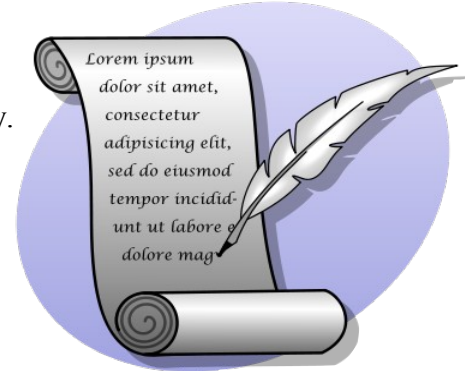


Writing a Page-Turning (But True) Family History

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The best way to ensure your family history research survives and is appreciated is by putting it in an easily digested format. The most effective option may be a well-written family history. But how can you create one that is both informative and interesting? Here are some steps that can make your family history a page-turner - without consigning it to the fiction section.



1. Form Your Vision

A. Select Your Subject and Scope

The first thing you must do is decide who you are writing about. More is not always better. Select realistic parameters, taking into consideration length and the amount of material available. You don't have to write a family history that includes every person on your family tree.

Remember: Completing a 20-page family history will have more value to your family than intending to write a 200-page family history.

Some options to consider:

- A biography (or autobiography)
- The story of one family group
- Descendents from one particular ancestor
- Ancestors of one particular person (out to a certain number of generations)
- The female or male only line on one side of the family
- The family in a certain geographic location

B. Format

We will focus on family histories, but remember that there are other projects you could undertake to gather and tell your family's story. Some include:

- Collections of letters
- Scrapbooks
- Cookbooks with family stories

Even with a written family history, you still must make decisions about how it will be formatted. Think about these at the beginning so you know where you are going with your project. But, be willing to make changes as your family history takes shape. Some things to consider:

- What length are you aiming for? A few pages or a few hundred pages?
- How will the information be presented? Will it be a bound book? Spiral bound? Collected in a binder with photos and documents?

Remember: There is no one right way. Be open minded and flexible to find what works for you.

2. Gather the Information

If you want to write a thorough and interesting family history, you must collect thorough and interesting information! Remember that your ancestors were real people with personalities and emotions, not just names on documents.

A. Use the “Basic” Records Fully

Don’t just pull out the names, dates, and places. See what other clues might be hidden in the details of the records. Look for things such as occupations, causes of deaths, etc. Then do some research to find out what this meant in your ancestors’ lives.

B. Look for Records that Go Beyond Names and Dates

Are there other “unconventional” records available? Obviously, if there is an opportunity to interview people who knew your ancestor, be sure and do this. Look for school or employment records as well as minutes to meetings your ancestor attended. Property, probate, and pension records can give fascinating insights as well.

C. Use Supportive Records to Create Context

Read records and accounts that don’t even mention your ancestor! Gain background knowledge of the time and place they lived by reading general histories or local histories. Then, search for records written by others who shared experiences to get an “inside look” at what these experiences may have been like for them.

Remember: It’s much easier to keep track of sources as you go then to try to go back afterwards and figure out where everything came from.

Remember: Many family histories never get written because people are looking for “just one more piece of information” – or they want to find “all” the information about the family first. There is always another piece of information to find. Make a deadline for yourself to stop gathering information and start writing!

3. Shape Your Story

A. Choose Your Story Telling Method

When you are preparing to write your history, think of yourself as someone telling a story, not simply someone reciting information. You aren’t looking to prepare a research report, but to help people “get to know” this family. It’s okay to let your own personality and feelings come through. Some outside-the-box ideas include:

- Interweave your journey of discovery with your ancestors’ lives
- Flip through documents and consider your ancestor’s life at each point
- If available, intermix your ancestor’s own words (from an interview or written history) or the actual words from others you interviewed about the person
- Be creative!

Remember: Not all family histories need to start with “My great-grandmother was born on July 12, 1890 in Fremont, Utah...”

B. Create an Outline

Your outline doesn't have to follow correct outline format. This should just serve as a way to help you organize your material. And remember, you don't always need to write from start to finish. Write the sections you are "ready" to write first.

- If your family history covers more than one person or family, how will you divide it up?
- Do you want your material arranged chronologically? By topic? (with sections on family life, making a living, significant experiences, etc.) By geographic location?

C. Decide How To Document

If you want your end result to be something that helps others gain from you have done (and helps them avoid reinventing the wheel), you must provide documentation. In other words, you need to let the reader know where you got your information. There are numerous style guides you can follow to do this. Also decide if you want to use endnotes, footnotes, or some other method.

-*The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th edition. University of Chicago Press, 2003.

-*Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace* 2nd Edition by Elizabeth Shown Mills, Genealogical Publishing Company, 1997.

Remember: The important part isn't to have every comma correct, but to include enough information that someone else could find the information again.

4. Write the History

A. Create the Scene

Paint a full picture of your ancestors' lives by pulling in the information you gathered to create the environment around them. Describe their actual physical settings – what the countryside looked like, what the house looked (or smelled) like. But also create the scene beyond physical settings. How did they interact? What did they eat? What historical events affected their lives?

B. Put Emotion in the Story

Almost always, within the course of your research, you develop an emotional connection to your family. You come to see them as real people with emotions too. Let your readers experience the emotion. You can do this by including your own emotions and reactions or by inferring what your ancestors' emotions may have been.

C. Using Generalizations and Inferences (without compromising facts)

Rely on feelings or descriptions of others and draw conclusions about the situations.

Remember: Be sure to indicate that this "might have been" how your ancestor felt, or that you would "imagine" your ancestor reacted a certain way. Label conclusions you draw as your own interpretation.

D. Be Sensitive.

Consider who will read the history. You don't want to embarrass or offend anyone. This is especially important when you are writing about living people. Be sure to protect their privacy. Your family history isn't the place to reveal all the family's "skeletons in the closet" to the

world. Even when dealing with people who are not living, sometimes you must proceed carefully.

5. Polish Your Writing

You don't need to be a candidate for the next Pulitzer Prize to produce a valuable, meaningful family history that your family will treasure. However, here are some tips that can help you spruce up your final product.

Remember: Do your best writing, but don't let a lack of confidence in your writing skills prevent you from writing your family's history.

A. Proofread. This simple step can make a big difference in the quality of your finished product. I suggest reading the history out loud. When we read our own writing, we often substitute missing words and fix incorrect grammar in our minds without even realizing it. When you read out loud, you force yourself to slow down and focus on every word.

B. Tighten up and liven up your writing.

- Eliminate unnecessary words such as excessive adjectives or adverbs.
- Vary sentence structure.
- Substitute active verbs for passive verbs.

C. Ask someone else to read the "finished" history.

6. Share Your Masterpiece

You've done it now! You've created a wonderful family history. But your work isn't done yet. For your family to gain from your hard work, you must make sure they know it exists.

A. Pass it out.

Don't be reluctant to charge a reasonable fee.

B. Contact groups that would be interested in the history.

This might include family associations, local historical and family history societies etc.

C. Consider posting it online – or at least posting information about it.

Resources:

There are many places you can go for more information. Here are just a few suggestions:

- Cyndi's List under "Writing Your Family History" at <http://www.cyndislist.com/writing.htm>
- You Can Write Your Family History* by Sharon DeBartolo Carmack (Betterway Books, 2003).
- For All Time: A Complete Guide to Writing Your Family History* by Charley Kempthorne (Boynton/Cook, 1996).

George Orwell's 6 Rules on Writing

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech that you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.