

Getting Started with Family History Research

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Project for Writing and Recording Family History (<https://cisa.asu.edu/family-history>)

First Steps

1. Begin with what you already know. Write it down.
2. For your descendants, keep a daily journal in which you record family events.
3. Document everything that you find via research.
4. To verify information, use primary sources—e.g., firsthand testimony or original documents, but even they can have errors.
5. Once you are ready to enter data, acquire genealogy software to keep records organized. There are dozens of software packages, including Family Tree Maker, Family Tree (FamilySearch.org), Legacy, Famtree, Ancestry.com, Ancestral Quest, Geni, My Great Big Family. Some are online; some are loaded onto your computer. Some are free.
6. Interview living relatives to find out what they “know.” Use a digital recorder and also take detailed notes. Because there are lots of family myths, verify stories by searching primary records.
7. Ask family members for copies of informal records—e.g., names and dates inside family bibles, letters, journals, newspaper clippings.
8. Visit cemeteries where ancestors are buried to get information from headstones. See “Cemetery Record Locator Sites” below.
9. Visit LDS FamilySearch Libraries. Search for locations online (familysearch.org)
10. Join a local genealogical society (<https://arizonagenealogy.com/societies>) or a chapter of the Family History Society of Arizona (<https://www.fhsa.org/>). See Arizona Genealogical Advisory Board (<https://www.azgab.org/>).
11. If you have Irish ancestors, visit the Irish Cultural Center (<https://www.azirish.org/>), located at 1106 N. Central Avenue north of downtown Phoenix.
12. Visit local historical societies where your ancestors lived to search for official records, newspaper stories, and other archival information.
13. Visit state historical societies where your ancestors lived.
14. Search United States Census records, 1790 to 1950. You can access census records online at Ancestry.Com (need a paid subscription) or for free at <https://www.familysearch.org> or at an LDS family history center, such as the one near the temple in downtown Mesa. You can also access the 1940 Census at the National Archives site: <https://1940census.archives.gov/> Note

that you can search only by location. For further information visit the U.S. Census Bureau: https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/decennial_census_records/census_records_2.html Also, the 1950 Census recently became available: <https://1950census.archives.gov/>

15. Search state census records. Do a Google search on “state census records” to see what’s available. The states often collected census records midway between the times when the federal census records have been collected. Most states stopped collecting information in the early 1900s.
16. Contact/visit county and state offices that have vital records—births, deaths, marriages—as well as wills and probate records.
17. Search historic newspapers. For example, Chronicling America, National Digital Newspaper Program, Library of Congress (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>) has newspapers from 1777 through 1963; it has advanced search options. Another option is Newspapers.com (<https://www.newspapers.com>), which requires a subscription.
18. Maricopa County Library District (<https://mclidaz.org>) offers resources for doing family history. Click on “Research” at the top of the page, which takes you to this page: <https://catalog.mclidaz.org/search/misc/esources.aspx>. Under “Research Categories,” click on “Genealogy” in the alphabetical list, which takes you to this page: <https://catalog.mclidaz.org/Search/misc/esources.aspx?ctx=1.1033.0.0.7&Category=2665>. The “Resources” list includes a link to Heritage Quest (<https://www.ancestryheritagequest.com/HQA>), which offers free access to some records. Note that you can access Ancestry.com for free when you are in the libraries in Maricopa County.

General Search/Digital Tools

1. Google (<https://www.google.com/>): Plug in names of ancestors and see what happens. For example, conduct advanced searches to look for obituaries, which usually include burial information. Also search on the terms “cemetery records,” “cemetery locations,” and “burial records.”
2. Bing (<https://www.bing.com/>): See Google description.
3. Yahoo! (<https://www.yahoo.com/>): See Google description.
4. ThoughtCo (<https://www.thoughtco.com/>): For example, see the section “Vital Record Around the World (<https://www.thoughtco.com/vital-records-around-the-world-4133304>).
5. Ask Custom Search (<https://www.ask.com>): See Google description.
6. Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/>): Family members in other parts of the country can post photos of ancestors, their homes, their tombstones, etc.

General Family History Sites

1. Cyndi’s List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet (<https://www.cyndislist.com/>) includes more than 300,000 links to other helpful sites in almost 200 categories.

2. Family Search (<https://familysearch.org/>): The new free subscription version includes many search tools, including name, location, and subject searches.
3. RootsTech (<https://www.familysearch.org/rootstech/home>), “the world’s largest family history conference,” has an amazing array of helpful sessions on how to do family history research.
4. Ancestry.Com (<https://www.ancestry.com/>): This requires a subscription. The site bills itself as “the world’s largest online family history resource.”
5. Progenealogists [“official Ancestry.Com research firm”] (<https://www.progenealogists.com/>)
6. Archives (<https://www.archives.com/>): Subscription required; seven days for free.
7. Utah State History (<https://history.utah.gov/>): See “Cemetery and Burial Database” (<https://history.utah.gov/cemeteries/>) where users may search by person’s name, cemetery name. It also includes death certificates for 1904-1956.
8. Digitalarkivet (<https://www.digitalarkivet.no/en/>): Norwegian civil and church records, including scanned parish records and searchable census records. Some basic Norwegian vocabulary is needed. The Swedish equivalent is ArkivDigital (<https://www.arkivdigital.net>).
9. Geni (<https://www.geni.com>): People upload GEDCOM files to the site, and the system finds connections. I’ve connected with hundreds of relatives in Europe in the last two years. Folks are very helpful, even willing to visit cemeteries in their areas. They can post photos on the site.
10. Genealogy.Com (<https://www.genealogy.com>): Some information is free, but a paid annual subscription is required for complete access.

Cemetery Record Locator Sites

1. Interment.net: Cemetery Records Online (<http://www.interment.net/Default.htm>): The site has records from dozens of countries, but it focuses on the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Germany. Search by individual’s name, place name, death date, birth date. Other cemetery search sites lead to this one.
2. Find a Grave (<https://www.findagrave.com/>): The site includes 60 million records. Users are encouraged to add records. Search by person’s name, birth year, death year. Search by location and cemetery name.
3. Billion Graves (<https://billiongraves.com/>): The site has a goal of that many graves.
4. Online Searchable Death Indexes and Records (<https://www.deathindexes.com/>): The site includes death records, death certificate indexes, death notices & registers, obituaries, probate indexes, and cemetery and burial records. (I found Pierce County, Wisconsin, cemetery records here!)

5. Illinois Genealogical Society: Cemetery Location Project (<https://ilgensoc.org/cpage.php?pt=15>): Cemetery locations only; not transcriptions.
6. Do Google searches on cemeteries in specific locations—e.g., a county, township, city.

Helpful Print Resources for Writing about Family History

- Carmack, Sharon. *You Can Write Your Family History*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2003.
- Conklin, Nancy Faires, and Margaret A. Lourie. *A Host of Tongues: Language Communities in the United States*. New York: The Free Press, 1983.
- Cox, Meg. *The Book of New Family Traditions*. Philadelphia: Running Press Books, 2003.
- Goldrup, Lawrence P. *Writing the Family Narrative*. Provo, UT: Ancestry Publishing, 1987.
- Haakenstad, Liv Marit. *A Guide to Norwegian Genealogy, Emigration, and Transmigration*. Amazon, 2022.
- Hatcher, Patricia Law. *Producing a Quality Family History*. Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1996.
- Hobbs, Catherine. *The Elements of Autobiography and Life Narratives*. New York: Pearson, 2005.
- Kane, William. *Journeys Taken: The Search for a Better Life: New France to New England, 1600-2000*. Tempe, AZ: Crowsnest Press, 2002.
- Kemphorne, Charley. *For All Time: A Complete Guide to Writing Your Family History*. Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 1996.
- Kyle, Nicole. *Writing Family History Made Easy: A Beginner's Guide*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2007.
- Martinson, Floyd M. *Growing Up in Norway, 800 to 1990*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992.
- McCarty, Terry M., with Margaret Ann Chatfield McCarty. *The Chatfield Story: Civil War Letters and Diaries of Private Edward L. Chatfield of the 113th Illinois Volunteers*. Georgetown, TX: BookSurge, 2010.
- Mencken, H. L. *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*. 4th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937.
- Miller, Brenda, and Suzanne Paola. *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.
- Perl, Sondra, and Mimi Schwartz. *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- Polking, Kirk. *Writing Family Histories and Memoirs*. Cincinnati, Betterway Books, 1995.
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- Simpson, Bland. *The Mystery of Beautiful Nell Cropsey: A Nonfiction Novel*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993.
- Spence, Linda. *Legacy: A Step-By-Step Guide to Writing Personal History*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997.
- Stillman, Peter R. *Families Writing*. Cincinnati: Writers' Digest Books, 1989.
- Sturdevant, Katherine Scott. Cincinnati: *Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History*. Betterway Books, 2000.
- Thiel, Diane. *Winding Roads: Exercises in Writing Creative Nonfiction*. New York: Longman, 2008.
- Zempel, Solveig, ed. and trans. *In Their Own Words: Letters from Norwegian Immigrants*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.