

# Writing your family

Gathering the facts is one challenge, but actually getting your family history down on paper is quite another. *Noeline Kyle* explains how to get the ink flowing.

**R**esearching family history is one of the most compelling and seductive tasks you will ever undertake. Who can fail to enjoy that delicious feeling of anticipation as you wait for the next certificate to arrive in the mail or listen, spellbound, as a relative tells you the very tale needed to solve the mystery of at least one part of the family story? Not to mention the satisfaction of finally turning up that elusive immigrant list you've been hunting high and low.

I know I always enjoy the chase and, like other historians, family historians need accurate and full details of their subjects and to complete their research well. But the belief that you must collect everything you think relates to the family can sometimes be a barrier to sitting down to write. It is what I call the 'collect until you drop syndrome' and it affects us all from time to time.

## Pick up that pen

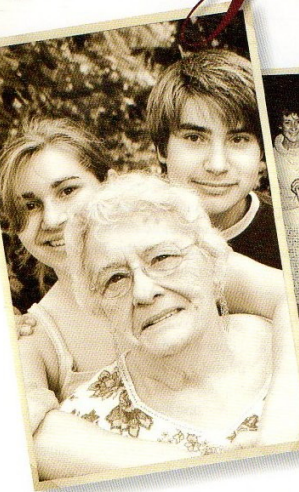
The counter to this is to write as you do your research. This will help to make both the writing and the research more focused and much easier. It will also help you sort out your data. I began researching and writing the history of my mother's family in 1980 and it was 2001 before I published the final story.

Over that time I wrote and re-wrote stories, myths, anecdotes and worked through many oral histories. The final story travelled a long way from its beginnings as I added in new research, re-worked themes and ideas and wrote about my ancestors with a deeper historical awareness.

Oh dear, I hear you say, but I'm already well into my research, indeed, I've almost finished. How can my writing begin easily now? No matter. The point is this: begin your writing now, irrespective of what point you are at in your research.

You might like to think of this as pre-writing, or beginning writing, or early drafts of writing or simply as taking notes. But in whatever form you do this early writing, it will provide the basic building blocks for constructing your unique family history. Committing the words to the page forces you to see more clearly where you want to go. The stories begin to take shape as you become more knowledgeable about your family and you begin to draw the events, characters, ideas, facts and stories together.

Your basic tools are, of course, the innumerable pieces of the past you have collected: documents, names and dates, land records, family stories, research



notes, press cuttings, obituaries, certificates. But how can you best sort and sift this mountain of source material to make it easier to put pen to paper and get your family history off to a start?

## Less is more

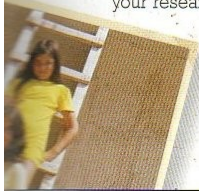
As beginner writers we nearly always want to write it all. We discover Irish history, German history, Scottish history, Italian history. The history of our origins consumes us and we include it all: Rob Roy, William Wallace, Robert Bruce, the tall chieftains, the wild warriors ... whatever we can find goes into the mix. Of course, someone else has already written the history of Ireland, Germany, Scotland, Italy and Australia. You don't need to write it again.

Focus your writing on those aspects of the past that specifically relate to your

# history

family. Writing as you do your research will help you do this. If your ancestors were farmers, then explore that aspect. Study local histories and try to relate how families, in particular women and children, might have lived their lives then. Connect your family to time periods, local events, national and world events and investigate how their lives might have been shaped by these.

These four basic steps will help you write more easily and write as you do your research:



## 1. Notekeeping

Notekeeping may seem like a simple task. After all, we do it all the time. The trick in family history, though, is to do it well and ensure it supports the construction of first-rate history as well as your own writing. Whether you copy notes by hand or photocopy your documents, the source of the information should be noted accurately and ideally include all of the following details:

- author/names, including initials
- book or journal article title/s
- year, publisher and place of publication
- page numbers (for articles, newspapers, bulletins, excerpts, etc.)
- name of the library or archives and any individual contact/s associated with your research
- file or catalogue number (if archive material)
- folio number or record series (if archive material).



For internet downloads, keep a note of the URL and the date you accessed it, as websites change, sometimes daily, or can even disappear.

## 2. Sorting and sifting – the mechanical task

Most of us will use a genealogical software program to store, record and then begin the preliminary sorting and sifting of family history data and to print a range of charts, family group sheets and descendant charts. Websites that will help you compare recent programs before you buy are shown in the MORE box.

A pedigree chart or a list of individual family data produced from your software program will provide you with a quick and easy means for extracting names, dates, and other information so as to make links between individuals, families and events. This is what I call the *mechanical* part of starting to sort and sift your data, a precursor to the next step, *interpretation and analysis*.

## 3. Ordering and classifying – the analytical and interpretive task

At some stage you need to start thinking about the meaning and significance of the data you have amassed. It is one thing to collect and sort your data but what does it all mean? The first step is to read your documents and draw from your reading significant ideas, themes and stories about the family.

Asking questions is also a key strategy. You will want to know how men, women and children lived out their lives. The growing of crops or purchase of food, meal times, food storage, child/parent relationships, childhood illnesses, everyday events – all of these will differ for families in other time periods and during particular local, national or world events. Interpretation is the key here and looking for meaning within the documents and links between them will take your writing beyond the mere recording of names and dates.

For example, death certificates supply considerable information about an early

European arrival in Australia, including how long the decedent had been in the colony. But a death certificate is often less valuable for a female ancestor. Maiden names are missing or are incorrect. First names can be wrong, birth dates muddled and parents' names absent. A closer reading of the certificate will alert you to why this might be so. Who is the informant for the death? In most cases the informant is a son or son-in-law and unfortunately these are the individuals in the family who knew the least about the ancestry of the woman concerned.

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On a marriage certificate, look at the witnesses who might have attended the wedding as this can provide clues to family relationships. Who is the informant on a birth certificate? Who did the delivery? I found on some birth certificates for my Irish ancestors that the midwife was the grandmother and this gave me a picture of how families helped and supported each other through family events. Places of birth, death and marriage track the movements of families and they also alert us to how we might write about the childhood of the people concerned.

Sorting and sifting the data and then interpreting your documents, re-reading them and linking them into the wider historical context help prepare the groundwork for your writing task. Similarly, writing and recording individual biographies, family stories, anecdotes and family myths and placing these in

a file are the first steps in using your research to write early stories. Place these with your charts and family group sheets and you have the basis for the beginning part of the writing process.

## 4. Make a writing plan

A writing plan can be a preliminary list of possible chapters. Begin with origins and move systematically through the various generations, events, themes and stages of family life. The plan will, of course, change as you become more knowledgeable and you can add more information as you do further research.

When I first started to write the history of my great grandmother I had a grandiose notion that I would also write the story of my mother and my sister, partly because their lives had some similarity although lived decades apart. As I did more research on Mary Kirkpatrick I could see that her story was sufficient on its own. So keep in mind that your plan will change. The challenge of writing well is to welcome that change and capture all of its complexity, feel empathy with it and keep on writing no matter what. **YL**

### → MORE

Dr Noeline Kyle offers many other strategies, ideas and resources for writing and publishing your family history in *Writing Family History Made Very Easy* (Allen & Unwin 2007, RRP \$24.95). Read all about it at <http://tinyurl.com/3aty5q>. Contact Noeline at: Web [www.familyhistorywriting.bigpondhosting.com](http://www.familyhistorywriting.bigpondhosting.com) Email [njk8@bigpond.com](mailto:njk8@bigpond.com)

To compare recent releases of genealogy software visit <http://lkessler.com/gplinks.shtml> [www.familychronicle.com/software.html](http://www.familychronicle.com/software.html)

Other useful websites include: [www.naa.gov.au](http://www.naa.gov.au) [www.nla.gov.au/oz/genelist.html](http://www.nla.gov.au/oz/genelist.html) [www.ancestry.com.au](http://www.ancestry.com.au)