

# Beyond the Family Tree – Bringing Your Family Stories to Life

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## Problems telling your story

- Too much data
- Not organized
- Don't know where to start
- Overwhelming your audience with too many facts - names, dates and places
- No human face to the people
- Not enough time

Focus on short stories on a topic of limited and manageable scope - Multiple short stories can later become part of a larger narrative OR

Gather your stories, regardless of topic or family branch, into a single collection

## Use a research question for focus

- Professional genealogists use research questions to focus their client research
- As researchers, we are often tempted to go down “rabbit holes” that divert us from our primary research goal.
- As writers, we don't want to go off on tangents that distract our readers from the story we want to tell.
- A research question will help bring clarity to your writing and make it easier for your readers to follow
- You may state the question(s) explicitly at the beginning of your story or use it/them as a mental guidepost to focus your tale as you write it

## Suggested topics

- Family Story – every family has them – prove, disprove, document, retell with details learned from research
- Individual person or family - somebody special to you, an interesting personality, a black sheep relative
- Immigration stories -why did your ancestor immigrate? Did they travel alone, were they meeting other relatives, were they the first to leave? Use evidence uncovered during research and historical context, if no known reason
- Objects or heirlooms
- Photographs – being able to identify an old mystery photograph is especially satisfying
- Discovery of a relative who survived the Shoah
- DNA discovery and how it fits into or expands your paper trail
- Untold stories of female ancestors
- Food and recipes – evoke family memories

Don't forget your personal story – your children and grandchildren probably don't know it

- Where you lived, went to school, what you learned

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- When/how/why did you and/or your family settle where they did?
- Did the family move around or stay in one place?
- Did you have a relative living with you (grandparent, aunt, uncle, etc.)? What do you remember about them?
- Was your family religious? Sometimes there is an interesting story to be told about that.
- Holiday traditions, ceremonial objects, holiday foods

## Nonfiction writing techniques

- Write a first draft, no matter how bad – fix during the editing process
- First paragraph is critical – grab the reader’s interest and make them want to read more – may need to shuffle the order of your story once your draft is finished. You can(start in the middle to “grab” your reader at the beginning, then fill in the background in your narrative.
- Maintain focus
- Use timelines to avoid confusion
- Adding context is critical to add interest – research the history of the times, places where ancestors lived and traveled, their occupations and economic circumstances
- Analyze occupations, figure out economic status from tax records, census records, military files (biographical information), educational level – how did these factors affect their lives?
- Tell your story within a context – don’t just relate dry facts

## Genealogical considerations

Privacy – get permission from living people to use their names

Cite your sources with footnotes or endnotes

- To be able to locate the source again
- So that future readers will be able to judge the reliability of the information presented in the story

Set aside time to write

Put your story in the cloud so that you can work on it from multiple platforms

## Suggestions for Further Reading

Alzo, Lisa. “Forged in Steel.” *Ancestry.com*, 17 June 2015.

<https://blogs.ancestry.com/ancestry/2015/06/17/forged-in-steel>: 2020). This blog post does not have citations, but is otherwise an excellent example of the type of detail you can use to add background to an ancestor’s story.

Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. *You Can Write Your Family History*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2003. There is a more recent edition from 2008. If you are going to buy a book on writing an interesting family history, this is the one to get.

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Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. "Flesh on the Bones: Turning Dry Ancestral Details into a Life Story." *Brevity*, May 2010. E-journal. [http://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/craft/craft\\_carmack5\\_10.html](http://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/craft/craft_carmack5_10.html) : 2019.

Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. "The Ghoul of the Queen City." *Warren, Carmack & Associates*, 2014. <http://warrencarmack.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Carmack-The-Ghoul-of-the-Queen-City.pdf> : 2020.

Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. "Re-Visioning and Editing Your Family History Narrative." *The Armchair Genealogist*, n.d. <https://www.thearmchairgenealogist.com/2015/02/re-visioning-and-editing-your-family.html> : 2020. Contains many useful tips and links on family history editing.

Hatcher, Patricia Law. "Adding Detail to a Narrative." *Ancestry [Magazine]*, 21 (July/August 2003), 19-20. Digital image. *Google Books*. <https://tinyurl.com/ulkaxvu> : 2020.

Stratton, Penelope L. and Hoff, Henry B. *Guide to Genealogical Writing; How to Write and Publish Your Family History*. Boston: New England Historical Genealogical Society, 2014. This book is geared more towards formal family histories, but has useful information.