



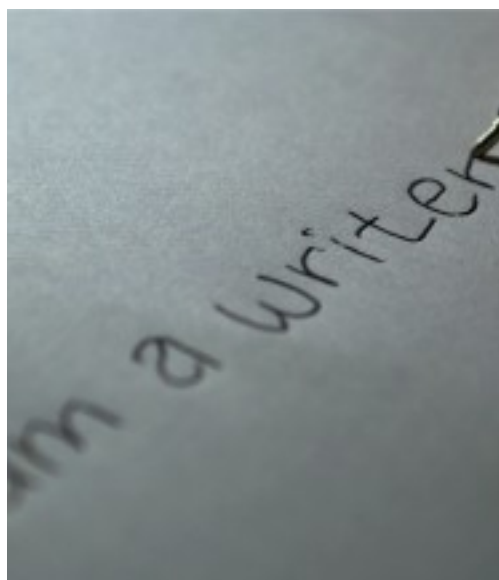
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WRITING FAMILY NARRATIVES

by Laura Murphy DeGrazia, CG



Exceptionally well-written family narratives inspire others to try to bring their own ancestors to life in the same way. It sometimes seems, however, that talented writers are born with a gift—that either a person has or doesn't have talent. Having talent certainly helps, but everyone can improve their writing ability. Just as genealogists spend time developing knowledge of sources and analytical skills, they can grow as storytellers.

People who set out to pen their family histories must know the fundamentals of sound writing—grammar and usage, spelling, style, and structure. Family historians merge creative storytelling

techniques with documentable facts, and in the process they must address some unique situations. To breathe life into people of the past, genealogists carefully use historic details of ancestors' lives to infer possible personality traits, mindsets, emotions, and motivations. Documents may show that a widow with young children moved to another city and lived near her sister. A researcher may suspect that the move was caused by the widow's need for assistance, but statements about motive must be handled with care. There are right and wrong ways to assign human emotions when sources don't spell them out.

Genealogy authors must know how to handle gaps in knowledge. Most family histories have some undocumented time spans, years that cannot be accounted for adequately.

Key story elements may be lacking. Names of spouses and parents, places of birth and death, and other details may not be known. Unlike fiction writers, family historians can't arbitrarily fill the gaps. Authors writing about their ancestors must consider the best way to account for such holes. Should the breaks be ignored or addressed? If the latter, how should the missing parts of the story be acknowledged?

Another question faced by researchers-turned-authors is how much detail to include. During research, genealogists uncover all sorts of records with perhaps hundreds of pieces of information about each family member. A narrative account telling the family's story can't include every detail from every record. One approach is to establish a central theme and use records to support it. The focus then will be on details that are important to the theme.

These issues and others are examined in a 2006 *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* article called "Developing Family Narratives from Leads in Sources," written by John Philip Colletta.[1] While many family histories published in the *Quarterly* demonstrate the principals discussed by Colletta, this piece explains the mechanics and the decisions. Colletta lists four important elements of any story—setting, action, character, and theme. He provides insight into each component and uses examples from his own research as illustrations. Some of his lessons apply to any type of writing (varying sentence length, using words that paint vivid pictures), but he devotes attention to concerns of family historians.

Colletta is one of genealogy's best-known storytellers. He is unquestionably talented and undoubtedly has spent significant time studying the art of writing. In this article, in addition to talking about writing, he demonstrates how genealogists should pursue supplemental sources to expand on basic discoveries. He encourages researchers to ask questions about their findings and gather answers. For example, a bare-bones fact may be that an ancestor arrived from Ireland in 1909. That point raises other questions. What was the voyage like? What were the passengers' accommodations? What did they eat onboard? Where did the ship dock? What happened to the passengers upon arrival? Although research may not uncover exactly what was on an ancestor's dinner plate each night, historic works about the shipping line and immigration will reveal details of the typical immigrant experience. With such knowledge, an author will be able to describe the story in more striking detail.

Conducting historical research on subjects associated with a family's story will help writers frame and support theories. Background information can help authors explain motives, envision personality traits, understand decisions, and grasp experiences. In his

illustration, Colletta collected information on related places, laws, and customs to develop possible explanations about residences during the Civil War. He clearly explains how he linked the hypothetical with documentable events.[2]

Colletta's instruction in this article touches on several other points that family historians will face as they set out to write their stories—for example, handling speculation, deciding on a theme, blending personal details with general information in what he calls “mini-essays,” and using contemporary quotes.

Genealogists who would like to write a family narrative someday should take time to study this piece in the *Quarterly* and benefit from the author's knowledge and experience. To see more of Dr. Colletta's work, search the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* archives for his other articles and visit his website to explore a list of his publications and activities. He will be speaking at the 2017 NGS Conference in Raleigh, North Carolina.

The *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* regularly includes articles that illustrate solutions to difficult genealogical problems. But as this article shows, the journal includes articles that instruct in different ways. *Quarterly* readers enjoy a broad array of topics that are important to genealogists. In this case, an expert storyteller discusses basic concepts about writing family history narratives, inspiring and encouraging his readers to try their own hands.

One additional note—those who plan on attending the NGS conference in Raleigh this May who are interested in learning more about writing should investigate session T224, “Writing a Family Narrative That Your Family Will Want to Read,” by Margo Fariss Brewer.

[1] John P. Colletta, “Developing Family Narratives from Leads in Sources,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 94 (March 2006): 23–37; PDF, *NGSQ Archives*(http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/ngsq_archives : 22 March 2017).

[2] Colletta, “Developing Family Narratives from Clues in Sources,” 33.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Laura Murphy DeGrazia, CG



Laura is a professional genealogist specializing in the New York City area and Irish Americans. She is a former trustee and past president of the Board for Certification of Genealogists. From 2010 through 2014 she edited the *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* and became editor again in January 2018. Her book on researching in New York City, Long Island, and Westchester County, New York, was published as part of the *NGS Research in the States* series in 2013. Laura is a member of the NGS Magazine Editorial Advisory Committee and the NGS Publications Committee and a former editor of *NGS Monthly*.

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