

M A V E R I C K A I

BUILD YOUR FAMILY TREE WITH AI

THE 4-PROMPT METHOD TO TRACE YOUR ROOTS

Turn everything you remember into a clean family tree, trace the history behind your last name, and get a list of real leads to chase, all inside one ChatGPT chat.

The exact 4 prompts, ready to copy and paste
How to map what you already know into a clean tree
Trace the origin and meaning of your family name
Turn ChatGPT into a research assistant that finds leads
The free public records to actually check
How to build a visual tree you can print and share
What AI can and cannot do (so you do not get burned)

2026 Edition

What You Are About To Do

You are going to build a real family tree using ChatGPT, in one chat, in about 30 minutes. Four prompts, in order. Each one builds on the last, so stay in the same conversation the whole way through.

Here is the honest version of how this works, because it matters. ChatGPT is not a genealogy database. It does not have a secret file on your family. What it is good at is three things: organizing everything you already know into a clean structure, explaining the history behind your name and where your people came from, and searching the open web to hand you leads worth chasing. The magic is not that it knows your family. The magic is that it turns a pile of half-remembered names into a real starting point in minutes.

4

prompts, in order

30

minutes start to finish

1

chat, kept open

BEFORE YOU START

Turn on web search in ChatGPT (the globe or search icon under the message box) so it can actually look things up in the research step. And use a real chat, not voice mode, so you can copy the tree it builds. That is the whole setup.

The four steps at a glance

Step	What you do	What ChatGPT gives back
1. Brain dump	Let it interview you for names, places, dates	A clean starting tree from your memory
2. Name origins	Ask about your surname and homeland	The history and likely origin of your family line
3. Find leads	Send it to search public records and the open web	Real records and names to verify yourself
4. Visualize	Ask for the full visual tree	A diagram you can copy, print, and share

Step 1: The Brain Dump

The first move is to get everything out of your head and into a structure. Do not try to organize it yourself. Let ChatGPT interview you. It is much better at asking the right questions than you are at volunteering the right answers.

STEP 1: Start the interview

PROMPT 1: THE BRAIN DUMP

I want to build my full family tree. Interview me one section at a time. Ask me everything you need to know: my full name, where my family is from, and every relative I can remember on both sides.

Ask for names, approximate birth years, birth places, and how each person is related. Go one branch at a time so I do not get overwhelmed, and keep track of what I have already told you.

When we are done, lay it all out as a clean, organized starting tree.

Answer whatever you can. If you are not sure of a year, say "around 1950" or "before the war." Approximate is fine. ChatGPT will hold all of it and assemble the structure for you at the end.

TIP

Do this with a parent or grandparent in the room if you can. The interview format is perfect for jogging their memory, and they will remember names and stories you never knew. This step alone is worth doing just for that conversation.

What to tell it, even if it does not ask

The more specific detail you give, the better every later step works. Feed it any of these you have:

Detail	Why it matters later
Full names, including maiden names	Maiden names are the key to tracing the mother's side
Towns, not just countries	"Naples" traces further than "Italy"
Approximate birth and death years	Records are searchable by date range
Immigration stories or years	Ship manifests and naturalization records exist for these
Old jobs, military service, religion	These show up in census and public records

HEADS UP

Spelling changes across generations. A name might be "Kowalczyk" on one document and "Kowalchik" on another after the family arrived. Tell ChatGPT to keep every spelling variation you know. It will need them in the search step.

Step 2: The Name Origins

Now that ChatGPT has your last name and where your family came from, ask it to trace the line itself. This is the part that makes people lean in, because a surname carries history, and most people have never heard theirs.

STEP 2: Trace your name

PROMPT 2: NAME ORIGINS

Based on my last name and where my family came from, tell me the origins of my family line.

Cover:

- The meaning and language roots of the surname
- The region or regions it is most common in
- How far back the name can typically be traced
- Any historical events that moved families with this name (migrations, wars, name changes)
- Whether the name was likely changed or shortened when my family immigrated

Be clear about what is well documented versus what is a general pattern for names like mine.

That last line matters. It tells ChatGPT to separate real history from educated guessing, so you know which parts to trust and which parts to verify.

WHAT THIS STEP IS ACTUALLY DOING

ChatGPT knows a lot about the general history of surnames, migration patterns, and regions. It does not know your specific ancestors. So treat this as the story of names like yours, not confirmed facts about your bloodline. It is a fantastic starting map, and it points you toward where to look next.

Push it further

Once it answers, keep going. These follow-ups pull out more:

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- What did people with this name typically do for work in that region and era?
- What would the surname have looked like in the original language or alphabet?
- If I wanted to trace this name back another

generation, what specific records should I look
for and where are they kept?

Step 3: The Trick, Finding New Leads

This is the step everyone wants. You send ChatGPT out to search the open web and public records for relatives and documents connected to your family. Done right, it comes back with names, records, and connections you did not have.

One thing to get straight first, because it will save you disappointment. ChatGPT can search the free, open web. It cannot log into paid genealogy sites like Ancestry or your DNA results, and it cannot pull private records. So it will not magically unlock a hidden relative behind a paywall. What it can do is comb through the huge amount of genealogy data that is public and free, and surface leads for you to confirm.

STEP 3: Send it to search

PROMPT 3: FIND RELATIVES AND RECORDS

Using everything I have told you, search the open web and free public records to find people, documents, and family connections I do not already have.

Search these kinds of sources:

- Free genealogy sites (FamilySearch, WikiTree)
- Obituaries and funeral home notices
- Historical census and immigration records that are publicly viewable
- Old newspaper archives
- Cemetery and grave databases (Find a Grave)

For every lead you find, give me:

- The name and how they might connect to my tree
- The source, with a link so I can verify it
- Your confidence: is this likely my family, or just a name match worth checking?

Do not invent people, records, or links. If you cannot confirm something, say so and mark it as a lead to investigate, not a fact.

HEADS UP

This is where AI gets people in trouble. A tool searching for matches will find people who share your surname but are not related at all. Every single lead is a maybe until you check the actual record. Treat the output as a to-do list, not a confirmed branch of your tree.

The free sources worth knowing

Source	What you find there	Cost
FamilySearch.org	Billions of records, trees, census, church records	Free (run by a nonprofit)
WikiTree	Community-built shared family trees	Free
Find a Grave	Headstones, burial dates, family plots	Free
National Archives	Census, military, immigration records	Free
Google + "obituary"	Death notices that list surviving relatives	Free

TIP

Obituaries are gold. They almost always list the deceased person's relatives by name, spouse, children, siblings, sometimes grandchildren. One obituary can fill in a whole branch. Ask ChatGPT to hunt for these specifically.

Step 4: Build The Visual Tree

Now pull it all together into something you can actually look at, print, and hand to family. ChatGPT can lay out a visual tree for you a few different ways depending on what you want to do with it.

STEP 4: Make it visual

PROMPT 4: THE VISUAL TREE

```
Now build me the full visual family tree using  
everyone we have confirmed, plus a separate  
section for the unconfirmed leads.  
  
Lay it out clearly by generation, showing how  
each person connects. Use my parents and  
grandparents as anchor points.  
  
Then give me a version I can reuse: export it as  
a diagram I can view, and also give me the raw  
structure so I can import it into a family tree  
app later.
```

Three ways to get a visual out of it

1. A diagram right in the chat

Ask ChatGPT to draw the tree as a diagram. It can generate an image or a structured chart you can screenshot. Good for a quick look and for sharing in the family group chat.

2. A file you can reuse

Ask for the tree as a GEDCOM file. That is the universal family tree format, and you can import it straight into FamilySearch, Ancestry, or any genealogy app. This is how you keep the work instead of losing it in a chat.

3. A printable chart

Ask for a clean, printable version organized by generation. Great for framing, for a reunion, or for a grandparent who wants it on paper.

EXPORT FOR REUSE

```
Give me this tree as a GEDCOM file so I can  
import it into FamilySearch or another app.  
Also give me a clean printable version organized  
by generation.
```

SET EXPECTATIONS ON THE ANIMATION

Some tools will produce a fancy animated tree, others will give you a static diagram or a chart. Either way you get a real visual you can use. If you want something polished for framing, take the exported structure into a dedicated tree app, that is what they are built for.

What AI Can And Cannot Do Here

This is the most important page in the guide. Genealogy is one area where a confident wrong answer can send you down a months-long dead end, or worse, get you attached to a family that is not yours. Know the line.

ChatGPT is great at	ChatGPT will get wrong
Organizing what you already know into a tree	Inventing specific ancestors it cannot confirm
Explaining surname and migration history	Exact birth or death dates for your relatives
Searching free, public web records	Anything behind a paywall (Ancestry, 23andMe)
Reading and summarizing an obituary you paste	Confirming a name match is actually your blood
Suggesting where to look next	DNA analysis or biological relationships
Drafting messages to relatives you find	Legal proof for citizenship or inheritance

HEADS UP

Never treat an AI-found relative as confirmed until you have seen the actual record with your own eyes. Surname matches are not proof. The single most common genealogy mistake, with or without AI, is grabbing the wrong person because the name lined up.

The golden rule

Use ChatGPT to generate leads. Use real records to confirm them. The AI is your research assistant, fast, tireless, and great at finding threads to pull. It is not the source of truth. The census document, the obituary, the headstone, those are the truth. ChatGPT just helps you find them faster.

When It Gets Stuck

You will hit walls. Everyone does. Here is how to get unstuck.

It made up a relative or a record

Call it out directly: "Did you actually find that in a source, or did you fill it in? Show me the link or remove it." Then paste the audit line from every research chat: "List every name you gave me and mark each as CONFIRMED with a source or UNVERIFIED."

The search step came back empty

Give it more to work with. A town instead of a country, a maiden name, an approximate year, an immigration date. Vague inputs get vague results. Also confirm web search is actually turned on.

You hit a brick wall on one ancestor

This is normal, genealogists call it a brick wall. Ask: "What specific records might exist for a person born around [year] in [place], and exactly where would I request them?" ChatGPT is excellent at pointing you to the right archive.

The names are in another language or alphabet

Lean into it. "What would this name look like in the original Polish? What are the common English spellings it became?" This is one of ChatGPT's genuine superpowers and it breaks walls that stump people for years.

THE BRICK-WALL BREAKER

I am stuck on [name], born around [year] in [place]. Walk me through exactly what records might exist for this person, which archive or website holds each one, and the precise search terms and spelling variations I should try.

TIP

Keep everything in one chat as long as you can. ChatGPT remembers what you have already found, so it stops suggesting duplicates and builds on progress. Start a new chat only when the old one gets slow or forgetful.

A Quick Word On Privacy

You are about to type your family's names, birthplaces, and history into an AI. A few sensible things before you do.

You are sharing real information about real people, some of them living. That is usually fine for building a tree, but use judgment. Do not paste Social Security numbers, full birthdates of living people, or anything sensitive you would not want stored. The dead are fair game. The living deserve a little care.

REACHING OUT TO RELATIVES YOU FIND

If ChatGPT surfaces a living relative, do not dump the whole AI report on them. People get spooked. Send a short, warm, human note: who you are, how you think you are connected, and a genuine question. Ask ChatGPT to draft it if you want, then make it sound like you.

DRAFT A FIRST-CONTACT MESSAGE

Draft a short, warm message to a possible relative I found. I am [name], I think we connect through [shared ancestor / surname]. Keep it friendly and low-pressure, introduce myself, and ask one simple question to see if we match. No walls of text.

HEADS UP

Set your ChatGPT data controls how you want them before you start. If you would rather your family details not be used to train models, turn that off in settings. Your tree, your call.

The One-Page Cheat Sheet

All four prompts in order. Screenshot this page and go.

The four prompts

1. BRAIN DUMP

Interview me to build my family tree. Ask for my full name, where my family is from, and every relative I remember, with names, years, and places. Go one branch at a time, then lay it out as a clean starting tree.

2. NAME ORIGINS

Based on my last name and where my family came from, tell me the origin and meaning of my family line, how far back it traces, and whether the name was likely changed when they immigrated. Separate documented history from general patterns.

3. FIND LEADS

Search the open web and free public records (FamilySearch, obituaries, census, Find a Grave) for relatives and documents I do not have. Give a source link and a confidence level for each. Do not invent anything. Mark unconfirmed as leads.

4. VISUAL TREE

Build the full visual tree by generation, with confirmed people and a separate leads section. Give me a diagram plus a GEDCOM file I can import into a genealogy app.

YOUR ACTION PLAN

1. Turn on web search in ChatGPT. 2. Run the 4 prompts in order, in one chat. 3. Treat every found relative as a lead, not a fact, until you see the record. 4. Export a GEDCOM so you keep the work. 5. Verify the exciting finds on FamilySearch before you tell the whole family.

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AI finds the threads. You pull them. That is how you find your people.