

# Guide to writing stories about your family history

## Introduction

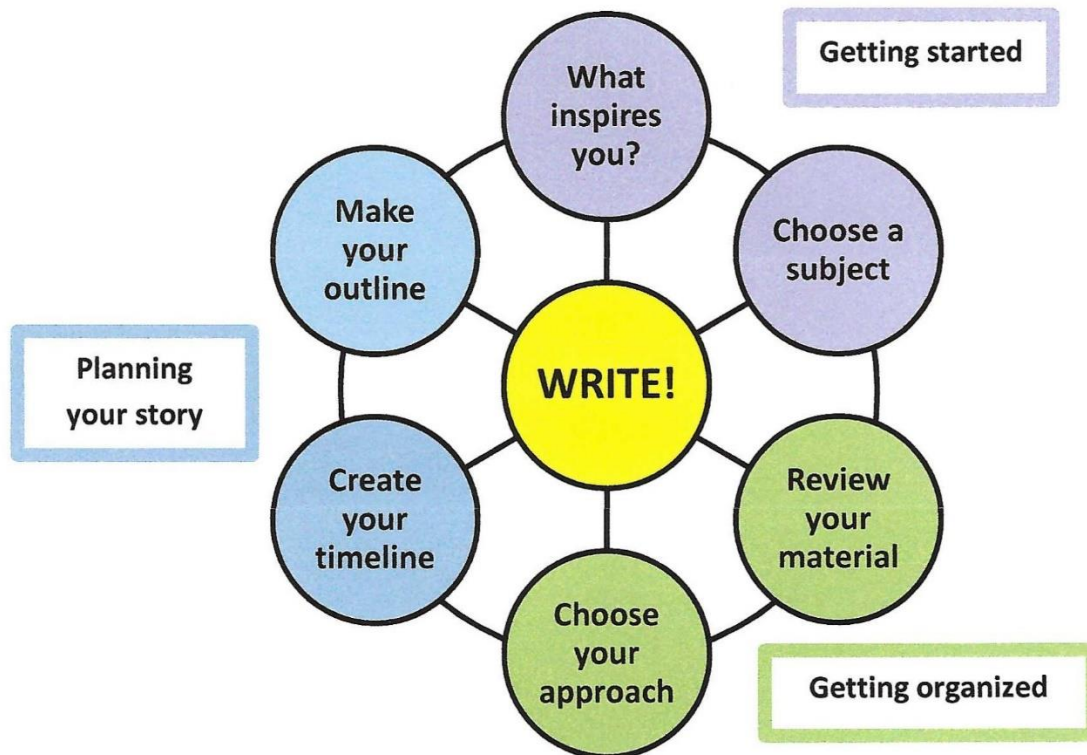
Members of the writing group of the British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa (BIFHSGO) believe it's important to turn genealogy research into stories that can be shared. To inspire other family historians to write about their ancestors, we offer this guide, which provides one approach to writing a family history narrative.

If you want to turn your research into shareable stories but:

- you don't know what to write about,
- and you don't know where to begin,

this guide will help you.

The basic steps to creating your story are pictured below. The steps are not numbered. You may begin wherever you feel comfortable. More detail on each step follows.



## What inspires you?

Your family history is full of stories. Which ones spark YOUR interest and get you asking questions?

- 1) What is the story behind the person in this old family photo?
- 2) What is the story behind that family legend?
- 3) What is the story behind these war medals?
- 4) What is the story behind that traditional family recipe?

## Choose a subject

- 1) Start small. Instead of writing your family's entire saga, start with the story of a single person, place, object or event. Stories can be grouped together or expanded later.
- 2) Focus on a subject:
  - Write about the place where your ancestors once lived—a remote part of the Scottish Highlands, Victorian London, or a village in England or Ireland.
  - Write about your ancestor's occupation: needle making, coal hewing or weaving.
  - Write about the journey your ancestors took to come to North America and the ship they travelled on.
  - Write about the war story of your parents or grandparents.
  - Write the story behind a family heirloom such as a piece of furniture or a family bible.
  - Select one person or family and write a story about: a wedding; a family burial plot; a little-known female ancestor.
- 3) Many stories can be found in BIFHSGO's quarterly journal, *Anglo-Celtic Roots*. Recent issues of ACR are posted in the Members Only section on the BIFHSGO website. Past issues of ACR are available to the public as pdfs on the society's website.

## Review your material

- 1) In a computer file or in a three-ring binder, gather and list materials you already have relating to your subject:
  - Birth, marriage, and death records
  - Census records
  - Electors lists
  - City directories
  - Military records
  - Passenger lists
  - Personal papers, such as photos, letters, journals, wills and deeds
  - Published materials, such as history books and newspapers

- Unpublished family anecdotes
  - An heirloom or heirlooms, or pictures of it/them
  - Relevant DNA results
- 2) Create illustrations that would add to your story:
    - Maps
    - A small family tree
    - A timeline (see further tips on this later in this guide)
  - 3) Resist the temptation to do more research if you can tell an interesting story with what you have already. Endless research leads to procrastination instead of writing. However, if you have put off obtaining a record that might contain crucial information, such as the cause of death in a death certificate, now is the time to order it.

### Choose your approach

- 1) This guide focusses on a nonfiction genre called Family History Narrative.
- 2) For information about other genres, see Sharon DeBartolo Carmack's book *You can write your Family History*.
- 3) Your approach will depend on your audience:
  - A simple story for children
  - A longer story for adult relatives
  - An account that includes information that would be helpful to other genealogists such as, your research methods or a background story
- 4) Decide on a final format for your story:
  - A pdf document you can email to family and fellow genealogists
  - A paper document you can print at home to share with relatives at a reunion
  - A book published through a self-publishing company
  - A photo book with added text, printed through a commercial photo book company
- 5) Decide whether to write in the first or third person, past or present tense.
- 6) Decide how to differentiate between relatives with the same name e.g. John Smith Sr and John Smith Jr or John Smith (1) and John Smith (2).

### Create your timeline

- 1) A timeline is a key writing aid—it creates a structure; it helps you set boundaries and keeps your story focussed.
- 2) To prepare the timeline, create a table with at least three columns, headed:
  - Year for listing dates relevant to your story
  - Ancestor data for listing events relevant to the subject of your story

- History for listing local and world events and socio-economic developments, only if they are relevant to your story. Often it is helpful to have two columns: one for local history events (municipal, country) and another for world events.
- 3) Check for major gaps in the timeline. Perhaps you should do some more research if it appears that filling the gap would help your narrative.
  - 4) Refer to the timeline in creating a rough outline.

### Make your outline

- 1) List the key points relevant to your story.
- 2) Be choosy about what information to include. You will have to leave some of your material out to stay on topic. Avoid going off on tangents.
- 3) Decide if you will follow a strict chronological order or not.
- 4) Note where to insert visual aids (photos, maps, tables, family tree).
- 5) Note where to insert details to add interest to your story and bring your ancestors to life, such as family anecdotes, excerpts from letters, descriptions of places.

### Write!

“The first draft is just you telling yourself the story.” Terry Pratchett

“Start writing, no matter what. The water does not flow until the faucet is turned on.” Louis L’Amour

- 1) Set aside time to write regularly and stick to your plan.
- 2) Focus your thoughts: Referring to your timeline and your outline, write a brief paragraph with the main points of your story. What do you really want the reader to know?
- 3) Write a first draft:
  - Beginning with a family anecdote or an interesting detail is more engaging than starting with “John Brown was born in 1870 and died in 1942.”
  - Bring your ancestors to life: For ideas on using social history, setting, plot, suspense, humour, and romance, refer to the book by Sharon DeBartolo Carmack listed as a recommended book on the Writing Resource page on the BIFHSGO website..
  - Insert photos, a family tree, maps and tables to illustrate your story.
  - Add section headings to help the reader follow the story.
  - Weave in relevant history from your timeline.
  - BUT, avoid going off on tangents that distract from your main story thread.
  - Include citations to indicate where you obtained your information. If you are writing with the intention of submitting to *Anglo-Celtic Roots*, do **not** use the Word footnote or endnote feature. Instead, number the references within the text and enter the numbered references as text at the end of the article.

- A punchy first line will catch the reader’s attention. You may add this any time.
  - A closing sentence that links to your opening is a satisfying way to end your story.
- 4) Revise:
- Revise your narrative so that the words flow, and the ideas make sense.
  - To polish your story, refer to a style guide such as the “Anglo-Celtic Roots Guide to Authors” found in the **Members Only** section on the BIFHSGO website. This guide to authors has information on issues such as: whether to capitalize a title etc.; what format to use for the name of a ship; how to refer to your great-great-grandmother etc. There is also basic information in this guide about formatting citations.
  - For more ideas on writing style, refer to the recommended books listed on the Writing Resources web page on the BIFHSGO website.
- 5) Feedback: Ask for comments from a relative, a friend, a writer support group, or a writing buddy. If your story leaves the reader with questions, rewrite to clarify what you mean.
- 6) Produce your final draft:
- Save your document electronically or print a hard copy to place in a presentation binder or folder.
  - If you choose the self-publishing route, follow that company’s guidelines for formatting.
- 7) Share your finished story with your intended audience.
- 8) Keep on writing!