



Dawn Parrett Thurston

DawnThurston@MemoirMentor.com

I've read scads of family histories over the years in the course of my own genealogy research and to educate myself to become a better teacher and writer. I've chaired awards committees responsible for honoring well-written family histories. With all this exposure, I've learned what works and what doesn't.

No written family history is a wasted effort, of course. For the author, it's a labor of love, despite the considerable effort it entails. For the family, it can be a treasured heirloom, resurrecting dear ancestors who would otherwise remain sterile names on a pedigree chart.

However, if you're going to commit precious time to writing a family history—sacrificing many other worthy projects to do so—you may as well write something that does justice to the lives of your interesting, complex subjects. And there's the rub.

How do you craft a family history that captures the uniqueness of the people you're writing about? What makes an interesting person become flat and bland when her story appears on paper? You should find out.

Avoid These Common Family History Writing Mistakes

Your Goal

You want to honor your family or a beloved ancestor with a written family history your descendants will cherish for generations to come. A worthy goal, but...

Your Problem

You want to write an interesting family history, because if you don't, no one will read it, and then it will just sit on a dusty bookshelf, and all your time will have been wasted, and...

"The only way to teach history, to write history, to bring people into the magic of transforming themselves into other times is through the vehicle of the story. It isn't chronology. It's about people. History is human. Human is the operative word here."
--David McCullough

Common Mistakes

- Failing to tell a story
 - ✓ What's wrong with "She did this, then this, then this"?
 - ✓ What is a story?
 - ✓ How do you research and organize your material for a story?
- Putting your ancestors in a vacuum—ignoring their life context
 - ✓ What is a life context?
 - ✓ Where do you find this information?
 - ✓ How do you incorporate it into your story?

Family Histories

Ian Frazier's *Family*

Rick Bragg's *All Over but the Shoutin'*

Leslie Huber's *The Journey Takers*

Dawn Parrett Thurston's *The Parrett Migration*

Lisa See's *On Gold Mountain*

Rachel Swarns' *American Tapestry*

Bill Griffith's *By Faith Alone*

Morris Thurston's *Tora Thurston: The History of a Norwegian Pioneer*

Edward Ball's *Slaves in the Family*

John Lanchester's *Family Romance: A Love Story*

John Colletta's *Only a Few Bones*

Ted Gup's *A Secret Gift*

How-to Books

Sharon DeBartolo Carmack's *You Can Write Your Family History*

Hazel Edwards' *Writing a Non-Boring Family History*

Dawn & Morris Thurston's *Breathe Life into Your Life Story*

Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*

Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*

Charles Kempthorne's *For All Time: A Complete Guide to Writing Your Family History*

Patricia Hatcher's *Producing a Quality Family History*

William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*

Roy Peter Clark's *Writing Tools*

For More Help

Join Dawn Thurston's free monthly classes at the OC FamilySearch Library. For more details, go to <http://ocfamilyhistory.org>

- Failing to keep your audience in mind
 - ✓ What do your readers need to know to understand the people and their era?
 - ✓ How much do you need to spell out?
- Naming places instead of *showing* places
 - ✓ How do you *show* places?
 - ✓ Provo then and now
 - ✓ Where do you find place information?
- Avoiding the personal
 - ✓ How would your ancestors have felt?
 - ✓ What were their motivations?
 - ✓ The pros and cons of speculating
 - ✓ The value of imagined "scenes"
- Writing dishonestly
 - ✓ Hero worship
 - ✓ Being unfair and judgmental
 - ✓ Showing contemporary bias—viewing the past through the lens of the present
 - ✓ Passing off fiction as fact—rumors? legends?
- Superficial researching—There's a world of information beyond Wikipedia.
 - ✓ Social history
 - ✓ Local, regional, national history
 - ✓ Maps
 - ✓ Boots on the ground
- Sloppy editing—and what it will do for your book
 - ✓ Typical problems
 - ✓ Getting the help you need
 - ✓ See list of how-to books in the left column.