

Writing a Non -Boring Family History

an article of approximately 1,000 words with sidebar

by Hazel Edwards

Sidebar

Recipe for a Non-Boring Family History

Ingredients:

1 cup of self raising imagination

Dates

Thyme (endless spoonful)

Researchitus (diluted)

Sprinkles of ancestral curiosity

Pinch of opportunity

Flakes of serendipity

Intriguing title, cover and blurb

zest of reader-researcher

half a litre of language including mixed fruit of adjectives (use moderately)

half a dozen embryonic ideas (egg shaped)

Slurp of suspense, secrecy or drama

Dash of inspiration

Method:

Dash inspiration on all pages.

Mix all data and especially dry ingredients in computerised container. Keep for an appropriate time. Heat emotions or ice-over disputes. For special occasions, decorate and display at reunion, anniversary or family gathering.

Result:

Historical readaholic or relative indigestion due to over much hot air.

From Hazel Edwards' Writing a Non Boring Family History' (Hale and Iremonger)1997, reprinted 2002

.....

Writing a Non-Boring Family History

So you've been asked to write your family history?

What do you do about Grandma's love letters? (They belong to the descendants of the lover-writer) How do you write about family secrets? What about illegitimate or 'bland' ancestors? How do you distinguish five generations named Elizabeth or John? What if you've only got names on a shipping list? Or you've just inherited a 'box of bits'?

Recently, 'family history' surpassed stamp-collecting as the favourite hobby internationally. Many family historians did not originally set out to write a book. Initially they enjoyed collecting family letters, facts and memorabilia and then became interested in preserving their family's past in a tangible way. Since most historians are looking for 'why?' things happened, there is a personal satisfaction in assembling the answer in a format which others will want to read.

To do justice to your intriguing ancestors, in a non-boring way, is a challenge. A few are interested only in assembling facts, before the owners of those facts vanish, but there are techniques which can make such compilations more readable. Other authors are interested in ensuring that their 'books' which have taken so many years to research and write are not given just cursory glances and shelved, forever.

There are practical ways of shaping your intriguing ancestors, quirky anecdotes and data so that 'his-story' or 'her-story' don't become just a 'blandised' list of births, marriages and deaths. Structuring themes, avoiding chronological boredom and effective characterisation are some of the skills, even if all you've got is a name on a shipping list.

- 1. Consider your prospective reader:** If you say that everyone will want to read this book, you're wrong. They won't! So who is your prospective reader? Family and friends? Colleagues? Fellow enthusiasts? Locals? Students? Special interest groups? Apart from those mentioned in it, your 'Great Family Saga' will interest others only if it avoids chronological boredom. Does it offer unusual insights into lifestyles, periods or personalities? Is it aimed at the general reader, the specialist or just your family? How could you broaden the appeal? Would it be relevant for tourists visiting your area?
- 2. Feature the conflict:** What is the major conflict underlying this family or period? Unless there is a conflict, which doesn't necessarily mean violence, there is no drama. 'Growing up' is insufficient to enthrall. There are three major areas of conflict: within the individual, between individuals and between the individuals and the society. Within your family's history all exist. You just need to acknowledge them. For example, a teetotaling family living in a hard-drinking community would show the conflict between the individual and the society. Feuding brothers in a civil war would indicate religious and political conflict. So would pioneers in a drought or flood.
- 3. Identify a theme:** What is your book about? It is more than just the story of 'X' family. What are the common idea threads? Were they a rebellious family? Visionaries? Inventors? Were they always associated with an industry, an

occupation or a family business? For example, ‘Our book is about pioneering German emigrants in the vineyards of the Barossa Valley of South Australia, their struggles with the climate, the country and how to keep practising their beliefs. Their persistence developed from their stubbornness which was seen at first as a flaw.’”

4. **Characterise:** Which character grabbed your interest? Why? Probably because this character was spirited and came into conflict with existing expectations. Design a dossier listing the physical details and the personality traits of your major ancestors. Make them live in your mind, then they’ll live for the reader too.
5. **Structure:** Avoid giving a boring collection of lists. Order your material by themes or geographically by personalities or places. Perhaps have three parts: The Old Country. The Journey Out. The New Land. Use anecdotes or mini stories to start chapters rather than who was born on which date. Most interesting first, second most interesting last, and then bury the boring bits in the middle. Perhaps write your quest from your viewpoint as the explorer-researcher trying to uncover the facts.
6. **Craft the Length.** Make chapters approximately the same length. Choose catchy titles rather than numbers for chapter headings. Ten chapters of 3,000 words will give you a book of 30,000 words plus illustrations and photographs. Or calculate minutes if making an audio or video taped history. Most histories are self - published, so cost will be a consideration.
7. **Personalise** Readers enjoy the day- to- day details, embarrassing moments and even four conflicting versions of significant family events. Collect anecdotes. These are mini stories. Use them to open chapters and introduce characters in action. Use dialogue even if you have to ‘create’ what you think they might have said.
8. **Check** Arrange for a ‘naïve’ and an ‘expert’ reader to check your manuscript. The ‘naïve’ reader who knows little about the subject will provide feedback on whether it is a ‘good read’. The ‘expert’ checks facts.
9. **Design:** Think about print size and shape. If readers are elderly, don’t try to save money by having small print on fewer pages. Make the book a pleasure to handle.
10. **Choose Intriguing Titles** Use a common family phrase, or a group of words like ‘Wheat, Wool and Whingers’. Avoid The Boring X Family.

P.S. Publishing a book is like creating a book child. There will be criticism, but there will also be praise.

Hazel Edwards runs workshops on ‘Writing a Non- Boring Family or Corporate History ’based on her book published by Hale and Iremonger, \$20
www.hazeledwards.com