



*Teaching
Genealogists AI™*
Instructor: Sylvia
Vargas

Getting Started in Genealogy

Module 1 – Start With Yourself

Course Instructor: Sylvia Vargas

Organization: Puerto Rican Genealogy Group

Website: <https://puertoricangenealogy.org>

Date Created: 2026-02-17

Estimated Time: 30–45 minutes

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will:

- Understand why genealogy starts with you, not with the oldest ancestor
- Write down the basic facts about yourself and your immediate family
- Learn the five key questions genealogists ask about every person
- Begin building your family information using a simple format

Why Start With Yourself?

It's tempting to jump straight to the oldest person in your family tree. But professional genealogists always start with what they know and work backward. Why?

- **Accuracy:** Each generation you document becomes the foundation for the next. If you skip a generation, you risk connecting to the wrong family.
- **Connections:** The details you write down about yourself and your parents will lead you to the records that reveal the next generation.
- **Confidence:** Starting with familiar facts builds your skills before you tackle unfamiliar records.

The golden rule of genealogy: Work from the known to the unknown. Never skip generations.

The Five Beginner Research Questions

For every person in your family tree, try to answer these five questions:

1. **What is the person's full name?**
2. **When and where were they born?**
3. **When and where did they marry?**
4. **Did they move? If so, when and why?**
5. **When and where did they die?**

You won't always have all the answers – and that's perfectly fine. Write down what you know. Leave blanks for what you don't. The blanks become your research goals.

Your Turn: Start With You

Open a Google Doc or a sheet of paper. Write your answers to the five questions:

About You

Your full name: _____
Date of birth: _____
Place of birth: _____
Current city/state: _____

About Your Parents

Now answer the same five questions for each parent. Write down everything you know, even if it's incomplete.

Parent 1:

Full name (including maiden name): _____

Date of birth: _____

Place of birth: _____

Date and place of marriage: _____

Did they migrate? From where to where? _____

Date and place of death (if applicable): _____

Parent 2:

Full name (including maiden name): _____

Date of birth: _____

Place of birth: _____

Date and place of marriage: _____

Did they migrate? From where to where? _____

Date and place of death (if applicable): _____

About Your Grandparents

Repeat for each grandparent. It's okay if you only know names or partial information.

Maternal Grandmother:

Full name: _____

Born: _____ Where: _____

Married: _____ Where: _____

Migration: _____

Died: _____ Where: _____

Maternal Grandfather:

Full name: _____

Born: _____ Where: _____

Married: _____ Where: _____

Migration: _____
Died: _____ Where: _____

Paternal Grandmother:

Full name: _____
Born: _____ Where: _____
Married: _____ Where: _____
Migration: _____
Died: _____ Where: _____

Paternal Grandfather:

Full name: _____
Born: _____ Where: _____
Married: _____ Where: _____
Migration: _____
Died: _____ Where: _____

A Note on Puerto Rican Names

Puerto Rican naming traditions follow Spanish customs. Understanding them helps you avoid confusion:

- **Two surnames:** A person traditionally carries two last names – the father’s first surname followed by the mother’s first surname. For example: **Juan Vargas Rivera** (father’s surname: Vargas, mother’s surname: Rivera).
- **Married women:** A woman may add her husband’s surname after “de.” For example: **María Rivera de Vargas**.
- **Common first names:** Many family members may share the same first name (José, María, Juan, Carmen). Middle names and surnames are essential for telling people apart.
- **Nicknames:** Family members may only know a person by a nickname. Write down both the nickname and the legal name if you know it.

Tip: When you write down a name, always include both surnames if you know them. This is the key to finding the right person in Puerto Rican records.

Reflection Questions

Before moving to Module 2, think about:

- Which grandparent do you know the least about? That person might be a good first research target.
 - Do you know which town (*pueblo*) in Puerto Rico your family is from? Even a partial answer helps narrow your search.
 - Who in your family is most likely to know more? That's the person to interview next.
-

What's Next

In **Module 2 – Talk to Living Relatives**, you'll learn how to interview family members to fill in the blanks you just identified. The people who lived the history are your richest sources of information.

© 2026 Sylvia Vargas. *Teaching Genealogists AI™*. All rights reserved.