

# Navigating Sensitive Topics: How to Write about Difficult Chapters of the Family History

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## WHY SENSITIVE TOPICS MATTER (& why only telling happy stories doesn't work)

- Difficult chapters help us honor truth while acknowledging the full dimensionality of our ancestors' lives.
- Confronting truth promotes healing.
- There are times you shouldn't—or might not want to—share.
  - To avoid harming living people
  - Not confident of the details or sources
  - To empower another person to tell their story themselves

## STRATEGIES FOR WRITING ABOUT DIFFICULT CHAPTERS

- Create authentic connections and accurately promote understanding.
- Do your research and self-analysis.
  - Your motives, research, emotional readiness
  - Legalities in your location and impacted family members' locations
  - Family's agreements/permissions
- Practice sound research and documentation strategies to address conflicts.
  - Gaps in research
  - Multiple family members with conflicting perspectives or memories

## TELLING LIVING PEOPLE'S STORIES

- We'll discuss the ethics of writing about living people and the importance of documenting agreements and permissions.
  - When writing stories on the behalf of others
  - When asking others for permission to include them in your stories
    - Practical strategies for approaching the subject

- Discussion points for conversations about going public with sensitive topics

## CHOOSING TONE AND LANGUAGE

- We will discuss how to avoid quagmires and maintain accuracy by being intentional about terminology.

## WRITING ABOUT TRAUMATIC EVENTS

- We'll examine how principles of trauma-informed writing can help family historians.
  - Transparency and connecting with readers
  - Working with victims of trauma to tell their stories
  - Self-care

## ETHICAL DILEMMAS

- We'll cover some typical ethical dilemmas family historians face in navigating sensitive topics.
  - Share or keep secret: How to decide
  - Should I change my story for others?
  - When is "too soon" to tell a story?
  - Handling disputes
  - Making revisions while maintaining integrity

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

*Note: These articles include resources from both a family history and a memoir perspective.*

Tara Bates-Duford Ph.D., "Harmful Family Lies, Secrets, and Legacies," *Psych Central*,  
<https://psychcentral.com/blog/relationship-corner/2019/01/harmful-family-lies-secrets-and-legacies>.

Kerry Cohen, "Telling Secrets in Memoir," *Gotham Writers*,  
<https://www.writingclasses.com/toolbox/articles/telling-secrets-in-memoir>.

Amanda Edgar, "Why Truth Is More Important than Facts in Your Memoir Writing," *Page and Podium*, <https://pageandpodium.com/blog/why-truth-is-more-important-than-facts-in-your-memoir-writing/>.

Annette Gendler, "How to Handle Blemishes When Writing Family Stories," *Family Tree Magazine*, <https://familytreemagazine.com/storytelling/writing/uncomfortable-details-family-stories/>

Suzanne Handler, MD, "5 Reasons Why Keeping Family Secrets Could be Harmful," *Psych Central*, <https://psychcentral.com/blog/5-reasons-why-keeping-family-secrets-could-be-harmful#1>.

Sharon Harrigan, "How to and (Especially) How Not to Write About Family." *Jane Friedman*, <https://janefriedman.com/write-about-family-memoir/>.

Laura Hedgecock. *Memories of Me: A Complete Guide to Telling and Sharing the Stories of Your Life*. Cedar Fort, 2014. <https://Amazon.com/dp/1462114539>.

———. "Connotative Words: Are You as Neutral as You Think?" <https://treasurechestofmemories.com/neutral-as-you-think-connotative-words/>.

———. "How to Write Personal Stories: Perspectives from Memoir and Family History," <https://treasurechestofmemories.com/perspectives-from-memoir-and-family-history/>.

———. "Why It's a Mistake to Only Tell Happy Stories," <https://treasurechestofmemories.com/mistake-to-only-tell-happy-stories/>.

———. "Writing the Difficult Chapters of Your Story: An Overview," <https://treasurechestofmemories.com/writing-difficult-chapters-of-your-story/>.

Sherick Hughes, "Preparing to Share and Receive Sensitive Family History," *Christine Sleeter*, <https://www.christinesleeter.org/sensitive-family-history>.

Sally Kohn, Ted Talk (video) "Let's Try Emotional Correctness," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCJTV5KaJJc>.

Devon Lee (with Laura Hedgecock), “Don’t Only Tell Happy Family Stories - AVOID This Writing Mistake (video),” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIMLX4H6Ius>.

Rebecca McClanahan, “Family History Meets Memoir,”  
[https://www.rebeccamcclanahanwriter.com/pdf/essay\\_family%20history.pdf](https://www.rebeccamcclanahanwriter.com/pdf/essay_family%20history.pdf).

Naseem S Miller, “Trauma-Informed Journalism: What It Is and Why It’s Important + Tips.” *The Journalist’s Resource (blog)*,  
<https://journalistsresource.org/home/trauma-informed-journalism-explainer/>.

Ronit Plank, “How to Approach Friends and Family About Your Memoir,” *Writer’s Digest*,  
<https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-nonfiction/how-to-approach-friends-and-family-about-your-memoir>.

Roach, Marion. “How to Distance Yourself When Writing Memoir.”  
<https://marionroach.com/2013/11/how-to-get-some-distance-from-yourself-when-writing-memoir/>.

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