6KLJtRpKtr0Of/rlp-with-dna-2023-blank> (this is the blank version without example data)

This template includes tables for DNA match details, people, kit access, correspondence, timeline, research log, FANs, segments, surnames, locations, citation templates, and a Shared cM table that automatically lets you know if the traced relationship you input falls within the range for the Shared cM Project. This base is explained in my book, *Research Like a Pro with DNA: A Genealogist's Guide to Finding and Confirming Ancestors with DNA Evidence*. It works for projects with multiple test takers.

Adding DNA Sources to a Research Log

There are many things you might want to track in your DNA research log: test takers, genetic cousins, match details, correspondence, segment data, locations, surnames, a log of tools used, and more. Tracking these in separate pages of a spreadsheet or database tool can help you stay organized.

People

People who test their DNA are key elements of a DNA research log. You will want to have a separate sheet in your log for keeping track of people, their trees, their contact info, and other pertinent data. You don't need to add all your matches, only the testers, and matches relevant to your current project. Some genetic genealogists keep spreadsheets with all the matches for a particular tester. Instead, I recommend that you create a separate research log for each project or objective. Then, when adding matches to your log, you only need to include the matches that are relevant to the project at hand. To include all the matches in a match list would obscure the information you're trying to draw out.

Kit Access

Another item to track in your DNA research log is your test takers. You may have invited your siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins to test. Additional relatives may share their results with you. A log of whose

kits you have access to, tests they have taken, and how to access them can help you track multiple test takers.

DNA Match Details

When a useful match is discovered between a test taker and a person in a DNA company database, you can track that in your log. If you don't create an entry in your log and record the ideas you had, it might be frustrating later to try to find the details.

Create one row in your table for a match relationship at a specific company. If you find that the same individuals match at another company, add another row. This allows you to track how much DNA is shared according to Ancestry and how much DNA is shared according to MyHeritage, since each company uses different thresholds and algorithms for calculating the amount of shared DNA. Add a separate row when another of your test takers matches that individual. This helps you track how much DNA is shared with a relevant match by various descendants of the research subject in your objective.

These column headings are ideas, not requirements. My Airtable bases include most of these suggestions, but I don't always fill in the entire row for each match. After reviewing a DNA match, I typically log the test taker, the DNA match, company/test, amount of shared DNA, number of segments, link to the match page, and link to the DNA match's tree. Anything else I can add is a bonus. If I don't know the relationship, I will typically add the company's estimate for the relationship column. If I don't know the common ancestral couple, I look at the shared matches and try to narrow down which side of the family it's on and put a guess there.

Correspondence

Logging your correspondence with matches helps you get organized and have a place to put valuable information received from your matches. When I receive a message back from a DNA match, it's not usually at a time when I'm actively working on that project. It's nice to be able to open my research log, copy and paste their response, and come back to the project later. When I come back to it, I review any recent correspondence, review the stopping point of my last research session, and make a plan for the next steps. Often the next step is to use the information received from the match to build their tree to find the common ancestor.

Research Log

Within a DNA research spreadsheet or database, your research log table will track documentary sources searched and DNA tools you have used.

Each DNA match may require several sources and searches to determine how they are related to the test taker. This means there may be several entries in a research log relating to one DNA match. Here are some possible research log entries for my AncestryDNA match, John:

- searches in published family trees to find John's ancestors or extend his tree
- link to John's profile in my Ancestry tree showing the ancestors I found for him

- searches in other record groups to find John’s ancestors
- white pages search to find John’s contact info

Each of these items becomes one or more separate rows in the research log table. For each entry, note the details of what you found and your thoughts and ideas for the next steps. Often you will find multiple people with the same name, and you won’t know at first which search matches the individual you are looking for. This is where a research log comes in handy. Simply add both search results as separate rows and continue to follow the clues. As you research, you will often be able to determine which result matches.

Segments

The segments table is a handy way to keep track of shared segments between matches. This table is linked to the DNA match details table so you can select one of the match pairs, then paste the shared segment data. You may want to use the checkbox field to remind yourself to paint the segments in a chromosome map at DNA Painter.

Additional Resources

Chapple, Mike. “Spreadsheets vs. Databases: These two concepts are not synonyms.” Blog post. Updated 16 July 2020. *Lifewire*. <https://www.lifewire.com/spreadsheets-vs-databases-1019747>.

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Elder, Diana and Nicole Dyer. “RLP 88: DNA Research Logs.” Podcast episode. *The Research Like a Pro Genealogy Podcast*, via *Family Locket*. 16 March 2020. <https://familylocket.com/rlp-88-dna-research-logs/>.

“Getting started: making new tables and linking records.” Airtable Support. <https://support.airtable.com/hc/en-us/articles/360021502354-Getting-started-making-new-tables-and-linking-records>. Accessed July 2020.

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