

Writing Your Family History From Idea To Manuscript

Written by Annette Madden
Saturday, 17 May 2003 14:37

Target Audience and Choosing a Focus

Your first task is to decide who you are writing the book for: you, your immediate family, a particular surname group?

Will you sell it to family members only or to the general public? Will you publish it yourself or present it to a publishing house? Is it a book for attendees at your next family reunion or is it the next "Cane River"?

Do you want to trace one surname completely or several connected families or all your family lines? (Recommendation: Focus on one family line at a time and publish as you go.)

Do you want to include all the descendants in a particular family line or a certain number of generations of a particular ancestor? Will you only include your direct ancestor (such a book will have limited appeal)?

Do you want to do an entire history or just trace the family while they lived in a particular place or during a particular time period?

Note: Do not include detailed information on living members of the family without the express written permission of those members, especially if the book is for public distribution.

Organizing your research

Creating a timeline/biographical outline for each ancestor you plan to include in your family history book will help you spot gaps in your research.

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An outline allows you to create a map for your book. Remember that outlines are flexible, not etched in concrete, and that you can add to, delete from, or edit them as you plan and write the book. An outline can be a detailed or as simple as you like.

Interview as many living relatives and friends as possible for information on more recent ancestors and descendants. They may also have letters, cards, obituaries, photos, etc., that may be helpful.

Don't wait until all your research is done. You have probably already figured out that your research will never be done! New information is always coming to light. That being the case, some of the information in your book may be theories or guesses, so be sure to say so.

Social history:

Find and include background information about territories and eras in which your ancestors lived. Include any historical events that would have impacted their lives.

Interview living relatives for social context. What was the daily routine on the farm? What was it like working on the railroad? What was the move from the farm to the city like?

Starting to write

Start with what's easy. Be specific about details.

Write as though you're telling a story. Remember that a good story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Don't worry about punctuation, proper sequence of events, etc. You can edit later.

If you reach a roadblock, set your writing aside for a while. Come back later with a fresh mind.

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Create a writing schedule. Schedule an appointment with yourself to write and mark it on your calendar. Find your writing style: one hour several times a week or one long session each week. Don't be interrupted, if at all possible.

Keep a journal with you to write down thoughts that occur during the day.

Who to start with:

Is there one ancestor or relative that particularly interests you or has a compelling story?

Did one of your ancestors have a unique line of work?

Do you have a group of ancestors that move to the same area? Write about this group and their interactions.

Note: Be considerate about what you include in a published history. Don't include stories that could offend or upset living relatives.

Editing

Read through your work. Read out loud to yourself. Have a friend or relative read your draft for continuity and clarity.

Look at your sentence structure. Is it too long or too short?

Look at the flow from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph.

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Check for uninteresting or irrelevant sections. Don't be afraid to edit them out.

Be sure you have been accurate with your content.

Do a spell check and a grammar check if your word processing program has them.

Look for consistency in personal name spelling.

Choose one date format and apply it throughout your book.

Proofread for punctuation errors.

If you are self-publishing a book for sale to the general public, you may want to hire a professional editor and copyeditor.

Layouts and Formats

- Narrative: Typically tells a story about a group of ancestors. It can be about one family line or several, and can include as many generations as you wish.
- Memoir: Talks about part of one person's life.
- Biography: Focuses on a single ancestor's entire life.
- Cookbook: Includes family recipes and the stories of the people who created them.
- Photo Album: Tell your story using photos

What do you want to include?

- Narratives/biographies
- Family group sheets

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- Descendant charts (use established genealogical formats: NGS Quarterly, Register Report, Ahnentafel (ancestry))
- Documents
- Photos
- Letters
- Signatures
- Physical descriptions
- Maps: town, county, state, plat, migration
- Social history
- Drawings or pictures of houses, homesteads

Suggested format:

1. Table of Contents
2. Narratives
3. Family charts, descendant charts
4. Interviews/Narratives of living descendants
5. Appendices (additional photos, pedigree charts, documents, etc.)
6. Bibliography (books or other materials you used in your research)
7. Documentation (your sources of information) Can be left out if only for family, not other researchers
8. Index: easiest to use a genealogy program that does this automatically. If it does not list women under maiden and married name, create a separate list to cross reference.

FROM MANUSCRIPT TO BOOK

Publishing

Genealogy database programs:

Can you export your data to a word processor or desktop publishing program? If so, you can manually go in and make changes. Caution: if you change the page structure, do you mess up the entire index? Or will it create a new index after you make your changes? Two programs which will create new indexes are Genbook and KinWrite Plus.

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Self-publishing:

The Xerox method: Print out on your computer and make copies at your neighborhood copy store. They can also do binding. 3-ring binders are great if you intend to add more information later.

Consider hiring an editor and copyeditor. You can also hire someone to do an index if your software does not support it and you don't want to do it yourself.

Copyrights cost \$20 and can be obtained at: Register of Copyrights, Copyright Office, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20559

You can obtain an ISBN at: US ISBN Agency, 630 Central Avenue, New Providence, NJ 07974, 877/310-7333, isbn-san@bowker.com

Finding a printer:

Check with local printers re: cost for number of pages, page size, hard or soft or spiral bound. Comparison shop.

On-demand publishing:

There will be less up-front costs. Books are printed as ordered. The author sets the price. Revisions can be made as needed. Comparison shop.

If you have written the next "Cane River", you will want to present your work to a commercial publishing house. The best way to do this is through an agent. You can find information on publishing houses and agents in *Writer's Market*, which should be available at your library reference desk.

Useful websites

[Share Your Family Story](#)

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[Creating a Biographical Sketch](#)

[Creating a Biographical Sketch, Part 2](#)

Useful books

Complete Workbook for Doing Your Own Family History, The; by Lynda Fay Katers

For All Time: A Complete Guide to Writing Your Family History; by Charley Kempthorne

How to Publish and Market Your Family History; by Carl Boyer

How to Write and Publish Your Family Book; by Genealogy Publishing Service

Producing a Quality Family History; by Patricia L. Hatcher

Write It Yourself II: A Guide to Compiling and Publishing Your Genealogy or Family History; by Wiley R. Pope