

Step 4: Advice on Corresponding With Matches

Your investment in Y-DNA will pay dividends as you learn information about your family through your exchanges with matches. You begin that process when a match is identified and hopefully continue it as you and the match explore information and stories of your family together.

Objectives of the Exchange

Before we talk about objectives, do not forget that an exchange with a relative is fundamentally about getting acquainted with a cousin. Don't be all business. Enjoy the exchange. Mix pleasantries and gentle questions in with the exchange. Break the ice. But do not extend that light exchange so much that the business gets lost. Yes, it is a judgment call. You make it every day.

When you are ready to get down to business. There are both narrowly drawn and broadly drawn objectives to guide your exchange.

In a well-focused sense, you are interested in the following:

1. Locating the ancestor that you share with the match. You and your match share DNA. Somewhere in your past, before the mutation occurred between generations, you would have had identical DNA. So, finding that earlier common ancestor is a key to understanding the family. It may be before or after your Paternal Earliest Known Ancestor (PEKA). That is a good place to start. If his is earlier than yours explore his line after the PEKA. Where does it meet yours? If yours is earlier, help connect his line with your PEKA.
2. Locating the generation when the mutation appeared. This may require a web of people related as descendants of the same PEKA sharing information to complete a family tree. Certainly it will involve exploration of siblings, the sons of the PEKA, and each of his sons, and so forth. This is what a family group can achieve.
3. Develop a family map as well as a family tree. In the effort to obtain names and dates for relatives, getting a sense for migrations and dispersion of the family is too often overlooked. Listen to that story about the trip to Texas. Figure out why your ancestor when to Iowa instead. And when the brothers split up.

Often the broad objectives are in fact more delightful. Mix them in liberally:

1. First, in the broadest sense exchange the information that each has acquired about the family. Birth dates and places, marriage dates and places, death dates and places, military service, land owned etc. Information is often passed down through families and if so is accessed only through contact among family members. Expanding the circle of family members is one of the invaluable aspects of DNA research. And don't be so narrow that

you are only interested in your direct line. Knowing the history of those siblings in each generation will pay real dividends.

2. Second, sort true from false information. Information passes from generation to generation with elaboration and erosion of memory. There is an old game that went by various names. Ten or twenty people form a circle and a message is whispered from the first person to his/her right. The process is repeated from person to person until the last person in the circle reveals what they have heard. The results are often hilarious. This is how family information may pass. A little failed memory here, a bit of exaggerated fish story there. You want to sort that out.

In the age of the internet, everyone plays this old game and posts on ancestry.com or family search. Wrong information masquerades as research. This is why there is such an emphasis in documentary genealogy on solid sourcing to expand and verify information. Explore the sources for the information that you are sharing. Do not fear a challenge to how you acquired information. It is part of learning about ancestors. And do not fear to ask your match where s/he obtained his/her facts. This process of exchange is even more important in the age of the internet in which false and disinformation can spread so widely and so rapidly. When you obtain the sources of information from your match, evaluate its reliability and record where the information came from. And do not fear information that passed through the family. It always contains some grain of truth and may be lost forever if we demand too much of it. Just understand its source.

3. Third, tell and listen to family stories. Vital information on ancestors is one thing, but stories about ancestors -- "We understand Martha was an outspoken woman. Uncle Roy used to tell about the time . . ." -- provide much more depth in your knowledge of your ancestors. They can finally come to life. There is often nothing more satisfying in exchanges than stories that will be lost to the next generation unless someone records them. Be that recorder. Keep a record of who told the story and when.

Before You Write the Message

Asking for information that is already available to you is a waste of time and suggests that you have not prepared well for your exchange. You want to make certain that you are not wasting time asking for information that is available outside the exchange.

Before sending the first message, check on your match's list to see if s/he has posted a family tree. If they have, study the tree. Know the names of their immediate relatives, the path that the generations have taken to get to their last known location, and where some holes may be in their knowledge of the family. In fact, do YOU have a family tree posted on your Dashboard? If not, you might be missing requests from your matches which could help you in your search for other family members.

The First Message

There are many suggestions and model emails out in the world, going to people whose DNA matches another. One could nearly write a book. But the simple fact is, all those suggestions can be boiled down to two lists: the Dos and the Don'ts.

The Subject Line	
<p>Do Use Names</p> <p>“Want to connect to your Smith Family” “My Smith Family may know your Jones Family”</p>	<p>Don't Use Pronouns</p> <p>Not “I think I know your family” Not “My family is related to you”</p>
The Message Text	
<p>Do Make it Brief!</p> <p>Tell why you made contact and what you are looking for Invite the match to look at your tree Pick a "brick wall" ancestor and give their vital information</p>	<p>Don't Present Your Entire Genealogy</p> <p>Not “I'll begin with myself and tell you all I know.” Don't ask the recipient to see their tree. Don't overwhelm the recipient with long lists of help you need them to tell you</p>
Closing the Email	
<p>Do Encourage Them to Reply</p> <p>“Thanks for considering my request.” or “Thank you for reading my email.” “I look forward to sharing information on our family.”</p>	<p>Don't End Abruptly</p> <p>Don't just signing your name Don't use emojis</p>

These suggestions are a start. You will certainly think of more ways to get their attention, be as brief as possible the first time, and make it clear what family or piece of information you hope to find. Exchanges build across time.

Save your contact email: it might be a useful template as you need to make more contacts. And if you don't get a response, give them some time then gently try again. Some people pursue DNA testing for reasons other than discovering their unknown family.

Recording the Information

The final stage is to capture the information from the connection to your match in your own records, noting its source so you can give credit. Such thoroughness will pay dividends for many

years in the future for whomever reads about your family.

Keep the text of the exchanges. If you talk over the phone make notes afterwards. Many researchers organize a file by family and by correspondent to keep track of this information.

Careful genealogists also recognize that exchanges with cousins are an example of secondary evidence. You should find out the source of that information from the match. Then, if it is a documentary source, verify the source through your own research. Don't throw away information you cannot verify but do assess your confidence in it.

Disappointments and Discouragement

Not every meal you eat at a fancy restaurant is memorable, even perhaps edible. But you never stop going out. There will be matches that do not respond. There will be matches who respond four months or two years later. Do not let it discourage you. Keep at it until you find that cousin who relishes contact with you.

And those who have worked at the history of their families over many years know that contacts are lost: sometimes by death, sometimes by dementia, sometimes by changing interests. That is why it is important that among the notes that you take are notes about children of the correspondent, or aunts and uncles that are the *real* family historians. Don't just take down information, take down notes on the family that surrounds the match.

A Thought Worth Repeating

Enjoy the process and celebrate the reward. Learning about your family, how you got here, is rewarding and interesting. Good luck!