

Genetic Genealogy Journey

Tips for Initial Contact with a Match

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Genetic genealogists frequently complain about the low response rate to requests for contact with our DNA matches (those who are on your match list). By focusing your message narrative, you can include pertinent information while maintaining a concise, succinct message likely to pique interest and encourage a response. In a world where many of us are struggling to find enough time to do everything we need to do, the easier we make it for our DNA matches to reply to a message the more likely we are to get a response.

MESSAGE CONTENTS

There are items that must be included when contacting your DNA matches so the recipient can reply with more than a request for additional information. If the recipient has to stop and search for needed information, he is less likely to make an immediate reply. Delayed replies often result in messages becoming lost in an overflowing inbox—a condition we wish to avoid.

Some of the information in our messages to DNA matches will be the same for all recipients; we can set up a template for the boilerplate text we will use repeatedly. This includes (1) information on us (or our family member) and testing company, (2) information on surnames in our family tree, (3) a link to our online tree, (4) a request to view the recipient's tree or for them to share information, and (5) other information that might entice the recipient to reply.

Some of the information in our messages is best customized for each individual match; we can use placeholders in our template as a reminder to add that unique information. The customized information should include (6) the name of the person with matching DNA to the person named in item 1 above, (7) the amount of DNA shared, (8) where that shared DNA is located, and (9) whether we have clues as to how we might be related.

Tips to make our message as strong as possible are included below for each item named above.

(1) Identify the DNA tester and the testing company for our family member using the exact account name with which he or she is identified in the company database. Many genealogists have asked family members to take a DNA test and manage the account for the testers. Some genealogists manage dozens of accounts. The recipient may ignore an incoming message indicating “we have a DNA match” that does not identify who “we” are. If the e-mail sender also manages multiple accounts and forgets to include the name of their family member, it may be impossible to determine which match the message is referencing.

(2) Include basic information on surnames in the family tree of the DNA tester. An alphabetical list of surnames is easy for readers to scan. It is useful to include dates and a migration trail with the surnames. A surname list similar to this:

- **Black** (KY 1805 > Jackson and Benton Co., AL 1830 > Milam Co., TX 1847 > San Saba Co., TX 1856 > Mason Co., TX 1858),
- **Johnson** (Chester Dist., SC 1790 > Conecuh Co., AL 1818 > Panola, Shelby, and Angelina Cos., TX 1870),
- **Parker** (NC 1790 > SC 1820 > Clinton Co., IL 1830 > Pope Co., AR 1836 > Milam Co., TX 1846 > Dallas Co., TX 1918)

is more likely to assist the recipient in finding potential ancestral links than is

- Black, Johnson, Parker.

(3) A link to an online tree allows the recipient to search for common ancestors. The goal is to make it easy for our DNA matches to peruse our tree. We can place our tree online at an easy to use website and send a direct link to our DNA match if we prefer not to use a testing company's tree program. Pasting the URL into an e-mail message provides a clickable link. This is accomplished by (a) accessing the tree, (b) highlighting the URL in the browser address bar, (c) using the control key on a Windows computer (or the command key on a Mac) and the "c" key to copy the data, and (d) using the control key on a Windows computer (or the command key on a Mac) and the "v" key to paste the data into an outgoing message.

RootsWeb WorldConnect offers a compact and easy to read tree view.¹ Another option is posting a tree, a PDF file, or other file type containing your family tree on your personal website for access. Ancestry,² FamilySearch,³ FindMyPast,⁴ Geni,⁵ Mocavo,⁶ MyHeritage,⁷ WikiTree⁸ and many other sites provide online family tree options. Monitor collaborative tree sites, where others may be able to change the information and links without your permission, to ensure errors do not lead your DNA match astray. For this reason, many of us prefer to use a personal family tree instead of a collaborative tree site.

(4) Include a request to view the recipient's tree or for them to share family tree information via e-mail. Ask the recipient for a direct link to an online tree. It can be difficult to locate the right tree on a large website even when we know the name of the tree and the user name of the tree owner. Include the instructions listed above for using the copy and paste functions if the recipient's tree cannot be located easily.

All URLs accessed 10 August 2015.

¹ "Search Family Trees at WorldConnect," RootsWeb, *Ancestry.com* (<http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/>).

² *Ancestry.com* (<http://ancestry.com/>).

³ *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/>).

⁴ *FindMyPast* (<https://www.findmypast.com/family-tree>).

⁵ *Geni* (<http://www.geni.com/>).

⁶ *Mocavo* (<http://www.myheritage.com/>).

⁷ *MyHeritage* (<http://www.myheritage.com/>).

⁸ *WikiTree* (<http://www.wikitree.com/>).

(5) Including interesting information, such as a list of patriarchs, matriarchs, famous historical persons, or famous sports figures in the family tree can entice a recipient to spend more time reading the message. That information may spark interest and cause the recipient to reply promptly.

(6) Identify the names of the people with matching DNA to the person named in item 1 above using the exact account name with which he or she is identified in the company database. The recipient of your message may also manage kits for multiple family members. Both the match on your side and the side of the recipient should be clearly identified by the name used on the account.

(7) Indicate the amount of DNA shared by the matching testers. Both the total shared centimorgans and the length of the longest block are useful to include.

(8) Optionally, indicate where the shared DNA is located, the chromosome number and starting and ending point of the shared segments. The recipient may have already mapped the shared portion of their genome to a particular ancestor. If so, the recipient will be able to indicate the most likely shared common ancestors.

(9) Indicate whether you have any clues as to how you may be related to the DNA match. This can be useful if we recognize the name of the DNA match from prior contact, if we view their family tree before sending the message and see the name of an ancestor we know is in our tree, or if we match on a DNA segment we have mapped to a common ancestral couple.

SAMPLE MESSAGE

Below is a sample e-mail message where the order of the information is different, but the items above are included.

Dear Jane,

My uncle has taken a Family Finder test at Family Tree DNA (FTDNA). His account name is "PAR04 for Debbie Wayne." He shares DNA with "Jane Austin Doe." I manage the account for my uncle. I am the family genealogist.

PAR04 shares a total of 80 centimorgans (cM) of DNA with Jane Austin Doe; the longest block is almost 34 cM long. FTDNA predicts PAR04 and Jane Austin Doe to be second to fourth cousins. The largest DNA segments shared are on chromosome 6; one segment is almost 20cM long, starting at location 17,992,858, and ending at location 36,812,814; and a second segment almost 34 cM long, starts at location 135,113,519, and ends at location 160,850,541.

I have mapped these segments on chromosome 6 to my paternal Parker line. That Parker line might be our connection unless we are related on my maternal line. I have not yet identified the ancestors who contributed these DNA segments on my maternal chromosome 6.

Surnames, and the dates and migration path of these lines, in our family tree include

- Black (possibly KY 1805 > Benton Co., AL 1830 > Milam Co., TX 1847 > San Saba Co., TX 1856 > Mason Co., TX 1858)
- Johnson (Chester Dist., SC 1790 > Conecuh Co., AL 1818 > Panola and Angelina Cos., TX 1870),
- Parker (NC 1790 > SC 1820 > Clinton Co., IL 1830 > Pope Co., AR 1836 > Milam Co., TX 1846 > Dallas Co., TX 1918)
- ... [additional surnames would also be included here]

Our family tree includes ancestors born prior to 1900 and is online at <http://fake-domain-name.com/dna/fake-tree-url.jpg>.

If you have an online tree please send me a URL so I can compare our trees. You may already know that you can access your tree online then copy the URL from the browser address bar and send that direct link. That would be most useful as it can sometimes be difficult to find the right tree without a direct URL. If you do not have an online tree I hope you can send me more information on your ancestry so we can work together to find our common ancestor. Even if none of the surnames and places listed above or on my tree seem familiar to you, I would like to review your family tree or surname/location list. We may be related through a speculative, unproven line I have not listed in my online tree.

I look forward to hearing from you and working together on our common lines in the future.

End with your favorite salutation.

SENDING THE MESSAGE

The sample message above is customized for one recipient. Some genealogists prefer to use a generic message and send it to multiple DNA matches. If a generic message is used, send the message individually to each recipient or use the blind carbon copy (bcc) function of your e-mail program. There are several good reasons not to send a mass e-mail (using the cc function of an e-mail program) to dozens of DNA matches. Many people do not like to have their e-mail address shared without permission. Some people will not respond to a mass mailing. Even worse, some e-mail programs consider mass mailings to be spam routing your message to the recipient's spam folder or not deliver the message at all.

TRACKING CORRESPONDENCE

In the same way we log documentary research and correspondence with genealogists on non-DNA matters, we should log correspondence and research on our genetic genealogy endeavors. This allows us to track messages that have not resulted in a response and contact the DNA match again after a suitable waiting period. Some DNA matches may never reply. The person could be deceased,

experiencing family or health issues, or may have lost interest in genealogy. Some genealogists get replies years after making initial contact. Do not give up. It may take multiple tries, but with luck, the match may eventually reply.

CONCLUSION

Making contact with as many matches as possible, starting with those with whom we share the most DNA, may result in extending and confirming our tree. Our correspondents will appreciate when we include all pertinent information in a concise message. That appreciation may lead to more responses.

Debbie Parker Wayne, CG, CGL, is experienced using DNA analysis, as well as more traditional techniques, for genealogical research in Texas, the South and West. She coordinates the genetic genealogy courses at several genealogy institutes and is the Texas State Genealogical Society's DNA Project Director. See <http://debbiewayne.com/> for more information.