

# How to Begin Writing a Family History

For many people, the prospect of writing a family history seems overwhelming, but it does not have to be. What follows are the keys to successfully completing a family history.

## Manage the Project—Do Not Let it Manage You

While it may be tempting to think, “I’ll write this one book, and tell everything I know, and that will be it for me.” It may actually be easier to write smaller, more focused books.

Many genealogists, for example, are tempted to do the “data dump.” This is one way to gather all of your research and push it out of the computer and into one, big book. My friend and fellow genealogist Pat Roberts calls these family histories the “door stops.” And they are. They are big enough to hold a door open in a strong wind, but uncomfortable to sit and read. Having your family read what you have so carefully researched and written about their heritage is the primary reason for writing a family history, is it not?

Most likely, you have the most information, documentation, artifacts and photographs about your own generation or those immediately before or after you. You probably have enough material for a book on the modern generations alone. Once you venture back beyond your grandparents, you may not have as much in the way of photographs and stories, but undoubtedly you have research that should be preserved and passed on. With modern printing technology, as long as you have 24 pages, you can create a softbound book. And as easy and cost-efficient as print-on-demand technology is, you can update your book quite easily when there is new information to impart.

## Take Stock of Where You Are and Where You Want to Go

The best way to guard against the data dump, is to stop and figure out what you already have on hand, and what additional research you may need. I call this process a research review. When you review what you already have, it is easier to see which part of your research is closest to complete, and what will require more time to fill in any holes.

Taking stock is another way to begin organizing what you have into the logical parts of a book. Books are typically written in chapters, and sometimes organized further by sections. Each generation could get a section, for example, with chapters within the section for the parents and each child. Or, you may not need sections if you are following a surname line, or establishing your relationship back to a particular ancestor in the past, such as a Revolutionary War patriot.



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Taking stock may give you ideas for whether you'll organize by geography (every generations of a family that stayed in the same place), by surname line, to trace a direct descent, or whether you will focus on an interesting individual or a couple (more like a biography) and tell the story of a single generation with those ancestors' parents and children taking a secondary role.

### Create "Bite-Sized" Pieces in Your Task List

Once you figure out what you have and what you still need, organize your tasks so that you can make the most efficient use of your research time, but also so that you do not have any overwhelming tasks (e.g. "I'll go to Salt Lake and take this line back to the 1500s, then I'll write the book.").

Do what you can in the time you allot yourself each day or each week. Even if you only check one or two things off your list every week, you will keep your project moving forward, and the effort will add up over time.

This goes for dealing with images as well. At some point you must sort through your images, identify them, label them (please) and scan or re-photograph them so that you have a digital version to use in the book. If you organize, identify and label first, it will be much easier to choose which photographs should be included in the book, and which ones should not.

Once you start digitizing, if you scan or re-photograph a few at a time every few days, the task will not seem as overwhelming as trying to scan a trunk full of photographs all at once. As you digitize, organize the images by folder and file name so that it will be easy to locate individual images when you are ready to include them in your final layout. I like to organize my file folders by family and by decade (e.g. Wilson 1940s, Wilson 1950s, etc.). I also try to name files so that I can tell from the file name who is in the picture (e.g. Wilson\_Roger\_x1951\_age4.jpg).

Once you have digital images, share a few. Use the social media sites your family uses, or post them to an online family tree. Send them to cousins by email. You

never know what you'll receive in return that may help your book project along.

### Do Not Try to Format While You Write

Trying to format while you write is often a useless time-waster. Get the words down the way you want them before you attempt to format the manuscript into a book. This is one of the most commonly expressed frustrations about writing a book-length manuscript. Too many authors get caught up in how it will look "as a book" and lose focus on what is most important—finishing the writing.

### Right Tool for the Right Job

Most book projects benefit from different tools for different parts of the process. For example, I prefer to use an organizing tool such as Scrivener or Evernote while I'm gathering little bits and pieces of information because these tools allow me to organize and re-organize easily.

Once I move into the writing phase, I use either Scrivener or a word processor such as Word to get the words down without any regard to the formatting. There is no sense in spending a lot of time formatting before giving the manuscript a thorough edit, because you may move a few things around after editing.

Once the words are in place, I edit using the features of my word processor such as spell check and grammar check, and I may send the manuscript through another check using grammar tools such Grammarly or Hemingway. If someone else is looking over the manuscript, we will use the "track changes" feature of the word processing software to see the changes as they are made. Once the final changes are made, we can turn off that feature so that the manuscript is clean and easy to read.

Once the manuscript is in its final form, I use InDesign, a page layout program to format the text. Page layout programs have a few advantages over word processors for formatting a book-length manuscript. Your word processor may have many of the same "advanced"

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features, although you may have to spend some time learning to use these features. Using the typesetting features, you can format the entire book at once avoiding any possibility of mis-matching styles across chapters.

I prefer to wait to add images until the manuscript is formatted. Images will look their best when scanned and cropped to fit the page layout at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) at full size. In other words, if you wish to display a photograph at 4" x 6" on the page, you will need an image that is 1200 pixels wide (4" x 300 pixels) by 1800 pixels tall (6" x 300 pixels). If you stretch images to fit the space, that will diminish the resolution of the image. While the image may look good on screen, it may be disappointing when printed in your book.

### Ask for Help if You Need It

At every point along the way in the publishing process, there are people available to help you. Ask your family for any remaining details or clues to help you finish the research. Reach out to other researchers using the forums or message boards on the major genealogical websites. Use social media. Create public posts on places where other people researching your family may see that you are writing a book and want to contribute. Ask volunteers to help you fill holes or take photographs in a location you cannot visit. If necessary, hire a professional to help finish the research, edit the manuscript, take photographs, lay out and typeset the book, design a spectacular cover, or put all of the pieces and parts

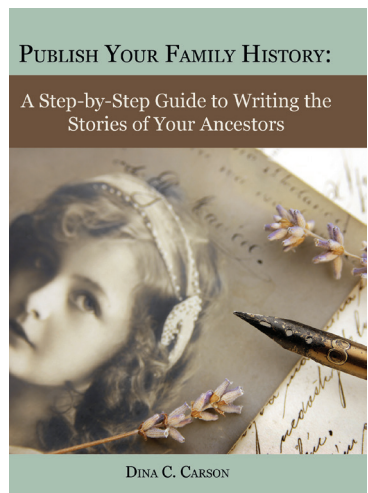
Dina C. Carson is the author of *Publish Your Family History: A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing the Stories of Your Ancestors*, available from [www.irongate.com](http://www.irongate.com), Amazon.com (in print or for Kindle) or other fine bookstores.

together for you. If you are close to the finish line, and cannot complete the book yourself, ask for help.

### Reward Yourself Along the Way

A book project can be big and time consuming, but oh so fabulous when completed. When you finish your research review, do something nice for yourself. When you knock off the most daunting task on your to-do list, celebrate. Determine a few significant milestones in your book project and set out a reward that will keep you working hard toward the next goal.

The most important reward when writing a family history is hard to measure while you're writing—it's the lasting legacy you will leave for your family, the next generation, and the honor you are giving your ancestors by remembering them.



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