

"Composing" Your Life Story

Note that I use the word *compose* rather than *write*. There are many options to how you may leave a record of the important events of your life, and your thoughts and feelings about those events. Some of these options require a minimum of writing, and some options that do require writing are relatively easy to accomplish.

Non-writing options

Select, organize, duplicate, and share photographs. But follow some basic principles: 1) use no paperclips, staples, Scotch tape, or bad adhesives. 2) Color prints "die" over time, so save them in black and white. 3) Store the originals in archival binders or polypropylene sleeves or pockets (no vinyl!). 4) Duplicate (either by scanning or photocopy) originals, but store electronic records in a variety of forms (CDs and DVDs are short-lived). 5) Don't write on the backs of photographs. 6) Don't laminate anything! 7) Never touch the front of a photograph.

Select, duplicate, and share mementos. Consider writing a paragraph, or even a page or two, on the significance of the photographs and mementoes you preserve—their "history."

Duplicate and share official documents

Do oral histories.

Easily written records

Compose chronologies: 1) the most important events of your life; 2) a family chronology; 3) your health; 4) your education; 5) places lived; 6) church callings; 7) vehicles owned; 8) family travel; 9) your appearance (weight, height, apparel sizes at different times in your life; 10) a record of what you do in a typical day. And many other topics.

Compose lists: what's in your purse/wallet; your wardrobe; a bathroom cabinet; kitchen "collections"; cosmetics; a tool chest; certain drawers in your home or office; the garage or a storage room; book and DVD collections; genealogical records—the list of options is large. Each list tells a great deal about you.

Do or have done transcriptions of the oral interviews you do: Transcribing is a technical, tedious and time-consuming activity—but immensely satisfying.

Archive letters and other correspondence (what you send, what you receive—especially electronic mail)

Longer written records

Journals/diaries: Consider composing significant extracts from what you write regularly.

A concise history: Write fifty or so pages on significant events and thoughts .

A complete life history (or parts of it): 100+ pages

Personal narratives and other short pieces (one to five or so pages each). This is probably the easiest and best way to compose a life story. Set aside a time (daily, weekly) to write about *one* memorable event, thought, or other experience in your life. Topics could number in the hundreds! The circumstances of your birth; childhood and adolescent memories; illnesses and accidents; important people in your life; homes and areas in which you lived; dress and grooming patterns; memorable world events; religious experiences; military service; school experiences; courtship and marriage; vocations and hobbies/pastimes; food preferences; etc., etc.

Writing Ancestral Histories

Since our generation is one of the first whose members are able and willing to write extensively, ancestral histories are feasible and much appreciated. Various skills are needed: you may have many of these skills, or may hire others to do the work you are unable to do:

Historical research	Writing	Word processing
Editing	Desktop publishing	Printing, distribution
Interviewing (oral history)	Transcription of oral history	

Sources of information:

1. Interviews of living people who have memories of the target ancestor
2. Family records
3. Journals, diaries
4. Official, vital, and personal records and documents
5. Mementos, photographs
6. Letters
7. City, county, regional histories; maps and newspapers; city directories
8. Local history organizations
9. Records of historical societies
10. Schools, businesses, and other record-keeping organizations
11. Military and Church mission records
12. Genealogical records: vital records, cemeteries, censuses, etc.

Composing the History of a Living Relative

1. Record oral memories (some how-to guidelines are available).
2. Take, collect, identify and preserve photographs.
3. Assemble family mementos and official records.
4. Collect and verify vital statistics and Church ordinance records.
5. Organize immediate families: brothers, sisters, and children of the relative whose history you are doing (hope that others will be willing to help).
6. Learn some of the skills you'll need in order to write the history: research, word processing, document processing (including photographs and mementos), interview techniques, transcription options, writing and editing, various methods of organization and preservation.
7. Undertake one or two steps or tasks at a time—what seems most urgent, interesting, or profitable.
8. Begin your own personal history.