

# No More Excuses: Ten Family History Writing Tips for Procrastinators

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When it comes to tracking their ancestors, most genealogists I know are dedicated, passionate, and persistent. We'll spend countless hours researching online databases, in courthouses or libraries, travel across the country or around the world to walk in our great-grandma's footsteps, and even go to extreme measures to "dig up the dirt" on that "black sheep" uncle. But, when it comes to compiling the years of research, charts, photographs, and other data into an interesting, informative, and captivating format, how many of us become creatively paralyzed before our fingers even hit the keyboard? Perhaps, we don't know where to start, we're overwhelmed by the amount of information we've gathered, or we simply say "I don't have time." Here are ten tips for you to get motivated to finally write your family's story!

- 1. Think like a writer.** The first thing you need to do is get over your "fear of writing." Many people mistakenly believe they need to have formal training to write a family narrative. I was a writer before I was a genealogist (this is the reason I call my Blog "The Accidental Genealogist"), and I consider myself more of a story gatherer as opposed to a name collector, so I'm always looking for the best ways to record, store, and share information. You may not have the same training or experience, but don't be intimidated. You can do it—you may just need more practice!
- 2. Have a focus.** Decide what it is you want to write. Is it a 250-page book? A series of profiles, or character sketches? A house history? Do you want to focus on one ancestor, one family, or several generations? Take some time to think about what story you want to tell.

3. **Get organized.** Once you've decided on who or what you want to write about, gather all the materials you need in one place (documents, photographs, charts, diaries, etc.). It helps if you have a designated "writing space"—preferably a room or area in your home where you do not usually do other activities (such as eating or watching TV). If you must leave your home so you can focus (for example, if you like to write at the library or a local coffee shop), then you need to think about portability when it comes to taking your information with you (scan your photos and documents, clip research articles into a cloud-based notetaking software like **Evernote** <https://evernote.com>, and use binders you can easily carry in tote bag or backpack). Before you start writing, create an outline or storyboard. I like to use **Scrivener3** by Literature and Latte Windows Version <https://www.lisaalzo.com/ScrivenerWin> (affiliate link) and Mac version <https://www.lisaalzo.com/scriv3mac> (affiliate link); free trial available.
4. **Set a deadline.** By nature, many of us are procrastinators. It's always tempting to put off a difficult task, so if you find yourself always delaying the writing process, set some deadlines and write the due dates in your paper organizer, or enter it into your smartphone or electronic calendar. Then, do whatever it takes to meet those deadlines! **Extra tip: Sometimes an event can serve as a good incentive—for example, a family reunion, anniversary celebration, or wanting to create a gift for the holidays).**
5. **Divide and conquer.** The thought of having to produce hundreds of pages of written material can be intimidating for anyone. A much better approach is to break your writing projects into smaller, more manageable pieces. Approach your project one ancestor or topic at a time. Remember small steps will add up to big gains. Manage multiple projects with free programs such as **Airtable** <https://www.lisaalzo.com/airtable> (with this link I receive free credits), **Notion**, <https://www.notion.so>, or **Trello** <https://trello.com>.

- 6. Play favorites.** A popular piece of advice given to writers is: “Write what you know.” You can apply this to family history writing as well. It will be much harder to write about an ancestor for whom you have very little information, so choose a good candidate. You can also select a favorite ancestor or one who has a “juicy” backstory. Start with the “easy” subjects before you tackle the harder ones.
- 7. Use visual aids.** Photographs or documents can be used to get the creative juices flowing. Pick a favorite family photograph. Who’s in it? What are they wearing? What are they doing? What facial expressions can you see? Is anyone else in the photograph? Describe it in as much detail as possible. Carefully look at the documents you’ve collected (baptismal certificate, passport, diaries, letters, etc.), extract the key details, and use them to create a narrative.
- 8. Schedule time.** Carve out time to write and then ignore the writer's block. Even if it’s just 15 minutes per day (this adds up to over 1-1/2 hours per week), put it on your schedule and then make sure to show up at your, laptop, iPad, or tablet to write, even if nothing comes right away. If you’re time crunched, set a timer or an alarm on your phone or computer and stop when the 15 minutes are up. If you have the luxury of more time, keep writing! Also, remember to take account of when you feel at your creative best, or when you can write with the least interruption (early morning, late at night, or middle of the afternoon).
- 9. Utilize technology.** Because of my busy schedule I like to be able to write whenever wherever I please (on the airplane, while waiting at the dentist's office or hair salon, at the park, etc.) I can’t live without cloud storage for my writing and my genealogy. I use Dropbox <https://www.dropbox.com>. and Google Drive <https://www.google.com/drive>. I also use several “Apps” for dictating notes or short passages. If you find it hard to type your thoughts—you can use dictation to pretend like you’re telling the story to your favorite aunt.

**10. Challenge yourself.** Find creative ways to beat writer's block and meet your deadlines. Start a blog with free tools such as Blogger.com or Wordpress.com. Writing groups or classes are another good way to prompt you into a writing routine. To push yourself even further, make plans to sign up for the National Novel Writing Month (NanoWriMo) <https://nanowrimo.org> that takes place each November. Use an app such as **WriteOrDie** <https://writeordie.com> to motivate yourself to write without distractions.

If you're still in draft mode and not yet ready to share your writing with others, set up a private Blog and make yourself write a post every day or a minimum number of times per week.

### **Summary**

Every genealogist can find at least one great story to tell, but often we let anxiety, fear, information overload or busy schedules interfere with the writing process. Try all or some of the above suggestions, then stop making those excuses and start writing!

**REMEMBER: You can't edit a blank page!**

Lisa A. Alzo, is a freelance writer, instructor, lecturer, and writing coach. She is the author of 11 books, including *Three Slovak Women*, and hundreds of magazine articles. Lisa offers writing coaching and courses through her online education site, Research, Write, Connect <https://www.researchwriteconnect.com>.