



# WRITING YOUR FAMILY HISTORY

## *A Guideline for Your Project*

Old Buncombe County Genealogical Society

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If you are interested in genealogy and have conducted even the shortest of searches for a relative, you might have thought about how to organize the results into a useful format. One could write a report, an article for a journal or even set up a notebook to share with others, but a book might seem daunting. Many genealogists dream about writing a book on their family research, but do not know where to start.

In 2012, OBCGS organized a working group to explore the steps needed to write a family history book. The group was able to organize their findings and put them all in one place to share with our members. The result is this guideline, a summary of the steps necessary to get your research ready for printing.

- I. **THE ORGANIZING PROCESS** – success is easier when you do some planning up front.
  - a. Choose the Format – cookbook, photo album, genealogy narrative, etc.
  - b. Choose the Scope – one family line descending from a distant ancestor; the grandparent’s story; the military service of a Revolutionary War soldier in the family including his family genealogy; etc.
  - c. Choose a Plot or Theme – one way to make the book more interesting to a broader audience is to use a plot or theme throughout. Suggestions might be their immigration story; life after slavery; survival during the Great Depression; etc.
  - d. Research the Time and Place – this provides more narrative for the reader and rounds out the family members’ experience so the reader understands what they went through to raise their family and survive.
  - e. Choose a Start and Finish – serves to “bookend” the story to make it more appealing.
  - f. Include Illustrations - identify photographs, maps and other original documents to add to the book to further enhance the story and allow the reader to empathize with the ancestors.
  
- II. **THE PARTS** – all books are made up into the “front matter”, the “body matter” and the “back matter” (Reference: [wikipedia.org/wiki/book\\_design](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/book_design) accessed Sept 2013)
  - a. **The Front Matter** – appears at the front of the book before the narrative begins. In order of appearance in the book, the following list covers most elements found in the front matter:

- i. Title Page – repeats the title and author as printed on the cover or spine
  - ii. Colophon – technical information on the back of the title page including copyright, edition dates and publisher information.
  - iii. Table of Contents – a list of chapter headings, subheadings and their page numbers within the book. It includes all the front matter headings and should appear after the title page.
  - iv. Foreword – written by someone other than the author, the foreword tells of the interaction between the book author and the Foreword author.
  - v. Preface – written by the book author, the preface covers the story of how the book came into being or how the idea was developed.
  - vi. Acknowledgement – acknowledgement of the people who contributed to the production of the book and written by the author, it is usually part of the preface.
  - vii. Introduction – written by the author to describe the purpose and goals of the book.
  - viii. Dedication – preceding the text and written by the author, the dedication names the person or people for whom the author has written the book.
  - ix. Epigraph – a phrase, quotation or poem that serves as a summary to link the work to a wider literary reference.
  - x. Prologue – written in the voice of the narrator or a character in the book, the prologue establishes the setting and gives background details, often some earlier story that ties into the main one, and other miscellaneous information.
- b. **The Body Matter** – the narrative, the story or the “meat of the book”. A hierarchical structure is important and could involve more than just chapters:
- i. The highest level would be “Volumes”
  - ii. The next level of organization would be “Books or Parts”
  - iii. The final level would be “Chapters or Sections”
- c. **The Back Matter** – the back matter follows the body matter and provides summary information at the end of the book. In order of appearance in the book, the following list covers most elements found in the back matter of a book:
- i. Epilogue – written in the voice of the narrator or a character in the book, this usually serves to bring the book closure if needed.
  - ii. Afterword – written by the author, this covers the story of how the book came into being or of how the idea for the book was developed.
  - iii. Conclusion – written by the author if needed.
  - iv. Appendix or Addendum – written by the author, this provides supplemental information such as corrections, updates or further details for the information provided in the narrative.

- v. Glossary – written by the author, the glossary provides the definitions of words of importance within the body of the book. They are normally alphabetized and may consist of items, places and characters.
- vi. Bibliography – written by the author, the bibliography lists the citations of the books consulted during the writing of the book. This is a separate list of references from the footnotes or endnotes.
- vii. Index – commonly written by the publisher, this lists the names, places or terms of importance along with the page numbers where they can be found in the body of the narrative.

### **III. THE STORY OR NARRATIVE**

- a. Software - the software for writing the book may consist of any or all of the following: the genealogy software, a word processor, desktop publishing, photographic manipulation, etc.
- b. Family Tree - include a family tree for graphic display of the family for ease of understanding of who is who and the dates associated with important events.
- c. Maps - find maps of the areas in which the families lived for reference points.
- d. Documents – collect copies of reference documents such as family Bible pages, military documents, excerpts from census records, bonds, land deeds, etc.
- e. Personal Artifacts – include artifacts from individuals such as signatures, diaries, letters, artwork or other interesting personal documents. Recording the intimate details of their experiences brings the family members to life.
- f. Photographs - don't forget to add as many photographs of as many different people as possible because this draws a majority of readers to the book to learn more about the families.
- g. References - keep good references or citations on the sources of all documents so you can tell the reader where you got the information. Note who donated any pictures you include. Citations should be simple and useful. You need to decide on their format – footnotes, endnotes, picture taglines, etc.
- h. Chapters - decide on the structure and titles for chapters and other parts of the book.

### **IV. PUBLISHING & MARKETING**

- a. Local Publishers – they provide all levels of support. They work with professionals who can typeset your book, lay it out in desktop publishing software and provide support on photographic elements. Costs need to be assessed up front. They can print your book in a hard bound or soft bound version but they require minimum numbers of books which may be more than you need and drives up the costs.
- b. Print-on-Demand Publishers – are popular alternatives because they provide similar levels of support but you can get a small number of books printed in formats such as hard back and softback versions. To save the most money, lay out your own book but the format of submission must follow strict requirements for layout and software.
- c. Printers such as OBCGS, Office Depot or Fedex Printing (for example) – may provide only limited typesetting/layout services, but can print your book in a soft back, spiral bound

version from an electronic file. The up-front costs are minimal, you get print-on-demand service but the finished format is limited.

- d. Marketing Support - all publishers will provide some level of marketing support. They can provide all or some of the following:
  - i. Copyright registration, barcode set up and ISBN registration for retail sales of the book
  - ii. Direct Sales – conduct sales from the author, a distributor, Amazon, etc.
  - iii. Events – conduct sales during book signings, book fairs, family reunions
  - iv. Communications – press releases, web site, newsletters

No matter what you plan to do with your research results, writing a book is certainly a viable option for genealogists. With these guidelines and some planning time, you can decide for yourself the best approach to producing a well-documented and readable family history book. OBCGS is here to help and we hope you have success no matter what!