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# Improving Writing Skills through Writing Family Histories

Sample Pages



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## Course Overview

*Improving Writing Skills through Writing Family Histories* is a content-based graduate level course, exploring the practice and application of nonfiction writing in the genre of writing family histories. Using a guided text, choose from 28 writing opportunities to create a collection of 15 family stories. Choose from a variety of writing structures, such as “slice of life”, poem, letter or creative nonfiction. Use research strategies to gather information for writing family histories from print and digital sources. Compile photographs, family documents, public documents, interviews and anecdotal family stories to support the content of the family story. Use focused questions to connect personal history to the history of the culture and time. Integrate family history information through the writing process -brainstorming, journaling, drafting, revision and editing. Access the writer’s strategy toolbox to choose from a wide array of writer crafts to revise and polish writing. Produce clear and entertaining stories employing writing strategies, organization, craft and style appropriate to task, purpose and audience. Create and compile a family stories presentation with photographs and documentation to support claims.

Choose a biography or autobiography to read. Connect your story to the stories of history. Study other biographies and autobiographies for style and craft. Explore print and digital texts for the crafts of writing nonfiction. Choose a text to read and use on improving writing skills in nonfiction writing. A teacher **as** writer is a more authentic teacher **of** writing. Share your experience, your stories and the lessons gained by engaging as a writer. Apply what you learned as a writer of family stories to your curriculum and instructional practices. Prepare a curriculum application for classroom use\* focusing on writing family histories using specific writing strategies.

Synthesis the value of taking a course on writing family histories (researching, reading and writing) as a model to help students find authenticity and meaning in their writing and meet the rigor of the Common Core State Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening.

*This course meets **Common Core State Standards (CCSS)** for K-12 Anchor Standards for Writing 3, 4,5,6,7,8,9, and 10.*

\* If you are not currently in a classroom, this exercise can be modified to best suit your personal and professional needs.

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## Instructor's Comments: Course Instructions

Before you begin, please preview or browse through the text, the course requirements and think about the family stories you want to tell. The text is somewhat like a cookbook with ideas for stories and ideas of writing. You will flip from story to writing strategy to writing tips. You may mix and match to suit your purposes.

The text is set up in two parts. The first part, **Writing Family Histories** offers 28 story topics. You will choose to write a minimum of 15 stories. The second part contains The **Writing Strategies Toolbox**, an annotated list of writing strategies mentioned on the pages in writing the stories. Writing Tips and a Suggested Bibliography of biographies, autobiographies and books on writing family histories completes the text. Use the text, outside readings, activities and writing assignments to complete the course requirements.

Please keep in mind this course is for YOU. Tailor designing the course work to meet your needs is invited. Please contact the instructor if you have questions, modifications or ideas that will make this course more meaningful to you.

### The Text

The first section of the text presents topics and suggestions for writing family stories. You are asked to write a minimum of **15 stories** as one of the requirements for completing this class. There are 28 suggestions, so look through all them before you choose. You may choose one person and write 15 stories about that one person. For instance, a teacher wrote 15 stories of her father during WWII, using letters he wrote to his sister and stories she remembers him telling her. I suggest you peruse the text and then create an outline or a plan. Remember this course is for you, to write your family history, in a way that works for you.

**Each page in the text** is set up with a theme. Each page suggests 4 parts to writing – brainstorming, journaling, writing a draft (story), revision and editing to create a final story. Use any and all the parts of writing to complete your stories. You are only required to turn in your final draft, but I encourage you to use the 4 parts of writing to create your stories. Writing, like wine, improves with age. The informal nature of brainstorming and journaling allow you to gather information and relax about the actual story. Often ideas percolate in these stages, making the draft writing, revision, and editing more productive.

A writer starts with an **idea**, then **brainstorms**, using webbing, clustering, lists, notes or sentence stems.

Many writers use **journal writing**, a process that allows for free expression of thoughts, feelings, reactions and wonderings. Sometimes known as a writer's notebook, this tool helps to gather ideas and reflections for writing. It is casual and informal. Often, stories come from brainstorming and journaling.

The next kind of writing is drafting **the story** itself. Some drafts could be a journal entry, like a diary or a letter. Some stories use elements of brainstorming to create stories, like Word Clouds or poems.

A **writing strategy** will be suggested from the **writing strategy toolbox**. The Writing Strategy Toolbox is located in the second section of your text. The writing strategies are organized alphabetically for easy access. I have collected these ideas as a result of my reading and talking with teachers, published authors and writers. I keep these writing tools in my “writer’s notebook”, and add to them as I gather new ideas. I dip into the writing strategies when I am in the revision stage of my writing. Use the toolbox section as a reference for writing strategies. Feel free to explore revision using any strategy (not necessarily the one suggested) or some of your own. Pick writing strategies that best suit your story and your style. If you are planning to compile all your stories in a book as a gift, you may want to use the same style / strategy in each story to create consistency. One teacher wrote all his family stories as poems. A photo accompanies each family story on one page and a poem on the opposite page. Lois Lowry creates a similar pattern in *Looking Back: A Book of Memoires* (2000). Study some autobiographies to see what appeals to you. **(Please see Course Requirements for Outside Reading: “Read a published family history, biography or autobiography” and “Read a How-to Book or Article on Writing Family Histories.”)**

**Revising** and **editing** are opportunities to polish the “first draft.” I encourage you to let the first draft “sit” or incubate. Take a break and come back to it with a different perspective. Sharing your writing with others often helps the revision process. Reading your work out-loud, either to yourself or someone else helps you to hear what might improve your writing or telling. Use revision tools, such as the 6+1™ Trait writing to assess “good” writing. Finally, edit your work for spelling, grammar and punctuation. Add any drawings, illustrations, photos, decorations, and you have a finished product! All of your stories will be revised and edited, but one is to be chosen to polish to final presentation, ready to publish, or present as a gift

Each page has a **writing tip**. Two of my favorite authors on writing, Barry Lane and Ralph Fletcher, write numerous, useful books about the craft of writing. But, I get overwhelmed with more than one idea at a time. I use writing books like I cook, one recipe at a time. The writing tips are suggestions to practice a craft of writing to improve your writing skills.

The **Extension** section includes books and other sources of information about the topic that may be helpful or inspire you. Writing is hard work. It needs “feeding” and “nourishing.” This list is for your enjoyment. Feel free to add and share your ideas! Many of the suggested titles are biographies, autobiographies and even some books on writing family histories. **(Please see Course Requirements for Outside Reading: “Read a published family history, biography or autobiography” and “Read a How-to Book or Article on Writing Family Histories.”)**

## **Photographs and Other Memorabilia**

It will be helpful to have photographs to accompany the stories you would like to tell. Photographs are great sources of information in and of themselves. I encourage you to find candid photographs whenever possible, as there is always the story behind the story in candid photos. Gather your photographs and memorabilia that you are going to use for this class. Don't get sidetracked trying to organize all the photos. See your "box" as a resource center. You will organize as you write your stories. If you want to write about Aunt Edna, you'll look for pictures of Aunt Edna. Remember to keep it simple.

Collect any memorabilia about your family history. Bibles, books, letters, public documents, awards, ribbons, newspaper clippings, artwork, crafts, piece of jewelry or knick-knacks all tell a story. Pictures of houses, a map to show where they lived, pictures of cars they once had, add historical perspective. Use the Internet for images of an historical era or events to add to your story.

Drawing pictures of your family members, their houses, cars, or experiences is another way to access information about your family history. Even magazine pictures help. Check out magazines such as "Reminisce" or "History".

## **Overview of the Process**

Create a plan. What do you want at the end of this class? You may want random stories about different members in your family. You may want all your stories about a single member of your family. You may have a special occasion coming up, such as the celebration of a grandparent's birthday or a college graduation. These occasions are often commemorated with a scrapbook or memory book. You may want to use a variety of writing strategies or you may want to practice one writing style. Each story needs to stand on its own. You may want to combine the stories to create a book, scrapbook, picture book, journal, a collage, or a digital presentation. You decide.

1. Before you begin, preview the text. You may want to follow my plan, and pick 15 stories out of the ones that are offered, and use the suggested writing strategies for each story, or, you may want to design your own family history book. Make a plan that meets your personal and professional needs.
2. Gather photographs, memorabilia, family records, research, etc. to help you write.
3. Review writing strategies from the **Writer's Strategies Toolbox**.
4. Use the suggested writing format, brainstorming, and journaling, writing the story, revising and editing, improving writing using the writing tip.

Culminate the exercises in the text in a formal presentation, either print or digital, showing a minimum of 15 family stories, 1-2 pages each, using effective writing crafts, with appropriate details and sequence of events, prepared for a variety of audiences. Choose one of the 15 stories to polish for presentation or publication.

**The Easy Plan:** OK. If you follow my plan, all you have to do is choose and write 15 stories, and polish one.

**The Complicated Plan:** Let's say that you want to write a family history about your children. You've got some ideas. You even have a scrapbook of photos that don't have the written stories you want to use. You decide to write stories, vignette style, telling the story in the photographs (or at least some of them). You look through the writer's strategy toolbox and decide to use a variety of strategies, but you also have some ideas of your own. You read the text for the writing tips and find a few that help in revising and editing. You use some strategies from your outside reading on writing. You contact the instructor with your idea. 99.9% of the time, instructor approval is granted. The .01% is reserved to make suggestions.

Bottom line - send in 15 "stories" of which at least one is polished.

Not to overwhelm you, but you might want to start on the outside reading assignment while you are writing your stories. The added benefit to dipping into published family histories, biographies and autobiographies is to not only to enjoy a good story well told, but to also garner ideas for your writing and presentation. Study form and function. After reading *Home Cooking: A Writer in the Kitchen* by Laurie Colwin (1988) I wanted to write a series of stories about food and eating, and add recipes.

The intent of combining outside reading with writing is to support your process. Writing is hard work. It is also depleting. Writing requires ideas and inspiration. Reading family histories written by others creates models and mentors. Reading about writing family histories allows us to stand on the shoulders of those who have cleared the path before us. Look for ideas that excite you, that make you want to stop reading and get back to writing. I use *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg (1986) when I am stuck, bored, in a rut. I just open it up and I read until I find an idea, an inspiration, and a reason to continue to work hard at writing.

Here is one: I open the book to the chapter entitled, "Baking a Cake". I read. Natalie talks about writing like baking a cake, gathering all the ingredients. She says, "You have all the ingredients, the details of your life, but just to list them is not enough. 'I was born in Brooklyn. I have a mother and a father.' You must add the heat and energy of your heart. This is not just any father; this is your father. The character who smoked cigars and put too much ketchup on his steak." (45)

Suggestions for reading biographies, autobiographies or other family histories and checking out books or articles on writing family histories are at the end of the text.

## Introduction

There is a keen interest in knowing our family history, our ancestors and connections to others. The hieroglyphics of early human writers show writing/drawing is a motivator for writing our stories and leaving a mark for future generations. Spend any time on Ancestry.com and quickly become hooked on seeking and finding family connections. Tools to search public documents such as marriage licenses, birth and death records, ways of connecting with others genealogical researches who might have the same last name, show a passion for discovering our family histories. Genealogy web sites have some of the highest number of hits, indicating a national pastime spent researching and maintaining family connections and recording family histories.

But writing a family history is a daunting task. Where to begin? Where to research? How to write it? Most people feel lucky to find names, date of birth and death, places where family members have come from. Adding layers and depths of generations often yields less accurate documentation or assurance that this is really your cousin thrice removed. The complexity of research and recording is compounded when there is divorce, stepfamilies, foster children and adoption to consider. It is time consuming to gather the information and compile it in a way that is interesting, relevant and readable. And it is often this kind of complexity and feelings of overwhelm that stop most people from writing down the stories and what they know about their family histories.

The intent of this course, *Improving Writing Skills to Write Family Histories* is to take out the “overwhelm” and encourage you to start with writing the family stories, story by story. How often have you enjoyed a family reunion and listened to stories about family members? Even the family stories that get told over and over are worth hearing again. Gather those stories. Write about moments in your life. Write about your experiences. Listen to stories from family members. Record the stories in writing. Recall stories you heard from family members. Write them down. Gather stories from the family members who are here, and the stories they remember being told to them. The collection will give a flavor and sense of your family history that you and your family will enjoy for generations to come. Adding to a collection of stories is easy to do! There are plenty of self-help books and articles on writing family histories and digital tools to help you. I encourage you to dip into the sources while you are taking this class, and hopefully continue after the grade is in.

Oh, and did I forget to mention how useful this course will be to you as a teacher in the classroom? Writing family histories is a way to encourage writing in the classroom and personalize history and encourage research!

Students of all ages, all grade levels often struggle with “I don’t know what to write about?” The best source of ideas is our own experience. Great writing starts with writing a story we are familiar with. Students can learn any of the skills and crafts of writing through writing family histories. Family stories can be told in a narrative format, or

informational writing style or use the elements of argument writing and employ research strategies. And best of all, if you take this course for YOU, you will have a mentor text to show your students. You are modeling writing as an authentic life activity.

Collect your family stories in a scrapbook, either print or digital. Use photographs, graphics, add original documents, use audiovisual tools and create a presentation to share with others. Create a picture book, a blog, website, a YouTube. Digital cameras and scanners allow you to individually publish your own work of art, combining pictures with text. Software programs, such as Family Tree Maker offer you tools to organize, collect, collate your family history from family trees, to writing stories with pictures.

Ralph Fletcher, a writer and a teacher, says if you want to write about something big (family history), write small (like stories and vignettes). Ultimately, it comes down to you and what you want to create. Let your style, time and needs dictate how you will create your final project. It might be a picture book. It might be a collection of short stories about one family member. It might be a calendar with a picture and story for each month. It might be a cookbook with family recipes and stories to go with them.

**Writing Family**

**Histories**

## Stories about My Family

As you sort through your family pictures and deciding what stories you want to tell, you will be flooded with memories. We love to look at pictures with others and say, “Remember the time when...” Jot down these memories in as short of form as possible to be used as potential stories in your “book.” They may be the titles of future stories.

**Brainstorm:** Who are the members in your family? What do you remember most about your family? Use photographs to help you. Write down all the ideas that come to mind. What kind of family did you have? What were the special times together? What was the world like during the time that you grew up? What was the world like when your grandparents were growing up? Don’t try to tell the stories. Just write enough to remember the story.

Use a sentence starter: “I remember....”

**Journal:** Remember this section is a warm up exercise. Write informally. Final stories often use journal entries to recapture feelings, thoughts and memories.

“Families are....”

**Write and/or Illustrate a Story: Suggested Writing Strategy:**

**Collage:** Create a family poster. Find words, phrases, from advertisements, magazine and newspaper to describe your family, or create your own on the computer.

**Revise and Edit:** Share with someone else. Listen to their questions. Is there anything you want to add?

**Extension:** *The Relative Came* by Cynthia Rylant  
*The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls

**Writing Tip:** The best way to become a good writer is to read a lot. Study the styles of authors whose writing appeals to you. Mimic their style. A fun exercise is to take sentences they have written and rewrite them in your own words but follow their pattern, noun for noun, adjective for adjective, verb for verb, etc.

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