

Writing an Engaging Family History

RT2656 • Penelope L. Stratton

Getting started

- Make mental shift from research to writing: now you are an author.
 - Analyze your goals: audience, time frame, materials.
- ☞ **Tip:** Look at published memoirs and family histories to get a sense of format and writing style.
- *Angela's Ashes* (McCourt); *Red House* (Messer); *The Big House* (Colt)
 - Historical nonfiction by David McCullough, Nathaniel Philbrick, Doris Kearns Goodwin, others

Possible formats for the narrative

- Register (descendancy) style or *ahnentafel*, with narrative incorporated within family groups or individual sketches
- Two-part work: Narrative family history and/or memoir, followed by genealogical treatment
- Entire book as narrative
 - Direct line of descent, with one chapter per person
 - Single family story
 - Thematic narrative

☞ **Tip:** Use boxed inserts.

Where to obtain materials: text

- Records: censuses, vital records, deeds, military records, shipping manifests, wills, etc.
- Family papers, diaries, letters
- Books: regional and town histories
- Interviews with living relatives; questionnaires completed by relatives

Looking for themes

- Historical themes: wars, migrations, politics, etc.; local/national/world
- Stories implied by census records, deeds, ship's manifests, etc.
- Family values or themes mentioned in letters, diaries, interviews: e.g., home/family, patriotism, religion, occupation . . .
- Stories told by photos

Determining your format and outline

- Create a timeline.
- Make a mind map or outline.

☞ **Tip:** Start small; break your tasks into manageable pieces.

Enhancing your text with images: where to find them

- Family papers, diaries, letters
- Old books
- Libraries, historical societies, and other repositories
- Internet searches
- Relatives' collections

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☞ **Tip:** Be aware of copyright law. Do not download and use photos without appropriate permission.

The writing process

- Be mindful the “arc” of your story: beginning, middle, end.
- When in doubt, write chronologically.

☞ **Tip:** Look for a significant event/theme in a person’s life and begin there, then go back and fill in details.

☞ **Tip:** Remember that you are writing *nonfiction*. Don’t suppose too much.

- Be sure to document your facts.
- Provide family charts where necessary for clarity.
- Edit! Self-edit and ask someone else to read your material. Read some aloud to see how it sounds.

Tips for more compelling writing

- Be concise; think about what to omit.
 - Use quotations to best effect—and don’t quote too much.
 - Use the active voice.
 - Avoid beginning sentences with “there is,” “there are,” “it is,” and the like.
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Activities to help get you started

- Practice by summarizing census and deed data, turning the information into a narrative paragraph or two.
- Write a short piece, 400 to 500 words, on a family story. Examples:
<http://vita-brevis.org/2015/09/whats-in-a-photo/#more-4767>
<http://vita-brevis.org/2015/08/objects-and-their-history/>
<http://vita-brevis.org/2015/03/a-surprising-brush-with-history/#more-3409>
<http://vita-brevis.org/2014/09/dam-humbug/#more-1970>

Resources

- Daily Writing Tips, <http://www.dailywritingtips.com/category/writing-basics/>
- The Purdue Online Writing Lab, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>
- NEHGS [Writing and Publishing](#) Subject Guide at AmericanAncestors.org
- [Guide to Genealogical Writing](#) (Stratton & Hoff), available from AmericanAncestors.org

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