

# How to Write Ancestral Stories Your Relatives Will Want to Read!

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## Define your goals

### **Who is your reader?**

This will determine both the story's content and the sophistication of the language you use. When we write for children, the language should be simple enough to be easily understood, and many terms will have to be defined as we go: a child may not know what the Civil War was, or what "naturalization" means. By contrast, writing for an educated adult allows us to employ more complex language and fewer terms will have to be defined. For some readers, we might leave out a particularly colorful or scandalous part of the story; for a different reader, we might highlight that very same information or even make it the centerpiece of our tale. Even if we don't have a particular audience in mind, it can be helpful to identify likely readers to help us clarify the style, language, and content we should choose.

**What idea or event will serve as the focus of your story?** Are you describing a single event or spanning an ancestor's entire life? Will you be describing one ancestor or multiple generations within a single story? The more clearly this is defined, the easier the story will be to organize and write.

**What do you hope to accomplish with your writing?** Is this a scholarly piece or something you hope your non-genealogist friends and family will read with pleasure? The answer will help you identify the style of writing. Scholarly writing is more minimal, focused on laying out the evidence and proving conclusions, but when we write for the people in our lives, the story has to be more reader-focused and accessible. We will probably use more conversational language, more description, and we may highlight more personal or entertaining or dramatic aspects of the story that wouldn't belong in a scholarly piece. Nonetheless, because this is genealogical writing and not fiction, we want the material to be well-researched, evidence-driven, and fully cited in addition to being entertaining.

### **What's the intended takeaway for the reader?**

What do you hope the reader will walk away knowing or feeling after reading what you have written? We can't control what friends or relatives will actually experience or feel as they read our words, but by striving to write with intention, we can find the story we want to convey. Our aim may be to inspire by emphasizing a particularly admirable accomplishment, or to highlight the struggles our ancestors overcame, or to demonstrate how generations of dysfunctional patterns were eventually broken. Write down what you hope the takeaway will be in a single sentence, and then keep coming back to that goal along the way so that you don't stray too far.

## **How can you create context?**

Our lives are very different from those of our ancestors, and part of conveying their story involves creating context for the events and documents that we describe. Consider creating a research plan for learning about the time and place in which your ancestor lived. Search local history resources, museums, and even library exhibits, and google "events" for the years and locations that are involved. Read local papers from the era, and if possible, look for diaries from people in similar circumstances to enrich your story.

## **Organize the components of your story**

### **Chronology**

Not all stories should start at birth and unfold chronologically (although this is certainly a perfectly good way to tell a story). Consider starting at the end of a life and then hearkening back to earlier times, or starting in the middle, hinting at what's to come, and then stepping back to the beginning and building to the end. There is no right or wrong place to start, but if you consider a few different options, you'll more easily find the chronology that best suits the story you want to tell.

Regardless of where you start, your first paragraph may determine whether your reader will venture beyond the first page, so take time to craft that first paragraph, and especially your first line. If you google the words "story hook," you'll find lots of advice about this. *However, the best time to write your first paragraph may be after you've written your story*, partly because it will be less intimidating to write, and partly because you'll be clearer about what you have to say. For inspiration, take a look at the first lines of some of your favorite books.

### **Structure**

Structure is simply how you put together the pieces of your story. The arrangement you choose should engage the reader's interest early on. It helps to have a single question that the reader will want to answer, something that will create suspense and build momentum, making him want to read further to find out how it will turn out. There are no rules about how to arrange the information, but playing with a few different structures may help you find the best arrangement for your particular story. Here are a few examples, but they are by no means the only ones:

**The collision of time and space:** Would the story have been different at different time and place? If so, you can lay out all of the things that might not have transpired under different circumstances, inviting your reader to wonder what actually did happen. By that time, the reader is engaged and interested your story, eager to find out what truly did occur.

**The arc:** What was your ancestor's journey? Where did he start and where did he end up? It may have been a physical journey from place to place, or a journey from oppression to freedom, poverty to wealth, or some other variation. Once you identify the beginning and the end of the journey, consider what your ancestor's goal may have been and the obstacles along the way. Each section of the story will be defined by the pursuit of that goal, opportunities that came along, and the obstacles that were or were not overcome. It's like climbing a ladder to the roof. You know where to start, and you know where you'll finish. Along the way, each rung of the ladder represents an opportunity to move closer to the top or an obstacle that must be overcome.

Knowing what happens at each rung creates the outline for your story. Then focus on writing one rung at a time.

**Ascending, descending, and oscillating stories:** Ancestral stories are often told as ascending, such as when the ancestor started with nothing and found success, or descending stories, when the family had it all and then lost it all. But some researchers have demonstrated that the most beneficial family stories are those that oscillate, replicating real life more closely by describing the ups and the downs, the good times and the bad. Although it may be tempting to sugarcoat these stories, or to pick and choose only the more attractive aspects of our ancestors' lives, I want to encourage you to be more inclusive of both the good and the bad. For more information about this:

- Robyn Fivush, Marshall Duke, and Jennifer G. Bohanek, "Do You Know: The Power of Family History in Adolescent Identity and Well-Being" at <http://ncph.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/The-power-of-family-history-in-adolescent-identity.pdf>
- Bruce Feiler, "The Stories That Bind Us," *This Life*, New York Times, 16 Mar 2013, p. ST1.

## Presentation

If you want relatively disinterested readers to actually look at what you've written, it's important to avoid scaring them away by handing them an intimidating sheaf of single-spaced text before they even get started. Some ways to make your story less intimidating and more appealing include the following:

**Fonts:** Choose fonts that are easy-to-read and appropriate for the age and visual ability of your readers. Child-friendly fonts (such as Comic Sans) may be more inviting for your younger grandchildren. For elderly readers, use larger-sized, easy-to-read fonts. Even if you are in love with an ornate font, it may not be appropriate if it makes the story more difficult to read.

**Spacing:** Add extra blank (negative) space between paragraphs, and separate some text items or stories into colored or indented and italicized text boxes to make the text more approachable.

**Images:** Nothing makes a story more inviting than pictures. If you have family photos and documents, be sure to include them. Many other pictures of people, events, and locations are available online, but be sure that you ask for permission to use them. Most images that you find online are protected by copyright. However, many are available for use, either because they are in the public domain or because the person who owns them has made them available for public use. Be sure to check! One way to improve the odds of finding something you can use is to use filters on Google:

- Enter your search terms (such as "immigrant ships") in a Google search.
- Choose "Images"
- Then choose "Tools"
- Select "Labeled for Reuse" from the pulldown menu.
- Make sure you double-check the particulars about the image you choose to ensure that it is truly available, and see if there are any restrictions, such as specific words or links that must be used in the citation.

## **Alternatives to conventional text-based storytelling**

For adolescent and young adult readers, or for busy adults, texting may be the best format. Some people send cliffhanger texts, short snippets of stories that stop just before revealing what happened so that the reader will be eager for the next installment to arrive.

**Apps:** Lots of storytelling apps are available online. Some, such as Twile (<https://twile.com>) and Tiki-Toki (<https://www.tiki-toki.com>), are timeline apps, allowing you to lay the story out chronologically using a visual format that can include clickable text, documents, photos, videos, and links to other websites. Animoto (<https://animoto.com>) allows you to easily create a video with music, simply by uploading images and typing in small amounts of text. Other apps, such as Scrivener (<https://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener/overview>) are specifically writing tools that can help you take your story from your first idea through your finished product. Some apps are free, some come with a fee, but even these typically offer a free trial.

**Geography:** Using the "street view" on Google Maps, you can zoom down to the places your ancestor inhabited. You may even be able to see the original structures, or get a sense of the countryside as it was in the past, and if that is the case, you can incorporate a visual tour into your story. Google Earth offers more complex but more comprehensive tools for this purpose.

**Slideshow:** Consider offering a PowerPoint or slide presentation at your next family gathering. A narrated visual presentation like this is often more appealing to some people than text. (Plus you'll have a captive audience!)

**Crafts:** Or we can follow in the footsteps of some of our ancestors and convey our ideas through creative arts. Quilts, coloring books, captioned photo albums, and scrapbooks are only a few of the ideas you can explore.

**Getting it written:** Finally, try not to worry about the final product, or what people will think, or whether you have the skills. This is what stops people cold, people who might very well have wonderful stories to tell but become too overwhelmed to get started. Try to separate the writing process from the editing process in your mind. Writing is all about getting words on paper (or computer or phone or tablet). It doesn't have to be good, because what you put down can always be revised and improved, either by you or by someone else, and ultimately, you really never have to show it to anyone. You have all the power here. So give yourself permission, permission to be playful about this, permission to explore and find your story, permission to experiment, permission to write badly (or even terribly). Take your time to complete the work, and do eventually go back and revise, but most importantly, begin!