

Introduction

In writing about relatives, we are telling the stories of what people do, and why; how they live; where they go, and with whom; and how the threads of their lives weave history. We can write about people we know personally and see frequently; people who we once knew, but who we have not seen recently (due to geographic relocation, death, or estrangement); or long-ago ancestors.

Choosing a Person To Write About

A. Make a list of people you would like to write about. Include living people; include relatives who you have known, even if they are now deceased; include relatives who you did not know, but who were known to your other relatives; and include ancestors who lived long before you.

B. Jot down a few words or phrases about each person on your list. Obvious physical characteristics; notable personality traits and personal habits, good & bad; what the person did, good & bad; where the person was from; events or tangible items associated with that person.

C. Confirm your relationship to your relative. How are you related? How long have you known that family member? How do you know about that family member?

Beginning the Story of a Relative

A. Choose a relative or ancestor from your list.

B. For relatives whom you have known - - Describe the person: appearance, character and personality traits (both good and bad). What did the person do for a living, as a hobby, for recreation? What was the person's involvement in his or her community? Where was your relative from? Why did that person relocate?

Include any events, legends, and tangible items associated with your relative. What exploits or adventures are associated with your relative? What strong memories do you have of your interaction with that family member? How has your relationship with that relative grown, diminished, or otherwise changed over time? What other information about this person would you like to know?

C. For relatives you do not know - - Describe what you have been told about that person's appearance, character and personality, both good & bad. What have you been told about that relative's career, hobbies and other interests? What have you been told about that relative's community participation (political activities, volunteer work, church attendance)?

What have you been told about where that relative was from, why he or she left, and the reasons that relative choose another place to live? What have you been told about the military or travel adventures of your relative? What have you been told about historic events and natural disasters your relative witnessed or endured?

Who told you about your relative? What positive or negative biases did the person have about the relative being described? How is the person (or persons) who told you about your relative related to that person? If you have been told about your relative by more than one person, how do the accounts differ? What other information about this person would you like to know?

D. For ancestors who lived in earlier times - - Describe what you have been able to learn about that ancestor, both good & bad; include information about appearance (e.g., photos, Civil War enlistment papers), character (e.g., published obituaries), personality (e.g., diary entries); include information about that ancestor's spouse and children (e.g., census returns, obituaries). Include contextual information, e.g., from county histories, historical timelines, etc.

Include information about activities (e.g., obituaries, diaries, letters); include information about where ancestor was from (e.g., census returns). How have you learned this information? (E.g., family legend, published biography, other sources, including your own sleuthing.) What information is missing? What other information about this ancestor would you like to know?

Why We May Lack Information about a Person

A. What do you wish you knew about your relative, but don't? Make a list. Speculate about why that information may be missing.

B. Living people - - They keep secrets due to embarrassment or shame; they think information about their own lives is not sufficiently interesting to share; they have forgotten details of their own lives; they are disinclined to share "private" information (e.g., finances, religious beliefs, medical history).

Other impediments to getting the whole story: Continuing grief over tragic events; strong loyalty to another family member precludes sharing some information; lack of information about their own history (e.g., adoptees); some people lie, or fictionalize details of their lives, either deliberately or carelessly.

C. Deceased people who we knew - - Many of the same reasons as listed above prevented our relatives from sharing some details of their history; our relatives died before we thought to ask about their lives; our relatives moved far away, and we lost access to the details of their lives.

D. Ancestors who lived earlier - - Reasons some ancestors left a lot of information behind : Longevity & frequent appearance in official documents; numerous descendants & family members with stories and information; they left memoirs, diaries, letters, photos and other tangible items documenting their lives.

Reasons why we cannot find information about our ancestors: They were ill or died young and did not generate many official records; they moved often and are hard to find in official records; they lived and died in other countries; their descendants lost continuity with original nation's culture and language.

They left few progeny, thus there is no one to remember stories and information; they were poor, resulting in fewer official records; they were widowed, divorced, or remarried, thereby losing information about original families (especially true for women); maiden names and information about original spouses were lost; they were involved in scandal, crime, or became estranged; cuts to family ties causes descendants to lose access to family information.

Some Strategies for Finding More Information

A. Make a list of steps you might take to learn more about your relative or ancestor.

B. How to learn more about living people - - Oral interview: If possible, get permission to tape record the interview; use open-ended questions (how, why, describe); prepare questions ahead of time; actively listen to interview subject for clues to additional questions; break up interview into manageable sessions.

Use photos and things as prompts to memory; ask the same questions in various ways; interview multiple family members about same people, places and events; don't procrastinate!

C. How to learn more about hard-to-find deceased relatives - - Remember to work from what you know toward what you don't yet know; re-examine the seemingly irrelevant; look at notes in margins, on envelopes; on the backs of official documents; examine tangible family things for clues.

Analyze everything; look at secondary information on vital statistical documents; analyze documents associated with collateral family members; think outside the box; contemplate what you might have done in your relative's circumstances.

D. How to learn more about long-dead ancestors - - Research historical context in which ancestors lived; utilize published county histories and city directories; prepare a timeline for your ancestor; analyze the timeline for gaps in information, and for patterns that suggest clues for further research.

Research collateral ancestors and in-laws in order to learn more about your direct ancestor.

Keep in mind different types of family relationships: Lineal (direct blood relationship); collateral (all other non-lineal blood relationships, e.g., aunts, uncles, cousins); in-laws (non-blood relationships resulting from association through marriage); step-family (when a lineal relative remarries); adoptive or tribal (non-blood relationships forming families by choice); surrogacy and egg/sperm donors (confidential blood or partial-blood relationships); triangulate DNA matches for clues.

Go to the source; travel to where your ancestor lived; explore research resources at that place.

Conclusion

A. Writing about people is where genealogy and writing collide. It's also a good way to identify gaps in our information, and use those gaps as clues for additional research.

B. By writing about our relatives and our ancestors, we recognize more details about our own lives and passions. We can use oral interview questions to "interview" ourselves.

C. The most interesting or dramatic story of a relative may be the story of our search for information about that person!