

## Writing a Personal History in One Hour

We all get to a point where we can't find records about our ancestor. And while most of our ancestors have not left us with a personal history, we can write a 1-2 page biography about our 2nd great-grandfather Johnson with just a little preparation by putting them *into* history. The history they lived and helped create. Even a short bio is better than if nothing had ever been written.

Within three generations you could be forgotten. Do you want to be just a name on a piece of paper, an unrecognized photograph in a forgotten album or a name and dates on a headstone? Wasn't there more to your life than that? Sometimes we get so caught up in researching and are in a hurry to get to the next name on our charts we forget that our ancestors have a story waiting to be told. We just have to find it and write it for them.

Does writing a 300-page book feel too overwhelming? Then don't do it. There is no right or wrong to writing about yourself or your ancestors. Just write something, even one paragraph.

- 1) Who do you want to write about? Choose an ancestor that you know the basic information of: name, date of any event, and/or a location. Gather the records and photographs you already have for the person. Study them. What do they tell you?
- 2) What should you write about? Pick one event: marriage, immigration, military etc. Or write a short bio about the person with snippets of some of the major highlights of their life. There is always something to write about. What are you curious about? What would you ask your ancestor about their life if you could?
- 3) Still don't know what to write about? Create a timeline of their life listing these main events: birth/baptism, school, marriage, children, religion/church, land/home ownership, military, occupation, death/burial.
- 4) Don't stop the flow of your writing to do research. But if you want to write more about an event, leave a note to yourself in red to research the topic/event at a later time.
- 5) But I don't know anything to fill in the timeline. Fill in the gaps between their life events with information from sites such as Our Timelines <[www.ourtimelines.com](http://www.ourtimelines.com)> which can give you ideas for major world/US events that happened during a person's lifetime and might have influenced their actions. For your immigrant ancestor, Google *name of country* and *timeline* or *historical timeline*.
  - *People's Chronology* by Trager (by year tells important events, inventions, etc.)
  - Twile <[twile.com](http://twile.com)> create an online timeline merging data you submit and historical events.
- 6) How much history do you need to know *before* you start writing? Actually very little. If you decide to expand this story, there are many books or websites that can help you fill in the gaps. I especially like children's books because they are full of pictures and easy text. They explain an event without going in depth into details. Historical newspapers can give you glimpses into their daily lives and local and world events for their area and time period. Look at the advertisements (clothing, food, autos etc.). Did they own land? Use maps to show where their land is located. Read diaries of the time period.
  - *Bringing Your Family History to Life Through Social History* by Katherine Scott Sturdevant.
  - Search at Amazon by series *Writer's Guide to Everyday Life* or by author Marc McCutcheon for books on writing about life from Colonial America to WWII.
- 7) You can breathe life into the events in their lives with photographs, documents or records you have within your possession or those that can be found online. Follow copyright policies.
  - \*\**The Photo Scribe: How to Write the Story Behind Your Photographs* by Denis Ledoux
  - FamilySearch.org
  - Ancestry.com
  - Heritage Quest (free census records; must have library card to use through ImagineIfLibrary)
  - National Archives Records Administration (NARA) <[www.archives.gov/research](http://www.archives.gov/research)>  
<[www.archives.gov/research/genealogy](http://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy)>
  - Library of Congress (LoC)  
Digital Collections <[www.loc.gov/collections](http://www.loc.gov/collections)>  
Free to Use <[www.loc.gov/free-to-use](http://www.loc.gov/free-to-use)> Copyright free items; not all LoC copyright free items are listed here.  
Farm Security Administration & Office of War Information: photos 1935-1945  
<[www.loc.gov/pictures/colletion/fsac](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/colletion/fsac)>

- Panoramic Maps 1847-1921 <[www.loc.gov/collections/panoramic-maps/about-this-collection](http://www.loc.gov/collections/panoramic-maps/about-this-collection)>
- Chronicling America (newspapers) <[chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov)>
- Federal Writers' Project <[www.loc.gov/collections/federal-writers-project/about-this-collection](http://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-writers-project/about-this-collection)>
- David Rumsey Map Collection <[www.davidrumsey.com](http://www.davidrumsey.com)>
- Flickr <[www.flickr.com/commons](http://www.flickr.com/commons)> Flickr links to LoC, NASA, Internet archive and over 100 archives and museums from around the world. These are photos with "no known copyright restrictions."
- Wikimedia Commons <[commons.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://commons.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)> freely licensed photos, illustrations, sound files and other media.
- Internet Archive <[archive.org/about/terms.php](http://archive.org/about/terms.php)> site has links to books, audio, images and videos. Read terms of use for copyright. Good place to find county histories published in the late 1800s.
- Google Images <[www.google.com/imghp](http://www.google.com/imghp)> & Videos <[www.google.com/videohp](http://www.google.com/videohp)>
- YouTube <[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)> Search by place, topic, occupation, or time period.

**8) Cite your sources.** This allows you and others (researchers or family) to trace where you found your information and validates your writing. Download Family Tree Magazine's Source Citation Cheat Sheet to see various citation formats. <[www.familytreemagazine.com/cheatsheet/genealogyessentials](http://www.familytreemagazine.com/cheatsheet/genealogyessentials)>.

**9) Don't think you cannot write.** Take a class at FVCC. Join a writer's group. Ask other genealogists. There are many books on writing in general and for family history.

- *How to Write the Story of Your Life* by Frank Thomas
- *You Can write Your Family History* by Sharon Carmack
- *Breathe Life into Your Life Story: How to write a Story People Will want to Read* by Dawn & Morris Thurston

**10) Men had public lives and created records for us to find while women had private lives.** But that doesn't mean you can't write about your female ancestors. Their lives were influenced by the events surrounding them (marriage, death of a child, son/husband going to war, immigration, selling/purchasing land, etc.). Look online for diaries of their time period and/or area. These may be located in a university library manuscript collection or a state historical society or state archive.

- Home Economics Archive, Cornell University <[hearth.library.cornell.edu](http://hearth.library.cornell.edu)> a collection of books and journals published 1850-1925 covering child care, cooking, housekeeping etc.
- "Historical Diaries and Journals Online" <[www.thoughtco.com/historical-diaries-and-journals-online-1422040](http://www.thoughtco.com/historical-diaries-and-journals-online-1422040)>
- Google the name of the state and *digital archives*. Google name of state and *historical journals diaries*
- Google the name of your ancestor's town. Is there a local museum or historical society? Search Google or the Internet Archive for a county history book. Not everyone who lives in the county will be listed, but since most of the books were written in the late 1800s, they should list information for the county and towns (including churches, schools, prominent men/families, geography etc.).

**11) A quick and easy way to write a story or memoir chronologically is to use a spiral binder.** Each page represents one year in the person's life. Label each page with a year and include only those stories, notes or events relating to that year on that page. Or simply use the notebook to record stories as they come to you.

- *The Book of Myself: A Do-It-Yourself Autobiography in 201 Questions* by David & Carl Marshall
- *My Life & Times: A Guided Journal for Collecting Your Stories* by Sunny Jane Morton

**12) You can do anything in small bites.** There are 15 people on a pedigree chart. You might want to write more about yourself and your parents than a life sketch, but that leaves 12 people—one for each month. Every month take a different ancestor and spend 15 minutes to an hour per week writing about them or searching for photos and documents to flesh out their stories. By the end of the year you will have a family history to share and be proud of.

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This class was meant to give you ideas on how to start writing about yourself or an ancestor. Hopefully you will want to expand this quick bio for your ancestor with research, documents, records and photographs. But if not.....*leave as much for your descendants as you wish your ancestors had left for you.*

## Suggestions When Writing Your Personal History

This list will give you ideas on what to write about and questions for interviews—but each interview will be conducted individually and tailored to the person you are writing about. Since there are always two sides to every story, interview more than just one person about an event. Every person in your family could write a story about the same event and each would have at least one point different in it. Remember to interview people about you—especially about your rearly childhood years. Write about your daily routine which might seem boring to you, but a descendant will be fascinated by it.

- 1) Birth: when, where, parents, surrounding circumstances and conditions. How did you get your name? Did your family use nicknames?
- 2) Childhood: health, diseases, accidents, friends, pets, trips, your siblings, vacations, visits to grandparents, relatives you remember, religion, what did your house/apartment/farm look like (picture of outside, diagram of inside). Did your family rent a house/apartment, live in a city, small town or in a rural area on a farm?
- 3) Siblings: names, date/place of birth, marriage, death, accomplishments, names of spouses/children, jobs etc.
- 4) School days: schools attended, teachers, courses studied, special activities, best friends, report cards; college attended, who or what influenced you to take certian courses or do things you might not otherwise have done.
- 5) Activities/hobbies as a youth: scouting, sports, chores at home, fun and funny situations
- 6) Courtship and marriage: meeting your spouse, falling in love, special dates, how the question was popped, the wedding, parties and receptions, gifts, honeymoon, meeting your in-laws, what influenced you most in your choice of spouse.
- 7) Settling down to married life: your new home, starting housekeeping, spats and adjustments, making ends meet, joys and sorrows, your mother-in-law, other in-laws.
- 8) Vocation: college degree or on-the-job training, promotions, companies you worked for, salaries, associates, achievements; did you have your own business; why did you choose to go into a particular profession.
- 9) Children: names (why chosen), dates & places of birth, characteristics, growing up, accomplishments, schooling, marriage, vocations, sicknesses, accidents, operations.
- 10) Civic & political activitites; military service: positions held, clubs, fraternities and lodges you have joined.
- 11) Church activities: churches attended, positions, answers to prayers.
- 12) Activities/hobbies as an adult: sports, gardening, dramatic & musical activities, reading habits, genealogy, travels, favorite songs, movies, television programs, authors, poems etc.
- 13) Special celebrations, vacations or holidays you remember.
- 14) Favorites: color, toy, food, places, first car, best present ever received.
- 15) Plans and hopes for the future.
- 16) Ancestors: your impressions of those you knew personally; a general sketch of those you did not.
- 17) What standards do you live by? Your encouragement and counsel to your descendants: carrying on family traditions and activities; their obligations to their country, church and family; your suggestions to your progeny and others on honesty, humility, health, diligence, perseverance, thrift, loyalty, kindness, reverence, the Bible and other religious and edifying books; service to fellowmen; your belief regarding God etc.

**♥♥Never underestimate the effect you may have on unborn generations in helping them through the trials and tribulations of life by the words you leave.**

**Write your story one week & one memory at a time.  
There is no limit to what you can write about.**

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| Week 1 – Kindergarten Days                        | Week 1 – Favorite food(s)                        |
| Week 2 – Grade 1                                  | Week 2 – Earthquakes, floods & fires             |
| Week 3 – Getting your driver’s license            | Week 3 – Easter Bunny                            |
| Week 4 – Grade 2 & 3                              | Week 4 – First car; first ticket; first accident |
| Week 5 – Naughty things you did as a kid          | Week 5 – Favorite dessert(s)                     |
| Week 6 – Board games you played                   | Week 6 – If I could time travel I would go to:   |
| Week 7 – Grades 3 & 4                             | Week 7 – First day of school (elementary & HS)   |
| Week 8 – Who was your favorite relative & why     | Week 8 – Favorite books (child, teen & adult)    |
| Week 9 – Grades 5 & 6                             | Week 9 – Town I grew up in                       |
| Week 10 – Favorite movies & movie stars           | Week 10 – Favorite TV shows (child & adult)      |
| Week 11 – Grades 7 & 8                            | Week 11 – Eye glasses and/or braces              |
| Week 12 – Gardening                               | Week 12 – Santa Claus                            |
| Week 13 – Broken bones, accidents & surgeries     | Week 13 – Leaving Home                           |
| Week 14 – Grades 9 & 10                           | Week 14 – If I could live anywhere I would live: |
| Week 15 – First childhood memory                  | Week 15 – Favorite fishing/hunting stories       |
| Week 16 – First airplane ride                     | Week 16 – Halloween                              |
| Week 17 – Hair styles (child, teenager, adult)    | Week 17 – Favorite meal for lunch                |
| Week 18 – Grades 11 & 12                          | Week 18 – Independence Day                       |
| Week 19 – Sleepovers                              | Week 19 – School plays, programs or concerts     |
| Week 20 – Imaginary friends/ stuffed animals      | Week 20 – Curfews & being grounded               |
| Week 21 – Camping trips                           | Week 21 – Favorite School Lunch                  |
| Week 22 – Who was stricter Mom or Dad?            | Week 22 – Who proposed? When? Where?             |
| Week 23 – First kiss                              | Week 23 – Graduation college                     |
| Week 24 – Childhood illnesses                     | Week 24 – Favorite meal for supper               |
| Week 25 – First bike                              | Week 25 – Wedding & Honeymoon                    |
| Week 26 – Scary things that go bump in the night  | Week 26 – When I grow up I want to be ....       |
| Week 27 – People I wish I'd known better          | Week 27 – Carnivals & circuses & parades         |
| Week 28 – College                                 | Week 28 – Special family traditions & recipes    |
| Week 29 – Memories of Mom                         | Week 29 – Embarrassing moments                   |
| Week 30 – Cooking; love it, hate it, learning how | Week 30 – Visiting the dentist                   |
| Week 31 – Tooth Fairy                             | Week 31 – Car accidents                          |
| Week 32 – Memories of Dad                         | Week 32 – Games you played at recess             |
| Week 33 – Siblings                                | Week 33 – Memories of Grandpa                    |
| Week 34 – Friends (child & teenage)               | Week 34 – Prom night                             |
| Week 35 – Your Childhood Pets                     | Week 35 – Chores                                 |
| Week 36 – Favorite Toy or Game                    | Week 36 – Favorite car                           |
| Week 37 – Changes in Technology                   | Week 37 – Memories of Grandma                    |
| Week 38 – Fall & Winter Activities                | Week 38 – Favorite color                         |
| Week 39 – Birthday parties                        | Week 39 – First House – child                    |
| Week 40 – Military experiences                    | Week 40 – First House – adult                    |
| Week 41 – Spring & Summer Activities              | Week 41 – Church                                 |
| Week 42 – Valentine’s Day                         | Week 42 – Hobbies                                |
| Week 43 – Favorite teacher(s)                     | Week 43 – First crush                            |
| Week 44 – Veterans in the family                  | Week 44 – Playing hooky                          |
| Week 45 – Favorite music/favorite song            | Week 45 – First train ride                       |
| Week 46 – Family vacations (good & bad)           | Week 46 – How I met my spouse –                  |
| Week 47 – Graduation – high school                | Week 47 – First time you voted. For who?         |
| Week 48 – Thanksgiving                            | Week 48 – If I had a million dollars I would ... |
| Week 49 – Christmas                               | Week 49 – Were you ever arrested?                |
| Week 50 – Favorite relative                       | Week 50 – First computer                         |
| Week 51 – First job                               | Week 51 – Teenage hangouts                       |
| Week 52 – Favorite meal for breakfast             | Week 52 – New Year's Eve                         |