

The following notes are based on my own experience as an editor, publisher and book consultant, with additional information from sources on the Web. – Graeme Eggins

Tips on preparing a family history

I will be quick, as I have been told you genealogists all live in the past lane.

The follow suggestions are based on my years as a publisher and editor of both general interest and business-orientated publications.

I am not a family historian so at Kay's suggestion have drawn on the advice of the Web's Armchair genealogist, Canadian Lynn Palermo.

I assume you have done your basic research and have collected all your notes, references, photos and other material.

You must also have an idea of what kind of document you want to create – a spiral-bound collection of A4 photocopied pages, a glossy coffee table publication or a PDF that lives permanently on the web.

You need also to have decided on the scope of your work. Do you wish to create something covering all your surname lines or do something less wide ranging? You need to decide early.

But whatever you do decide to produce it will take much, much longer than you think. That is almost guaranteed.

Now let's move on a major areas of decision – what are you going to produce?

Production decisions

Will you be happy with a simple photocopied scrapbook or folder with plastic sleeves to be shared by a few family members or do you need a full-scale, hardcover book to serve as a reference for everyone, including other genealogists?

Or, alternatively, do you want to produce a regular family newsletter covering different aspects of the family's history (including recent births, deaths and marriages), run a dedicated Web site or produce a history on DVD complete with short movies.

Whatever format you choose you need to decide about financing at a very early stage.

For example, you are prepared to bear all the costs or if you want other family members to contribute towards the expenses? I will come back to this subject later.

If you are determined to produce a traditionally printed book you have to consider a number of alternatives, each one of which can greatly affect the cost per copy.

Book cost variables

They include:

- The number of books you want printed.
- The stock (e.g. the gsm - *grams per square metre* - and if it is coated or not) and the page size (A4, A3 etc)
- The total number of pages. Do you want a 196-page coffee table book or a 60-page paperback?

- Whether you want full colour, black and white or a combination of both
- The type of binding - saddle stitched for example
- The cover design. Do you want the cover machine varnished or cello glazed? Do you want the title embossed or printed?
- Decide now if you need to employ a specialist to design and prepare the material for the printer

Now let's look at various **publishing formats** and their comparative costs, from cheapest to most expensive.

Publishing formats

1. Home-made scrapbooks and albums:

If you have a large collection of family photos and memorabilia, a scrapbook or photo album can be a fun way to tell your family's story. Clear plastic sleeves can protect the pages you have printed at home.

Domestic Laser printers produce excellent low cost results. **Inkjet** printers are fine but tend to be slow, and their inks don't last as long.

You can have your pages professionally bound by a printer or DIY using a spiral binding machine you buy at an office supplies store.

Include in your album photographs, maps, newspaper clippings and other documents in chronological order.

Insert family trees to complement the images.

The advantages of albums are that they are cheap to make in small numbers and can be easily updated as you unearth new material.

2. A CD or DVD

Assuming you have a home computer, you can always burn all your research material to a CD or DVD and distribute that to the family.

A family history CD can hold large amounts of data and include photos, sounds, scanned document images, and even video - something a printed family history just can't equal.

A digital scrapbook or slideshow of sections of the family history makes a great gift as well.

And as author you save all the costs of printing on paper - let your readers do that if they want.

One risk is that technology goes out of date very quickly - words printed on paper endure. So distribute a digital copy of your work by all means - but also encourage readers to print it out themselves.

3. Go on the Web

Many people today have set up Web sites or dedicated on-line chat rooms where family members can post messages, hold conversations, put up photos of new additions to the family and so on. Others have their own blogs.

The costs of maintaining a Web presence – once it has been set up – are low and of course web sites have the great advantage of being accessible to everyone in a family, no matter where they live.

Another advantage of a web site is that it can be updated easily and at no cost when new or corrected information comes to hand, something you can't say about a traditional book.

A book in **PDF format** can be placed on a web page with very little trouble and it too can be updated quickly and easily as you get feedback from readers.

And you can password protect a site or parts of it if you need to.

4. Professionally digitally printed booklets or family newsletters

Digital printed books are the most popular publishing option for family historians. You just take a computer disc to a bureau like Xerox or Office Works here in Lismore and they print and bind it using a super photocopier.

Turnaround is usually fast and you can order far fewer than a minimum of 500 or 1000 copies as you do with traditional printing.

It's comparatively cheap to print more copies if you need them.

An interesting variation is a family **cookbook**. A cookbook allows you to share your wider family's favorite recipes while writing about the people who created them.

A cookbook by its nature is usually easier to sell than a plain family history, not only to wider family members but also to friends and acquaintances.

5. Commercially offset printed book

Your most expensive option is to have your book offset printed.

Offset is the Rolls Royce of book quality but is usually far too expensive for most amateur authors due to its high set-up costs.

The factors I mentioned earlier – cover stock, use of colour, binding etc – can all be very expensive in an amateur publication which is not underwritten by subscriptions, sponsorship or advertising.

6. Commercially published book

Unless you are a best-selling author, a crime czar, a TV celebrity or a sporting hero, your chances of having your family history published commercially are effectively zero.

Even if it was published, you would be lucky to ever earn more than about 7% of its retail price.

Gift alternatives

If you are not ready to produce any of these items, what about some gifts based on your research?

Calendars are easy and inexpensive to create using your computer or the services of the local copy shop. Create a calendar that commemorates your ancestors with old photos and your ancestor's birthdays, marriage dates, etc.

Copies of records: You most likely have family members who don't really understand your passion about researching ancestors.

One great way to interest them is to give them a copy of an old record, which contains their name, or that of their close relatives.

Example would be a page from a migrant ship's passenger list or a census reports or a copy of their parents' marriage licences.

But back to the main game...

How to cut your costs

One of the major decisions you have to make early is financing your family history publication. If you decide to meet all the costs yourself, then enough said.

Beware though. A miscalculation or major error and you could end up with half your garage half full of \$50 books no one wants.

Most authors would prefer to ease the financial burden by selling their publication at a price that gives them at least some money back.

You can sell at cost or add a small margin to cover your other expenses such as phone calls, Internet time and postage.

You could also seek sponsors or just straight out donations from wealthier relatives. Good luck!

Remember the size, quantity and the method of printing all influence the cost of your family history book.

So who will buy your book?

Is it just close family members – the wider family - everyone with the same surname – family historians - general readers?

Most family history authors concentrate on the family at large.

Big family reunions give you a great opportunity to market your book **before you have spent a penny**. Ask your relatives what they would be willing to pay for a copy – show them some dummy pages or a give an outline of its coverage.

Consider offering a discount price- say 10% off – if they put down a deposit with you now.

You can make the same offer by snail mail or email to everyone you contacted during your research.

Whatever you do, don't mistake promises for firm orders. Under-order – you can always get more printed if you need to.

Increase potential buyers

Increase your potential audience by mentioning as many people as possible (the first thing browsers look for is their own name) and give insights into local area history (tourists, historical groups, libraries might buy it).

And it goes without saying that you can publicise your work through the network you have set up doing the research in the first place.

Whenever possible, set your book against an historical backdrop. Mention the major social, political, religious and economic news of the time you are writing about.

Scope and readability

Now we have all that out of the way, let's think about the scope of your book.

People need skeletons, houses need frames, and writers need structure. All good stories have a beginning, middle, and an end, and it's these three parts that are the secret to writing a readable family narrative.

How do you write an involving narrative when all you have is a list of dry facts and documents to draw on? How do you turn your facts into a story about an individual you never met?

To quote the Armchair genealogist, Canadian Lynn Palermo, you need to do even more research.

Here are some of her suggested research sources for bringing the lives of an ancestor to life.

Where to look for anecdotes

- Interview living relatives and friends, seeking out stories about daily events, traditions, hobbies and specific interests.

- Use your research skills to find social histories and recollections by other people in the same given time and place.

- Look to newspapers and local histories during the period of your ancestors to help paint a picture of the community in which they lived. TROVE can be a great help (<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper>)

- Revisit the neighbourhood of your ancestors to appreciate the kind of community they came from. Staff at a local museum may also help.

- Look to timelines of wars, natural disasters and epidemics to understand the world and local events your ancestors lived through. For fairly recent background, look at

<http://whathappenedinmybirthyear.com>

Typical forms of family histories

Family histories fall into three main forms:

A **narrative** tells a story and typically encompasses a group of ancestors. Your story can focus on one family line, or several, and can extend back for several generations or even longer.

The narrative form is a good choice if you want to interweave the lives of several people. If you do several connected lines, you will most likely put limitations on how many descendants to include, e.g. no more than a page to each couple.

If you decide to follow the **Single Line of Descent** style of narrative you would begin with the earliest known ancestor for a particular surname and follows him/her through a single line of descent (to yourself, for example). Each chapter of your book would cover one ancestor or generation.

Another is to follow the "**All Descendants Of...**" This means you begin with an individual or couple and cover all of their descendants, with chapters organised by generation.

If you're focusing your family history on an immigrant ancestor, this is a good choice.

Other forms

Another alternative is to follow **Grandparents**. Such a book would include a section on each of your four grandparents, or eight great-grandparents, or 16 great, great grandparents if you are very ambitious.

Each individual section focuses on one grandparent and works backwards through their ancestry or forward from his/her earliest known ancestor.

A **memoir** gives a different focus. You might choose a memoir if you have you wish to write about your own life history or one particular ancestor. Memoirs usually cover a limited number of years.

A **biography** is best when you want to focus on a single ancestor's entire life. Your book could be a series of interwoven biographies of your ancestors.

Any of these suggestions can easily be adapted to fit your interests, time and creativity. For example, you may choose to write a family history covering all people of a particular surname in a particular region, even if they aren't all necessarily related to one another.

Whatever format you adopt, please try to include as many anecdotes as you can find.

Need a starting point?

Ask yourself a few simple questions to help identify the starting point of your book.

Is there one ancestor or relative that stands out as being interesting and/or intriguing? Begin with a story about those interesting intriguing characteristics and how they shaped your ancestor's life.

Did one of your ancestors have an interesting story about his or her immigration? You can then use the flashback story writing technique to fill in the person's life before immigration

Do you have a group of ancestors that migrated to the same district? Write about the area and your ancestors' experiences.

Does one of your ancestors come from an interesting place? Describe the city, town, or region and the impact living there might have had on your ancestor.

Write the blurb

One way to double check your final decision on the scope of your book is to write the **blurb** before you have finished polishing the book.

You write the blurb as an inspiration to achieve your aim – no more than three paragraphs saying what the book is about.

Does your blurb answer the question “What will the reader gain by reading your book”?

Establish your credentials - make yourself sound like the ultimate authority. Use testimonials if you can organise them (that's a whole separate subject).

Create a working title

Think of a working **title**. Make it one to six words with a possible subtitle. Should get attention (tease and promise), indicate the main subject and limits of coverage. (In the commercial world, a snappy title can increase sales by 15%).

Always call your book by its working title – psychologically makes it seem more real and achievable.

For many books, making the subject of the book the **first word** of the title is helpful. People searching for information on the Jenkins Family in a library will look up Jenkins rather than “The history of the Jenkins family” or whatever. So a title like “Jenkins – the family that fed the nation” might be better

Family historian Warwick says catchy titles are the bane of his life. He says: “I think they are acceptable, as long as the main family name(s) concerned are shown on the spine or on the front cover.

“When I am browsing in a library for family history books possibly containing my names of interest, I do not want to have to look in the index of every book.”

Warwick is right – **IF** you want your book to appeal to other historians.

If, however, you want to appeal to a wider audience think of something more enticing that “Smith Family history 1780 to 1955.”

Many general histories have titles that are variations on the “Rise and Fall” theme.

Other popular phrases include “The hidden history of” and “The untold story of ...”

What you choose is up to you – but remember Warwick's advice.

And finally, incorporate your title into an eye-catching cover design.

Graphics are important

As you know, photos of your ancestors and living family members can greatly enhance any family history as they can just about any publication.

Graphics and headlines help attract readers' attention, provide information concisely ("One photo is worth 1000 words").

Knowing this, you should include as many photos, portrait paintings, sketches, maps and other graphics as you think relevant.

Page layout tips

Studies have repeatedly shown that for example, newspaper and magazine readers invariably look first at the main heading, then the main illustration and its caption before reading a word of the text.

Your publication should follow this human habit, also known as the theory of **reading gravity**.

The theory recognises that English speakers read left to right and down the page. The Primary Optical Area is top left and the Terminal anchor bottom right.

Less read items such as maps and tables could be placed in the remaining **fallow corners**.

Other layout points:

- Be consistent in **paragraph treatment**. For example, you may decide to have all opening paragraphs flush left and the rest indented.
- If you **indent** paragraphs, make sure it is by the same amount throughout. If unsure of the amount, look at other publications and copy the indent style and line spacing you like. You can easily set this up in Word formatting.
- Be consistent in **spacing** between lines and paragraphs.
- Always think in terms of spreads. The right hand page (RHP) is the dominant page.
- Start chapters on a RHP
- If you can, allow chapters to finish on a final LEFT HP
- Check for unsightly **rivers of white** space in solid blocks of text. Insert more paragraphs if necessary.

Set a comfortable measure

The *measure* is the number of characters and spaces in **a single line of a column of text**.

- A count of 60 to 70 characters and spaces is best for text in a single column page.
- A count of 40 to 60 characters wide per column is best for multi-column pages.

To achieve the desired measure, you may need to increase or decrease the size of the type you are using or make your columns wider or narrower.

Layout tips for illustrations

- As much as possible, ensure that illustrations of people and animals are not looking out of the page, directing your eyes away from the main text.
- Decide on a policy of either using photos as they are, with minimum retouching, or to reduce all photos to black and white or sepia for consistency of tone.
- Where possible, place photos near the text describing the individuals in the picture.
- Use a computer graphics programme to put a black key line (black border) around each photo
- Group photos from the same branch of the family tree on the same page or group of pages.
- Consider creating a photographic timeline such as a series of group shots from a family reunion taken over successive years.
- **Captions** are especially important in a family history. Ensure that captions are accurate and hopefully encourage reading of the surrounding text.
- Attempt to clearly identify each person in a photo. Most readers understand caption instructions such as "From left to right" or "L to R".

For very large groups of people where identification of everyone is impossible, at least caption the photo with information about when and where the photo was taken. An example: "Smith and Brown cousins gathered at Catherine Brown's home in Alstonville in May, 1897 for her 60th birthday."

- Use a consistent size and font for captions throughout your book.

Some writing dos and don'ts

- Use active voice. "Jack Smith killed the mad bull with one blow of his axe" rather than "The mad bull was killed by Jack Smith using an axe."
- After writing, read your words aloud, to check that your sentences flow naturally.
- Do quote extracts from old documents to give the flavour of the time - but not too much.
- Be wary of passing judgement on people. A villain of the 18th century was often a pauper who stole a loaf of bread to feed his starving family.
- Explain the meaning of any archaic words.
- Don't generalise when you don't know. "Everyone loved grandfather." Or "the entire community was in fear of the blacks." Identify who said those things.

Make your own style sheet

A style sheet is a list of layout, grammatical and other “rules” which you make up and then apply consistently throughout your work.

Consistency is the key to a polished, professional looking result.

- Use of **capital letters** (North and south, capitalise only the first word and proper names in headings)
- **Quotation** marks – single or double? You decide.
- **conversions** (say “as thick as a thumb” rather than 1 in or 2.5cm or when writing for readers who use metric and imperial, try for common measurements such as “the height of a power pole” instead of 10 yards or 9m.
- use of **italics** (normally used for the names of newspapers, titles of films, songs, plays, works of art, verse)
- **Use consistent in spelling** (decide to use *fertilise* or *fertilizer*) – use your dictionary as your Bible – check your Word dictionary is the Australian version
- **abbreviations** (eg NSW, am, kg, mm, St, 1845-46 **not** 1845-6 or 1845/6, the 1880s, 18th century not 18C or Roman numerals). Use proper terms. If unusual, write in full followed by the abbreviation, then use the abbreviation. (Remember to publish a glossary of abbreviations at back of book).
- spell out the numbers one to nine (“seven children” not “7 children”) but use **figures** in times, weights and measures and ingredients (10am, 3 ton, 4 oz etc)
- Watch **apostrophes** (the 1930s, but ’59, don’t use apostrophes on common words like phone, flu, teens)
- Set a style for **dates** (12 June or June 12th or June 12). Pick a style and stay with it.

The Cambridge Guide to Australian English Usage can settle disputes.

Dealing with controversies

Most family history researchers uncover “secrets” which some family members don’t want reported (secret adoption, illegitimate children, de factos, suicides, genetic weaknesses like insanity, criminal records).

As one wit once said: “Many a family tree needs pruning”.

Some authorities say you should not include detailed information on living members of the family (i.e. birth, marriage dates etc) without their permission in writing.

Possible solutions

- Don’t publish till the objector/s dies
- Include material which is on public record open to all but don’t emphasise it in any way

- Include multiple explanations of events and let the reader decide what is true. We may never know the full truth of past events so they become a matter of modern interpretation

- When in doubt, leave out
- Use “alleged” or “people assumed” or “supposing”

Finally, and most important of all, **when in doubt, leave out!**

Two on-line resources

For more detailed advice, including on how to obtain an ISBN number for a book, consult:

<http://www.thearmchairgenealogist.com/>
<http://guides.slv.vic.gov.au/publishing>

I'm looking forward to your book!

- Graeme Eggins
July 23, 2013
Ballina