Writing Up Your Research

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Writing up our research is the best way to preserve our findings for future generations. There are numerous ways to write and present your research. We will explore some of those here, from electronic to print, blogs to books. Take advantage of different end products for different projects.

Writing For Your Portfolio

Writing for your portfolio is different than writing for publication. What follows are best practices for publication, electronic or print. But in preparing our portfolios for BCG or ICAPGEN, it is required that it be entirely our own work. This means no assistance for things like grammar and proofreading. The important thing is that your work be as clear and readable and as free from grammar and spelling errors as possible. This is the standard when you are being judged. Nobody is rejected for a few double-spaces after period or spelling errors. Here are the rubrics for the research report (RR10), case study (CS7), and kinship determination project (KD7).

> RR10: The report's arrangement is confusing; or explanations are frequently disorganized, rambling, or off-topic; or many grammar, spelling, punctuation, or typographical errors hinder reader understanding.

> CS7: The research process is described more than the evidence; explanations are frequently disorganized, rambling, off-topic, or confusing; or there are many grammar, spelling, punctuation, or typographical errors.

> KD7: Proof summaries or proof arguments describe the research process more than the evidence; explanations are frequently disorganized, rambling or confusing; or writing throughout the project contains many grammar, spelling, punctuation, typographical or organizational problems.

As you can see, it takes a number of mistakes before one attains a "does not meet standards" for the rubric. Nobody's portfolio ever fails solely because of grammatical and typographical errors.

Why Do We Write?

Family historians write up their research for three major reasons;

1. To Preserve Our Research
2. To Share Our Findings
3. To Tell Our Family's Story

The first decision to make involves selecting what type of project to work on. Often we think that writing up our research means a major project, such as writing a compiled genealogy that rivals *War and Peace* in length. This is far from the truth. There are many options for you to choose from. The trick is to look at the content you have and determine the best way to use that content to create products.

Content

For the purposes of our discussion here, content is the raw material of our research. It is the information collected from our sources, as well as the sources themselves. You may have copies of original records, letter, diaries, or more. There may be family photographs or paintings. You may have home movies or recordings of oral history interviews. All of these can be used to help your writing, and included in the end product that you choose to create.

Looking at the kinds of source materials that you have can also help you determine what your final product might be. And the final product you choose will help to determine how your source materials are presented.

Types of End Products

You may wish to create end products that are printed on paper. Despite what you may have heard, nothing on the internet lasts forever. Some of these products might include:

- Journal Articles (for scholarly journals of record or genealogical/historical societies of all levels)
- Monographs (small compiled genealogies or local histories focused on an individual family group or a single small location)
- Books (larger compilations that might include a single line of descent from an individual, or all lines of descent)

Digital products might include:

- Blog (a website for an individual or small group that is updated frequently and often written in an informal, conversational style)
- eBook (a digital version of book-length content that can delivered in a variety of formats)

Thinking Outside the Box

When thinking about your content and your final product, be as creative as possible. Compiled genealogies are always great, and very needed. But there are other ways to produce content as well. For example:

- Transcriptions of letters and diaries that are annotated with additional information to provide greater context.
- Create a slide show that includes images of individuals, quotes from them or about them, and additional text. Remember that text should be in small, manageable chunks that are easily read quickly.
- You can also create a script for a narration that could be used for slide shows or videos. Conversely, you could also transcribe oral history interviews to go along with the recording, or to present the information in a different way.
- Take a single photograph, or small group of them, and tell the story of the photograph. Where was it taken? Why was it taken? Was there a family gathering, an important event, etc.?

Remember that all of these projects can be broken down into smaller sections, then turned into a larger project. For example, once you have a certain number of articles or blog posts, you can use them to put together a monograph. Once you have a few monographs, you are well on your way to a book.

Sources for creating a blog
- www.bluehost.com
- www.godaddy.com
- www.hostgator.com
- www.justhost.com

Sources for publishing ebooks
- www.apple.com/ibooks
- www.bookbably.com
- https://kdp.amazon.com
- www.lulu.com

Sources for self-publishing books
- www.bookbaby.com
- www.createspace.com
- www.ingramspark.com
- www.lulu.com

Five Essential Resources for Writing

1. The University of Chicago Press, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).
2. Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, Third Edition (Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2015).
3. Joan F. Curran, Madilyn Coen Crane, and John H. Wray, *Numbering Your Genealogy: Basic Systems, Complex Families, and International Kin* (Arlington, Va.: National Genealogical Society, 2000).
4. Amy Einsohn, *The Copyeditor's Handbook: A Guide for Book Publishing and Corporate Communications, with Exercises and Answer Keys* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2011).
5. Penelope L. Stratton and Henry B. Hoff, CG, FASG, *Guide to Genealogical Writing: How to Write and Publish Your Family History*, Third Edition (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2014).

Five Must-Do Things for Good Genealogical Writing

1. Avoid Misteaks! Profeeding and Editing are Essential
   o No matter the temptation (even to save time or money), it is important to have your work proofread and edited. This will save you frustration and potential embarassment after punctuation.
2. Always Use one of the Two Major Genealogical Numbering Systems
   o For descendancies, use *Register* system or one of the other journal systems (NGSQ, TAG, NYGBR, etc.).
   o For ancestries, use the Sosa-Stradonitz (ahnentafel) system.
3. Use Hyphens and Dashes Appropriately
   o Hyphens (-) are use to join words, and to breaks words at the end of a line.
   o En dashes (–) are used to create ranges of numbers.
   o Em dashes (—) are used to set apart phrases and clauses (replacing commas, parentheses, and colons).
4. Make Plurals Properly
   o Plurals are made by adding an 's' or and 'es' at the end of a word.
   o Apostrophes are only used to make a possessive, never a plural.
5. Only One Space After a Period
   o Double-spaces after a period are never used for publication. They are unprofessional. No popular magazine, newspaper, or genealogical journal uses them.

Perhaps the best thing you can do to is to write as clearly and concisely as possible. This takes practice. But over time, with practice (and lots of editing) you will get better at it. It is often our tendency to add all kinds of adjectives, adverbs, and other words to make it sound impressive. But the reader will get far more out of your writing if they can readily comprehend what you are saying.

Five Excellent Practices for Writing Clearly

1. Use the Active Voice
   This is one of the biggest problems of writers. It is very easy to slip into the passive voice. The active voice makes the writing clearer, and often shorter. In the passive voice, the noun is the subject of the sentence. In the active voice, it is the object. For example, you might right of your Revolutionary War ancestor that "The British soldiers were defeated by John's unit." (passive voice) but "John's unit defeated the British soldiers." is clearer and shorter.

2. Avoid Qualifiers
   Big, small, tremendous, little, etc. are all overused and usually unnecessary. Strunk and White call them "the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words."

3. Focus on Nouns and Verbs
   This goes hand in hand with the previous practice. Let the nouns and verbs carry the story. Over reliance on adjectives and adverbs tends to bulk up our writing, often making it more difficult to understand in the end.

4. Use Simple Language
   One can write "due to the fact that," but the word "because" achieves the same effect with far fewer words and takes up less space.

5. Omit Needless Words
   Sometimes we think that the more words we use, the better our story sounds. Quite the opposite is often true. After you have written some, put it aside for a time. Then pick it back up and read it. Usually you can discover a number of words you can delete, either outright or by rephrasing.