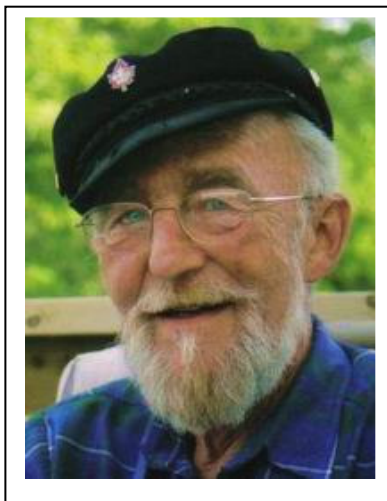


The Family Historian

Patrick Wohler

Column #73

The Family History Book



Reader Ray Chard asked recently for a few suggestions on writing the Family History Book. This is usually the ultimate goal for Family Historians. I have read that we all have at least one book in us but it takes a certain amount of skill to get it out. Writing, itself, is a fairly personal thing and I am not sure that anyone can really teach someone else to write. Furthermore, if your ego is easily bruised, writing for public consumption is a dangerous occupation.

What one can learn from others and from examples of good books is more about the organization of material, the design of the content, and the significance of different tones of writing. What works and what is not likely to work. Check a few out in your local library.

I like to use colour, for example. This would make the manuscript prohibitively expensive to print, but I don't print it. I distribute it to family members on CD-ROMs. They can print out all or parts of it as they wish from their own computer. OK, I confess that I do print out some extra copies for relatives, especially older ones, who are not comfortable with computers.

While some design features can be implemented after the manuscript is completed, especially if you are writing it on a computer, there are a few

decisions to be made right at the beginning.

Who is the intended audience? Knowing your audience will help you to select appropriate vocabulary and structure. It will also guide you in knowing what kind of focus to give the work. If most of them have little interest yet in the history, you may want to give a higher profile to interesting anecdotes and such.

How should the book be organized? Family Histories are frequently confusing as they jump through generations and different branches of the family, so some serious thought has to be given to this question. Take a look at published examples and see what works well and what doesn't. You can write the sections in any order you want and put them in order later but you should know what that order will be.

Is it colour or color? Spelling and grammar must be correct and consistent if you want your book to have any sense of authority. Barbara Hopper, who frequently judges genealogical writing for the Ontario Genealogical Society, recommends the Oxford (not Webster's) dictionary, a thesaurus, and Kate Turabian's *Student's Guide for Writing College Papers* as excellent references for the writer. She also lists the most common mistakes she found in an article in the OGS journal, *Families*, in May 2005. Please, above all "Due knot real eye one Spellchecker".

Revising

After you have written a section, set it aside for a week or so, then critically re-read it. Find your favorite words or phrases that are used too frequently (one of mine is 'however') and change some of them. Most of us have words that we seem to be genetically programmed to misspell. Make a list of these and check carefully for them. Check your choice of words, spelling, and grammar. Revision is critical to success. I revised my first book eight times before submission and was thoroughly sick of it by that time.

Many common errors are simply the result of haste in writing or proofreading but others are based on a lack of attention to vocabulary, spelling, or syntax. A Thesaurus and Dictionary will certainly help to avoid errors if we realize that we need help with something. Where the biggest problem lies is where we do not know that we do not know.

Most books on writing have lists of common errors and you might find it useful to consult some of them.

Citations

Here is the real test of discipline and professionalism. Certainly any direct quotations and all illustrations should have their sources identified. Furthermore much of our work is original research and we should identify the sources of our information. This allows the reader to assess the reliability of our data and if necessary to check back to the source to verify its correctness.

If you believe some of the literature, there is ONE way to do citations correctly but that just is not the case. The MLA, APA, and a variety of other organizations have all adopted various conventions for this but the one in most common use, certainly in the humanities, is the University of Chicago Press Style, which is explained in the book mentioned above by Kate Turabian.

It does not really matter which convention you follow, but it is best to stick with one of the common ones and be consistent in its use. In this way the reader comes to know what to expect and the citation can do its job properly.

If your local bookstore does not have a copy of Turabian's *Student's Guide for Writing College Papers*, any college bookstore will.

Whatever you write and how you present it make statements about yourself - do yourself proud.

I welcome comments, queries, and suggestions at: p_wohler@hotmail.com

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