

Creating an Ancestor Sketch

Thomas MacEntee, of Genealogy Bargains

<https://genealogybargains.com>

hidefgen@gmail.com

Most genealogists never complete that family history book based on their research. Consider a different approach: producing short, 3-5 page “sketches” about an ancestor. Decide which elements to include: cover, timeline, facts, family stories, photos, source citations, and more. Once a few of these sketches are done, compile them into one comprehensive book.

Basic Elements of an Ancestor Sketch

To summarize genealogical research for an ancestor, consider including the following elements:

- **Cover or title page:** List the name of the ancestor, a descriptive subtitle with birth and death dates, and, if possible, a photo.
- **Brief life summary:** Create a narrative based on the facts uncovered about the ancestor. Superior writing skills are not required; numerous online tools can generate a summary based on facts.
- **Timeline of important life events:** Arrange facts in chronological order. Many genealogy platforms, such as Ancestry, offer this feature. Utilize online tools to create a timeline from an uploaded list of facts.
- **Photos:** Include photos of the ancestor, if available, with descriptive captions. If photos are unavailable, use images of significant places related to the ancestor’s life.

Additional Elements of an Ancestor Sketch

- **Family Tree:** A family tree chart provides a visual understanding of the author’s relationship with the ancestor. Choose a simple 3-generation chart for clarity and use a larger chart for the final book compilation.
- **Family Stories:** Include family stories but verify their accuracy as with any other genealogical element. Document the story with sources, narrative text, and details about the people and places involved.
- **Social History:** Add context about the ancestor’s life, such as their hometown, occupation, military service, and religious affiliation, to enrich the narrative.
- **Access Points:** For both print and digital versions, include links to the ancestor sketch, both online and in PDF or other file format.

Ancestor Sketch Formats

- **Order of elements:** The order is flexible, but a typical sequence includes a cover page, brief summary, photos, timeline, and credits. Adjust as necessary to enhance readability and engagement.
- **Print:** Use document creation platforms like Google Docs or Microsoft Word, then save as a PDF. Print copies at a local printer, public library, or home.
- **Digital:** Share sketches on digital platforms. Consider building a website using platforms like Wix or Weebly or circulating the PDF via email.

Importing Genealogy Research Information

Genealogists use various methods and software to store research. These platforms may not always facilitate easy data access for creating sketches.

- **Review export options:** Explore export options for parts of an ancestor's profile. Platforms like MyHeritage and software like Legacy Family Tree offer book creation features.
- **Copy and paste:** Copy generated timelines or life stories from genealogy platforms into document creation tools. Some formatting adjustments may be needed.
- **Leverage the power of AI:** Utilize free AI programs, such as ChatGPT, to generate content based on provided facts.

Source Citations, Copyrighted Material, and Credits

- **Source citations:** Decide if including source citations is necessary. For casual readers, they can be distracting. Consider using endnotes instead of footnotes.
- **Copyrighted material:** Avoid using copyrighted images or text without permission. Even for personal use, unauthorized content can lead to infringement issues if shared publicly.
- **Credits:** Acknowledge assistance from others and include a copyright statement, e.g., "© [YEAR], copyright [AUTHOR NAME]. All rights reserved."

Documenting Family Stories

Family stories often inspire genealogical research. Ensure these tales are documented for future generations.

- **Getting started.** Start with a bullet list of recalled stories. Keep it concise.
- **Use a Family Story Template.** Document stories with details such as the title, source, narrative text, people, and locations involved.
 - **Title:** Enter the title of the family story.

- **Source:** Enter the author, title, who told the story or if it is personal knowledge, how the story was delivered (verbally, recording, email, etc.) and on what date and what location.
- **Text:** Enter the text of the family story.
- **People:** Enter names of people as they appear in the text; enter full name as well as nickname and add relationship information explaining how each person is related to each other.
- **Locations:** Enter location names as they appear in the text; enter full location name and add contextual information explaining how the location fits into the story.

Tips, Tricks, and Tools

Use these tips, tricks, and tools to save time when creating an ancestor sketch and to add a personal style to the finished product.

- **Create a template:** Develop a consistent template for all sketches to streamline future compilations.
- **Use graphic and publishing platforms and software:** Utilize platforms like Canva or Adobe InDesign for enhanced layouts and image integration.
- **Use artificial intelligence:** AI tools like ChatGPT can generate graphics, timelines, and social history content, and rewrite text in various styles.
 - Have AI generate graphics to use for a title page. Use the prompt “Create image of life in New York City in 1700” for a specific location and time period.
 - Use the prompt “Create timeline” and then paste in a list of facts.
 - Generate social history content using a prompt like “Tell me about life in New York City in 1920” or “Social history for San Antonio, Texas in the 1890s.”
 - Have AI rewrite the content in a specific style by using the prompt “Rewrite” then pasting the text then adding “style casual” or “style engaging.”
- **Self-publish in print and digital formats:** Leverage self-publishing platforms like Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing or Lulu.com to produce the ancestor sketches in print, PDF, and digital formats.

Resources

- **Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing**
<https://kdp.amazon.com/>
- **ChatGPT**
<https://chat.openai.com/>
- **CHEAT SHEET – Documenting Family Stories in Writing**
<https://genealogybargains.com/cs-familystoryFREE>
- **Copyright Services: Copyright Term and the Public Domain**
<https://guides.library.cornell.edu/copyright/publicdomain>
- **FORM Family Story – Microsoft Word**
<https://genealogybargains.com/form-familystory-doc>
- **FORM Family Story Sample - Death of Anna Austin**
<https://genealogybargains.com/form-familystory-sample>
- ***How to Create a Family Tree Chart or Book on MyHeritage***
<https://education.myheritage.com/article/how-to-create-a-family-tree-chart-or-book-on-myheritage/>
- **Weebly**
<https://www.weebly.com>
- **Wix**
<https://www.wix.com>