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

   Writing Exercise: Think of a family story you would like to tell. How will you start it? What will your hook be? Tip: Don't start at the beginning!
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.*
   "Description doesn't begin on the page. It begins in the eye and ear and mouth and nose and hand of the beholder. To write good description, we must look long, hard and honestly at our world. Careful and imaginative observation may well be the most essential task of any writer." Rebecca McClanahan (Word Painting: A Guide to Write More Descriptively)
   Writing Exercise: Place an ordinary object in the middle of a bare table. Study the object for 10 minutes (set a timer). Notice every detail about it, how it weighs, feels, its texture, scent, etc. After the timer goes off, write a description of the object, reporting what you saw and felt. Use concrete nouns (things you can touch and feel) and sensory details (colours, shapes, smells, textures). Then think about what you saw using your imaginative eye (did it remind you of something else? A memory?) "The naked eye provides us with sensory, concrete experiences. The imaginative eye opens up other worlds." Rebecca McClanahan
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.
   "Building scenes from fragments of facts and telling details sometimes requires **informed speculation**. Reveal your guesswork with cue words and phrases like: could have, would have, might have, must have, should have, would appear, would seem, perhaps, likely, maybe, likely, probably, suppose, no doubt… When you make these imaginative leaps, give readers source clues or footnotes to reinforce their trust." Jeanette Taylor
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-pamaw-s-cookbook
Nos Dimanches à la Carpière – www.blurb.ca/b/7209956-nos-dimanches-la-carpi-re
Recettes de ma grand-mère Hélène by Vincent Girodet
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://geneabloggerstribe.com

RECOMMENDED 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
Hertzel, 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/
McClanahan, Rebecca. *Word Painting: A Guide to Write More Descriptively.* Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1999.
Taylor, Jeanette. "Animate Historical Nonfiction with Lifelike Details." https://thescribes.ca/how-to-write-scenes-in-creative-nonfiction/

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/
Livingston, Sonja. "A Thousand Mary Doyles". *Brevity*, Issue 46, May 2014. http://brevitymag.com/nonfiction/a-thousand-mary-doyles/
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/
Rustad, Harley. "Love Letters from the Battlefield". *The Walrus,* November 9, 2018. https://thewalrus.ca/love-letters/
Temple, John. "Champagne in the Cellar". *The Atlantic,* July 13, 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/07/champagne-in-the-cellar/490376/

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
Tizon, Alex. "My Family's Slave". *The Atlantic,* June 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/lolas-story/524490/

Personal memoirs

Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. "Switched at Midlife". *Hippocampus Magazine.* http://www.hippocampusmagazine.com/2012/01/switched-at-midlife-by-sharon-carmack/
Chancellor, Bryn. "String, Too Short". *Brevity,* January 11, 2019. https://brevitymag.com/current-issue/string-too-short/
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
Pagels, Elaine. "Finding the Heart". *The New Yorker,* November 4, 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/finding-the-heart
Phillips, Elisa. "Grandfather". *The Penmen Review.* 2014. http://penmenreview.com/grandfather/