

OPERATION GRANNY FILES

From Sources to Sentences

*A Family History Writer's Workbook — because your ancestors deserve more
than a database entry*

Writer's Workbook

Mission 24: Writing Your Family History — From Research to Narrative

Clearance Level: Biscuit-Tin Operative

operationgrannyfiles.substack.com

QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY

Family history writing is not creative writing — it is sourced, honest, scene-driven prose. This workbook walks you from a folder full of records to a paragraph your sister will read twice. Six worked examples, three structural skeletons, and a reading list. By the time you finish the last page, you will know how to turn a tax-form sentence into a scene, where to put your citations, what to do when the records go quiet, and which of three structures — annal, biographical sketch, or family-history essay — fits the ancestor you are writing about this week.

1. The Terrible Paragraph — Before and After

Every family history begins with the same paragraph. It is not your fault. Nobody taught you to write one any differently.

Before — the tax form:

John Smith (1820-1890) was the son of William Smith. He married Mary Jones in 1842. They had eight children: William Jr., Mary Ann, John Jr., Sarah, Thomas, Eliza, James, and Catherine. He was a farmer in Lincoln County, Tennessee. He died in 1890.

That paragraph contains six documented facts and zero life. A reader who is not already related to John Smith will not finish it.

After — the scene:

On the morning of 14 April 1842, John Smith stood beside Mary Jones in the Lincoln County courthouse and signed his name with a steady hand.¹ He was twenty-two. The marriage clerk wrote her surname twice in two different spellings — a small clue that nobody in that room was a stranger to a hard week. The farm John would work for the next forty-eight years lay six miles west, on a creek that flooded most Aprils. He would bury two of the eight children he and Mary had together in the small graveyard at the edge of that creek, and he would be buried there himself, on a hot afternoon in August 1890.²

Same six facts. Different paragraph. The reader is now in the room.

What changed:

- The first sentence is a *scene* — a specific morning, a specific gesture (signing his name with a steady hand).
- A small concrete detail (the misspelling) does double duty: it humanizes the moment and proves the writer has actually read the source.
- The future-tense glance forward ("would work for the next forty-eight years") fuses biography and scene without breaking the moment.
- Citations are tucked underneath as footnotes. The prose breathes.

GRANNY PRO TIP

Strike the words *lived* and *resided* from your draft on principle. They are placeholders. *He lived in Tennessee* is a database row. *He worked the same forty acres in Lincoln County for thirty-one years, signing his name on tax rolls in five different decades* is a sentence. Vague verbs are usually covering for missing research. Specific verbs always reward the reader.

2. The Source-to-Sentence Workbench

Every source you have pulled is a fact in search of a sentence. The trick is knowing which sentence each source can honestly support. Here is the workbench — six common record types, what each one will give you, and how the same data becomes prose.

Table 1: Record-Type to Sentence Conversion

Record type	What to extract	Sentence pattern (example)
Marriage license	Date, place, officiant, witnesses, signature evidence	<i>"On 14 April 1842, in the Lincoln County courthouse, John Smith signed his marriage license with a steady hand — a small literacy that his father had not had."</i>
Census entry (post-1850)	Household composition, occupation, real-estate value, birthplace of parents	<i>"By 1860 the household included six children under twelve and a farmhand boarding in the back room. The census taker valued the property at \$1,200 — a comfortable sum that year for a farmer in a county of mostly tenant labor."</i>
Will / probate inventory	Date, executor, beneficiaries, named possessions, debts	<i>"His will, signed three weeks before his death, named his eldest daughter as executor — an unusual choice in 1890 Lincoln County, where probate ordinarily went to a son. The inventory listed nine head of cattle, a parlor organ, and a Bible the appraiser valued at fifty cents."</i>
Land record (deed)	Acreage, location, price, witnesses, date	<i>"The deed, signed on a Tuesday in October 1855, transferred forty acres on Hickory Creek from Elijah Cabot to John Smith for \$480 — paid, the record specifies, 'in lawful money of the United States.'"</i>
Military service record	Unit, dates, casualties present,	<i>"He mustered in at Nashville on 4</i>

Record type	What to extract	Sentence pattern (example)
	discharge condition	<i>September 1863 and mustered out two years later in North Carolina, walking the one hundred and forty miles home in nine days. He carried a Springfield rifle and, the discharge paper notes, a wound across the back of his left hand."</i>
Newspaper notice	Date of publication, named persons, the editorial voice	<i>"The Fayetteville Observer, on 21 August 1890, reported his death in twelve lines under the heading 'A Long Life Quietly Lived.' The notice mentioned the farm, the eight children, the war — and ended with a sentence almost certainly written by his daughter: 'He was a man who paid his debts.'"</i>

The Three-Pass Exercise

Open a clean document. Pick **one** record from your files — any record, for any ancestor. Then run it through this three-pass exercise.

Pass 1 — Transcribe. Write down what the record literally says. Field by field. No interpretation. This is the audit trail.

Pass 2 — Translate. Now write what the record *means* in plain English. *"On 14 April 1842, John Smith and Mary Jones got a marriage license in Lincoln County."* One sentence. Boring is fine — boring is honest.

Pass 3 — Tell. Now turn the boring sentence into a scene. Add one concrete detail (the misspelling, the steady hand, the courthouse air in April). Hedge anything you cannot prove. Drop a superscript at the end of the sentence and write the full citation underneath.

Three passes, fifteen minutes, one paragraph that did not exist before. Do this for ten records and you have a chapter.

3. Voice and Point of View

Before you start writing the chapter, decide who is telling it. Family historians have three honest options, and a few dishonest ones.

The three honest voices

Third-person omniscient — the historian's voice. The narrator stands outside the story and knows everything the records show. Used by most published family histories and by journals like the *NGS Quarterly*. Reads sober and authoritative; works for any ancestor at any distance. Sample: *"By the spring of 1857, John and Mary had buried two children. The household furniture, when it was*

inventoried thirty-three years later, included a small wooden cradle the appraiser noted as 'much worn.'"

Third-person limited — the close camera. The narrator stays close to one ancestor at a time and only reports what that person could plausibly have known or seen. Reads more intimate; risks slipping into invention. Sample: *"John Smith, by the spring of 1857, had buried two children. The cradle stayed in the parlor."*

First-person reflective — the researcher in the room. You are part of the story, openly. The chapter is partly about the ancestor and partly about the act of recovering them. Used by family memoirs and most contemporary genealogy on Substack. Reads honest and inviting; risks making the chapter about you instead of about them. Sample: *"I have stood in the Lincoln County courthouse where John Smith signed his name in 1842. The signature is steadier than I expected. So is the day, looking back from 184 years away."*

The voice to avoid

Free-indirect interior monologue. *"John felt the spring air on his face as he walked to the courthouse, his heart heavy with..."* No, dear. Unless you have his diary, you do not know what John felt or how heavy his heart was. That sentence is fiction. Hedge it, source it, or cut it.

GRANNY PRO TIP

Pick a voice on page one and stay there. The single most common amateur mistake is drifting — opening in third-person omniscient on page one and ending in first-person reflective by page four. Readers feel the wobble even when they cannot name it. Choose your voice deliberately. Hold it. Switch only at chapter breaks, never mid-paragraph.

4. Hedge Language — The Three Honest Verbs

When the evidence runs thin, you do not have to choose between fabricating a memory and saying nothing. There is a third option, which is what professionals do: hedge in the open.

Table 2: Hedge-Language Calibration

Phrase	Use when	Example
<i>Almost certainly</i>	Multiple converging sources point to a fact, but no document states it outright	<i>"He almost certainly served in the Tennessee 5th Infantry — three of his named neighbors enlisted on the same week and the pension roster lists 'J. Smith' of Lincoln County."</i>
<i>Probably</i>	One strong source plus circumstantial pattern	<i>"She probably knew her grandmother — both were counted in the same Davidson County household in 1880, and the 1885 obituary places them at</i>

Phrase	Use when	Example
		<i>the same funeral."</i>
<i>Likely</i>	Suggestive evidence, no direct corroboration	<i>"The family likely moved west in the autumn of 1872, after the wheat harvest. The next census places them in Missouri; the prior tax record places them in Tennessee."</i>
<i>Appears to have</i>	One source, no corroboration, but no contradiction	<i>"He appears to have learned to write between 1855 and 1860 — his 1855 deed bears a mark, while the 1860 census line for his household carries his signature."</i>
<i>The records suggest</i>	The inference belongs to you, not to any single document	<i>"The records suggest a falling-out between the brothers in 1867 — they appear on separate land patents in two adjoining counties from that year forward, and never again as co-witnesses on each other's documents."</i>

A practical rule

Anything you write in a *hedged* voice can be supported by a footnote explaining the chain of reasoning. Anything you write in the *indicative* voice — *she was afraid, he was proud, they loved each other* — had better come from a letter. And that letter had better be cited.

The hedge sentence is not a cop-out. It is the most honest sentence in the room. It tells the reader exactly what you believe, exactly why, and exactly where the certainty ends.

5. Handling Gaps — The "We Don't Know" Sentence

Sooner or later your sources will go quiet. Henrietta is in the 1860 census in Tennessee and in the 1880 census in Missouri, and the twenty years between are a held breath. That is fine. Write the gap.

Worked example — the gap paragraph:

The records do not say where Henrietta lived between 1865 and 1872. The Lincoln County courthouse, where her marriage was filed, lost most of its records to fire in 1864. The county that next claimed her — Greene County, Missouri — does not appear in her trail until the 1872 tax roll, four hundred miles west of where she had last been counted.³ What we know for certain is this: she arrived in Missouri with two children she had not had in 1860, and a husband whose name appears on no marriage register we have yet located in either state.

That paragraph does three things at once. It admits the gap. It explains why the gap exists (a real fire in a real courthouse). And it names the new facts that bracket the gap, so the reader knows what we do know.

Three rules for the gap paragraph

1. **Name the gap.** Specify the years. "*Between 1865 and 1872.*" Vagueness reads like negligence.
2. **Explain the silence.** Courthouse fire? Migration? A name change at a second marriage? The reader trusts you more when you show your work on why a record is missing, not just that it is.
3. **Bracket the gap.** State what you know on each side of the silence. The gap becomes evidence in its own right.

A flawed written history is better than a perfect unwritten one. Write what you know. Mark what you don't. The next researcher — possibly you, in five years, with better records — will thank you.

6. Fact-Checking Your Own Draft

Before you publish — or before you print and pass around the Thanksgiving table — run your chapter through this six-question audit. It will catch nearly every error a casual reader could catch, and most of the errors a careful one could.

The Granny Six-Question Audit:

1. **Every fact has a footnote.** Read every sentence. If it asserts a fact, there is a superscript and a citation. If it asserts a feeling or an interior state, it is either hedged, or it is sourced to a letter or diary that is cited.
2. **Every date has a place.** "*In 1842*" is incomplete. "*In April 1842 in Lincoln County, Tennessee*" is honest. Dates without places make the chapter sound like a worksheet.
3. **Every name on the first appearance has a year.** "*His brother Elijah (1818-1879)*" on first mention. Drop the year-range after that.
4. **The chapter has a center of gravity.** Can you identify, in one sentence, the single most important day or theme this chapter is about? If not, you wrote a summary, not a chapter. Rewrite the opening.
5. **The hedge language is consistent.** You did not write *probably* in one paragraph and *certainly* about the same uncertain fact in another. Pick a level of confidence and stay there.
6. **A stranger could follow it.** Ask one person who is not related to read the chapter. Ask them where they got lost. Fix that paragraph. Ask again.

GRANNY PRO TIP

Always read your final draft aloud before you publish it. The mouth catches errors the eye misses. Awkward sentences sound awkward. Tax-form paragraphs sound like tax forms. A chapter that reads well aloud will read well silently.

7. Three Structural Skeletons

A family history chapter can take many shapes, but three structures handle 90% of what beginners actually need. Pick the one that fits the ancestor you are writing about this week.

Skeleton A — The Annal (year-by-year)

Best for: short lives, ancestors with thin records, or chronicle-style projects where the goal is completeness rather than narrative arc.

Shape:

- **Headline:** name, dates, place
- **Opening paragraph:** the single most important fact of the life (one sentence)
- **Year-by-year notes:** ~50-150 words per documented year
- **Gaps** stated explicitly
- **Closing paragraph:** what the records collectively suggest about the person

Length: 800-1,500 words. Works well for a Substack post or a sidebar in a longer book.

Use when: you have fewer than 20 documented events across a life, or when chronology *is* the story (a soldier's war years, a migrant's decade in transit).

Skeleton B — The Biographical Sketch (one person)

Best for: ancestors with rich documentation, where you can find a center of gravity and write the chapter around it.

Shape:

- **Opening scene:** the single most interesting documented moment (the day, not the summary)
- **Backstory section:** how the ancestor arrived at that day
- **Forward arc:** what happened after
- **Reflection:** what the life adds up to, in your honest reading
- **Citations** underneath

Length: 1,500-4,000 words. The standard family-history chapter shape. Most published family histories are a sequence of these.

Use when: the ancestor has at least one *moment* (not just a date range) you can document, and you have enough surrounding records to flash backward and forward from it.

Skeleton C — The Family-History Essay (a theme)

Best for: when the ancestor is one of several telling the same story — siblings in the same migration, a generation that all served in the same war, the four daughters who all married within ten miles of home.

Shape:

- **Thesis paragraph:** the theme you are tracing (migration, vocation, faith, a single decision repeated)
- **Three to five characters as evidence:** one section per ancestor, each section a short scene plus the documented facts
- **Synthesis paragraph:** what the pattern adds up to
- **Citations** underneath

Length: 2,000-5,000 words. The literary form; reads more like a *New Yorker* piece than a chronicle.

Use when: the *pattern* is more interesting than any single ancestor in it. The form rewards good prose and a clear thesis.

8. Citation Style — A One-Page Cheat Sheet

The narrative paragraph reads in your voice. The full citation lives underneath. Here is the pattern in twelve seconds.

In-prose superscript example:

On the morning of 14 April 1842, John Smith stood beside Mary Jones in the Lincoln County courthouse and signed his name with a steady hand.¹ The marriage clerk wrote her surname twice in two different spellings — a small clue that nobody in that room was a stranger to a hard week.²

Matching footnote block at the page bottom:

¹ Tennessee, County Marriages, 1790-1950, Lincoln County, marriage record for John Smith and Mary Jones, 14 April 1842; digital image, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org> : accessed 14 May 2026). ² Same source. Surname spelled "Jones" on line 4 and "Joans" on line 6.

Three citation standards to know:

- **Evidence Explained (Mills, 3rd ed.)** — the most-cited genealogical standard. Recommended for printed family histories.
- **NGS Quarterly style** — slightly leaner; common in published journals.
- **Chicago Manual of Style (notes-bibliography)** — fine for trade publication, less precise on archival sources.

You do not need fancy software. Microsoft Word, Google Docs, and Substack all support footnote/endnote numbering natively. Pick one tool, set it up once, never look at the formatting again.

GRANNY PRO TIP

Cite every fact, even the ones you think are obvious. The future researcher reading your chapter does not know what you know. The footnote is not for you — it is for the granddaughter who decides, in 2068, to check your work. Leave her the trail.

9. Writing It Down At All — A Word in Granny's Voice

There is one more move that matters more than scene, hedge language, voice, citation, or structure put together. It is the move most people never make.

Write the chapter. Even if it is not perfect. Especially if it is not perfect.

The flawed written history outlives every cloud subscription, every database password, every tree your grandchildren cannot get into because they do not remember which email you used in 2024. A printed page in a filing cabinet outlives all of it. Three printed pages can change a family for a generation.

The longer you wait to write the chapter, the better you will research it, and the smaller the chance it ever gets written. Researchers who never publish are not protected by their thoroughness. They are erased by it.

Give yourself a deadline. Give the chapter a length you can finish. Write the version you can write *this* week. Print it. Put a copy in a manila envelope and label it with the ancestor's name and dates. Put the envelope somewhere a family member will eventually find.

That is the gift. The research is private. The narrative is the gift.

10. A Short Reading List

Five books and essays your audience can learn from. None of them are about *how* to write family history — they are family history *that is well written*. Read them the way a young carpenter studies cabinetry: not to copy, but to absorb.

- **Annette Gordon-Reed — The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family**** (W. W. Norton, 2008). The gold standard for evidence-driven family narrative. Gordon-Reed takes a single enslaved family across three generations and reconstructs their lives from the sparse documentary record without ever inventing a memory. Her footnotes are a master class. Read for: hedge language, evidentiary humility, the use of context as biography.
- **Alex Haley — Roots: The Saga of an American Family**** (Doubleday, 1976). Imperfect as research, foundational as form. Haley invented the contemporary family-history narrative the way Dickens invented the serialized novel. Read for: scene-driven openings, the use of an ancestor's voice as a structural device, and the costs and limits of "narrative" when the documentary record cannot bear the weight.
- **Helen Macdonald — H Is for Hawk**** (Grove Press, 2014). Not a family history, but the best contemporary model of first-person reflective nonfiction. Macdonald braids her father's death with a Victorian biography of T. H. White and her own apprenticeship to a goshawk. Read for: voice, structure, the way a thesis can be carried in the texture of the prose.
- **Saidiya Hartman — Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments**** (W. W. Norton, 2019). A rigorous, openly speculative reconstruction of young Black women's lives in early-twentieth-century New York. Hartman names her speculation in the prose — the technique she calls "critical fabulation" — and never lets the reader forget where the record ends and her imagination begins. Read for: the most honest possible handling of gaps in the archive.
- **John McPhee — The Patch (essay: "The Patch") in The Patch (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).* McPhee writes about his father in a fishing scene that lasts about twelve hundred words. It is a model of restraint, scene economy, and the way a single concrete detail (the bass, the medical light) can carry the emotional weight of forty years. Read for: the discipline of less*.

A second tier, if you want more: Lauren Markham's *The Far Away Brothers*, Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach* (a novel, but the research notes are publicly available), and any issue of the *NGS Quarterly* from the last three years.

11. Your Assignment This Week

A short, specific exercise. Twenty minutes a day for five days will get you there.

- **Monday — Pick the ancestor.** Just one. The one you most want to write about, not the one you have the most records on.
- **Tuesday — Find the day.** Read every record you have for that ancestor. Pick the single most interesting documented moment. Mark the date.
- **Wednesday — Three-pass exercise.** Transcribe, translate, tell. Write one paragraph using all three voices (hedge, sourced, scene).
- **Thursday — Flash backward and forward.** Add one paragraph of context before and one paragraph after. Footnote every fact.
- **Friday — Read it aloud.** Run the Granny Six-Question Audit. Print one copy. Put it in an envelope.

That is your first chapter. The next chapter will be easier. The third will be easier still. By the tenth, you will not need this workbook.

GRANNY SAYS

"The research is private, dear. The narrative is the gift. Write what you know, mark what you don't, cite every line, and put a copy somewhere a grandchild will eventually find it. A flawed written history is better than a perfect unwritten one — every single time."

Notes

Use this space for personal notes and discoveries.