

Practical Tips for writing a Family History, a Memoir, or other Long Documents

John Nimmo 11/11/2015

During my working life I must have written thousands of reports and other documents. I used to dictate these to a PA or a dictating machine and never thought I would ever need to type anything or use a computer.

After I retired, and realising I was in danger of getting left behind, I joined SeniorNet in 1998 to learn emailing and word-processing as I wanted to write my life story.

My first book was called **Minding the Times**, a four year project I completed in 2004. This was my first attempt to write about our family. It included 180 pages of A4 text and 94 pages of pictures and exhibits inserted in several separate picture sections through the book.

My audience was our children and our extended family. I wanted to write a series of family memories or Memoir, rather than a detailed family history bogged down with deaths, births, and marriage dates, and other statistical information. But I still wanted my story to be based on sound geological research and data.

When I started I was a complete novice on typing and page layout. I used Microsoft Word - which is what we learned as members of SeniorNet and what I had at home - and I stayed with the MS Word default settings for my text and page layout. Fine tuning these settings would have been beyond my knowledge and capability at the time.

The book contains 274 pages, and the font is Times New Roman size 12.

On a printer's advice, I made special pages for my pictures and did not insert them into the text. This meant we could print them on better quality paper.

Keeping the picture pages separate from the text document made formatting much easier in MS Word, and enabled me to colour print them if I wished to and to insert them by hand into each book at the right position before it was bound. We used simple ring binding.

The cost for using colour pictures was high, with the book costing \$100. I also printed a version with black and white pictures that cost about half that

amount. I called this second book 'The Road to Us' - taken from a book by Bill Bryson about evolution.

My first book was lacking on the family history of my maternal grandfather, Kenneth James Chambers in particular. Serious gaps and major errors came to light which had to be corrected and to get some researching assistance, I joined the Kilbirnie Branch of the NZSG.

Their members were a great help in pointing me in the right direction to find more answers about my McLeod ancestors from Assynt in the Scottish Highland, and to my great surprise as I thought we were 'pure Scottish,' about my Chambers ancestors in Kilkeel in Northern Ireland.

We established family research contacts in Scotland, Ireland and in Canada and their assistance was invaluable.

About two years later I was ready to write a second book to incorporate the latest research findings. I called it **Show not Boast**, derived from the ancient Nimmo family motto 'I Show not Boast'.

I used most of the Minding the Times story and added the new information to it, filling in the main gaps and correcting the errors.

After writing up the new material and integrating it with the original text I did a major tidy up of the whole text document and improved the formatting, using the MS Word default settings.

I used a different approach for my pictures this time. Once I had the chapters in place and stabilised, I inserted the pictures and exhibits which I had already captioned, into the text pages, instead of into a block of picture pages at the end of a chapter as in the first book.

For example, if I was writing a story about our Grandad, I inserted his picture/s right there, so that my readers didn't have to go to the end of the chapter to a picture section to see him.

This approach is much better for your readers, but it creates formatting issues and difficulties in keeping your text and your pictures stable in MS Word. I found it required the insertion of many section breaks and page breaks all through the document to keep the pictures and text stable.

As I learned more in the SeniorNet classes, I began to use a few of the 'bells and whistles' that are built into Word. - Footnotes, and drop-caps are examples. I used footnote references to enable readers to access more information on a particular subject if they wished to.

Examples of this are recommended books or stories to read about the Irish potato famine, the Scottish coalfields and the Scottish Highland clearances.

I put subjects that were interesting in their own right, but which would have interrupted the flow of my story into separate Appendixes.

Production Details for Show not Boast

Produced in MS Word

The font is Calibri Size 12 which I just liked better at the time than Times Roman

Chapter Headings are Calibri 26, bold and I used action headings or headlines where it was appropriate to use them

I showed Chapter titles at the top right on each page in the header

I used Drop caps to start each Chapter most look good, a few look a bit odd.

Pages number 446 in A4 size. I liked A4 size as I wanted to include many pictures and exhibits.

I used justified text which looks tidy but it can lead to a few untidy gaps around picture insertions especially near to page margins, which are hard to get rid of.

Total words, 157,272

Pictures inserted, 251 of various sizes, all captioned

Charts/Exhibits inserted 62

Total Insertions 313

Text pages without insertions contain from 530 words to 630 words per page

I acknowledged stories/Input/text provided by other writers/contributors, and showed it in italics

Getting Your Story Started

This is a key issue for storytellers – Where and how do I start?

The first question to answer is ‘Who is your audience?’ Mine was my family.

Write for your audience.

In both of my books I started from my four grandparents, William and Helen (nee Matheson) Nimmo, and Kenneth and Mary (nee Mitchell) Chambers. I remembered them all well and found it easy to write about them.

I came forward from them through my life and to the present day, and went back from them as far as I could into the lives and times of our ancestors. This concept worked well and I can recommend it.

I was fortunate in that other members of my wider family had researched and published stories about the Nimmos, the Mathesons and the Mitchell families, and I was able to use and build on their work.

I set up working files in my computer for each of the grandparent families and later generation families to hold my pictures and exhibits.

Early on I set up a new working file for the ongoing drafts of the new book.

Some Suggestions for starting on a Club History

If I had been writing a Club history I may have started with the people who championed the club’s formation, who they were and where they worked, and their working and living conditions at that time.

Was it difficult to start the club, were there obstacles that had to be addressed, how did they overcome these and raise funding?

I might have included something about the club house that has been home to the Club for the past (x number) of years, or something interesting from the original Club Minute book.

Or maybe about the first or a notable past President, or one of the Club’s famous members, maybe an All Black or a tennis or cricketing star who began their career there.

Starting with something or somebody or an event you can describe or paint a picture of will help to get you going.

If you only have a few pictures to include, and are not very familiar with handling pictures on a computer, consider keeping them on separate picture pages as it will save you a lot of formatting issues and you can insert the printed picture pages by hand before your book is bound.

Managing Working Drafts

To return to my project, my typing is fairly slow and ponderous so for both books I dictated my first drafts in many small 'bites' on a small tape machine and employed a typist to produce electronic copies which she emailed back. I saved these into my working file on my computer. Today we can dictate directly to a computer word processor (eg Dragon Dictate)

This is the creative process where we just aim to get our thoughts down on paper. We don't try to edit our work much in these first drafts, because editing tends to stifle creativity. We just get our stories down 'warts and all.' Sometimes this is called dumping.

It pays to develop good writing habits and establish a regular daily writing routine to work on your draft document.

Move stuff around, add and delete, improve the grammar and readability and keep your formatting consistent and tidy.

Regular Back-ups are Essential

It is good practise to develop a regular backup process to copy our latest working document file and any new picture/exhibit files to an external drive either on the cloud or to one you can keep somewhere off-site.

Readability is important for our readers.

There are many ways to test our work for readability and it's a good idea to do this early so that we don't have to make as many changes and corrections later on.

There is some helpful material on our website as below.

Go to: <http://www.seniornetwgtn.blogspot.com>

Under the heading Workshops in the left column, go down to Writing / My Writing Pot where there are many helpful hints, tips, tests, and readability formulas.

Also see Kevin Norquay's 2013 presentation 'Write it Righter.'

The New Zealand Style Book for NZ writers, editors, journalists and students, published by GP Publications Ltd, is a very useful reference. You can buy this from Whitcoulls for about \$29.95.

Test some pages of your work against the various readability measures, stick to the basic rules and avoid long rambling sentences.

Pictures and Exhibits.

An early job for me was to get the pictures I wanted to use on to my computer. Many of my pictures were 35 mil colour slides and scanning them with my scanner would have been very slow and messy.

Someone referred me to Wairarapa Camera Services in Queen St Masterton.

They have a large modern scanner and offered a better price for scanning slides than any of the City stores.

They did an excellent job and couriered my 300 odd slides back all on a CD on a two day turn-round.

I saved the CD to my computer where I had set up separate files to hold the pictures and exhibits for each line of our family, and for our children growing up.

As well as the slides, I also used many old family pictures in the book which I scanned and saved. Where necessary I enhanced and improved these and other old exhibits using MS Picture It, an old program, but I found it easy to use and it did a good job. Today I'd probably use Faststone Viewer for this work.

A word about captioning. This is very important. Think of future generations, the more descriptive they are the better, and they must not date. 'Mary at the Hastings Show' would be inadequate. Use something more descriptive like Mary Anderson at the Hastings A&P Show, circa 1944

Pulling it all together

Once I had my draft text into reasonable shape, I inserted the pictures and exhibits into the text where I wanted them.

I had to use many page and section breaks to keep them stable in the text which is a time consuming and frustrating job in MS Word especially in a long document.

I then did a final check on the layout of my document. I tried to keep plenty of 'white on a page' and make it attractive and readable.

Then as a separate last exercise I went back to the beginning and edited my draft carefully, checking spelling and grammar, my use of capitals, names, sentences, references and the sequencing of events, all the time checking that the pictures had remained stable.

Indexing and Table of Contents

I used the built in features in MS Word for this and found both worked well.

Formal Editing

We need outside help here as we can't do a final edit of our own work because we are so familiar with it that we are inclined to miss things and see things that aren't there.

I asked Kevin Norquay, our son-in-law and a newspaper editor, to do this job for us. He made many corrections and improvements and we finally had a pdf document ready for the printer.

Cover Design

My cover design was done by Chris Jones of Graphetti Design, our other son-in-law. He tried to depict people young and old in the background on the front and back covers and he captured this well.

We need to get an ISBN Number for a book like this and can apply for it on-line.

Show not Boast includes:

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Preface and Introduction

My story with pictures and exhibits

Timelines for each old family

Simple family trees for each main Grandparent branch

Details of Extended Family of younger generations

Ten Appendices on various Interesting topics/stories that would interrupt the flow of my story if included in it. An example is The Decline of The New Zealand Stock and Station Industry.

An Index which is based on people rather than places or times, because a family story is about the people.

Printing

Production in full colour was done by Printstop Ltd in Grenada Village. The cost was \$50 for the hard cover version and \$32 for the soft cover. This was a very competitive price and lower than any other quote.

Their initial quote was for 50 copies and I did 20 hard cover and 30 soft cover. Since then I've had several more small runs done at the same cost per copy.

Some learnings with the benefit of Hindsight

Microsoft Word is not designed for amateur production of long complex documents like this and I had to learn this the hard way.

Inserting pictures and exhibits and keeping them stable in the text requires the insertion of many section breaks and a good deal of 'fiddling.' It is very frustrating but with patience it can be done.

Next time – if there is to be one which I doubt – I would use a publishing programme and I may also use a different font than Calibri.

Conclusion

I am very pleased that I did this project. Our kids and grandchildren and my brothers and sisters and their families all have their own copy and love it.

As they say,

'We now know who we are and where we've come from.'

It was a big job, but well worth the effort.

Thanks