

WRITE NOW? YES, RIGHT NOW

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG, FASG

When the subject of writing a family history comes up, people often say “I’m not at that stage yet; maybe later. . .” This is an unfortunate attitude. There are dozens of reasons to begin immediately, but I’m going to present just five, in alphabetical order (but starting with P for variety), on why you should start today by writing individual family sketches for the research you’ve already completed. A family sketch would include a narrative, a genealogical summary, and full documentation.

PEN PAL PREP

How often have you participated in an exchange similar to the following, either by e-mail or with envelope and stamp? “We may be cousins. I’m descended from a Simon Smithy, too. Where is yours from?” “He’s from Summit County. Is that where your Simon is from?” “Yes. I have Mary Morgan for his wife. Who do you have?” “I have his wife as Jane Jones. There’s even a marriage record.” “Maybe he had two wives? I have a marriage record, too, and his will names wife Jane.” “No, his will in 1787 names wife Mary. I have a copy.” “Oh! My Simon Smithy died in 1903.”

Wouldn’t it be lovely (to quote a stage lyric) if in the first exchange you’d had a documented sketch for Simon Smithy to send to your almost-cousin, who also had a similar document to send to you? Wasted time is unproductive time.

QUESTION QUALITY

Once you’ve written a sketch, print it out, turn off the computer, and go find a comfy chair. Read it. Now read it again. This time, ask yourself “Is the quality of the research high enough to justify my conclusions?” Consider various aspects of quality. Did you study all persons of the surname (and collateral surnames) to be certain you haven’t attached your ancestor to the wrong parent? Did you use a variety of sources? A conclusion based on a single census and a tombstone isn’t a conclusion. It’s a leap of faith.

I like to consider the situation backwards and say “If I had reason to believe this was incorrect, where would I look to prove it wrong?” If you haven’t looked there yet, this would be a good time to do so.

From experience, I can say that it is very difficult to do a dispassionate, detached review for quality while you are in the midst of research or if you are not seeing every bit of evidence presented in a logical manner. (In other words, the printed narrative, genealogical summary, documentation, and comfy chair are vital—just don’t fall asleep.)

RELAXING READING

Genealogy is passé. What we do now is family history. We go beyond names, relationships, and documents to try and understand our ancestral families. When we write, we write family history. If you wait until you are “ready” to

prepare your family history, you won’t have time to do a lot of background reading. By writing your family history one family at a time, as you work on the research, you are more likely to get and give a complete picture of the family. And there’s a bonus. The relaxing reading may suggest new research avenues to explore.

The title “relaxing reading” isn’t a misnomer. (Yes, it’s time for a comfy chair again.) I begin at home with my ancient set of Encyclopaedia Britannica for brief but scholarly articles about occupations, historical figures and events, religious movements, and urban maps.

Most genealogical library materials are noncirculating. We must use them at the library, with one eye on the clock. In contrast, most of the materials we use for family history background are circulating library books. You can take them home and read them at your leisure. They may be in the Youth section (for our children and grandchildren to use in school reports). Many are found in college libraries. This is good news, even if you don’t live near a college, because many colleges participate in Interlibrary Loan programs.

SECONDHAND SOURCES

Return to your printed sketch, but this time look only at the sources. Are they good enough? I’m not referring to format. Is the source you used good enough for you to rely on? I recently had to browse records in Ancestry World Tree to try and determine the *real* source for a precise birth date I was seeing on the Web. If accurate, it would blow away (in scholarly genealogical terms) a published European origin. I had been able to reduce my efforts to a couple of dozen entries by checking only those indicating there were notes or sources attached (thank you for those lovely icons). Entry after entry after entry indicated its source as “so-and-so’s database.” Not one had a *real* source attached. Obviously, I could put no faith in the birth date.

What if your secondhand source is a compiled, published genealogy in either article or book format? Compiled genealogies aren’t created equal, so it is your responsibility to include an evaluation in your source citation. Be specific. Is the author a respected genealogist? Does the work meet the suggestions given above for quality? Most importantly, is every fact documented?

TEDIOUS TASKS

Writing an entire family history all at once is no fun. It’s tedious. Very tedious. Very, very tedious. As the editor of a scholarly genealogical journal, I can tell you that I spend an awful lot of my time on tedious tasks.

Tedious tasks include systematically checking that every fact has a source. Tedious tasks include finding a source when one is missing. (I’m considering a keystroke macro to type “needs cite” in bold red italic underline because I have to type that so often.) Tedious tasks include

getting the publication information that you forgot to write down the first time or that wasn't on the title page you photocopied.

P-Q-R-S-T

This is just a smattering of the reasons you should begin writing your family history—right now.