

Your Grandpa Did What?: Write A Family History That Reads Like Fiction

- I. Existing Family History Accounts?
 - A. Researching Facts vs the mechanics
 1. Most family histories are not meant to be read/compilation of facts
 2. However if we can tap into the techniques a fiction writer uses, we can improve our stories and invite those who read them turn the pages
 3. Of course all family histories are based on facts. We shouldn't make up stories just to make them interesting. Do your research
 4. If you are taking this class to learn how to write your story, chances are you have already done plenty of fact finding.
 5. So we'll concentrate on the mechanics of fiction writing and how we can use these techniques to get our reader's to beg for more.
 - B. Decisions to make before you start
 1. Types
 - a. Memoirs - only covers a specific period or topic
 - b. Biographies - entire life
 - c. Extended Family Histories- in-depth story covering many generations
 2. Format
 - a. Chronological
 - b. By stories
 - c. By geography
 - d. By characters – use a pivotal point in the character's life to begin
 3. Viewpoint and Tone
 - a. Will you write it in your words?
 - b. In a family member's words?
 - c. Will it mostly come from journals or letters, specifically in those formats?
 - d. Will it be just the facts or will you add creative elements, invented dialogue to get a point across?
 - e. Will it be just the meat of a story where you'll include charts at the back that contain the dates and places you want your readers to remember?
 - f. Or will it be a combination of creativity and charts?
 4. Consider your audience
 - a. Audience may not share your understanding of the time or place – this requires more explanation
 - b. Readers may be unaware of the social, cultural, or physical milieu of the story
 5. Draw up some type of plan

- a. There is nothing more frustrating than starting a story and half way through the middle you decide to change the way you approach it
 - b. Even if you do draw up a plan, you may decide to approach the story in a different way later, but giving this some preliminary thought might save you from wandering all over the board after you begin
 - c. Decide how deep you want your story to delve into the life or lives of your hero or heroine.
 - d. Make these decisions early on to save yourself the headache later
6. How about the mechanics of your manuscript?
- a. Script should be readable/ probably best not to write it out longhand
 - b. Indent your paragraphs or use spaces between your paragraphs
 - c. Use plenty of white space
 - d. Can use sidebars and footnotes, just be careful not to clutter the page
 - e. 12 point is good
 - f. Leave off bolding except for chapter headings
 - g. Traditional font – san serif (with tails) Times New Roman, Clarendon
 - h. Avoid fancy script
 - i. Use italics with reserve
7. Use Pictures- at least 1 mg resolution
8. Expect to Edit
- a. Spend as much time on your manuscript or more than it took to write the first draft
 - b. Check grammar, spelling, sequence structure
 - c. Avoid cliché, say things in a unique way
9. Formal Publishing VS Self Publishing
- a. If you want to sell the books, you should present them in the most professional way you can
 - b. You can find many companies on the Internet

II. Fiction Writing Techniques

- A. When you pick up a novel, what elements in the book make you want to read to the end?
1. Characters that come alive
 2. A hook that draws us in
 3. A middle that doesn't sag
 4. Fresh verbiage
 5. Vivid description

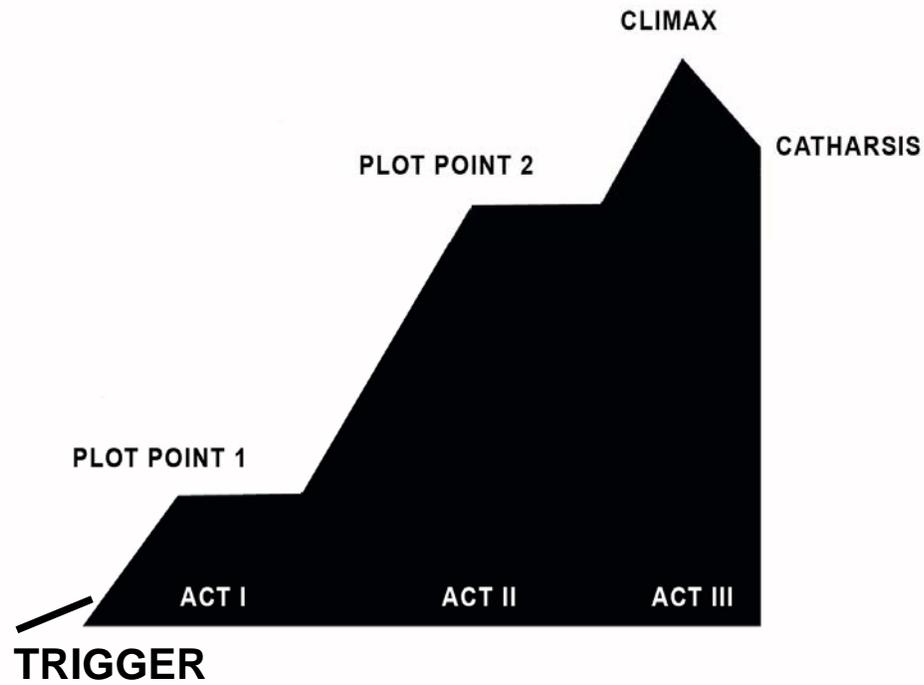
6. An ending that provides a punch (Spielberg quote: People have forgotten how to tell a story. Stories don't have a middle or an end any more. They usually have a beginning that never stops beginning.)
 7. So many different techniques that we can use to take the excitement up a notch or two and we need to be using those in our family history writing
 8. Structure like five-act play structure
 9. Recommend: *Thanks, But This Isn't for Us: A (Sort of) Compassionate Guide to Why Your Writing Is Being Rejected*, Jessica Page Morrell, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, New York 2009
- B. Let's start at the beginning with beginnings
1. Who was the brilliant person who suggested that a family history has to start with "Samuel Martin was born on 3 March 1849 in a log cabin in Illinois."
 2. What is the one element we need to get off on a running start?
 3. Hooks
 - a. Hooks establish credibility, introduces viewpoint and voice, makes reader care about people and unfolds the story
 - b. Several things a hook must do
 - Introduce your main character or characters under stress and the story world tipping off balance
 - Introduce character's core personality
 - Create momentum, tension, and suspense by hinting at upcoming conflict
 - Create involvement and sympathy with sensory details
 - Establish setting and situation
 - Introduce and incite an incident that thrusts the story forward
 - c. Use the most interesting aspect of their lives
 - d. Do a bit of research and bring color into the locale or the events that take place
- C. Keep the middle from sagging
1. Leave something hanging at the end of each chapter or scene
 2. Don't give away everything at once-create an air of mystery
 3. Use humor
 4. Relate feelings and emotions we all have
 5. Expose skeletons in the closet
 6. Relate stories of ingenuity and how they relate to modern-day life
 7. Use the unexpected
- D. Writing the building Blocks of stories- Structuring Scenes

1. Scenes are like the pearls of a necklace. Each one is necessary to the whole
 2. Like stories, scenes should have a beginning, middle and end
 3. Scenes take place in the now and make your readers worry, anticipate what will come next
 4. A scene includes more information than conflict: mood, sense of time and place, anticipation, a reflection of what has gone on before
 5. A scene has a three-part mission: a problem, a goal, and the conflict that keeps us from the goal
 6. Scenes can include:
 - a. Flashbacks
 - b. Showdowns
 - c. Surprises, twists, complications
 - d. Seductions/crimes
 - e. Love scenes
 - f. Fight scenes or surrenders
 - g. Struggles
 - h. Revenge
 - i. Chases
 - j. Deceptions/betrayals
 - k. Disclosures/revelations
 - l. Answers
 7. Try to make them accurate and original/ different than anybody else's
- E. Endings Aren't Death Sentences
1. The same brilliant person who started their history with "Samuel Martin was born on... probably thought they'd better kill off their ancestors in the end.
 2. You don't have to kill off your ancestors
 3. Don't have to have a happy ending either
 4. Can conclude with a tragic ending
 5. Use a meaningful quote of your character that is the essence of who he was
 6. Build up action to the climax
- F. Memorable Characters
1. What makes compelling characters?
 - a. Your ancestors can be neurotic or despicable, vain or shallow, but they must be vivid, fascinating, and believable, and their actions, decisions, and motives must propel the story forward to an inevitable conclusion
 - b. "What if my ancestors are wimps?" you might ask.
 - Find the most interesting stories surrounding your ancestor. Make them zing with fresh prose or humor or descriptive background

flourishes. If you love them enough to write about them, then make them shine.

- Don't allow your ancestors to worry, fret, sigh, retreat, blame, crumble, hesitate, equivocate (beat around the bush), bore or be wishy-washy
 - Find the best in them and highlight those traits
- c. What if your ancestors are larger than life?
- Show some character flaws
 - Remember to introduce some problem that even your great grandfather need to solve by the end

Five-Act Play Structure



- Trigger = problem situation
- Plot point 1 = 1st complication
- Mid point = 2nd complication (not shown on chart)
- Plot point 2 = 3rd complication
- Climax = crisis
- Catharsis = resolution

Family History Book Publishers

<http://www.creativecontinuum.com/> Creative Continuum

<http://familyhistorypublisher.com/> Family History Publishers, Inc.

<http://www.smithprinting.net/> Smith's printing company

<http://www.rppress.com/> Royal Press

<http://www.americanancestors.org/newbury-street-press/> American Ancestors / Part of the New England Historical Genealogical Society

<http://familyheritagepublishers.com/> Family Heritage Publishers

<http://www.genealogybookstore.com/publishing/> Genealogy Publishing Service

<http://www.heritageamericainc.com/> Heritage America

<http://www.heritagebooks.com/publishing.html> Heritage Books, Inc

<http://www.historypreserved.com/> History Preserved

<http://www.hollyhockpress.com/index.html> Hollyhock Press (Small Press)

<http://www.timelesstreasurespublishing.com/> Timeless Treasures Publishing

<http://www.genealogyprinting.com/> The Genealogy Printing Co.

<http://www.pathcom.com/~rstewart/> Stewart Publishing & Printing

<http://www.wemakebooks.com/> We Make Books

Self Publishing

<http://www.alphatoomega.us/> Alpha to Omega

Software to create your own genealogy books

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