

## How to Write like a Historian.....Without Being One. Part 2

By Laura Suchan

1. Historians use conceptual frameworks to connect and organize knowledge to make it more meaningful and to help people make sense of history. Fitting information into a framework makes it more usable. Examples of frameworks may include;
  - a. Themes
  - b. Timelines
  - c. Questions
  - d. Maps
  - e. Chronological narrative<sup>1</sup>

Writing with themes is usually the most popular choice to arrange information. Think about what themes and sub themes might be relevant to your story. Examples of themes may include migration, food, myths/stories, celebrations, war, recreation, politics, community and business. Ask yourself questions such as does your family have stories about a particular historical event or did anyone participate in a migration? Were any family members involved in a particular organization? Did anyone play sports? Questions such as these will help you recognize and organize the themes in your history.

Below is an example of how I used my grandfather's story, as a displaced person arriving in Canada post World War II, in a immigration history paper. I wove the story of my grandfather and his experiences into the larger picture of the immigration of displaced persons to Canada

*“Canada’s post war immigration policy was designed to encouraged the development of the raw material resources industry, mainly forestry and mining in Northern Ontario and Quebec. Since (my grandfather) did not have any relatives in Canada he chose to enter the country using the second route and reported for employment in a logging camp in La Tuque, Quebec. From discussions with many Displaced Persons , this appears as a typical scenario for Ukrainian immigrants who did not benefit from the support of*

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<sup>1</sup> (<http://www.studentsfriend.com/onhist/frame.html>), (accessed March 7, 2007)

*relatives already settled in Canada. Immigrants faced a period of employment (usually one year) in the field in which they were brought to Canada. During this time they were expected to pay the Canadian government for their passage and if fortunate, save enough money to provide passage for their families from Germany.*

Stefan and his family, like many other Ukrainians, chose immigration rather than face repatriation to the homeland which was now under Soviet rule. Post war Germany held very few prospects for the thousands of Ukrainians"

My grandfather, an average immigrant, became an excellent illustration of Canada's post war immigration policy at work. In order to write about my grandfather's story in any detail I had to research Canada's role in accepting these immigrants. My relative's journey was played out against the larger picture of historical events taking place nationally in Canada and even internationally in post war Germany.

2. Keep in mind your subjects and their experiences were typical, and also part, of collective behaviour. For example when researching my grandfather's experience, I asked the question of how common or uncommon was his behaviour? Were other immigrants following the same path as my grandfather? What external forces were at work to influence his decision? This is what is meant by inserting the experiences into historical context. If you are lacking for information on your relative it is acceptable to use historical descriptions of what was typical behaviour for the time to fill in the blanks of your family history.
3. Define and identify any unfamiliar terminology, or dated names for things. For example do you know to what a Mae West refers? The first time I heard this term I knew of the actress but not of its reference to the yellow life preservers of the Allied soldiers during WWII. When I use this example in high school presentations I am lucky if one student has ever heard of Mae West. Including a brief description will ensure the term remains recognized.
4. Avoid what Sturdevant calls the "Titanic Syndrome".<sup>2</sup> This refers to the insertion of historical events that are irrelevant to a story. Sturdevant noticed her students

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<sup>2</sup> Sturdevant, pg 206

tended to throw in bits of historical knowledge into their genealogical summaries whether the event had anything to do with the assignment or not. The Titanic appeared to be a favourite topic. References such as my grandmother was born five years before the Titanic sank do not contribute much to the story. When using social history for historical context, keep it relevant to the story.

Writing with these six simple guidelines in mind will enrich your personal history stories and ensure your writing is more than just names and dates. One final comment, when you are finished with your family history, consider donating a copy to the applicable archives, museum or genealogy society. They will usually welcome well written, researched and relevant material. Practice these guidelines and you too will be writing like a historian in no time.