It Takes a Human:
Genealogists and Writing

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Genealogists cannot uncritically rely on software to produce clear, accurate, and coherent reports. To meet the standards one must write, rewrite, edit, and proofread.

I.   **It Takes a Human to PREPARE.**
   A.   **Audience**
   B.   **Purpose**
   C.   **Subject**: Who, What, Where, When, How and Why
   D.   **Outline**—The Architect and the Blueprint
      1.   Introduction
         a)   Set the context.
         b)   Explain why the topic is important.
         c)   State the premise.
      2.   Body
         a)   Build the points.
         b)   Develop the ideas and arguments.
         c)   Support your main claim.
      3.   Conclusion
         a)   Restate the main ideas and arguments.
         b)   Restate the premise.

II.   **It Takes a Human to WRITE.**
   A.   **Narrative—The Contractor**
      1.   Laying the foundation
         a)   Tell a story.
         b)   Answer the "whys" and the "hows".
      2.   Let it flow.
         a)   Write naturally.
         b)   Keep it simple.
         c)   Be clear.
         d)   Keep facts and opinions separate.
         e)   Attach footnotes to each fact.
      3.   Organize from general to specific.
   B.   **PROOFREAD**

III.   It Takes a Human to REVISE and REWRITE.
   A.   **Composition—Framing, walls, floors, doors, windows**
      1.   Manuscript
         a)   Reorder.
         b)   Cut.
         c)   Paste.
         d)   Refocus.
      2.   Paragraphs
         a)   Topic or lead sentence
         b)   Organized and Coherent Composition: Does the writing flow?
         c)   Do the facts support the conclusions?
      3.   Sentences
         a)   No fragments
         b)   Grammar: verb tense
         c)   Use of Pronouns
         d)   Punctuation
         e)   Active, strong voice
         f)   Avoid clichés and colloquialisms
      4.   Words
         a)   Misused
         b)   Misspelled
         c)   No contractions
         d)   Abbreviations, use very sparingly
   B.   **PROOFREAD**

IV.   It Takes a Human to EDIT.
   A.   **Standards—Building codes**
      1.   Consistency
      2.   *Concise*
      3.   *BCG Standards Manual*
      4.   Citation formats (Mills, *Evidence*)
      5.   Numbering systems (Curran, *Numbering Your Genealogy*)
   B.   **Tools of editing**
      1.   Dictionary
      2.   *Chicago Manual of Style*
      3.   Style Sheet
         a)   Dates: Day-Month-Year; no apostrophe for decades or centuries (1920s, 1860s)
         b)   Places: do not abbreviate; use the proper geographical designation for the time period
      4.   Checklist
         a)   Active voice
         b)   Clarity
         c)   Separating theory and analysis
         d)   Spell Check – beware; Typographical Errors

C. **PROOFREAD**

V. **It Takes a Human to PROOFREAD.**
   A. **Put it aside.**
   B. **Find a persnickety outside party.**

VI. **It Takes a Human**
   A. **Humans are smarter than a computer.**
   B. **Computer programs are indispensable tools.**

Internet Resources:

BCG Website

Skillbuilding, http://www.bcgcertification.org/skillbuilders/index.html

> Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "**Good Genealogical Writing**." *OnBoard* 4 (May 1998): 16. http://www.bcgcertification.org/skillbuilders/skbld985.html

> Freilich, Kay Haviland. "**Polishing Our Everyday Writing**." *OnBoard* 4 (September 1998): 24.
> http://www.bcgcertification.org/skillbuilders/skbld989pf.html

References:

The BCG Genealogical Standards Manual. Washington, DC: Board for Certification of Genealogists, 2000.
   Compilation Standards
   #35—The writing is clear. Grammar, spelling, usage, and punctuation follow the rules of standard English; organization is logical and comprehensible; and the writing style is straightforward, precise, and reasonably free from unintelligible abbreviations, undefined jargon, malapropisms, casual chitchat, and typographical errors.
   #36—Sources for all genealogical and biographical fact statements are cited in *The Chicago Manual of Style*'s reference note" format in footnotes or endnotes.
   Standards for Writers
   #67—The character of the writing meets general standards that apply throughout the genealogical field—accuracy, clarity, coherence, and full citation of sources.
   Lineage, Pedigree, and Genealogy Compilations
   #52—The compilation uses a clear, comprehensible format that is generally accepted in the field and is *consistently* applied.

Barnes, Donald R. and Richard S. Lackey. ***Write it Right: A Manual for Writing Family Histories and Genealogies***, 1ˢᵗ edition. Rockville, MD: Lyons Press, 1983. This step-by-step guide leads reader from fear of writing to a completed written piece. Contains great advice. Some specifics and details in the text are dated.

Canby, Henry Seidel and John Baker Opdycke. **The Elements of Composition**. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927. There are few changes overtime for fundamental rules about words, sentences, paragraphs, grammar, and composition. Example of a discarded textbook that one might purchase at a library book sale.

The Chicago Manual of Style: The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors, and Publishers, 16th edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010. The 16th edition is available in hard copy and as a subscription website. **Must have.**

Curran, Joan Ferris, Crane and Wray. **Numbering Your Genealogy: Basic Systems Complex Families and International Kin,** Special Publication No. 97 (Revised edition of Special Publication No. 64). Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2008. Genealogical writers must become familiar with numbering systems for organizing and presenting family information. **Must have.**

Hatcher, Patricia Law. **Producing a Quality Family History**. Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1996. Although the focus is on publishing a family-history book, contains excellent directions, suggestions, and advice for any type of genealogical writing. Has an extensive bibliography that is useful for identifying additional writing resources.

LeClerc, Michael J. and Henry B. Hoff, editors. **Genealogical Writing in the 21st Century: A Guide to Register Style and More**, 2nd edition. Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2006.

Millls, Elizabeth Shown. **Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace**, 2nd edition. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2009. **Must have. Must use.**

Mills, Elisabeth Shown, editor. **Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians**. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2001. **Must have.**

Strunk, William Jr. and E. B. White. **The Elements of Style: With Revisions, an Introduction and a Chapter on Writing**. 3rd Edition. Needham Heights, MS: Allyn and Bacon, 1979.

Ross-Larson, Bruce. **Edit Yourself: A Manual for Everyone Who Works with Words**. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996. A concise book that is a very useful guide for identifying common problems in writing.

Zinsser, William. **On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction**. 6th edition. New York: HarperResource Quill, 2001.