

Writing and Publishing Your Family History

Class 3: 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. However, keep in mind your deadlines and audience. Deadlines may limit the amount and depth of your coverage. The audience determines your style and tone.

Writing Tips

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: Carol Baxter, c2016.

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

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 <https://www.storiestotellbooks.com/blog>.