

# Adding Story to Family History

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Words, words, words. To write your family history, start by just putting words on a page. Consider the work as being made up of *three components*: family, history, and story. Keep the names and vitals, *and* add biographical and contextual facts to present the story of your ancestors' lives. Think of each ancestor as a "character," but research and document their very real lives with the best possible sources.

## Organizing

Make overarching decisions based on:

- **Deadlines** – may limit the amount and depth of your coverage
- **Audience** – determines your style and tone

Organize ideas then data:

- **Table of Contents/Outline** – decided what to include and where
  - Who will be discussed? What about them do you want to share?
  - Options for incorporating narrative and genealogy:
    - Insert narrative after birth-death-marriage data within the sketch.
    - Include narrative chapters before and/or after genealogical presentation.
    - Feature narrative within sidebars/boxed inserts.
    - Provide transcriptions in one or more appendixes.
  - *TIP*: Use a genealogical format to help structure your work. *Register* and *ahnentafel* styles have elegant numbering systems that help us understand who is related and how. Chapters can then be divided by family or generation.
  - *TIP*: Your title can help in defining (and then sticking to) your scope.
- **Folders** – store notes/files in physical and/or digital folders that align with the TOC/outline



## Writing narrative

Every piece of writing should have a beginning, middle, and end. Include an introduction and conclusion at the beginning and end of your book or article and even within each chapter.

Identify your thesis – what point are you trying to make? Provide examples aimed at proving and/or clarifying that point.

What is the plot/conflict/tension in your story? To convey that, each event should include an originating event, rising action, climax, falling action, and a resolution/conclusion.

To get started and stay organized, try freewriting, making lists/timelines, or taking notes following the table of contents/outline. *TIP:* Follow a template for the genealogical format.

### Writing Tips:

- ✓ Be clear. Be consistent.
- ✓ Cite all your facts.
- ✓ Make sure you understand the numbering system for your format and implement it correctly.
- ✓ Interpret and present data clearly and chronologically within each entry.
- ✓ Become familiar with commonly used abbreviations.
- ✓ Contain your information to the scope of your project.
- ✓ Decide what to omit.
- ✓ Don't let missing information stop you from writing. Note areas needing further attention.
- ✓ Later, reread and look for patterns that can be discussed in introductory sections, side bars, boxed inserts, etc.
- ✓ Use the active voice.
- ✓ Use plain language.
- ✓ Avoid wordiness.
- ✓ Avoid repetition.
- ✓ Use quotations wisely.
- ✓ Avoid sentences that start with “there are,” “it is,” and the like.
- ✓ Keep your sentences short and beware of endless run-on sentences.
- ✓ Don't try to explain too many relationships in the text.
- ✓ Include charts.
- ✓ Make one paragraph per topic, and break up that paragraph if it starts to run long. Think of it as having a beginning, middle, and end and don't forget to have a point!

## Perspective

Find your voice – based on the story you aim to tell and the intended audience. We recommend writing consistently in third person, intimately enough to use your subject’s first name but with enough distance to maintain impartiality.

### Options for narrative style:

- Narrative non-fiction – “history told as a story,” preferred
- Encyclopedic – recitation of facts
- Journey of discovery – sharing your own experiences
- Faction – fiction based on facts, not recommended

### Anchor the story

- by location
- by timeframe
- Help the audience understand where and when events occurred and who was involved.
- by generation
- by characters

For each event, answer the six most basic questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? However, don’t let missing information stop you from writing. Add qualifying words (like probably, may, seem) to indicate uncertainty. Explain issues and/or present evidence supporting or contradicting possible connections.

## Biography

In writing a biography (or a biographical sketch), your goal is to give the reader a sense of who that ancestor was. What did they do, and what happened to them?

### Details to include:

- Education
- Military service
- Civic service
- Occupation(s)
- Residence(s)
- Religious affiliation(s)
- Social class/ financial status
- Personal description

### Look for biographical info in sources like these:

- Census records
- Immigration records
- Wills and probate
- Land records
- Obituaries/gravestone inscriptions
- Newspaper articles
- Books
- Diaries
- Letters
- Family stories
- Interviews

## Context

Add context about social, political, economic, and geographic currents that may have shaped your ancestor. Providing context allows your readers to better understand what factors affected these people and how they in turn had an impact on the world around them.

### Subjects to consider:

- Historical events/eras
- Geography
- Cultural and religious beliefs/practices
- Descriptions
- Politics and military
- Language and names
- Medical practices/knowledge
- Economy

### Look for contextual info in sources like these:

- Histories
- Timelines
- Maps/Gazetteers
- Websites/Publications  
by/about subject matter
- Newspaper articles
- Manuscript collections
- Governmental records
- Presentations
- Interviews

## Resources

Baxter, Carol. *Writing Interesting Family Histories*, 3rd ed. St. Ives, New South Wales: Baxter, c2016.

Baxter, Carol. *Writing and Publishing Gripping Family Histories*. St. Ives, New South Wales: Baxter, c2016.

Gouldrup, Lawrence P. *Writing the Family Narrative*. U.S.A.: Ancestry Pub., c1987.

Gouldrup, Lawrence P. *Writing the Family Narrative Workbook*. U.S.A.: Ancestry Pub., c1993.

Stratton, Penelope L. and Henry B. Hoff. *Guide to Genealogical Writing: How to Write and Publish Your Family History*. Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, c2014.

Sturdevant, Katherine. *Bringing Your Family History to Life Through Social History*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Betterway Books, c2000.

Stories To Tell: Self-Publishing for Independent Authors, blog, at [storiestotellbooks.com/blog](http://storiestotellbooks.com/blog).

Stratton, Penny. "Writing and Publishing Your Family History." subject guide, at [americanancestors.org/tools/writing-publishing-your-family-history](http://americanancestors.org/tools/writing-publishing-your-family-history).