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Chapter 1
Getting Ready to Start

Before you get stuck in to actually writing anything, it's a good idea to figure out what you're trying to get out of the project.

In this chapter, I'll go through that, as well as the basic process of planning, researching, writing, finishing and sharing your life story...

What's The Point?
(when you get right down to it…)

*Before you start thinking about the details of what you're going to write, you need to get clear in your head **why** you want to write it in the first place.*

The story of one life or many?

When you sit down to write a project like this, your first step is to figure out *whose* story you want to tell – and how much of it:

<u>*Your Own Personal Life Story*</u> (autobiography)

So this is where you tell the story of your own life, what you've learned and experienced, and how things have changed over time.

There are a few reasons why you might want to write an autobiography:
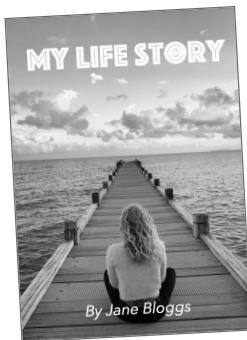
1) If you've lived a particularly interesting life – maybe you've travelled a lot, raised a big family or had an unusual career.

2) If you've learned valuable life lessons that you want to pass on to other people.

3) Or maybe there are things about your past that you want to make sure don't get forgotten (or that you think might help people to understand you better).

Your *whole* life story might be more than you want to tell, though…

<u>*Specific Memoirs*</u>

You might not want to include everything in your story, and that's absolutely fine. Writing about a particular time, event or theme in your life is often called a "memoir":

1) Writing this sort of story lets you "cut to the chase", so you're only writing about the interesting bits.

2) If you've got more than one time, event or theme you want to write about, there's nothing to stop you writing more than one memoir.
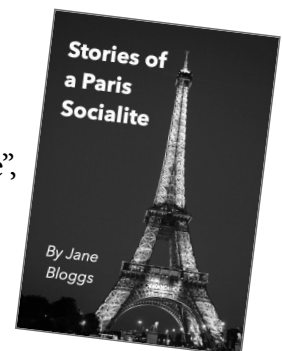
Family History

It might not be just *your* story that you want to tell, though, but the stories of previous generations.

1) A family history can be a very powerful thing to pass on to younger generations – helping your children or grandchildren to understand where they come from.

2) The more detail and colour you can add, the better the story – family history is more than just genealogy.

3) But remember that you're part of the family too, so make sure you include your *own* memories as well.
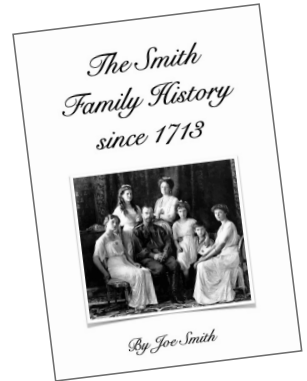
> *"Family history" and "genealogy" aren't the same. Genealogy is tracing your family tree – the dates of births, deaths and marriages and how people are related. Family history is about the lives those people led, and the more details you can include the better – for example if you know that Great-Uncle Bertram invented the paperclip, make sure you talk about that in your story.*

Someone Else's Life Story (biography)

You might not be interested in writing your *own* story – maybe it's someone else's tale you want to tell. Maybe there was a particularly interesting character in your family, and you don't want them to be forgotten.

Just remember to be a bit sensitive if you're writing about people who are still alive. Maybe ask them if they're happy for you to write their story first.

Who's going to read your story?

This is an important question to ask yourself before you get stuck in, too. *Who* you're writing for affects:

1) How much **background detail** you need to include – are you writing for someone who already knows you, or do you need to put your story in context for them?

2) What **personal information** you might be happy to share – if only members of your family are going to read this, you might be willing to share more than if it might be read by strangers.

3) How "**pretty**" or "**professional**" you want to make it. And how bothered you are about things like grammar and spelling.

So have a think about whether you're writing this for your family, your friends, a wider audience... or even just for yourself.

Preparation, Preparation, Preparation...

I'm sure you're champing at the bit to get started, but there's more to a big project like this than just picking up a pen and putting it to paper.

Over the next few pages I'll talk you through the different stages of writing a book or family history project, and the big decisions you'll have to make at each stage. It might feel a bit daunting at first, but proper preparation prevents plentiful problems and paralysing panic... probably...

How do you know what to write?

Don't expect to just be able to sit down and write your story from start to finish. There are lots of steps to go through first before you ever write a sentence you intend to keep!

In this book, I'll take you through each of these steps in detail:

Try to think as big as possible at this stage – you probably won't include everything you come up with, and not every idea will be a winner, but even the rubbish ones can sometimes spark other good ideas.

IDEAS

Start with a pen and paper (or a keyboard and a blank document if you prefer to type) and jot down all the thoughts and ideas you've got about the story you want to tell.

1) Start with the basics – what do you want to write about and why? Are you writing about your family history, your own life or a bit of both?

2) Who are you writing it for? What are you wanting to achieve?

3) Then think about what you'll want to include in your story. You can start with any photos or documents that you have to hand, plus any stories or anecdotes that you already know, then branch out from there.
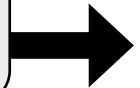
STRUCTURE

Think about how you want to organise your story. Do you want it to be a long continuous tale from start to finish, or do you want to give snapshots of your life or your family at different points in time? See pages 16-23 for all sorts of structure ideas, including some more unusual ones.

You don't have to make a firm decision about it at this stage, but it's good to have an idea in mind as you go. Having at least a vague idea of a structure gives you something to plan both your research and your writing around.

PLANNING & PRACTICALITIES

It's around this point in the process that you need to start thinking about *how* you're going to go about writing your project:

- Think about what **technology** you're going to use for the actual writing, and any other resources you'll need. For something as big as t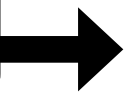his, I strongly recommend working on a PC, laptop or Apple Mac. You *could* do everything with a tablet (e.g. an iPad), or even pen and paper, but you'd be making life hard for yourself.

- Think about any **apps** or **programs** you might need as well – for planning and scheduling, keeping notes, editing pictures and writing up your finished story.

- Write a **plan** for your project. Don't worry if you change your mind or move bits around once you start writing – but without a plan to tweak, you won't know where to start or what research needs doing.

- Think about **timing**. Do you want to get your story finished by a particular date? If so, you'll need to set yourself deadlines. (In fact, deadlines can be very handy even if they're just plucked out of thin air – more about that later...)

I wouldn't really recommend attempting something on this scale with a tablet or iPad – this isn't really what they're designed for.

*You don't need to **decide** for definite which apps you're going to use for writing up until you're about to start. It's worth thinking about in advance, though.*
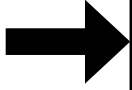
RESEARCH

Some questions to think about when you're planning your research:

- What is it you're hoping to find out?

- What do you know already that might help you?

- Where do you need to go/what do you need to do to find this information?

What sort of research you want to do will depend a lot on whether you're writing about your own life or someone else's. But we've given you lots of help with it in Chapters 4 and 5.

Your detailed notes and research stages will blur together – and they should do! Otherwise when you come to write up notes from the research you did at the start of the project, you'll have forgotten a lot of what you were thinking about at the time.

TAKING NOTES & COLLECTING PICTURES

You'll probably be scribbling rough notes *as* you do your research, but it's a good idea to write those notes up as a separate stage. It helps you keep track of what you've got.

1) You're not trying to write finished pages yet, so try not to get caught up in getting the words perfect. *Detail* is important at this stage, though.

2) As you write your notes, you might find that your focus changes, or you don't have as much information on a particular person as you thought you would at the start. That's fine – remember you can always come back and change things later.

3) This is a good time to collect any pictures you might want to include in your story – scanned photos, newspaper clippings, etc, so they're ready to add to your document later.

By the end of this stage, you should have all your content in note form ready to craft into a thing of beauty. That takes you to the end of the planning and research stage.

The Writing Process

Once you've got everything planned out, done your research and written your notes, it's time to start turning it into the genuine finished article.

FIRST DRAFT

The best advice I can give you for the first draft stage is to **just start writing**, even if it feels a bit rubbish to begin with.

1) You'll probably end up doing several different drafts along the way, so try not to worry about getting it perfect first time.

2) There's lots of advice on how to get started on pages 138-140, so don't worry if you find this step a bit intimidating. *(Trade secret – we **all** do!)*

I strongly suggest you back up your work as you go along – I'll explain how to do that later in the book.


RE-DRAFTING & EDITING

This is probably the trickiest part – and I'm not just saying that because it's my day job! As you pull together final drafts, you need to make sure that your writing makes sense, is nice to read and works as a whole story.

I'll go through all this in lots of detail later in the book, but here are some things you'll want to think about:
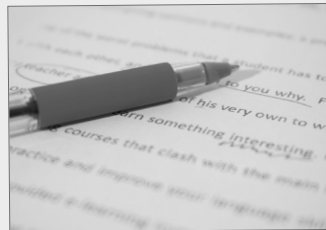
- **Tone** – when you're actually talking to someone, you can get a lot of your meaning across by using a particular tone of voice. That's much harder to do in writing. It isn't always obvious when someone's being sarcastic, or just joking around. It's also easy to end up sounding "preachy" or boastful when you don't mean to.

- **Purpose** – if you have a particular aim that you want to achieve by writing your story, keep it in mind as you go. It's easy to lose track of your aim when you start writing.

Reading what you've written out loud can help.
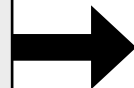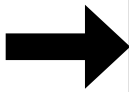
- **Length & pacing** – are there parts where the story feels a bit slow and boring? Or doesn't really go anywhere? It's easy to find yourself waffling on (*and on... and on... Sorry, where was I?*) without realising. Or you might have a few sections that you think you've rattled through too quickly, which deserve a bit more detail.

- **Structure** – keep the structure you decided on at the start of the process in mind as you edit, as you'll probably want to rearrange a few things. Don't feel like it's set in stone, though. If you find that your original structure isn't working as well as you'd hoped, you can always rethink it.
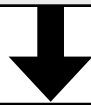
LAYOUT

Decide how you want to include **visual elements** like documents and photos:

1) Do you want to place them in between paragraphs, give them a page to themselves, or try to put them in the middle of the text?

2) This might depend on what software you use for writing your story – LibreOffice, for example, can be a bit awkward about putting photos in the middle of text, but it's not impossible!

3) You should try to avoid having sections that are just long "walls of text", as this can be a bit off-putting to your reader.

4) Think about using **paragraphs**, **subheadings**, **bulleted lists**, different **fonts**, **titles**, or even **basic diagrams** to mix things up a bit and give your pages some variety.
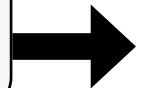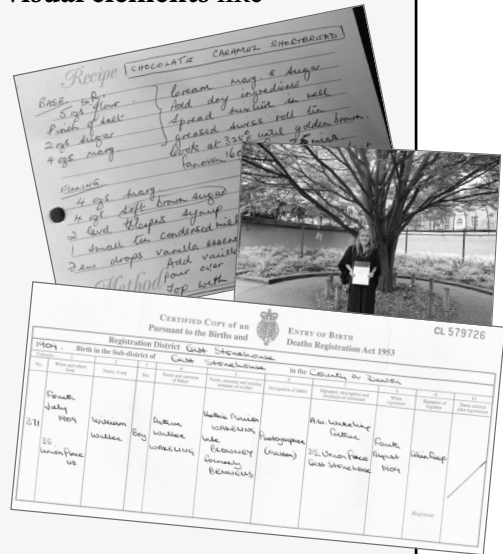
FINISHING TOUCHES

Once you've got the bulk of your writing done, you might want to consider some optional extras that make it easier to read and feel more like a "real book". Things like:

- **Headers, footers and page numbers** – page numbers are a good idea if you're going to print your finished story, just in case the printed pages end up in the wrong order. Headers or footers can be good too, for labelling chapters.

- A **contents page**, to help people find specific bits of your story more easily.

- A **front cover** or **title page**. This can be as simple or as fancy as you like – although fancy covers are hard work to get right.

- A **thank you page** – this can be nice to add if you want to acknowledge any help you've had from friends and family along the way.
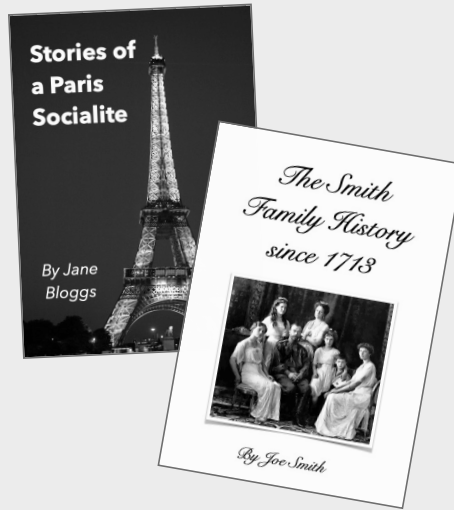
PROOFREADING

This is probably the most boring part of the entire process (even for word nerds like me who do it for a living) but it's an important one.

1) There are various tools and programs you can use to check your spelling and grammar on a computer, but they aren't foolproof, so it's a good idea to check it manually as well.

I'd recommend taking this stage slowly, and in manageable chunks – preferably with a tea or cake-based reward after each chunk.
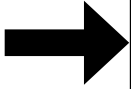
2) It's important to check that you've spelled the names of people and places correctly, and make sure that any dates you've included are accurate.

If you can find a **willing volunteer**, ask a friend to check it for you as well. Using someone else can help to find any silly mistakes you might have missed – after a few hours of staring at your work, it can be hard to see the wood for the trees!

It's also common for your eyes to skip over mistakes in something you've written, because you know what you were trying to say.

SHARING

Once your story is all polished and perfect, you can decide how to share it with your readers.

1) **Printed copies** can be exciting, because you get to hold the thing you've created in your hands, but they can also be expensive and time-consuming to make. It can also be difficult to share them with people who are far away.

2) **Digital copies** are cheaper to produce (often free) and can be shared across the world, but they don't always have that same feeling of "Look at what I made".
You also need to consider what format to send them in – documents made on an Apple Mac don't always work on PCs, for example. If in doubt, check with the person you're sending it to.

There's lots to think about here, but don't panic – we'll take you through it all step by step.

And don't forget to make a **full back-up copy** of your finished project at the end. After all that hard work, you don't want to risk losing it if your computer packs in!