



## "Some of You Might Not Like What I am About To Say..."

Dave Obee expresses his frustration with some family history terminology

**T**HE SAME QUESTIONS POP UP FROM TIME TO time on the genealogy pages on social media: What is a first cousin once removed? And is grand uncle the proper term, or is it great uncle?

Every time I see these questions I try to help, but I might as well stand on my doorstep and shake my fist at the rain. It would be about as useful.

I have my own questions. Why do so many family historians try to complicate things? Why do we use terms that are bound to confuse? That's as annoying and unhelpful as the conference speakers who insist you need to master Excel spreadsheets before you can sort through DNA matches. (Yes, they help, but they are not essential.)

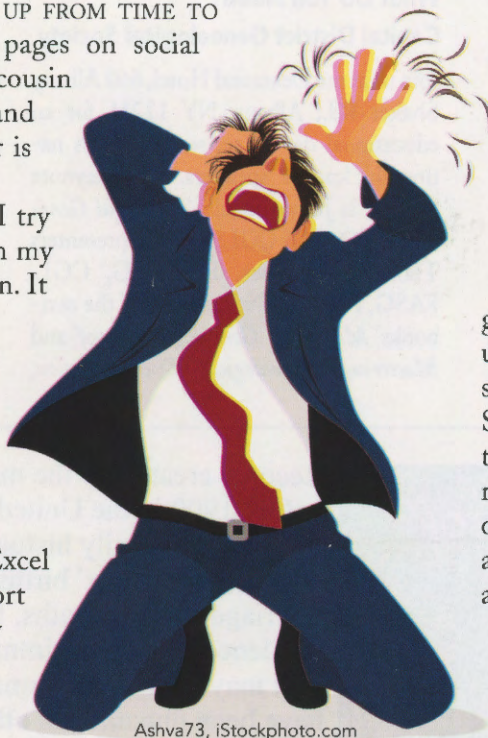
But back to the point at hand. A first cousin once removed would be the child of a first cousin, unless he or she is the parent of a second cousin; all we know for sure is that the person is from a different generation. The term does not, however, identify whether the person is up or down, generation-wise.

Using terminology like that might help you feel that you really know your stuff, but it will not help anyone understand who you are talking about. It's a step up from saying "random person", but only a small step. At best, it is an intentional effort to be unclear; why would we do that?

I am writing this the day after I had dinner with my first cousin once removed. Quick, now, imagine who that person would be. You don't know which generation is removed, and you don't even know which side of the family the person is on.

What if I said that I dined with my mother's cousin?

Wouldn't that be more descriptive, and easier to understand as well? Beyond that, "first cousin once removed" takes four words, and "mother's cousin" takes two. Half the words, but much more useful information.



When I hear the "removed" approach, I try not to think the obvious: That the speaker's logic has been removed as well.

The "removed" terminology is only part of the problem. What about my great-grand-uncle, or some such thing? Maybe he is a great-great uncle or a grand-grand uncle – some people prefer grand, some prefer great – but who cares? Since you have no idea who I am talking about, maybe I should just refer to my grandfather's uncle, on my dad's side. It's clear, it's not ambiguous, and you don't need an advanced academic degree to sort it out.

For those of you who have taken the time to memorize the fancier terms: Why? Why do you try so hard to confuse yourself, and those around you? Does it make you feel smarter, even though it gives less information than the alternative?

Beats me. Maybe your second cousin four times removed could give me the answer. ☹



DAVE OBEE runs CanGenealogy.com, a link site devoted to Canadian resources.