

Getting Started with Family History Writing: Tips for Beginners

Duane Roen, Professor of English
Dean, College of Letters and Sciences
Dean, University College
Vice Provost, Polytechnic campus
Coordinator, Project for Writing and Recording Family History
Arizona State University

duane.roen@asu.edu

480-727-6513

Offering Helpful Feedback to Writers

1. This resonates with me:
2. I like
3. Questions:
4. Suggestions:

Getting Started with Writing about Family History: Invention Activities

A Memorable Family Member

1. List a few family members who evoke the most memories for you—memories that you'd like to share with your siblings, cousins, children, and/or grandchildren.
2. Choose one of these family members: _____
3. What did this person look like?
4. What roles did this person play in the family?
5. What are some words, phrases, or common expressions that you associate with this person?
6. What kinds of activities did you do with this person?
7. What did this person like to do most in life?
8. Where did you like to go with this person, or what did you like to do with this person?
9. What is the single most memorable event that you associate with this person?
10. What feelings come to mind when you think of this person?

A Memorable Family Event

1. List a few family events that hold the most memories for you?
2. Choose one of these events: _____
3. When did this event occur?
4. Where did this event occur?
5. Who participated in this event?
6. How did you participate in this event? What was your role?
7. How have your thoughts about this event changed over time?
8. What is the significance of this event to you?

9. What is the significance of this event to other family members?

A Memorable Family Place

1. List a few places that have the most family memories for you.
2. Choose one of these places: _____
3. What do you see when you look around in this place?
4. What smells do you associate with this place?
5. What sounds do you associate with this place?
6. What family members come to mind when you think of this place?
7. What are some family activities or events that have occurred in this place?
8. What feelings do you associate with this place?
9. What is most memorable about this place for you?

Biographical/Autobiographical Poem

Here's the form:

- Line 1: (First name)
- Line 2: (Several traits of this person)
- Line 3: (Relationship to someone else)
- Line 4: Who loves (several people or things)
- Line 5: Who feels
- Line 6: Who needs
- Line 7: Who fears
- Line 8: Who gives
- Line 9: Who would like to see
- Line 10: Resident of
- Line 11: (Last name)

Here's an example:

Doris,
 Norwegian, Swedish, Dutch, and English in her ancestry;
 Daughter of Walter and Lucille (Bystrom) Bennett, wife of Harley;
 Who loved spending time in the country, cooking for a threshing crew, and walking for hours;
 Who felt happiest when she was talking with friends and family;
 Who needed a cure for a disease that robs far too many minds;
 Who feared snakes and swimming holes;
 Who freely gave her time to children with special needs;
 Who wanted to see an end to suffering and pain in the world;
 Lifelong resident of Pierce and St. Croix counties in Wisconsin;
 Roen.

Daily Journaling: Recording Family History as It Happens

Journal Jar (a sampling)

Courtesy of Janet McNaughton, Tempe Chapter, Family History Society of Arizona

Between the ages of 5 and 10, what was your favorite activity?

Describe a sound from your childhood. What was it? When did you hear it? What does it bring to mind?

Describe a childhood birthday.

Describe a childhood Christmas.

Describe a favorite childhood friend and some things you did with that friend.

Daily Journaling to Record Family History as It Happens

Principle: “Memory is always partial and selective.”

– C.K. Reisman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*

Purpose: To let your descendants know what your life/your family’s life was like.

Concern: What do you want descendants to know about your life?

Sample Questions for Daily Journaling:

1. Among your activities today, which ones are indicative of 2013?
2. What did you do today that reveals something about your personality?
3. What happened in the world today that made you pause to think?
4. What was the weather like today?
5. What television shows did you watch today? Why did you watch them? How did they make you feel? How did they make you think?
6. What did your children/grandchildren do today that shows their personalities?
7. What did your children/grandchildren do today that made you reflect on who they are?
8. What did your children/grandchildren do today that made you proud?

9. What cognitive, social, or language development did you see in one of your children/grandchildren today?
10. What did your children do today that caused you to reflect on your parenting?
11. What happened on this date in history? In the family? Locally? Regionally? Nationally? Internationally?
12. What well-known person died today?
13. What was it like at work today?
14. If you called a sibling or parent today, what did you talk about?
15. If you thought about something from your childhood today, what was it? How did it make you think or feel?
16. If you listened to an “oldies” (50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s) radio station today, which song made you think about your earlier years? What memories came back to you?
17. If you thought about an ancestor today, what memories came back to you?
18. If you emailed a family member today, what did you write?
19. If you received an email or letter from a family member today, what did that person write?
20. If you noticed a family photo today, what memories did it evoke?
21. What piece of good news did you receive today?
22. What did you eat today?
23. What did you wear today?
24. What recreational activities did you do today?
25. What book did you read today? Summarize what you read.
26. What newspaper did you read today? Summarize the most memorable story.
27. What movies are popular this week? If you have seen any of them, give a brief synopsis.

Questions to Generate Enriching Details About Family History

1. Who is the most interesting family member you have known? What made that person so interesting?
2. How did you meet the love of your life?
3. What is the funniest story in your family's history?
4. Who is the funniest person in your family's history? Tell a story about the funniest thing this person ever did.
5. What is the proudest moment in your family's history? Narrate this event.
6. What is the saddest moment in your family's history? Narrate this event.
7. What is the greatest hardship that your family has endured?
8. What are some of your fondest memories about school?
9. What was the most pivotal event that led you to your career?
10. What was your favorite family vacation? Describe it.
11. What is your favorite family photo? What story is related to that photo?
12. Why did your grandparents/parents live in _____ ?
13. Why did your _____ (some ancestor) come to America?
14. What was happening in America when _____ came to America?
15. What family tradition has been maintained the longest in your family?
16. What was happening in the world on the day that _____ was born?
17. What is the most memorable war story that one of your relatives ever told you?
18. What is your most precious family heirloom? What makes it so treasured?
19. What is the most interesting family letter that you have found? What makes it so fascinating?
20. What were your parents' best parenting skills?
21. What was your nickname as a child? How did you get that nickname?
22. What is the most interesting fictional account of some family story?
23. What do census records indicate about _____'s occupation?
24. What was that occupation like when your ancestor was in it?

25. What are some relevant historical details about the place where _____ lived?
26. What was happening in America in the year _____? (Do a Google search on a year.)
27. What was happening in a specific country in the year _____? (Search on country and year.)

Organizing Your Family's History: Some Options

Some Organizational Patterns and Genres

To enrich any of the following, weave social/cultural history into the family history.

1. Reference Genealogy (Carmack)

This is a “bare-bones” genealogy—names, dates, places (Carmack, p. 8).

2. Genealogical Narrative (Carmack)

This is an extension of a reference genealogy, including biographical information and discussion of research methods (Carmack, p. 8).

3. Life Story Writing (Carmack)

This category includes biographies, personal memoirs, and autobiographies (Carmack, p. 8).

4. Family History Narrative (Carmack)

This is well-documented and tells a family's story (Carmack, p. 8).

5. Family History Memoir (Carmack)

This focuses on the writer's quest to search for ancestors (Carmack, p. 9).

6. Edited Letters and Diaries (Carmack)

The editor uses documents to tell the family's story (Carmack, p. 9).

7. Fictional Family Sagas Based on Truth (Carmack)

It is not documented, but it may include a list of sources consulted (Carmack, p. 9).

8. Straightforward Chronology for the Entire Family

Start with the first known date for your family's history and move forward year-by-year until you reach the present.

9. Straightforward Chronology for Each Individual in the Family

Beginning with the earliest known ancestors in your family's history, narrate each person's life from birth to death.

10. A Collection of Stories (an anthology)

11. Organizing Chapters

- Chronologically
- Thematically (e.g., "Favorite Family Recipes")
- Metaphorically (e.g., "Navigating Rough Waters")
- Associatively—one idea leading to another

12. Autobiography or Memoir?

Autobiography is a chronological narrative that covers the writer's full life. Memoir focuses on part of a writer's life—either a span of years or a theme.

Using Narrative Techniques for Sections of Your Family's History

1. Straightforward Narrative

- Narrate the experience from beginning to end.
- Relate key details surrounding the event or experience.
- Note the impact of the experience on your life or the lives of others who were part of the narrative.
- Reflect on the significance of the experience.

2. Flashback

- Begin in the present.
- Flash back to the events and experiences you want to share and relate them in sequence.
- Relate key details surrounding the event or experience.
- Look back on those events and experiences in terms of the impact they had on you and your life or the lives of other family members.
- Reflect on the significance of the experiences.

3. Begin with a Crisis

- Begin with the crisis point in the narrative.
- Go back to the beginning and tell the story to the end.
- Relate key details surrounding the event or experience.

- Reflect on the significance of the events and experiences.

Some Resources

- Baker, Russell. *Growing Up*. New York: Signet, 1984.
- Carmack, Sharon Carmack. *You Can Write Your Family History*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2003.
- Conklin, Nancy Faires, and Margaret A. Lourie. *A Host of Tongues: Language Communities in the United States*. New York: The Free Press, 1983.
- Cox, Meg. *The Book of New Family Traditions*. Philadelphia: Running Press Books, 2003.
- Frankel, Stuart. *From One Generation to Another*. East Hampton, NY: Hidden Pond Press, 2005.
- Goldrup, Lawrence P. *Writing the Family Narrative*. Provo, UT: Ancestry Publishing, 1987.
- Hatcher, Patricia Law. *Producing a Quality Family History*. Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1996.
- Hobbs, Catherine. *The Elements of Autobiography and Life Narratives*. New York: Pearson, 2005.
- Kane, William. *Journeys Taken: The Search for a Better Life: New France to New England, 1600-2000*. Tempe, AZ: Crowsnest Press, 2002.
- Kane, William. *The Brothers and Sisters: A Story of Two Immigrant Families*. Tempe, AZ: Crowsnest, 2003.
- Kemphorne, Charley. *For All Time: A Complete Guide to Writing Your Family History*. Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 1996.
- Kyle, Nicole. *Writing Family History Made Easy: A Beginner's Guide*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2007.
- Martinson, Floyd M. *Growing Up in Norway, 800 to 1990*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992.
- McCourt, Frank. *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.
- Mencken, H. L. *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*. 4th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937.
- Miller, Brenda, and Suzanne Paola. *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.
- Polking, Kirk. *Writing Family Histories and Memoirs*. Cincinnati, Betterway Books, 1995.
- Rainer, Tristine. *Your Life as Story: Discovering the "New Autobiography" and Writing Memoir as Literature*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1997.
- Simpson, Bland. *The Mystery of Beautiful Nell Cropsey: A Nonfiction Novel*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993.
- Sturdevant, Katherine Scott. Cincinnati: *Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History*. Betterway Books, 2000.
- Thiel, Diane. *Winding Roads: Exercises in Writing Creative Nonfiction*. New York: Longman, 2008.
- Trillin, Calvin. *Family Man*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.
- Walls, Jeannette. *The Glass Castle*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.
- Walls, Jeannette. *Half-Broke Horses*. New York: Scribner, 2009.
- Wiebe, Katie Funk. *How to Write Your Personal or Family History: If You Don't Do It, Who Will?* Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2009.
- Zempel, Solveig, ed. and trans. *In Their Own Words: Letters from Norwegian Immigrants*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.