

The Write Stuff: Using Nonfiction Writing Techniques to Write a Better Family History

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As genealogists we often focus on facts and uncover so much information that our research produces nothing but boring lists. But do you really know what happened between the dashes of your ancestors' lives? How can you share that information in a compelling and interesting way? This session will discuss how to using nonfiction writing techniques to produce a "can't put down" family history that will keep the pages turning for generations.

What is "Creative Nonfiction?"

Creative nonfiction is a genre of writing that uses literary styles and techniques to create factually accurate narratives.

Synonyms: Literary non-fiction, new journalism, literary journalism

Representative authors: James Baldwin, Truman Capote, Ernest Hemingway, Tom Wolfe, etc. **Learn more at:**

<http://www.class.uidaho.edu/druker/nonfic.html>

<http://www.creativenonfiction.org/thejournal/whatiscnf.htm>

Family Histories Should:

- Should inform, engage, enhance (and entertain)
- Not just names, dates, places. Or...footnotes
- "Show, don't tell!"
- Fundamental principle of "nonfiction" writing
- Many ways to document family history
- Use techniques of "creative nonfiction" to share your stories
- Family trees and genealogy charts provide a framework: names, dates, places
- Family histories provide the "stories" - bring names and other facts to life

Family Trees vs. Family Story

- Traditional family trees often not more than just boring lists of many facts
- Years of research (sometimes in confusing formats)
- Family trees can be transformed into interesting stories
- Our ancestors lived through important historical events

The "Writing" Part

- You don't have to be a "professional"
- Don't get discouraged if you don't immediately see how it all fits together
- You don't have to get every date and time perfect
- Stories do not have to be told in an exact sequence
- Don't worry about the final product - you'll get there/will succeed with practice.

Tips for Writing a Compelling Family History

- You don't have to write one large narrative
- Break your writing tasks into smaller, manageable pieces
- Write profiles/sketches
- Write in scenes
- Create a timeline; highlight key personal & historical events
 - OurTimelines <http://www.ourtimelines.com>
 - TimeToast <http://www.timetoast.com>
 - Genelines <http://www.progenysoftware.com/genelines.html>
 - Treelines <http://www.treelines.com>
- Resist the temptation to edit as you write; Use "Edit-Lock" tools (see list below).

Nonfiction Writing Elements

- Plot – a good story
- Structure – Arranging events in the way you choose
- Description – Incorporating details that appeal to the five senses
- Dialogue – A speaker's exact words
- Characterization – Telling and showing what characters are like

Tips for Shaping Your Story

- Select and emphasize
- Use scenes
- Start at the beginning of the end
- Use active narration
- Strive for truth
- Keep your protagonist company (include other characters)
- Identify an antagonist

The Writing Process

- Mind Mapping (brain dump your ideas then connect like thoughts)
- Create an outline or storyboard – to organize main ideas
- Use a flow chart – jot down the main events of the incident you are telling; then arrange in chronological order (first to last).
- Flashback: a scene that breaks into the story to show an earlier part of the action
- Flash forward – a scene that shows a later part of the action
- Use description (images and descriptive details: sights, sounds, smells)
- Supplement with memorabilia (certificates, recipes, maps, photos, etc.)
- Fact check so as not to stall the creative process.
- Don't worry about how all the pieces fit together or about any inconsistencies during your initial draft.
- Try to just write the narrative as it comes to you the first time through, then go back and self-edit for punctuation, grammar, word choice, style, structure, etc.
- Remember: "Show, Don't Tell."
- If you plan to include footnote, endnotes or citations, just insert a placeholder with a note to yourself to go back and add them in the correct format.

Challenges

- It's too big a job!
- It's too difficult!
- Not enough time!

Setting Parameters

- Break the task into smaller pieces
- Schedule time to write (even just 15 minutes per day – using a timer/alarm)
- Set a word count
- Write even when you don't feel like it
- Avoid “inspiration trap” and “waiting for the muse!”

Polishing Your Writing – Use a Checklist

- Is my writing concise but complete?
- Are my ideas linked in a logical way?
- Is my writing clear?
- Did I avoid providing the same information twice?
- Did I include sensory details, description, and dialogue?
- Read your prose out loud
- Have someone else (who is objective) read and critique it

Lisa's Favorite Writing and Organizational Tools

Any.do <http://www.any.do>

Blogger: <http://www.blogger.com>

CardBoard Index Cards (Android) <https://play.google.com/store>

Day One <http://dayoneapp.com>

Dragon Naturally Speaking (\$; free iPad app) <http://www.nuance.com>

DropBox <http://www.dropbox.com>

Evernote (free, premium version available) <http://www.evernote.com>

Google Drive and Google Docs <http://www.google.com>

Hemingway Editor (web based \$6.99) <http://www.hemingwayapp.com>

IndexCard App (\$2.99 iPhone; \$4.99 iPad) <https://itunes.apple.com>

LiveScribe Pen (Interactive Notes on the Go) <http://www.livescribe.com/en-us>

Microsoft Word (\$) <http://www.microsoft.com>

Notability (iPad app for \$.99) <http://itunes.apple.com>

PenUltimate (iPad; \$.99) <http://itunes.apple.com>

PrimoPDF (free) <http://www.primopdf.com>

Scapple (\$14.99) <http://www.literatureandlatte.com/scapple.php>

Scrivener (Mac \$45; Windows \$40; free trial available)

<http://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener.php>

StoryToolz (free idea and book title generator tools) <http://www.storytoolz.com>

StorySkeleton (iPhone/iPad) (\$8.99 iOS) <http://www.storyskeleton.com>

Trello <http://www.trello.com>

WordPress <http://www.wordpress.com>

Workflowy <http://www.workflowy.com>

WriteApp <https://writeapp.me>

Writing Your Family History App (iPhone; iPad \$5.99) <http://itunes.apple.com>

“Edit Lock” Tools

BlindWrite <http://blindwrite.herokuapp.com>

Ilys (free; web-based with word count) <http://ilys.com>

Earnest (free) <http://www.moreofless.co.uk/earnest>

FirstDraft (works with Google Docs) <http://firstdraft.io>

Write or Die 2 (\$20) <http://www.writeordie.com>

Toma Timer (for Google Chrome) <https://chrome.google.com/webstore>

Resources

1. Alzo, Lisa A. *Three Slovak Women, Second Edition*. CreateSpace, 2012.
2. Alzo, Lisa A. *Writing Your Family History Book*. Heritage Productions, 2008.
3. Sturdevant, Katherine Scott, and Sharon DeBartolo Carmack. *Bringing Your Family History to Life Through Social History*. Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2000.
4. Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. Harper Perennial, 2006
5. Legacy Family Tree Webinars: Search under “Lisa Alzo” for writing topics: “Ready, Set, Write! Share Your Family's Story”; “Digital Writing Tools for Genealogists”; “Ten Ways to Jumpstart Your Family History Narrative”
<http://www.familytreewebinars.com>
6. Hack Genealogy Boot Camps and Writing Intensives <http://hackgenealogy.com>
7. “Life Stories Writing Guide” by Lisa A. Alzo, Lulu <http://www.lulu.com/shop/lisa-a-alzo/life-stories-writing-guide/ebook/product-15222236.html>
8. *Scrivener for Genealogists Quick Sheet* (Mac, Windows \$8.95 + s/h) Purchase at: <http://www.lisaalzo.com/2014/10/new-scrivener-for-genealogists-quick-sheet>

Articles

1. “May The Muse Win: How To Break The Destructive Habit Of Editing While Writing” by Akshata on Make Use Of, 6 November 2014
<http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/may-muse-win-break-destructive-habit-editing-writing>
2. “Structure: Beyond the Picnic-Table Crisis,” by John McPhee, *The New Yorker*, January 14, 2013 issue: <http://nyr.kr/1tO48lb>
3. “The Habits of Highly Productive Writers” by Rachel Toor, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <http://m.chronicle.com/article/The-Habits-of-Highly/150053>

Writing Prompts

1. Creative Writing Blogging Prompts <http://www.writersdigest.com/prompts>
2. Family History Writing Challenge <http://www.familyhistorywritingchallenge.com>
3. National Novel Writing Month (November) <http://www.nanowrimo.org>
4. GeneaBloggers <http://www.geneabloggers.com/daily-blogging-prompts>
5. Fearless Females http://www.theaccidentalgenealogist.com/2010_02_01_archive.html