

Social and Historical Data Use

Family Tree University "Writing Your Family Memoir: Create a Captivating Record of Your Family's Story" 2010

Using historical or social data can make your story more interesting and appealing to others. For example the event is "Grandpa enlists in the army in 1942," the historical theme might be "What was life like for a common foot soldier during World War II?" Though you may give a brief overview of the causes and effects of World War II, remember that you are not writing a general history about World War II. Your goal is to write about your grandfather's experience and to show how common or uncommon his experience was. You do this by relating the average experiences of people like your grandfather. This is what is meant by putting your "characters" into a broader historical context.

If you are writing a personal memoir that deals with the recent past, you may have trouble identifying "historical" themes. In that case, think in terms of "human nature" themes that would be historically universal. Say you are writing your memoir about your role as a caregiver to a disabled elderly parent. What emotional themes would be universal to anyone in that situation, no matter whether the story occurred in 2004 or 1804? The caregiver would likely experience, to a greater or lesser degree, grief, loss, resentment, frustration and satisfaction, to name a few. These are all "human nature" themes that anyone could relate to, and they each have a universal, "historic" quality to them. Similarly, your themes could revolve around specific caregiving duties or major decisions, such as whether to move your elderly parent into a nursing home.

Here are some other examples of personal events coupled with their historical themes:

Date: 3 June 1907.

Event: Eleanor arrives alone at Ellis Island.

Historical Theme: What was it like for a woman to go through processing at Ellis Island on her own?

Date: 25 Apr 1920.

Event: Uncle Harry moves to Florida and buys land.

Historical Theme: What drew people to Florida in the 1920s?

Date: Sep 1970.

Event: I started high school.

Historical Theme: What was it like to be a teenager in the 1970s during the sexual revolution and race riots?

Date: 18 Sep 1892.

Event: Great-grandpa and grandma married.

Historical Theme: What were courtships and marital relationships like during this time period?

Date: 17 Oct 1756.

Event: Fifth great-grandma gave birth to her first child.

Historical Theme: What was it like to give birth in the 1750s?

These historical themes will serve as the basis for the historical/social research you will need to do.

Doing Research

Make a trip to your local library and introduce yourself to the reference librarian; if you're writing family history and there's a genealogy section, introduce yourself to the genealogical librarian, too. He or she can be a valuable partner in this project. With the librarians' help, familiarize yourself with the research tools and materials your library has available. These may include copies of newspapers and magazines on microfilm or other media, historical reference books (local and national), social histories, and general reference books.

Select at least one historical theme that will be of key importance in your book. This might be the immigration of the main character, a 1920s wedding, the decline of the family business during the Depression, your father's military experience, or your own military experience. Once you've settled on a historical theme, ask the librarian to help you find a social history about that theme. Social histories tell about ordinary people and their daily lives.

For example, let's say you are writing about your mother who was a housewife during the 1950s. Look for social histories that cover what women's lives were like in the 1950s. The librarian may show you works such as Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (Basic Books, 1992), Brett Harvey's *The Fifties: A Woman's Oral History* (HarperPerennial, 1993), and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (Dell Publishing, 1963, 1974). Or say you are writing about your grandfather who farmed in the Midwest but also taught school during the winter months. To learn more about this topic, the librarian may show you a book such as Wayne E. Fuller's *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West* (University of Chicago Press, 1982).

Putting people into historical perspective does not mean throwing in a famous national event just because it happened during the same time that your story took place. For example, suppose that you were born in 1953, the year that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed for selling atomic secrets to the Soviet government. Unless you were born because the Rosenbergs were executed, or your parents were protesting the execution (or someone in your family was also selling atomic secrets to the Soviet government!), this historical event has no relevance to your story, regardless of how prominent the headlines were.

On the other hand, if you remember what you were doing and what you were feeling when you heard the news that John F. Kennedy had been assassinated, or that the Challenger had exploded, or that the World Trade Center buildings had collapsed on 9/11, and that event is significant to the theme of your story, then it is relevant to include it.

As another example, the Depression of the 1930s is a major historical event, which affected millions of people. We can read in the national newspapers how it affected the nation, but how did it affect ordinary people like you, your parents, or your grandparents? Here's an excerpt from an unpublished family memoir by Sharon DeBartolo Carmack:

"There wasn't much money when we were kids," said Mary, who was born in 1933. "I wanted to go to some kid's birthday party, but my aunt had forgotten about it, so I didn't have a gift to bring. Aunt Janey gave me a bunch of bananas to take as a gift. She said, 'If you want to go, that's what you're taking.' Well, I wanted to go. I wanted to eat cake and ice cream. I didn't think it was so bad when I first took them over, but then all the kids laughed at me because I gave Carmen—that was the girl's name—a bunch of bananas. All the other kids gave her hankies and stuff like that. I was so embarrassed. But we were still feeling the effects of the Depression."

So, along with gathering family stories, you'll want to research what life was like in general during the time period you're writing about. In sum, if you include a famous national event, tell the reader why it is important enough to mention it, and research the impact it had on the lives of ordinary people, such as the "characters" in your book.