

# COMPUTER

## CORNER

### Google Docs for Genealogists

by [mike@blackledge.com](mailto:mike@blackledge.com)



*Teachers are assigning projects to our grandkids today with the requirement that they must be accomplished in Google Docs. Do we even know what Google Docs is? Why would teachers require this? Is it something we should be using? This article will provide introductory background plus comparisons of Docs and its commercial competition . . . as well as introducing one unique feature that seems to be created specifically to assist the genealogist researcher.*

This article should probably be called “Google **Office** for Genealogists” as technically, Google Docs is just a word processor – however, the term is used commonly to represent the entire office suite of products. I was motivated to write this column when our own **Lark Robart** was drafting her

Google docs



Computer Corner [CC] article on creating a genealogy blog [CC, August 2018]. One of her statements caught my attention: she said she used Google Slides to create the inspired logo/image she uses on her blog [EightRoadsToMontana.com](http://EightRoadsToMontana.com) – wait, Google Slides? I had never used that, not sure I had heard of it. Why Google Slides? Lark responded, “I decided to use Google Slides after talking to my sister about slides she was presenting for a class she was taking. The key is . . . it’s free! And I don’t have Picasa or PowerPoint. I can also access Google Slides from anywhere. I really like that feature.”

Now Lark really had my attention: available from anywhere? Even on a trip to Salt Lake City? Free? As in, no Microsoft Office fees?

I had learned just a little about Google Docs over the years – Lark had submitted her column draft in that format, and back in 2014, my grandson had prepared his New Mexico State Park report for his on-line school in Google Docs. As loyal readers know, I am constantly amazed at this world – it appears so money-driven, yet there are hundreds, yea, thousands of smart folks who get up every morning and work all day to create or improve a product which they want you to use – for free! I probably shouldn’t be so amazed, as most of those people are paid, while we see many AGS volunteers working hard for all of us every day – with zero compensation! (Now that I think about it, I’m one of those volunteers, but I don’t work nearly as hard as many I could name like **Howard Henry**!)

As I pondered Lark's response, I thought about **Marianne and Tom Eaton** telling me about a year ago that they had 'subscribed' to Microsoft Office 365 – in lieu of 'buying' they were paying a lease price of well over \$100 annually to install the suite of well-known products on their home computer: the ubiquitous Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint. But isn't free better than \$100, when you don't even own the software product anyway? This required some investigating!

Let's first clarify the differences between these two products:

### **Google Docs:**

- a **web-based** office suite: thus the office programs, and the documents you create with them, are all kept on a Google server and accessed via the internet at [docs.google.com](https://docs.google.com);
- available to anyone with internet access whether through a PC, laptop or mobile device;
- free with a Google account; if you have a Gmail account you already have access to Google Docs;
- allows you to share documents for viewing and editing, and allows multiple users to collaborate simultaneously on a project over the web.

[That last feature explains why many teachers are jumping on the Google Docs bandwagon: their students can work together on-line on projects, and the teacher can monitor what students are doing.]

### **Microsoft (MS) Office:**

- a **PC-based** [or Mac-based] office suite: the programs and the documents you create with them remain on a computer or local drive;
- MS Office must be purchased, registered and loaded onto a computer;
- MS Office provides more sophisticated features and, as a fixed and widely used program, more resources are available for guiding and training the user.

All these differences may be important to your usage. As Lark reminds us, "Google Sheets, for instance, does not have all the bells and whistles included with Excel. This might have made a difference when I was preparing a spreadsheet as a paralegal but it hasn't made any difference for me as a genealogist."

We need to mention Google Drive at this time – by now we are all aware of The Cloud, right? [CC, Aug, Nov 2016] Google Drive is Google's answer to Dropbox and OneDrive: a file storage and synchronization service launched in April 2012. Google Drive allows users to store files on their servers, synchronize files across devices, and share files. This is the platform that allows Google Docs (and related suite programs) to work for teachers, students and genealogists.

Thus because of Drive, Google Docs is available to all of us with access to the Internet. Once I drafted this article in Google Docs, I was able to share it with Lark and my grandson – on the Google Docs site, I just clicked on Share and it allowed me to select their email addresses from my Gmail contact list. I added a note to indicate why I wanted them to take a look at the draft, hit

the Send button, and it's there for them! The email sent by the system contains a link back to the article in Google Docs and allows them to edit it as they see fit – and send me a response.

Now, what is the special feature for genealogists? Well, we know that Google can be an integral part of our genealogical research, to include searching on-line, “keeping” notes, working with photos, and obtaining archived material. This article can't provide a complete workshop but let's see how to use the **Explore** option that is unique to Google Docs. The Explore tool adds to this by helping us draw out new details from our existing data. In this article, we will give you enough information to get you started – if you need more, go to the *google-docs-explore* source listed in this article's reference list.

The first step is to create your Google account – you probably already have a Google account if you are using any of their tools such as Gmail, Picasa, Keep. If not, go to [docs.google.com](https://docs.google.com) and come up with a username and password for your new account.

Next, go to Google Docs and open a new document for your research. Click on the plus sign to open a blank page. Give it a title, and then consider what you want to do for your document pertaining to your research. Just by writing out what you already know about your ancestor, you will perhaps come up with a question that makes sense in your research. Something specific such as “In what year did Howard Henry and Zona Ehret get married?” Here it will make a difference as to what features you have access to from various family trees, such as Ancestry's LifeStory feature, or MyHeritage [Family Tree] options of More, Print Charts & Books, and the Family Book option. All of these can be available to you from within your Google Docs document.

Once you have your facts entered and a clear research question included that you can work on answering such as “In what year did Howard Henry and Zona Ehret get married?” then, if you like, refine it into sub questions such as “Were Howard and Zona married in Minnesota in 1913?” Now you reached the point where you can bring Google Explore in to help you: just highlight that specific question in your write-up and right-click (Ctrl-click on the Mac) to bring up the options menu, from which you can select Explore.

This produces a box in which you will see three tabs. The first is **Web**, the second **Images** and the third **Drive** (your own files on your computer).

In the Web tab, Google will provide you with six results based on your Explored text and if you select the See All Results on Google link on the bottom or the Web Results link on the top you will be brought to a regular Google search of your text.

The six results presented alongside your document are similar to the top six results that you would get from Google if you had typed the highlighted text directly into a search box – but they are often not exactly the same. On many different searches you will find that Google excluded or included different results, presenting an opportunity to discover potentially overlooked pages.

**Summary:** Google Docs (to include the office products: Slides [Presentation] and Sheets) is available to you for free – and since it is not loaded on your desktop computer, it is available to you anywhere you can get to the Internet. Many genealogy societies are using Google Docs, e.g.,

to upload their minutes so they can share them with all their members. For individuals, it can facilitate collaborative genealogy with your fellow researchers. It has numerous features such as templates for many purposes. Furthermore, it has a feature called Explore which can be of particular assistance to genealogy researchers writing up their family history to trigger specific questions which Explore can assist in filling the gap. All you need to do is take the opportunity to “explore” this free asset. See the References to learn about these tools in more detail.



### **References:**

<http://www.lfpl.org/jobshop/docs/google-docs.pdf>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google\\_Docs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_Docs)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google\\_Drive](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_Drive)

<https://familyhistorydaily.com/genealogy-help-and-how-to/google-docs-explore/>

YouTube video by Thomas MacEntee: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAAO2cMjuZM>

NOTE: All Computer Corner articles referenced are available via the AGS web site: [abqgen.org](http://abqgen.org)