

Family Storytelling 101

“The personal essay is as much about the author’s quest, the attempt, to find and/or understand past lives, as it is about the ancestor. The author doesn’t have to have all the answers and doesn’t have to reach conclusions. The reader is coming along for the journey, the experience, the sense of discovery the author makes along the way.” – Sharon DeBartolo Carmack (“You Don’t Have to Write a Book”)

BITE-SIZED STORYTELLING

- **Anecdotes + Memories:** Keep a diary or notebook and write down memories as they come to you; or interview a family member.
- **Diaries + Letters:** Publish copies of diaries and letters; add editorial information
- **Cookbooks + Recipes:** Publish cookbooks and recipes; add photos and stories. Could also do this with heirlooms (share a photo and tell its background)
- **Visual Storytelling:** Create a poster with timelines and photos; Scan and publish photo albums; Tell a photo story, what is happening in a single photo.
- **Ancestor profiles or vignettes:** Write a short overview of an ancestor’s life, or a vignette of an incident in an ancestor’s life
- **Social media:** Set up a family Facebook page, or create a family blog. Post short anecdotes, photos, etc. to share with immediate family, and also as “cousin bait”
- **Personal essays:** Fact-based storytelling. Focus on a certain person or family event and write a non-fiction story using fiction techniques (see below); you can add your personal memories, thoughts, speculation and questions; can frame it as a quest or journey of discovery. Base it around ancestral research and facts, combined with historical context and social history. Footnotes can add important details and enhance credibility while not distracting from the storyline.

PERSONAL ESSAY STRATEGIES

1. Start your story with a **hook** to engage the interest of the reader: start at an exciting part of the story and use flashback to fill in the gaps
 - Start in the middle of the story, then use flashbacks to fill in the gaps
 - Open with an unusual or exciting event, or a turning point in someone’s life
 - Create an air of mystery
 - Use humour
 - Ask a rhetorical question
 - Make a provocative statement
 - Shock or surprise the reader
2. Have a **quest**: what questions or mysteries are you trying to solve?
3. Use **vivid description**: use all of the senses, but *show don’t tell*
4. Develop believable, sympathetic **characters**; depict both the inner and outer struggles they faced
5. Pull research from many **sources** to fill in the **details** of your story (historical context): oral history interviews, photos, letters, diaries, newspapers, maps, social and local history books
6. Include a **beginning, middle and end** with a plot that advances your quest, makes your reader keep reading, and has a resolution or conclusion

DIARY + LETTER TIPS and EXAMPLES

Stop Go by Joe Creegan	www.blurb.ca/b/7020747-stop-go
1931 Buck Hyer Diary by Bruce Hyer	www.blurb.ca/b/6821575-1931-buck-hyer-diary
A Diary of the Boer War by Peter Caulfield	www.blurb.ca/b/3706576-a-diary-of-the-boer-war
Uncle Alf’s Letters by Gill Gill	www.blurb.ca/b/5069040-uncle-alf-s-letters
Your Most Welcome Letter by Sharon Murphy Mohrlock	www.blurb.ca/b/1783345-your-most-welcome-letter

COOKBOOK EXAMPLES

Pawmaw’s Cookbook by Marie Maines	www.blurb.ca/b/7328378-pawmaw-s-cookbook
Nos Dimanches à la Carpière – Recettes de ma grand-mère Hélène by Vincent Girodet	www.blurb.ca/b/7209956-nos-dimanches-la-carpi-re
Dear Elizabeth by Deborah LeMoine	www.blurb.ca/b/7177690-dear-elizabeth-softcover-kitchen-edition

PHOTO ALBUM EXAMPLES

Katharine Wells Netting Photo Album – From the Collection of Katharine Ruth Helfer Hess Editor F. Scott Hess	www.blurb.ca/b/1051474-the-katharine-wells-netting-photo-album
Photo Album Redux – Brogan Family Photos from 1945 to 1959 by Becki Broan Bishop	www.blurb.ca/b/1286300-photo-album-redux

BLOGS

WHY and HOW to Start a Family History Blog – <https://lisalouisecooke.com/start-family-history-blog/>
TIPS for Improving your Genealogy Blog – <https://lisalouisecooke.com/2016/10/3-ways-to-improve-your-genealogy-blog/>
GeneaBloggers Tribe – <http://geneabloggertribe.com>

RESOURCES

Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. *Tell it short: A guide to writing your family history in brief*. Salt Lake City, UT: Scattered Leaves Press, 2016.
 Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. Write a Memoir to Remember! *Writer's Digest*. March 11, 2008. <https://www.writersdigest.com/memoir-by-writing-genre/write-a-memoir-to-remember>
 Hertz, Laurie. "But Will They Love Me When It's Done? Writing about Family in Memoir". *TriQuarterly*, March 8, 2016.
<http://www.triquarterly.org/craft-essays/will-they-love-me-when-it-s-done-writing-about-family-memoir>
 Johnson Crow, Amy. 52 Ancestors in 52 Weeks. <https://www.amyjohnsoncrow.com/52-ancestors-in-52-weeks/>
 Palermo, Lynn. Family History Writing Challenge. <https://www.familyhistorywritingstudio.com/family-history-writing-challenge-2021/>

READINGS: FAMILY HISTORY PERSONAL ESSAYS + MEMOIRS

Foer, Franklin. "The Girl Who Lived". *The Atlantic*, December 28, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/12/escaping-nazis-story-girl-who-lived/579139/>
Remembering my grandmother, whose improbable survival became the foundational story for my family's existence.
 Livingston, Sonja. "A Thousand Mary Doyles". *Brevity*, Issue 46, May 2014. <http://brevitymag.com/nonfiction/a-thousand-mary-doyles/>
There she is, Mary Doyle, and another right beside her. Heads turned for one last view of land before the Cork coastline slips out of sight.
 Livingston, Sonja. "The Opposite of the Composite: How One Girl Became a Thousand". *Brevity*, May 14, 2014.
<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2014/05/14/the-opposite-of-the-composite-how-one-girl-became-a-thousand/>
My father's side (while murky) was thought to be mainly Québécois. But now I'd found a girl from Ballyhaunis blooming on one of the branches of the family tree.
 Rustad, Harley. "Love Letters from the Battlefield". *The Walrus*, November 9, 2018. <https://thewalrus.ca/love-letters/>
How words kept my grandparents connected during the Second World War.
 Temple, John. "Champagne in the Cellar". *The Atlantic*, July 13, 2016.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/07/champagne-in-the-cellar/490376/>
How I used the internet to find the man who saved my parents' lives in a Budapest basement during World War II

Sensitive subjects

Daloz, Kate. "My Grandmother's Desperate Choice". *The New Yorker*, May 14, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/my-grandmothers-desperate-choice>
My questions about my grandmother's death, of a self-induced abortion, haven't changed since I was twelve years old.
 Tizon, Alex. "My Family's Slave". *The Atlantic*, June 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/lolas-story/524490/>
She lived with us for 56 years. She raised me and my siblings without pay. I was 11, a typical American kid, before I realized who she was.

Personal memoirs

Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. "Switched at Midlife". *Hippocampus Magazine*.
<http://www.hippocampusmagazine.com/2012/01/switched-at-midlife-by-sharon-carmack/>
Her voice on the phone: "Hello, Sharon? This is your daughter." I smile. "No," I say. "I'm your daughter. You're my mother."
 Chancellor, Bryn. "String, Too Short". *Brevity*, January 11, 2019. <https://brevitymag.com/current-issue/string-too-short/>
We are a house of notes. My husband, a night-owl artist, writes to me in the dark of the quiet house as I fall into dreams.
 Koul, Scaachi. "There's No Recipe for Growing Up". *BuzzFeed*, November 2, 2016. https://www.buzzfeed.com/scaachikoul/looking-for-my-mother-at-the-bottom-of-a-pot?utm_term=.gg1bwQ4yZ#.mtlWdbjyQ
My mom's Kashmiri cooking has always tethered me to home. So it's no wonder she won't give me (all) the secrets to doing it myself.
 Pagels, Elaine. "Finding the Heart". *The New Yorker*, November 4, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/finding-the-heart>
Religion often frames suffering as punishment. A family tragedy taught me otherwise.
 Phillips, Elisa. "Grandfather". *The Penmen Review*. 2014. <http://penmenreview.com/grandfather/>
The memories of my maternal grandfather always shine brightly in my mind. Like photographs that have been laid out on a table in a dark room under a single spotlight.