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Add Life to Your Genealogy

You may have spent years gathering names, dates, and places, entering your data into the best genealogy program, and making them all connect in a multi-page chart. Yet when you share your work with family or friends, few seem to mirror your enthusiasm.

Is this a familiar story?

What's missing?

Life—the story between the dashes that makes those boxes transform into living beings.

You may think, “Well, that’s fine for people who have trunk loads of family letters or a book written by a past relative.” But it’s not true. With a bit more research, fact-based snippets, a few words from an official document, and some creative writing, you can weave a story that makes distant relatives leap right out of their little boxes and into your life.

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National award-winning graphic designer, Paula Bartell Slavens started a personal history business in 2000 and has completed projects for clients throughout the United States. Husband Rick Slavens, supports her with genealogical and social history research. One of their projects is 625-page, 300-year family history project for a Pittsburgh client. Slavens will read excerpts from this book at the workshop, demonstrating how a few know facts and skillful writing can transform family names, dates, and places into a compelling story that breathes life into long-gone friends and relatives.

Presentation Content:

As a genealogist, we create the family trees with all the branches. As personal historians we add the leaves and flowers that give that tree its identity, it's texture, and color. That in turn, fills in the dash between our births and deaths. It's the story between those two points that turns data into flesh and bone.

Elements for filling in the dash and adding leaves and flowers to our family trees.

1. Oral history—Interviewing family & friends
2. Research. Read books, if cannot have real life input, learn from other's stories.
3. Historical events—What happened during this time?
4. Social history—Everyday life. Tools and lifestyles.
5. Pictures and drawings
6. Heirlooms and artifacts
7. Family letters, diaries, and memoirs

What if you have little or nothing about a family member?

1. Start with genealogical records
2. Research lifestyle through newspapers
3. Check advertisements
4. Learn how one spent an ordinary day
 - a. Transportation
 - b. Food and food prep
 - c. Household chores
 - d. Grooming
 - e. Entertainment
5. Medical treatment & equipment
6. Religious beliefs
7. Social mores & biases
8. Education
9. Career opportunities

Getting started: organize your data

1. Create source files with content (i.e., copy reference materials into a subject folder)
2. Create separate photo files, organized in subject folders by date
3. Organize Interviews in subject folders
4. Print out family group sheets or charts to keep names and relationships straight.
5. When data is completely organized, create catalog of contents
6. Create Photoshop contact sheets.

Rules of writing

1. Determine how the story will be told: Third person, first person, second person, more?
2. Review the “sound bites” or actual words from your story tellers.
3. If details are missing, write the story in the third person, then interject the actual words as emphasis or confirmation.
4. Show, don’t tell.
“Don’t tell me the moon is shining. Show me the glint of light on the broken glass.” —Anton Chekhov.
5. Include events, people, places, life context, and reactions.
6. Use descriptive words that capture the senses, sounds, and feelings, in addition to the scenes.
7. Tell the truth, or use creativity to expand on the truth.
8. Identify the writing as literal truth versus emotional truth.
9. Be careful of dialogue, if you do not have the actual words, must use a disclaimer.

Disclaimer examples

1. “I’ve tried to speak as plainly and truthfully as the squirms and wiggles of the human psyche will permit.” —Rick Bragg
2. “I wish to preserve and make sense out this time in my life. Where I have been unable to remember fully, I have allowed my imagination to fill in the details.” —Dawn Thurston
3. “The conversations that appear in this personal history have been reconstructed from my memory. While the dialogue is probably not exactly what was spoken, I have tried to re-create the spirit of the conversation and the attitude and personality of the speakers to the best of my recollection.” —Dawn Thurston.

Describing people

1. Avoid expressions like, “She was of average height and weight.” or “She was a stylish dresser.”
2. Make people seem real by making them unique, memorable, and human.
3. Describe looks by how someone wore his/her hair, clothing styles, jewelry, body image.
4. Describe body movements and voice.
5. Identify behaviors or ticks—a stance—tousling of the hair.
5. Show the whole person.

Writing exercise:

1. Think of a time when you were frightened.
2. What kind of behavior did you display?
3. How would you describe the setting?
4. What event happened to cause the fright?
5. Describe how your body reacted?
6. Let the readers feel your fear.
7. Remember: show, don't tell.

Writing tips:

1. Record your story in a concept form without the details.
2. Organize it in a chronology that makes sense to the reader.
3. Once the structure is in place, go back and refine it.
4. Use action verbs, not: was, were, have been.
5. If possible, change the story to a first tense to capture the "now."

Books to Read:

Barrington, Judith. *Writing the Memoir* (The Eighth Mountain Press, Portland, Oregon).

Case, Patricia Ann. *How to Write Your Autobiography: Preserving Your Family Heritage* (Woodbridge Press Publishing Company, Santa Barbara, CA. 1983).

Gouldrup, Lawrence P. *Writing the Family Narrative* (Ancestry Publishing. 1987).

Cheney, Theodore A. Rees. *Writing Creative Nonfiction* (1987).

Kuriloff, Pershe C. *Rethinking Writing* (St. Martin's Press, New York. 1989)

Lomask, Milton. *The Biographer's Craft* (Harper and Row, New York. 1986).

McDonnell, Jane Taylor. *Living to Tell the Tale: A Guide to Memoir Writing* (Penguin, New York 1998).

Mitchell, Mary. *Life is Like a Patchwork Quilt: The Art of Recording Life Stories*

Rainer, Tristine. *Your Life as Story: Discovering the "New Autobiography" and Writing Memoir as Literature* (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, a member of Penguin Putnam, Inc., New York, NY).

Rosenbluth, Vera. *Keeping Family Stories Alive: Discovering and Recording the Stories and Reflections of Lifetime* (Hartley & Marks, Point Roberts. WA. 1990, 1997).

Sturdevant, Katherine S. *Bringing Your Family History to Life Through Social History* (2000)

Thurston, Dawn and Morris. *Breathe Life Into Your Life Story* (Salt Lake City, 2007).