

Back to Basics: Craft a Compelling Family History Narrative from Start to Finish

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You've been an avid genealogist for many years and you've got the research record to prove it. Perhaps you have over 1,000 names entered into your genealogy software program, have thoroughly documented all of your sources, and have created a paper trail stored in enough file folders or notebooks to fill an entire room of your house. But, do you really know your ancestors? What did they look like? Where did they live? Have you recorded their stories (or for that matter, your own) into a format that future generations would find interesting and useful?

We've all heard the old cliché, "Genealogy is more than just names, dates, and places." Often family trees are not more than just boring lists. But, it's the heritage, traditions, family lore (and, yes even, the drama) that puts the "flesh on the bones." Moreover, after all the time you've invested in your research, it would be a shame to just leave all of the information you uncovered in a sterile pedigree chart or family group sheet! But, it's often the idea of producing a written family narrative that intimidates many a skilled researcher.

In this session, you'll learn the basics of crafting a compelling family history narrative in simple, manageable steps. Discover how to overcome writer's block and use key techniques and tools for documenting your ancestors' lives, or your own life story.

Overview

- How to organize your material.
- Dividing your writing tasks into small manageable pieces.
- Methods for placing your family in context with local, national & world history.
- How to overcome writer's block.
- Selecting the best details to advance the story.
- Examples and practice writing exercises.

Formats

- Scrapbook Journaling
- Bio/Character Sketch or Profiles
- Longer narratives (books)
- Blog

Excuses for Not Writing

- I don't have time!
- I don't know where to start.
- But...I'm not a professional writer.
- I'm not done with my research.

The Five P's of Writing a Family History

- Plan
- Prepare
- Plot
- Produce
- Publish

Plan

- Decide on subject:
- Who, What, When, Where, Why?
- Decide on format (book, series of profiles, etc.)
- Determine your audience (Family? Public? Both?)

Prepare

- If sharing with a public audience, always get consent from living individuals you include in your story.
- Gather materials (documents, photos, interviews, source citations, other research).
- Set a deadline.

Plot

- Brainstorm ideas (Mind Mapping).
- Create an outline.
- Storyboard – Use index cards or software (“virtual corkboard”).
- For book-length project about 60 index cards (one scene per card).
- Use apps/online tools (see Page 5).

Quick Tips:

- **Start small (perhaps with ancestor profiles).**
- **If writing a book, consider dividing it into two parts:**
 - Part I: Readable narrative**
 - Part II: Reference section: genealogical reports or summaries, endnotes**
- **Remember, all good stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end.**

Produce

- Now Write!
- Don't get discouraged if you can't immediately see how different pieces fit together.
- You don't have to get every date perfect.
- Block out time to write – even if it is just **15** minutes per day.
- Don't worry about the final product - you'll get there! You will succeed, with practice.
- You can write, even if you are still researching.
- Stories do not have to be told in an exact sequence.
- Have someone else proofread it for you.

Publish

- Determine the method – Print, eBook, Both? Blog?
- Consider your genealogy software program or specialty software or services:
 - Personal Historian (\$29.95) <http://www.rootsmagic.com/Personal-Historian>
 - MyCanvas Ancestry.com (price varies) <http://ancestry.mycanvas.com>
 - StoryToolz <http://storytoolz.com>
- Research publishing houses, printers, online services such as:
 - Lulu <http://www.lulu.com>
 - CreateSpace <https://www.createspace.com>
 - Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing <https://kdp.amazon.com/self-publishing>
 - Scribd <http://www.scribd.com>
 - Smashwords <http://www.smashwords.com>
 - Apple iBooks <http://www.apple.com/apps/ibooks>
- Ask around for recommendations (friends, colleagues, use social media)
- Consider the cost (budget).

Blogging (Tips and Advice/Prompts)

- Geneabloggers <http://geneabloggers.com>
- Blogging Genealogy <http://www.blogginggenealogy.com>
- The Book of Me, Written By You <http://www.anglersrest.blogspot.co.uk>

Writing Exercises

1. Writing from documents
 - a. Family Documents
 - b. Baptismal certificate
 - c. Passport
 - d. Ship's Manifest List
 - e. Census
 - f. Wills, Probate, Deeds
 - g. Naturalization Papers
 - h. Diaries/Letters, etc.
2. Writing from photographs
 - a. Find one of your favorite old family photographs.
 - b. Ask questions: Who is in it? What are they wearing? What are they doing? What is their facial expression? Is anyone else in the photograph? Describe the photo in as much detail as possible.
3. Writing a character sketch
 - a. Pick an interesting character in your family and try to write a few sentences or even a paragraph or two about this person.
 - b. Include details that capture attention, memories, etc.
4. Write from Interview Transcript
 - a. If you've interviewed family members, turn their words into a narrative.
 - b. Go through your transcript to select telling quotes, and key details.

Sample:

My mother remembered kneeling behind the black coal stove in the basement of the house on Crawford Avenue. Each strike of the leather strap-first across her shoulders, then over her back and legs-stung more than the last one. Large red welts appeared on her body, but the physical pain was nothing compared to her fear and embarrassment. She thought he would never stop. When he finally did, she sobbed and lifted herself from the floor. In spite of the beating, she did not hate her father; she vowed not to do anything wrong again and wanted to please him.

If you work on these practice writing exercises one by one, ancestor by ancestor, you'll be well on your way to writing a compelling family history.

Motivation/Challenges

- Writers Groups (local library, college, online, Facebook, G+ Communities)
- National Novel Writing Month <http://nanowrimo.org>
- The Family History Writing Challenge (Feb) <http://familyhistorywritingchallenge.blogspot.com>
- Writer's Digest (writing prompts) <http://www.writersdigest.com>

Additional Resources

Alzo, Lisa A. *Three Slovak Women: Second Edition*. CreateSpace, 2013.

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Fulford, D.G. *One Memory at a Time*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Lewit, Jane, and Ellen Epstein. *Record and Remember: Tracing Your Roots Through Oral History* Scarborough House, 1994 (Out of Print).

MacEntee, Thomas. *Preserving Your Family's Oral History and Stories* [Kindle Edition]. Amazon Digital Services, Inc. (2013).

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace 2nd Edition*. Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc. (2009).

Sturdevant, Katherine Scott, and Sharon DeBartolo Carmack. *Bringing Your Family History to Life Through Social History*. Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2000.

Lisa's Favorite Writing Tools

Dropbox Cloud Storage (free; premium) <http://www.dropbox.com>

EasyBib <http://www.easybib.com>

Editorially <https://editorially.com>

Evernote (free; premium) <http://www.evernote.com>

Google Drive <https://drive.google.com>

Papyrus Editor <http://papyruseditor.com>

PenUltimate <http://evernote.com/penultimate>

Skitch <http://evernote.com/skitch>

Scapple (\$; free trial MacOSX; Windows Beta) <http://www.literatureandlatte.com/scapple.php>

Scrivener (\$; free trial; MacOSX; Windows) <http://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener.php>

Trello <http://www.trello.com>

WriteApp.Me <https://writeapp.me>