

# Write As You Go: A Methodology for Writing Efficient Research Reports

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<https://genealogycertification.wordpress.com>

<https://appliedgen.institute> (Write As You Go! will be a Fall offering)

Do you have a genealogical brick wall? Do you wish to write articles for your society? Would you like to be more confident in your genealogical work? Or, perhaps you are considering applying for certification. You are at the right place!

Recording your genealogical findings as you research has many advantages to you and your family members. Recording the years of work that you have done on your family is rewarding and can also help solve problems. Why write as you go? Each person has their own reason but here are some that resonate with me.

- I may think I have looked everywhere, but writing up my findings points out gaps in my research. A classic example is while writing my Case Study for my Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG) portfolio, I discovered that I had not accounted for a 10-year gap in my person of interest's life—a critical 10 years. Where was he?
- It forces me to be a “professional” skeptic. I slow down to question new information I have discovered. We all know we need to be careful of accepting as truth online trees, but what about Gramma's Bible, or information on a census? Each source and the information it contains must make us pause to determine if we should accept the evidence it provides. We even may have to justify its use in writing.
- I like having all the information about one problem in one place. In an early report I wrote, I started and stopped working on my person of interest at least five times over a two-year period. I could still easily pick up the report, skim it, know exactly where I left off and restart. Eventually the problem was solved with the help of an online tree (that was partially wrong) and collaboration with the author!
- “Write as you go” combines my research log, research plan and the research notes into a single document. I no longer feel guilty for not keeping a research log! Nor is there any double entry.
- It gives me confidence in my work. I am following the Genealogical Proof Standard.<sup>1</sup>
- But best of all? I find that my efficiency of writing has increased, while improving accuracy.

Write As You Go! is easy in concept.

- State your research question
- Record the known information
- Master the “evidence block”, and don't leave the evidence block until it is complete,
- Analyze and correlate
- Come to a conclusion

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<sup>1</sup> Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards* (Nashville : Ancestry.com, 2019) 1-2.

To be successful, it takes practice and discipline. We are so used to seeing how fast we can find a piece of evidence and then moving on that we often do not complete the evidence block. Habits are hard to break. At first you might find yourself using the principles of Write As You Go! about 45% of the time invested in a report, but as you practice and discipline yourself you will gain confidence in the system and perhaps apply “write as you go” principles 85% of the time or more.

But before we start with our person searches, we need to understand the context first.

## Context

I have been thinking a lot about “context” ever since I listened to Elizabeth Shown Mills presentation at National Genealogical Society 2019 conference on “Context: A Powerful Tool for Problem Solving.” Context is topical research, where we learn about the environment our ancestors lived in. It is the literature search for genealogists...an approach where we look first

Elizabeth Shown Mills extols us to address context, in its broadest definition, early in the research process. In my experience, contextual research is critical at the beginning but is continuous throughout the investigative process.

### “Context Principles

1. The records we use often do not mean what their words seem to say.
2. The actions our ancestors took often do not mean what we think they mean.
3. Context is always the lens through which we must interpret our information
4. Records that are put into context have a lot more to say than the simple words we copy from them.”<sup>2</sup>

## Genealogical Proof Standard

GPS stated differently, for the purposes of “write as you go” and broad context research:

- Have I created and implemented a Context research Plan?  
What obvious context pieces am I missing?
- Do I have complete citations of my context resources?
- Is the information consistent or inconsistent across resources.
- If inconsistencies are identified, can they be rationalized?
- Am I writing as I go or just “grazing”?

## Hypothesizing

I have become a fan of hypothesizing. At a point where I THINK I know the answer, I might hypothesize the answer and then try to prove it wrong! Where I have multiple answers (for example, five men with the name John Smith), I hypothesize as to the answer, research that one person and determine if that person could be the correct “John Smith.” I do this exercise with each of the candidates and then determine the most likely candidate.

## Outline

### A Possible Template Outline

1. Research question is your title
2. Date, your name, any revision dates
3. Record known information
4. Record results of Context search
5. Record new research
6. Correlate, & identify conflicts

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<sup>2</sup> Mills, Elizabeth Shown. “Context: A Powerful Tool for Problem Solving,” Now also on Legacy FamilyTree Webinars. Principles are used with her permission.

7. Write your conclusion (when you have one)
8. Research plan or future searches (optional)
9. Negative searches
10. Attachments (optional)

### The "Evidence Block"

Foundational to the generation of a "Write As You Go!" research report is the evidence block-- the source and evidence found that supports the research question. For each entry, whether it is a source providing context, known information or newly found evidence, the entries look the same: 1. cite your source; 2. include a snip, if appropriate; 3. transcribe an extract (probably); and 4. analyze the results. When I have many evidence blocks and they have some similarity, I also put a brief title at the top.

Figure 1  
Example of an Evidence Block

1880 US census: Gertrude Eiler  
**1880 US census, Stephenson County, Illinois, population schedule, Kent Township, ED 178 p. 20, household 174, dwelling 178, Gertrude Oyler; NARA T9, roll 252.**

Occupation	Relationship	Age	Name
Keeping House	Wife	65	Gertrude Oyler
	wife	20	Bertie Kottman
Farmer	son	30	Arthur
	son	2/12	Baby

Oyler, Gertude, 65, married, keeping house  
 Kottman, Bertie, age 20, wife, married  
 ----, Arthur, age 30, married farmer  
 ----, baby, age 2/12, son  
 Gertrude and Bertie were born in Hesse; Arthur in Prussia and the baby in Illinois.

*Analysis: Gertrude is living without FCE with her daughter, Elizabeth "Bertie" (also went by Bertha) who is now married to Adolph Kottman, enumerated and indexed as Arthur Rottman. They have a newborn, not yet named in the household. Arthur is farming. Because this is in Kent Township, it is assumed that Arthur is farming the land of the Eiler family.*

I differentiate the various components by type style. The citation is in bold, the snip is followed by the indented extract and finally the analysis is in italics. What is necessary is that it is obvious where one Evidence Block stops and the next begins. Another technique is using a horizontal line to separate the blocks.

### Resources for Research Reports

There are not many resources that focus on the process of writing as you go. Most focus on the product, or outcome.

There isn't much magic about this, but like most skills---practice, practice, practice.

Here are some resources that may help. URLs current as of 7 April 2021:

Bishop, Shelley K. blog, *Family Tree Magazine*. "How to Write a Genealogy Research Report," (<https://www.familytreemagazine.com/premium/genealogy-research-report/>) 28 July 2018. Excellent article with a template. They give you five free articles.

- Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards, Second Edition*. Nashville, Tennessee : Ancestry.com, 2019.
- . "Genealogical Work Samples." <https://bcgcertification.org/learning/skills/genealogical-work-samples/> Examples of research reports and a variety of Evidence Blocks.
- Henderson, Harold. *Archives*. "Rip and Run vs. Write as you Go," (<https://www.archives.com/experts/henderson-harold/rip-run-vs-write-as-you-go.html>) 19 August 2013. A favorite author of mine.
- Jones, Thomas. "Inferential Genealogy," (free) [http://broadcast.lds.org/elearning/FHD/Community/en/CBIG/Inferential\\_Genealogy\\_Course\\_Handout.pdf](http://broadcast.lds.org/elearning/FHD/Community/en/CBIG/Inferential_Genealogy_Course_Handout.pdf)
- Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, Virginia : National Genealogical Society, 2013.
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Context: A Powerful Tool for Problem Solving." National Genealogical Society Conference 2019, session F301. \$ <http://playbackngs.com>.
- . *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, third edition. Baltimore : Genealogical Publishing Company, 2015.
- Morelli, Jill. blog, *Genealogy Certification: A Personal Journey* (<http://genealogycertification.wordpress.com>). Search on "strategic"
- . "Break Brick Walls by Efficiently Writing Your Findings." Webinar, 2 April 2020. Virtual Chapter-Association of Professional Genealogists. Behind a member wall. <https://apgen.silkstart.com/cpages/virtual>.
- . "Content and Context: Conducting a Literature Search." National Genealogical Society 2021 Family History Conference. BCG Skillbuilding track. Lecture NGS2021-BCG-011. <http://playbacknow.com>.
- . "Write As You Go! A Workshop." This online 3 sessions course is given annually with signups taken all year long. <https://seagensoc.org>
- Peters, Nancy. "Reporting on Research: Standards Encourage Better Communication" *FamilyTree webinars*. <https://familytreewebinars.com>. Probably the best on the construction of a research report.
- Powell, Elise Scalise. Presentations at various conferences on the topic, including APG webinar in March 2020.
- Stanbary, Karen, CG. "Techniques for Integrating Documentary and Genetic Information in a Research Report." BCG-Legacy Family Tree Webinar, 17 March 2020.

## Resources for Context

- Academic library databases (often found at colleges and universities)  
 These are usually too expensive for public libraries or a personal subscription.
- JSTOR: <https://www.jstor.org>
- ABC-Clio: <https://www.abc-clio.com/ABC-CLIOSolutions/LearnMoreAC.aspx>
- "Ask a Librarian," a feature of the library you are using.
- Amazon: <http://amazon.com> and/or Abe Books: <https://www.abebooks.com>
- Look here for books on your topics and then order or check out of your local library.
- ArchiveGrid: <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid>
- Manuscripts can be difficult to find. ArchiveGrid helps find manuscripts available primarily in the US. Look close to your geographic area of interest, or close to where you live, or conduct a national topic (very specific) search.
- Covert, Liz. podcast, "Ben Franklin's World." <https://benfranklinworld.com>. She discusses with authors of historical books on how they conduct historical research.
- DoHistory, <http://dohistory.org>
- FamilySearch: <http://FamilySearch.org/Wiki> a go-to site for me. Do a topical search by ethnic group or geographic region, etc.

Google: <http://Google.com> Also check out Google Books and Google Scholar. Google Books has county histories and other pre-1923 books of interest.

Legacy Family Tree webinars: <https://familytreewebinars.com/index.php> (\$)

Browse the 1000+ titles by your topic of interest.

Libraries, historical societies, genealogical societies in your geographic area

Never underestimate what is not online! Deeds, taxation records, city council minutes, jury lists, court records, civil and criminal cases, divorces, etc. etc. etc. But remember you are not looking for your ancestor, but a better understanding of the environment your ancestor lived in.

PERiodical Source Index (PERSI). *Find My Past*. Find My Past is a pay site but you can access PERSI for free. This record set is only an index of the articles contained within various periodicals including genealogical society newsletters. <https://search.findmypast.com/search/periodical-source-index>

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