

GenGuides | GET READY TO WRITE

by *Genwriters* | Compiling Your Family History

Your research has uncovered some fascinating information about your ancestors. In fact, you probably have piles of information about generations of ancestors. Where do you begin writing your stories? How do you choose just one ancestor to begin your writing adventure? Spend a few quiet moments reflecting on your research time. Then ask yourself a few simple questions to help identify that starting point:

- ✓ Is there one ancestor or relative that stands out in your mind as being interesting and/or intriguing? Begin with a story about those interesting intriguing characteristics and how they shaped your ancestor's life.
- ✓ Did one of your ancestors have an interesting tale about his or her immigration? Begin the story with that immigration tale. You can then use the flashback story writing technique to fill in the person's life before immigration.
- ✓ Did one of your ancestors have a unique line of work? Describe that occupation and how your ancestor might have come to learn it. Did your ancestor's children follow his footsteps in that line of work?
- ✓ Do you have a cluster of ancestors that immigrated to the same locale? Write about the locale and the interaction between your ancestors within the context of where they lived.
- ✓ Does one of your ancestors come from an interesting, or different, locale? Describe the city, town, or region and the impact living there might have had on your ancestor.
- ✓ Are you going to write a "whole life" story or select scenes and vignettes to write about?

When deciding what and who to begin writing about, focus on one branch of your tree. With the volumes of research and data you have collected, you may want to climb the entire tree at once. Step back and carefully examine the different branches of your tree. One branch may stand out as a logical starting place. You might want to begin with the branch with the most information, the most generations, or in your mind, the most complete. Begin writing the generation you know the most about or are more comfortable with. It needn't be the most recent generation. It might be one in the middle. You can then work backward into the past, then forward to more recent generations. Starting with what's most comfortable, or a person who interests you most, will make the writing more enjoyable both to you and ultimately your readers.

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CHOOSE A FORMAT FOR YOUR FAMILY HISTORY

Who are you writing your family history book for? Will it be a tome to be shared only with family members? Will it be rich in historical content with wide-spread appeal? Will it be a reference book for other genealogists? Will it be a book focusing solely on one surname with all descendants and collateral lines? Will it be a book written to appeal to the younger members of your family?

Your audience will influence the structure and scope of your book. The more widespread your audience, the more formal and structured your book will be. If you are writing for family, there may be a more casual flair to it.

You will want to choose a format for your family history book that will work well with the ancestor or cluster of ancestors you have chosen. With the ancestor(s) in mind, think about the following formats and how each would enhance the story you will write:

Narrative: A narrative tells a story and typically encompasses a group of ancestors. Your story can focus on one family line, or several, and can extend back for several generations. The narrative form is a good choice if you want to interweave the lives of several people.

Memoir: You might choose a memoir if you have one particular ancestor you wish to write about. A memoir will typically convey a specific episode or time of a person's life.

Biography: A biography is best when you want to focus on a single ancestor's entire life. Your family history book could be a series of interwoven biographies of your colorful ancestors.

Cookbook: A different approach, and one quickly gaining popularity, is a cookbook. Share those tried and true family recipes while writing about the people who created them. A family cookbook, interspersed with stories and photographs, can become a treasured heirloom.

Photo Album: Perhaps you are fortunate enough to have a box full of family photographs. Tell your story using photos.

Regardless of the format you choose to write your family history, be sure to intersperse it with photographs, maps, copies of documents, quotes from diaries, or other interesting tidbits that were gleaned from your research.

WRITING A LIFE

After you have selected an ancestor to write about, gather all the information your research has uncovered. You have most likely amassed a wide variety of documents. Put all the documents in chronological order. This will help to identify gaps in your research. Organizing sequentially helps to identify missing information.

Our ancestors' lives were a sequence of events, each one impacting the next. Spend some time reviewing your research, going through your ancestor's life in chronological order. Look for a trend, theme, or focus for your writing.

Create a timeline with information gleaned from your research. A timeline lists the events in an ancestor's life chronologically. This is a very helpful tool to analyze the information you have collected, to help pinpoint social history events related to your ancestor's life, and is a good first step toward writing an outline for your book. Working chronologically will help you to arrange your thoughts and determine if there are gaps in your research.

Your ancestors were affected by the world around them. Incorporate local, world, and social events that affected their lives. These pertinent dates can be added to the timeline and may help to explain why your ancestor made a decision he/she made. Historical, economic, and social events and trends may have greatly impacted your ancestor, or they may have had no impact at all. You must assess the appropriateness to include these external events in your written narrative.

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TO CREATE A TIMELINE:

This method can be used either for a handwritten timeline or a typed one.

- ✓ In the far left column of the paper, you will chronologically list years, beginning with the year your ancestor was born .
- ✓ You can then number each line consecutively up to the year your ancestor died (or the current year if he/she is still living).
- ✓ Create a narrow column just to the right of the first column and, beginning with the second line, number sequentially beginning with the number "1". This column will then show the age of your ancestor in any given year. This column is particularly helpful when entering marriage dates and the birth dates of children. You will be able to see, at a quick glance, the age of your ancestor when different life events occurred.
- ✓ The remaining space on each line will be used to enter life events. Fill in everything you know: marriage dates, migration dates, immigration, birth dates of children, death dates of parents, real estate purchases, military service ... the list can go on, but you get the idea.
- ✓ Insert historical and social events that are pertinent to and affected your ancestor's life. Do not list extraneous events that are irrelevant.

WRITING A LIFE

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Personal events likely played a greater role in shaping your ancestor. Those life events, such as the death of a close friend or relative, financial problems, disability, marital issues, and personal impact from disasters can significantly impact your ancestor's life.

Your ancestor was not an island. The family and the community both impacted him/her just as your ancestor impacted the family and the community. Learn all you can about your ancestor's parents, siblings, spouse, and children. Each of these people had an impact on your ancestor's life.

As you review your documents chronologically, and add pieces of information to the timeline, keep in mind the idea that your ancestor was a piece of a larger whole. Don't remove him/her from context.

AN OUTLINE IS YOUR ROADMAP

Just as most people would not go on vacation without a road map, many writers would not write a book without first creating an outline. Working from an outline will give you direction.

Forget about the outlines your English teacher required in high school. This one needn't be formal and structured. This outline is simply a way to organize your thoughts and map out a plan for your narrative.

Keep your research notes and timelines handy while writing your outline. Begin with the main points you want to cover. Then fill in details under each of these points. Sort these details in the order you want to write about them. They needn't necessarily be in chronological order. Be creative when writing your story.

When you write, keep your outline handy. Tweak it as you write, adding details as they come to mind. Your success as a writer will be enhanced with the practice of using an outline to guide you along the path.

CREATE A WRITING SCHEDULE YOU CAN LIVE WITH.

Decide how much time each week you want to spend writing your family history. It could be an hour, a few hours, or a whole day. Schedule an appointment with yourself to write and mark it on your calendar.

Think about the best time of day to write. Are you an early bird whose creative juices run rampant along with your morning coffee? Or do you have a clearer mind after lunch before the pace of the day picks back up? Perhaps you are a night owl who prefers to write into the wee hours of the morning. It doesn't matter when you write, just that you do it. So think about a time of day that would work well, when other demands of your busy life aren't tugging at you, and write at that time.

Whatever you decide, write your plans into your schedule. Set aside that time just as you would a visit to the doctor or the hairdresser. Don't let the phone, or the children, or your friends interrupt you. The answering machine can answer your phone calls, and the doorbell was probably just a solicitor.

Immerse yourself into your writing, into the lives of your ancestors. You'll be so happy you did when you begin to see the pages of your written family history become a book.

TIPS TO WRITE EFFECTIVELY

- ✓ Don't worry about writing chronologically, or in the order that follows your outline. You can put your pages in order later.
- ✓ Start with what's easy. Look over your outline and begin writing with an easy, familiar topic. This is the best way to get your style established.
- ✓ Be specific about details. Describe your settings using the five senses: taste, touch, smell, sight, sound.
- ✓ Write as though you're telling a story. Don't focus on your verbiage—just tell the story. You can edit later.
- ✓ Be sure to include one or more social history topics in your writing.
- ✓ If you reach a roadblock, set your writing aside for a while. Work on another section and come back to the one you got stuck on later. A fresh mind and new attitude can propel you beyond that roadblock.
- ✓ Your writing will become more natural the more you write. Make time every day to write, to develop your style. The more you write the easier the task will become.
- ✓ Keep a journal to write down those ideas that come to mind during the day. The journal can be as simple as a small spiral notebook that fits into your purse or pocket. Or you might invest in a pretty hardcover journal found in many stationery stores. Regardless of the style you choose, keep it close at hand. Memories and thoughts for your family history will pop into your head when you least expect it. You won't want to forget them, so write them down.
- ✓ Let your thoughts flow while in a writing session. This is not the time to get bogged down with grammar and syntax. You can fine tune your writing later during the editing process.

WRITE NOW! Don't wait until your research is done before you start writing. Begin writing with the information you have collected to date. You can add other details as your research progresses. The important thing is to begin writing to preserve the research that is complete.