FREE PRINTABLE KIT

Where Your Last Name Comes From

A simple kit to find the meaning of your surname and start your family tree: the 4 types of surnames, free places to search records, questions to ask your family and a printable 4-generation tree.

- The 4 types of surnames, with examples
- Free record websites, step by step
- 20 questions to ask your relatives
- Printable family tree and record sheet



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The 4 types of surnames

Almost every last name started in one of these ways

For most of history, people had only one name. As towns grew, a second name helped tell two people apart: John the son of William, Maria from the river, Peter the baker. Over time, those descriptions became family names passed from parents to children.

Type	How it started	Examples
Patronymic	From the father's first name: "son of"	Johnson, Williams, Rodríguez, Fernández, MacDonald, O'Brien
Occupational	From the work someone did	Smith, Miller, Taylor, Baker, Carter, Pastor, Herrero
Place	From where someone lived or came from	Hill, Wood, Rivera, Castillo, Torres
Nickname	From how someone looked or acted	Brown, Young, Moreno, Rubio, Delgado

> **Tip**
> The same surname can have more than one origin. Two families named Rivera may not be related at all. Records, not the name alone, show your real line.

Clues hidden in the name

Endings and prefixes that tell a story

Clue	What it usually means
-ez, -es (Spanish)	"Son of": Martínez (Martín), González (Gonzalo), Sánchez (Sancho), López (Lope)
-son, -sen	"Son of" in English and Scandinavian names: Johnson, Larsen
Mac, Mc	"Son of" in Scottish and Irish names: MacDonald, McCarthy
O'	"Descendant of" in Irish names: O'Brien, O'Neill
-ski, -cki	Often "from a place" in Polish names
Di, De	"Of" or "from" in Italian names: Di Marco

Spanish and Latino names: two surnames

In Spanish-speaking countries, people usually carry two surnames: the first one from the father and the second one from the mother. In the U.S., many families keep only one, or join both with a hyphen. When you search old records, try every version: both surnames, only the first one, and the hyphenated one.

The most common surnames in the U.S.

Top 10 in the 2010 Census, from the U.S. Census Bureau

Rank	Surname	Type
1	Smith	Occupational (metal worker)
2	Johnson	Patronymic (son of John)
3	Williams	Patronymic (son of William)
4	Brown	Nickname (brown hair or clothing)
5	Jones	Patronymic (son of John)
6	Garcia	Spanish, origin debated
7	Miller	Occupational (grain mill)
8	Davis	Patronymic (son of David)
9	Rodriguez	Patronymic (son of Rodrigo)
10	Martinez	Patronymic (son of Martín)

Three Spanish surnames are in the top 10: Garcia, Rodriguez and Martinez. The Census Bureau publishes the full list of surnames, so you can look up how common your own name is.

Start your family tree in 5 steps

Begin with what you know and work backward

Step	What to do
1	Write down yourself, your parents and your grandparents: full names, dates and places.
2	Ask the oldest relatives first. Use the 20 questions in this kit and write the answers the same day.
3	Gather papers at home: birth and marriage certificates, old letters, photos with names on the back, funeral cards.
4	Search free records online, one person at a time, starting with the most recent generation.
5	Write where each fact came from. A date with no source is only a guess.

Good to know

Records about living people are often private. Start with relatives who passed away, and respect the privacy of the living when you share your tree.

Free places to search

Websites with free records (some ask for a free account)

Where	What you can find
FamilySearch	Free genealogy site with billions of records from many countries, including church and civil records from Latin America. Free account required.
National Archives	U.S. census records. The 1950 Census was released in 2022 and can be searched online for free.
Ellis Island records	Free passenger search for arrivals at the Port of New York, on the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation site.
Chronicling America	Free historic U.S. newspapers from the Library of Congress: births, weddings and obituaries.
Find a Grave	Free memorials with dates and, many times, photos of headstones.
State vital records	Birth, marriage and death certificates. Each state has its own office and rules.

Search tip

Names were often misspelled. Try different spellings, initials and the name without accents. Search by place and year when the name does not match.

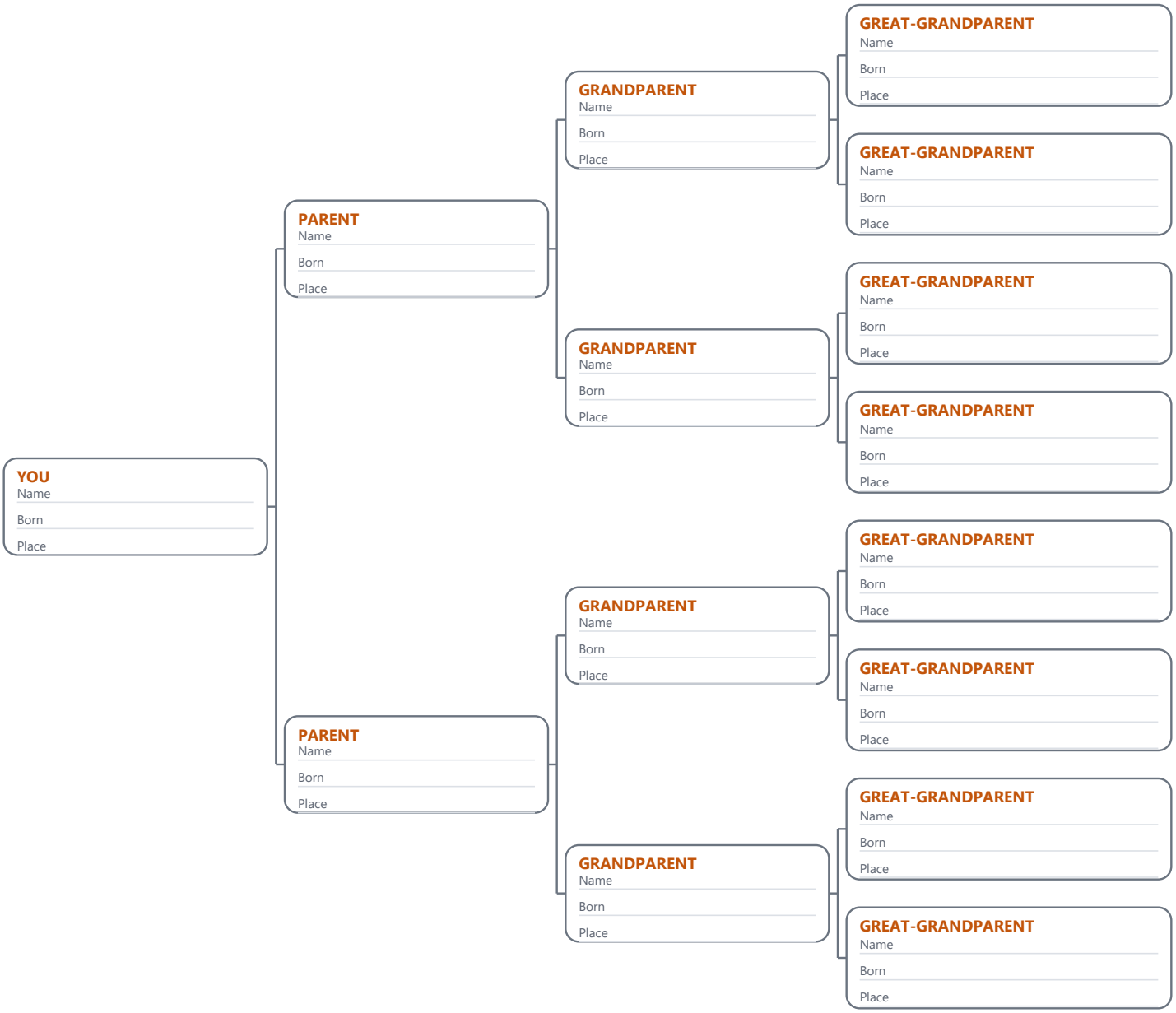
20 questions to ask your family

Great for a holiday table: write the answers the same day

- What were the full names of your parents and grandparents?
- Where and when were you born? Where were your parents born?
- Did anyone change or shorten the family name? Why?
- Who was the first one in the family to come to this country?
- What town or region did the family come from?
- What did your grandparents do for work?
- Where did the family live when you were a child?
- Are there old photos? Who is in them?
- Did anyone serve in the military?
- What languages were spoken at home?
- Where are the grandparents buried?
- Was there a family Bible, letters or documents?
- What was your wedding like, and where was it?
- What traditions came from the old country?
- Which family recipe is the oldest?
- Do we have relatives in other countries?
- What is the oldest story you heard as a child?
- Was anyone in the family known by a nickname?
- Who in the family knows the most about our history?
- What would you like the grandchildren to remember?

Printable family tree

4 generations: fill in from left to right



Family record sheet

One sheet per person. Print as many as you need.

Full name _____

Other names or spellings _____

Born (date and place) _____

Married (date and place) _____

Spouse _____

Died (date and place) _____

Buried _____

Father _____

Mother _____

Children _____

Work _____

Places lived _____

Came to the U.S. (year, port) _____

Sources _____

> **Keep it simple**
> Write dates as day, month in letters and year (25 Nov 1950). It avoids confusion between U.S. and Latin American date formats.

DNA tests and final tips

About DNA tests

- A DNA test can match you with relatives who also tested. Ethnicity results are estimates and change as the companies update them.
- Read the privacy terms before you test: who can see your data and how to delete it.
- DNA works best together with records and family stories, not instead of them.

Final tips

- Never pay someone to search a free website for you.
- Save copies of every document you find, with the website and the date.
- Share what you find with your family: someone may recognize a face or a name.

Free educational kit by Vifalio, based on public information from the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Archives, the Library of Congress and free genealogy websites, checked in November 2026. Surname origins are general meanings: your own family line can only be confirmed with records. Not affiliated with any genealogy company or government agency.