



Writing Tips from Genealogy Ensemble

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Getting Started on Big Writing Projects

Don't expect to produce the perfect family history right away. Get down a first draft, but expect to rewrite it many times and make many revisions until it flows smoothly.

Have a feel for the scope of your project and your audience.

Don't take on something that is beyond you and then get discouraged. You can start with a project of limited scope that you publish online, in a binder or as a scrapbook for the grandchildren, and then expand on it later.

Break down your project into small chunks – a profile of one grandparent, for example, this week, an uncle or great-grandparent next month. You can build up your family history one profile at a time, then link them together. Or, if all you have is raw census and BMD information, make a simple narrative with that information and add other details if and when you find them.

Start with one person at a time

Create a basic genealogical profile of each person in your tree, including notes on the highlights of their lives (where they lived, education, employment, appearance, etc.)

You can later build on these notes, but for now this will clarify what you already know about each person and highlight gaps where you need to do further research. Identify sources for each piece of information and flag items that need confirmation.

Jot down reminders to yourself of interesting anecdotes or character traits. These notes may point to individuals who could be central to your story or sidebars worth expanding. Their stories will eventually bring your family history to life.

Whenever possible, let each person tell their own stories through letters, diaries or, if you have interviewed them, in their own words.

When you introduce an individual into your narrative or begin a book chapter, do not start with the person's birth. Introduce the person with an anecdote, description or statement about his or her significance in the family story. Then you can flash back to describe the person's birth, life and death in more detail.

Add multimedia objects for interest

Use photos to illustrate your project, including photos of individuals, their homes, interests and occupations. Perhaps they had their own scrapbooks or souvenirs such as train tickets, newspaper clippings, etc. that you can scan or photograph.

Incorporate family tree charts into your project too. Small charts of branches of the family can help your readers make sense of relationships. A large chart with many generations provides an overall view of the family.

Use chronological time and events to link people

Create timelines of local events and regional or national histories. You need to know whether a certain ancestor suffered through an economic recession, for example, or left his or her homeland

because it was in the midst of revolution. Knowing the contexts of your ancestors' lives will help you make sense of the decisions they made.

Clear, Concise and Lively Prose

or, How to Keep Your Readers Awake and Bring Your Ancestors to Life

Choose verbs carefully

Dynamic verbs are key to strong story-telling. They include action words such as carry, explore and launch and can be either transitive or intransitive.

Appear, seem, sound, show, become, remain are **static verbs** that can weaken your sentences:

He appeared angry.
His face turned red with anger.

Try not to overuse the verb **to be**, including *is*, *were*, and *am*:

Uncle Joe was the kind of person who liked to gamble.
Uncle Joe played blackjack at the casino every weekend.

Choose a precise verb over a verb and an adverb.

Grandfather was very proud of Ted's accomplishments.
Grandfather beamed whenever he talked of Ted's accomplishments.

Would, suggesting a habitual action, is often unnecessary.

Grandmother would give us goodnight hugs.
Grandmother's goodnight hugs smelled of lavender soap.

Tighten sentences

Eliminate adverbs that mean the same thing as the verbs they modify:

Yelled (loudly), met (together), (gently) caressed, wept (sadly).

Avoid qualifiers such as very, rather, slightly.

Eliminate redundant adjectives: free gift, true fact, convicted felon.

Eliminate redundant words

The reason is because.....because
There is no doubt that.....doubtless
Due to the fact that.....because
As to whether.....whether
Tidy in appearance.....tidy
At this point in time.....now
For the purpose of providing.....to provide
He is someone who enjoyshe enjoys
Experienced veteran.....veteran

Totally unique.....unique

Other **meaningless adjectives to avoid**: distinctive, unique, interesting, special, auspicious, historic.

Avoid the passive voice.

We were asked for tea every Wednesday by Aunt Mary.
Aunt Mary invited us for tea every Wednesday.

Replace generic adjectives with specifics:

She wore a colourful jacket.
She wore a red, blue and white jacket.

His speech was boring.
By the mid-point in his speech, several members of the audience had nodded off.

Add colour

Details add interest.

She worked on Broadway for three years.
She acted in Broadway productions such as My Fair Lady and Mame from 1965 to 1968.

Show, don't tell.

Afternoon tea at Aunt Mary's was an old-fashioned occasion.
Aunt Mary served afternoon tea in the drawing room, pouring the tea from a rosebud-covered teapot while Mother passed the cinnamon toast.

Don't forget beauty, purpose, rhythm and surprise

Remember that readers read stories to themselves. They react to the sound of your words, and will appreciate an author who carries them along with awe-inspiring, careful or shocking prose, depending on your purpose.

Readers need to feel like they're in the midst of a moving lively story. By varying the lengths of sentences, paragraphs and chapters, you can force them to slow down or speed up as the story trajectory requires.

They also want to feel as though your story means something to their lives. Strive to offer insight about culture, history or personality.

If you can't make them think deeply, at least make them laugh, cry or shout out loud.

Great Beginnings in Non-fiction

A dancer who describes himself as a singer will do neither well.

To insist on describing ourselves as something we are not is to embrace existential illiteracy. We are not a civilization of British or French or European inspiration. We never have been. Our society is not an expression of peace, order and good government. It never was.

A FAIR COUNTRY BY JOHN RALSTON SAUL, 2008

Canadian nature writer Ernest Thompson Seton had an odd bill presented to him on his twenty-first birthday. It was a record kept by his father of all the expenses connected with young Ernest's childhood and youth, including the fee charged by the doctor for delivering him. Even more oddly, Ernest is said to have paid it. I used to think that Mr. Seton Senior was a jerk, but now I'm wondering, What if he was—in principle—right? Are we in debt to anyone or anything for the bare fact of our existence? If so, what do we owe, and to whom or to what? And how should we pay?

PAYBACK BY MARGARET ATWOOD, 2008

My wife's father is dying, and I can think of little else, because I love him and I love my wife. Once or twice a week, Ruth and I drive the forty miles of winding roads to visit him in the nursing home.

THE FORCE OF SPIRIT BY SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS, ORION, 1999

In my memory, it was a Thursday evening at Harbourfront, Toronto's arts centre at the edge of Lake Ontario. Greg Gatenby, artistic director of Harbourfront's literary events, had organized a reading in support of Abbey Bookstore, a bilingual Canadian bookstore in Paris. Many of the well-known Toronto writers had been invited to read.

THE RED SHOES BY ROSEMARY SULLIVAN, 1998

I sat at the speakers' table and noticed him come through the door. He surveyed the large room with some distaste and just a touch of embarrassment. Several hundred men and women were milling around breakfast tables.

SPITE HOUSE BY MONIKA JENSEN-STEVENSON, 1997

For half a century now, a new consciousness has been entering the human world, a new awareness that can only be called transcendent, spiritual. If you find yourself reading this book, then perhaps you already sense what is happening, already feel it inside.

THE CELESTINE PROPHECY BY JAMES REDFIELD, 1993

Home was a yellow bungalow with chokecherry trees and rhubarb bushes, and a round hole in the fence where a pair of wrens, every year, would try and fail to raise a brood under the interested gaze of our cats. Home was a hundred yards from the South Saskatchewan River: late at night I would turn and listen to the drifting gulls or the wail of an ambulance as it hurtled victims down the riverside road to the hospital nearby.

BEYOND FORGET BY MARK ABLEY, 1986

“I like to fly—and I’m restless.” Amelia Earhart’s entire life had that restless quality to it, as if she were searching for her role as a woman in modern America. “She was in rebellion against a world which had been made, for women, too safe, too unexciting,” observed an editorial in the New York Times when she was lost at sea in 1937. “She wanted to dare all that a man would dare.” That quest characterized her whole life, not just her last flight. Amelia Earhart could never have lived a conventional female life.

STILL MISSING BY SUSAN WARE, 1993

On that day, her last, Georgina Dinsborough was three months into her ninety-first year. She was a marvel. Everyone told her so and, though the reiteration grew tiresome, Georgina herself acknowledged that in many ways she was. Marvellously lucky, at least, for how much of her reasonable steady health and mental clearness she owed to nature, how much to the habit, so long part of her, of weeding out any hint of frailty or contradiction, she didn’t know.

SO MANY HAVE DIED BY JOYCE MARSHALL, 1984

We can’t all be Marco Polo of Freya Stark but millions of us are travellers nevertheless. The great travellers, living and dead, are in a class by themselves, unequalled professionals. We are amateurs and though we too have our moments of glory we also tire, our spirits sag, we have our moments of rancour. Who has not heard, felt, though or said, in the course of a journey, words like: ‘They’ve lost the luggage again, for God’s sake?’ ‘You mean we came all this way just to see this?’ ‘Why do they have to make so damn much noise?’ ‘Call that a room with a view?’ ‘I’d rather kick his teeth in than give him a tip.’

TRAVELS WITH MYSELF AND ANOTHER BY MARTHA GELLHORN, 1978

One of the most fateful errors of our age is the belief that ‘the problem of production’ has been solved. Not only is this belief firmly held by people remote from production and therefore professionally unacquainted with the facts – it is held by virtually all the experts, the captains of industry, the economic managers in the governments of the world, the academic and not-so-academic economists, not to mention the economic journalists.

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL BY E.F. SCHUMACHER, 1974

Beaton had somehow eluded captivity—the English suspected that no great efforts had been made to hold him—and in Pitscottie’s words, he began to rage as any lion loosed of his bond; in short he was once more in a position to galvanise Catholic pro-French opinion.

MARY QUEEN OF SCOTTS BY ANTONIA FRASER, 1969

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message.

UNDERSTANDING MEDIA BY MARSHALL MCLUHAN, 1964

The subject of this essay is not the so-called “liberty of the will,” so unfortunately opposed to the misnamed doctrine of philosophical necessity; but civil, or social liberty: the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual.

ON LIBERTY BY JOHN STUART MILL, 1859

Organizing Your Family History Research

1. Before you start writing, your research files need to **be well organized** so you can find details quickly when you need them.
2. One way to organize files is by family name, then separate each name into generations, places or time periods. Important individuals can have their own file folders. You can also have folders with background on the places where they lived and aspects of their lives you plan to explore (eg – the Scottish textile industry, farming in Upper Canada, the Riel Rebellion). When you start working on a particular family, you can separate a large file into narrower topics. Meanwhile, put the other files you aren't using away somewhere so you don't get confused and overwhelmed.
3. **Decide on the structure and limits of your project.** What kind of project do you want to undertake and who is your audience? For example, do you want to focus on one family surname, all the descendants of one ancestor, or start with yourself and look back at your own grandparents and great-grandparents? Will you include aunts, uncles and cousins?
4. If you are undertaking a big project, spend a lot of time before you start writing going over your research material. Take notes on what you have, subject headings and facts that catch your interest. Try to get the overall picture of your project in your head. Then write an **outline**. Again, start with an overall outline of chapter headings, then go into deeper detail. All the effort you put into getting organized now will pay off later.
5. As you write, question every statement you make: how do you know it, and how sure are you that it is accurate? Preferably, you should have more than one source for a statement. If census records, for example, disagree with the family bible, acknowledge there is a discrepancy. If you are speculating, make that clear. Keep in mind that many Internet resources and books are themselves incorrect. And family stories are wonderful, but only as reliable as the memory and biases of the storyteller, so verify as much as you can in newspaper reports and other sources.
6. **Cite your sources.** It is easier to do this as you go along rather than leave it to the end. Even if you are just writing for your grandchildren and don't want to use proper footnotes, keep a separate sheet on which you state, for example, "On page 4, Robert McLeod's birth date is taken from the Old Parish Records, accessed on www.familysearch.org on Jan. 14, 2012." If someone else later expands on your research, he or she will be extremely grateful.
7. **Back up your work regularly** on a memory stick or external hard drive.
8. If all of the above sounds too overwhelming, just pick your most fascinating ancestor and start writing. Give yourself small, easily achievable goals and plan to assemble your material later.

9. Just do it.

Writer Dilemmas

As you write, consider the following questions:

1. Where is the line between fiction and non-fiction and how can authors avoid crossing it or make it clear they have?
2. How do you make narrative compelling?
3. Can you make assumptions clear without splattering your text with maybe, possibly and perhaps?
4. When do you stop researching and start writing?
5. Is there a difference between family history writing and historical literature?
6. What is an author's responsibility to those about whom we write?
7. How do you respect previous eras?
8. Are there rules for genealogical writers?
9. Why must we always check with living sources prior to publication?

Copyright

Copyright or *droits d'auteur* refers to the legal protection of a particular expression of an idea or information. It covers the expression of text, pictures and performances. In Canada, it lasts for seventy years past an author's death.

Genealogy writers writing about the recent past must respect copyright.

Libel

Publishing a defamatory comment about someone is known as libel. Malice means negative intent.

Writers of true stories about people can easily hurt others feelings. If it can be shown that publishing something hurt the reputation of a person, or made others hate, contempt, fear or ridicule them, they can sue for libel. If libel is proved, not only the writer, but also the editor and the publisher are all actionable.

In Canada, defence from an accusation of libel means not only proving that the defamatory was true, but also showing either that the writer did not intend to hurt the reputation of someone by publishing it, or that publishing it was in the public interest.

It is not even necessary to name a particular person, but if readers understand who is meant, the statement can be deemed libellous.

Recommended Writing References

June Casagrande. **Grammar Snobs Are Great Big Meanies. A Guide to Language for Fun and Spite.** New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

Sharon DeBartolo Carmack. **You Can Write Your Family History.** Genealogical Publishing Company. Baltimore 2003. Probably the best book on the market for this topic.

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Stephen King. **On Writing. A Memoir of the Craft.** New York: Simon & Shuster Inc., 2000.

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Margaret D. F. Mahan. **The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th edition.** The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Brenda Dougall Merriman. **Genealogical Standards of Evidence: A Guide for Family Historians.** Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010.

Elizabeth Shown Mills. **Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace.** Revised edition. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2009.

James Moffett. **Points of Departure. An Anthology of Nonfiction.** New York: New American Library, 1985.

*Christine Rose. **Genealogical Proof Standard. Building a Solid Case,** 4th Edition, 2014.

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Lynne Truss. **Eats, Shoots & Leaves. The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation.** New York: Gotham Books, 2003.

William Zinsser. **On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction.** New York: Harper and Row, 1976.

Family Histories

- Burns, Mildred L. *The Wolfe pack: stories of a Midwestern family, 1850-1950*. Ste-Anne-De-Bellevue, Qué., Shoreline, 2010.
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- Kalman Naves, Elaine. *Portrait of a Scandal: the Abortion Trial of Robert Notman*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2013.

Historical Resources

- Bradbury, Bettina. *Wife to Widow. Lives, Laws and Politics in Nineteen-Century Montreal*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011.
- Black, Dan and John Boileau. *Old enough to fight: Canada's boy soldiers in the First World War*, Toronto, James Lorimer & Company, 2015.
- Collard, Edgar Andrew. *Montreal Yesterdays: More Stories From All Our Yesterdays*, Montreal: The Gazette, 1989.
- Cook, Tim, et al. *Canada in the World Wars*, London, England, Sevenoaks, 2016.
- Dickinson John A. and Young, Brian. *A Short History of Quebec*, second edition, Toronto: Copp Clark Pittman Ltd., 1993.
- Gossage, Peter and Little, J.I.. *An Illustrated History of Quebec: Tradition and Modernity*, Don Mills Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Linteau, Paul-André. *The History of Montreal, The Story of a Great North American City*, translated by Peter McCambridge. Montreal: Baraka Books, 2013.
- Olson, Sherry and Thornton, Patricia. *Peopling the North American City: Montreal 1840-1900*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011.
- Prévost, Robert, *Montréal a History*, translated by Elizabeth Mueller and Robert Chodos, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1993.
- Swift, Daniel. *Bomber County: the poetry of a lost pilot's war*. New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011.
- Westley, Margaret W. *Remembrance of Grandeur: The Anglo-Protestant Elite of Montreal, 1900-1950*, Montreal: Libre Expression, 1990.

Online Resources

Articles

<http://www.americanancestors.org/writing-a-family-sketch/> This article describes how to keep track of family members using a genealogy register-style format.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/commentary/why-obituaries-seduce-us-theyre-a-door-on-a-world-thats-vanishing/article10823791/> Writing an obituary is quite similar to writing an article about a family member.

Blogs and Webinars

*<https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/genealogicalproofstandardpart1/> Family Search Blog, “Understanding the Genealogical Proof Standard”. This link explains the GPS and links to an interview with expert Christine Rose and several follow-up articles.

<https://www.familyhistorywritingstudio.com/family-history-writing-challenge-2018/> Every February, Lynn Palermo issues a month-long family history writing challenge with tips and motivational support. It is free.

<http://www.thearmchairgenealogist.com> This blog is a first-rate guide to researching and writing your family history. There are two particularly relevant sections: Writing Your Family History and The Family History Blog to Book Project. There is also an excellent guide for the genealogy beginner.

<http://www.genwriters.com/> This extensive site has links to a variety of background resources for the family historian, as well as online grammar books and other resources for writers.

<http://www.lcgsfl.org/cpage.php?pt=44> A page written for members of the Writers Group of the Lee County Genealogical Society in Fort Myers, Florida. There are great hints here to help get you started.

<https://www.olivetreegenealogy.com/index.shtml> Lorine McGinnis Schulze has been researching and writing about her family’s history since 1996. On this site, she posts many genealogy resources, and she posts about writing on her blog <http://olivetreegenealogy.blogspot.ca/>. In <http://olivetreegenealogy.blogspot.com/p/sharing-memories.html> she suggests prompts to help readers start their own genealogical journals.

www.globalgenealogy.com You can order genealogy books and archival supplies from this Canadian-based website.

<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/> Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation and Source Usage is a companion site to Elizabeth Shown Mills’ book on citing and analyzing historical sources.

<http://genealogy.about.com/cs/oralhistory/a/interview.htm> Suggested questions for interviewing family members. Similarly, <http://www.jewishgen.org/infofiles/Quest.html>

www.banq.qc.ca The Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec site is essential for Quebec researchers.

www.genealogyalacarte.ca Gail Dever's blog will keep you up-to-date on news about family history resources in Quebec, Canada and elsewhere.

Genealogy Ensemble Blog and Member Publications

www.genealogyensemble.com The *Genealogy Ensemble* blog features stories written by a group of family history researchers in Montreal and the opportunity to order *Beads in a Necklace, Family Stories from Genealogy Ensemble*, edited by Janice Hamilton and Tracey Arial, Montreal, 2017.

Genealogy Ensemble member Janice Hamilton also has her own blog, *Writing Up the Ancestors*, <http://writinguptheancestors.blogspot.ca>, and a book *The St. Lawrence River: History, Highway and Habitat*, Montreal: Redlader Publishing, 2006.

Genealogy Ensemble member Dorothy Nixon also has a blog **Writing Montreal** <https://floithecity-aworkinprogress.blogspot.ca/> and a book available on Kindle: *A Laurier Era Family - Money, Love and Crisis* https://www.amazon.ca/Laurier-Era-Family-Crisis-Suffragettes-ebook/dp/B00FBWT5JO/ref=sr_1_8?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1515596254&sr=1-8

Genealogy Ensemble member Tracey Arial has a website, <http://www.traceyarial.com> with the **Arialview** blog, **Notable Nonfiction** writing tips and her books, including: *Guide to Government Action for Independent Writers in Canada* Toronto: Professional Writers Association of Canada, 2009; and *I Volunteered: Canadian Vietnam Vets Remember*; Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer 1996.

Genealogy Ensemble member Jacques Gagné has posted compilations to help researchers find their ancestors in rural Quebec, in France and the U.S., and to help them find Quebec ancestors who were Loyalists, Huguenots or who had European roots. For example:

Gagné, Jacques. *Church Registers: A Wonderful Resource for Researching Quebec Ancestors*. <https://genealogyensemble.com/2017/04/02/church-registers-a-wonderful-resource-for-researching-quebec-ancestors/> April 2, 2017.

Gagné Jacques. *Finding Quebec's Early Notarial Records*. <https://genealogyensemble.com/2017/01/01/finding-quebecs-early-notarial-records/> January 1, 2017.

Gagné, Jacques. *Researching French Canadian Ancestors through the Drouin Institute*. <https://genealogyensemble.com/2016/07/24/researching-french-canadian-ancestors-through-the-drouin-institute/>, July 24, 2016

Gagné, Jacques. *Genealogy Collections: Collections in Genealogical and Historical Societies in Quebec*, <https://genealogyensemble.com/2015/06/14/genealogy-collections/>, June 14 2015.