Get Organized to Write Your Family Story

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Most of us feel a desire to leave something tangible for our families as a result of all the hard work we've done researching our ancestors. But the idea of writing our family stories can be very daunting. The best approach is to make it as easy as possible, and one way to do that is to have an organization system that helps us be prepared when we sit down to write.

Before we even talk about how to organize, though, we need to talk about some ideas that stand in the way of our success as family history writers.
1. I have to write my whole family history.
2. I can't start writing till my research is done.
3. I have to write a book.
4. I can only write if I'm inspired.
5. I have no idea where to start.

None of the first four is true. And number 5 is what we're going to concentrate on in this presentation.

Getting organized to write is easier if our genealogy is organized pretty well in the first place, and that's a stumbling block for many of us. So a lot of the resources in this handout have to do with organizing our genealogy in general, in addition to organizing in order to write.

Step 1: Organize your space
Some people can happily work amid clutter and others simply can't. Regardless of which category we're in, having a space for writing where we can keep our resources at hand is important. Office space with a desk and some bookshelves is ideal. A second monitor is wonderful. But not everyone has that luxury. If we have to set up at the dining room table and then put everything away when we're done, we should develop a way to be able to keep everything together so setting up again for the next writing session is as easy as possible. For some of us, the solution may be to go out to a coffee shop with our bag of research and source books and our laptop. However we end up organizing our writing space, it's worth taking some time think about what space arrangement would work best.

Step 2: Organize your time
Writing only gets done if we do it regularly, so we need to think about how much time we want to devote to our writing project each week. We can schedule the time on our calendar and make it just as important as anything else we have on our

calendar. We should think of our writing as a project that will take time to complete. Divide it into phases and treat the end of each phase as a deadline. Find a routine that works and stick to it.

Step 3: Organize your ideas and goals

Individual writing projects need to be focused on one goal, and that goal must be manageable. If we sit down, open up a Word document, and set out to write the story of all our ancestors, we will fail. That is too big a project. Instead, think about an article-length project focused on the biography of one ancestral couple, for instance. Or the story of one family's migration. Or a three-generation narrative. Making our goal manageable, something we can actually complete and share, is an important key to success. Then we can move on to the next manageable writing goal.

Step 4: Organize your research

Once we have a space to write in, time set aside, and a manageable project goal, it's time to organize our research for writing. I like to keep things simple, so I recommend three tools for organizing your research:

- A research log
- A timeline
- A list of research to do's

We can use these tools separately or we can combine them into one document. Whichever method we choose, using these tools as we're researching an ancestor automatically sets us up to write about them.

Research log

Research logs can be simple or complex, depending on how much information we include. Ideally, we would use a research log as we're doing research on an ancestor, but we can use it effectively to organize for writing even after our research is done. A research log is a list of sources we have consulted or plan to consult for a particular research project. To get ready to write, we would enter all the sources we've found for the person or people we want to write about. Some people find it helpful to organize by record type so we can easily see if we've covered all the research bases. Be sure to include citations for each source. See "Research Logs" in the resources list for more information on research logs and a link to a form you can use.

Timeline

When we have logged all our documents and other sources, we then create a timeline for the project that puts the events of our ancestor's life in chronological order. We can do this on the research log or separately in another document. See

"Timelines: Templates and Forms" below for examples of how to construct a timeline.

Research to do list
Typically, when we start organizing our research we discover gaps, so we need a way to capture the list of sources we still need to consult in order to create a complete picture of our ancestor's life. A to do list can be kept on our research log, on our timeline, or separately.

Writing it up
Now that our project is defined and organized, and we're working on filling in any research gaps we've identified, we're ready to start writing. As we go along, putting together the ancestral story we've chosen to tell, we will probably discover that we need some additional background information from county histories and other resources on the time and place our ancestor lived, even cookbooks. As we write, we're also searching for information that will bring the story to life. Once we're done with our first draft, we go back and edit and polish, add pictures if we have them. And then we're ready to share this project with our family and perhaps even have it published in a genealogy periodical.

Resources

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