

Writing Your Family History in Five Steps

Barbara Krasner offers tips on how to record your family history in written form for future generations.

In 2011, I sat down with twenty notebooks, filled with penciled scribbles of family member vital events, census records, and immigration records. My goal was to write a genealogical memoir. It was only when I reviewed my notes that I could see past names and dates. I saw people connected not just to my family history, but also to local, national, and world history. I saw distinctive characters.

For example, my great-grandmother, Bryna, seemed to be quite the matriarch. She lived to age 97 and I often wondered how she must have felt emigrating from a small Belarusian village with wooden huts and horse-drawn carts to the tenements and trolley cars of Newark, New Jersey. I examined her arrival date in the United States: May 1901. Her daughter, Ida, married in September 1901 to a man deemed unsuitable for her. I could only imagine my great-grandmother's dismay at this and her saying to her husband, "Grab the candlesticks and the featherbed, we're going to America."

I spent four weeks drafting this memoir. The process enabled me to synthesize the information I had collected over the course of 20 years of research.

As a result, I've compiled a series of five steps to help anyone write a family history.

1. Know Your Goals and What You Want to Produce

A sweeping family history is a demanding undertaking. It's best to start with a clear focus and clear goals. You could choose to center your narrative around a specific person or a couple. For instance, I wrote a brief family history for my parents' 50th wedding anniversary and distributed copies at the event. The booklet appropriately only addressed my parents, their families, and their children and grandchildren. It did not go into any detail about collateral relatives. The family tree charts I included showed direct ancestry, although another version showed my parents' brothers and sisters. I also included photos.

You could also choose to make your main character a place, such as the ancestral homestead, or a family heirloom. A family artifact frequently serves as the centerpiece of a family history memoir, documenting the author's search for meaning behind it.

Do you want to write a narrative to commemorate a certain family event? Do you want to write a family history to share with your children or grandchildren? Where do you want to place your energies? For an upcoming narrative, my goal is to write only about my great-grandmother, my

grandmother, and my mother — those who married into my Krasner family and who had the 1930s and my father in common. Having this goal will help keep me on track and limit any rambling.

2. Create a Core Message

At the center of your narrative lives a core statement that articulates what your main character wants above all else. For my great-grandmother, it could be: *A sixty-year old woman leaves two grown children behind to stop a daughter's wedding in America. But she could not imagine the heartbreak that awaits. Between 1910 and 1918, her husband band and three of her four daughters die (two in Europe and one in America).*

This core statement should have emotional resonance. That's why people read. It's the author's responsibility to take readers on an emotional journey. Many family histories are dry and merely contain names, places, and dates. They present the facts with no point of view. That might be fine for a scholarly paper, but if you want to share your history with your family, think about joy, sadness, anger, anxiety, grief, and other emotions.

3. Create Characters

The highest compliment usually paid to a work of nonfiction is that it reads like fiction. Our ancestors often lived under extraordinary circumstances that might make their stories seem like fiction. Nonetheless, you've done the research to back up your claims.

Review any interviews you've conducted with family members to gain insights into your main characters' private lives. Maybe your main character was a young woman at a New England racetrack during World War I and she figured out a system to win, beating out all the men, including her father. Examine photos to discover stances, clothing, hairstyles, and environment. Through photographs, I can see that my great-grandmother continued to wear black clothing after her husband died, long after the mourning period ended.

To get into your main characters, it's a good idea to engage in free-writing. Grab a notebook and put yourself into the minds of your characters. Write as if you were those people. What kept them up at night? What were their dreams, their heartbreaks? What obstacles got in their way?

Every character — every human — has both good and less-than good traits. A gangster is good to his mother or gives back to the neighborhood. An alcoholic is generous when sober. A loving grandmother has moments of deep despair. A caring father has fits of anger.

It's also a good idea to make a list of every role your ancestor played. My great-grandmother's list looks like this:

- Wife — Widowed in America, where she doesn't speak the language
- Mother — Gave birth to at least six children; outlived half her children (three die between 1910-1918); two daughters make poor marriage choices
- Daughter
- Sister — Had one brother in America and other siblings in Belarus
- Orthodox — Wore traditional matron wig

You should also include places lived and jobs held. Some patterns may emerge, perhaps abandonment or a flair for adjusting to new environments. One pattern that persisted for my great-grandmother was that she grew increasingly younger through US Census data.

4. Develop a Narrative Arc

There will be two outlines to work with for your family history. The first is a narrative arc that is the structural form used to shape fiction. The arc typically begins with some kind of inciting incident. Perhaps it's arrival in the United States or Canada. Perhaps it's the death of your family member's parents or a spouse. Some event serves as a trigger for succeeding events that produce escalating consequences.

Again using my great-grandmother as the example, her inciting incident is receiving the news of her daughter's marriage in America. She gathers up her husband and youngest daughter and they travel from Belarus to Rotterdam to come to America. She does not stop the wedding and becomes attached to her American grandchildren. Her daughter, Malka, dies in Europe and grandchild, Minnie, comes to her in New Jersey. But then war breaks out in Europe. Her husband, Morduch, dies. Her daughter, Doba, dies in the flu pandemic. Her daughter, Ida, dies a month after giving birth and the baby dies, too. She has to question whether coming to America was worth it.

To create the narrative, I combine the facts I've researched with the stories family members have told me. Photos can also provide clues into your family's daily lives.

5. Link to Broader Historical Context

The second outline links your family history to the broader historical context. This could include local, national, and international events, such as war, the Great Depression, industrialization, immigration, inventions, catastrophes, epidemics, blights, etc.

My great-grandmother was part of the mass wave of immigrants to the United States. World War I affected her family on both sides of the Atlantic. As an Orthodox Jew from a small village, city life in Newark and modern living (what she might have thought about the first airplanes flying in and out of

Newark Airport and indoor plumbing and electricity) would have had to change her perceptions.

You could also link your story to social customs of the time period and place. Someone living in the tenements of the Lower East Side will have a different story than someone homesteading in Wyoming. Ask yourself, "What was life like?"

Filling in the Gaps

The material you've gathered may only get you so far. Maybe your aunt worked as a welder in a California airplane factory. You can conduct further research among historical sources to gain an understanding of what her daily life may have been like. Perhaps you had a relative who died of Hodgkin's' disease before it was given that name. You could research health and medical care of the time period. Oral histories, diaries, local histories, among other sources, can provide great assistance and many offerings can be found online. For my great-grandmother's story, I've researched early 20th-century Newark and have driven to all the places the US Census gave as her addresses. While the buildings no longer stand, I could still get a sense of the neighborhood and its distance to shopping areas and transportation.

By reviewing your facts and notes, you can uncover a larger story. The mission is to reconstruct a credible world for your readers, to transport them to a different time and place, and make your family's history come alive. Xx



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While you write your narrative, you may want to read these family histories for motivation and inspiration:

The Tribal Knot by Rebecca McClanahan

Family by Ian Frazier

We Are Here by Ellen Cassedy

What They Saved by Nancy K. Miller

Roots by Alex Haley

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