

Writing and Publishing a Family History: 10 Steps

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Step #1: SHIFT MENTAL GEARS

- Begin thinking about your family history not as a research project but as a *writing* project, something with a beginning, a middle, and an end.
- Figure out how to turn some of your disparate elements—notes, photos, documents—into something else.

Step #2: CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE AND TIME FRAME

- Who is your audience? Immediate family, extended family, genealogical community?
- When do you want to have it done?

Step #3: CHOOSE A GENEALOGICAL FORMAT

Two basic formats: *Register* style (descendancy format) or *ahnentafel* (ancestor table)

- *Register* (descendancy) style
 - begins in the past (often with the immigrant to America) and moves forward in time, tracing all or some descendants of one person
 - can trace multiple lines, one at a time
 - backbone of system = family group
 - key people receive identification numbers
 - vital data (birth, baptism, death, burial, marriage—each with place and date) and list of children (if applicable) included for each person
 - plenty of room for narrative text
- *Ahnentafel* (ancestor table)
 - begins at or near the present and moves back in time
 - usually every known person in a direct line
 - precise numbering system (like a pedigree [multigenerational] chart)
 - vital data (birth, baptism, death, burial, marriage—each with place and date) included for each person

► **TIP: Look at other publications as models.**

Step #4: DEFINE YOUR SCOPE (MAKE AN OUTLINE)

- An outline will serve as your working table of contents and help keep you on track.
- Will you cover one particular ancestor for a certain number of generations? More than one ancestor, for as many generations as possible? Something else?
- Considering your audience and time frame, don't bite off more than you can chew!
- Return to your outline/table of contents as you write, and refine as necessary.

Step #5: CREATE A STYLESHEET

Make a list of spellings, genealogical conventions, and the like to standardize throughout your work. Consistency makes your work look professional.

- capitalization
- variant/unusual spellings
- numbers
- date style
- abbreviations
- etc.

►**TIP: Make a list of key references and short forms of citations.**

Step #6: WRITE!

Put your fingers on the keys and begin! Person by person, family group by family group, or generation by generation.

►**TIP: Cite as you write!**

►**TIP: Don't let gaps in information stop you from writing.**

Step #7: ADD NARRATIVE AND PHOTOS

- Examples of where to find narrative
 - census data
 - ship's registers/immigration records
 - wills and probate records
 - military records
 - obituaries
 - diaries and letters
 - interviews with family
- Where to find images
 - family collections
 - libraries, repositories, historical societies
 - various online sources, such as Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/>; Norman B. Leventhal Map Center, <https://www.leventhalmap.org/>; and Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/>

Step #8: READ, REFINE, REPEAT

- Self-editing is important.
- Check and cross-check your data.
- Reread your material against your stylesheet.

►**TIP: Ask someone else to review your manuscript.**

Step #9: INDEX

- For any publication except very short ones, include a comprehensive index of names.
- Consider also indexing key place names and historical events.
- Do the indexing yourself or hire an indexer. (If you work with a publisher, the publisher will likely handle indexing.)

Step #10: PRINT AND PUBLISH

- A printer prints and a publisher provides additional services (design, editing, typesetting, indexing, printing, warehousing, distribution).
- What are you comfortable doing or managing yourself? What can you afford? Do you need help with distribution?
- A printer could be a local copy shop, a commercial book printer, or an online service such as Lightning Source. You are responsible for all the work preparing your manuscript for print and delivering a print-ready PDF.
- A publisher could be a service with a physical presence or an online presence only.
- Online publishers tend to be pay-as-you-go but offer a wide range of services.

NEXT STEPS

- Look at some other family histories for inspiration: span of coverage, format, design.
- Write an outline and make a plan based on your content, audience, and schedule.
- Try writing a single genealogical sketch, either in *Register* style or as an *ahnentafel* entry. Include data as well as narrative, and include citations.

You are doing a service by leaving a legacy, no matter how small or large.

—John Bond, *The Story of You*

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WRITING AND PUBLISHING RESOURCES

“Writing and Publishing Your Family History,” <https://www.americanancestors.org/education/learning-resources/read/writing-publishing>

➤ *This helpful subject guide gives specific examples of genealogical formats and also has links to further resources.*

Guide to Genealogical Writing, by Penelope L. Stratton and Henry B. Hoff (Boston: NEHGS, 2014), available (also as ebook) from <https://shop.americanancestors.org>

➤ *An in-depth guide to writing your family history, with detailed examples.*

Portable Genealogists on writing and publishing topics, available from <https://shop.americanancestors.org>:

“Building a Genealogical Sketch”

“Genealogical Numbering”

“Reference Notes”

“Compiling a Bibliography”

“Editorial Stylesheet”

“Indexing”

➤ *Four-page laminated guides on different aspects of writing and publishing. A compilation version is also available.*

The Chicago Manual of Style, 17th ed., available in print or as online subscription via

<https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html>

➤ *The bible of the book-publishing industry, “CMS” will help you with everything: capitalization, punctuation, abbreviations, numbers and dates, citation styles, guidelines for book production, and more!*

Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace by Elizabeth Shown Mills (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2017).

➤ *A comprehensive guide to citing genealogical works in particular.*