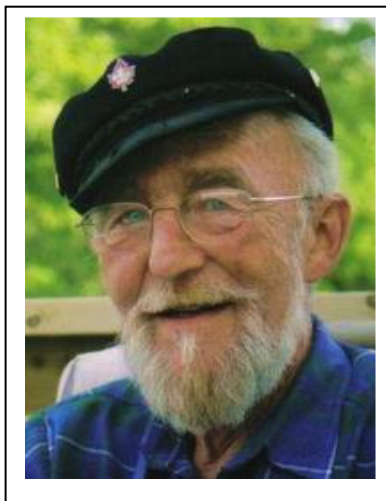


# The Family Historian

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Column #60

### A Few Thoughts on Notetaking



One of the most common and important activities for Family Historians is taking notes. Furthermore, sometimes when we return to the notes to use them, we are a little dissatisfied with them and yet it is not something that we really think much about.

This is not nuclear science. Everyone takes notes. Some peoples' notes, however, are better than others'. Wasn't there usually someone in school who was known as the best note-taker in class?

There are actually several different approaches to taking notes and you might want to try several to see what works best for you. It really doesn't matter what system you use as long as you follow a very few basic guidelines.

One of the most difficult things to overcome is our completely unfounded faith in our memories. *Do not trust your memory.* After all, that is why we take notes.

*Prepare a bibliographic entry for every source you consult.* Include where you found it, its call number, and, later, a brief personal note about its usefulness to you. If it is a person, provide details such as age, relationship to subject, and anything else that would reflect on their reliability as a witness.

I also give each source an arbitrary reference number starting with 1. In this way, I can document a note with a reference like "9-27", meaning the ninth source and page 27. Making it easy to document helps us to actually do it. This really helps when you encounter conflicting data, as you will, and you can compare the reliability of your various sources.

*When in doubt, capture it.* It is easier to discard unneeded information later than to try to track it down again.

As much as possible, *use your own words.* This helps to ensure that you actually read the material and thought about it for a minute, rather than just moving it from a page to your notes. If you must use the author's own words, enclose them in quotation marks.

If your handwriting is anything like mine, *transcribe your notes as soon as possible.* I have revisited notes that I made a few months ago and had a difficult time deciphering them. The sooner you can move the notes into a more permanent format the better.

For straight historical research, I prefer large index cards. Each card will contain information about one idea only and will have a coded reference to its source. Only one side of the card may be used. This allows the cards to be spread about on a table as we try to organize our material for writing, without losing references. When the project is done, you can scratch out what you wrote on one side and use the other side for the next project.

For much of my genealogy research I just use a standard stenographer's notebook with the spiral binding at the top. I tried numbering the books and the pages in them but it was just too complicated for me. The one thing I do is to include the date for each note taking session.

Many researchers put their notes straight into a laptop computer. I tried this, but it just didn't work for me.

Some specific types of genealogy research work better with forms that were designed for the job. I have designed a few of these for myself and the Ontario Genealogical Society has designed templates for recording data from the various censuses. These latter are very useful.

A friend of mine, who is a very competent researcher and writer, uses the backs of envelopes for his notes. He must go through a lot of envelopes, but it works for him. And as long as your system works for you, who could ask for anything more?