Writing Tips and Tricks

Some Style Considerations

Dealing with Names

- The standard convention for families of English descent is to put a woman's previous surnames in parentheses before her married name: Mary (Todd) Lincoln or Sarah (Marshall) (Bennett) Smith.

- If you don't know a woman's surname, be careful how you use parentheses.

    Correct: John Jones married about 1775 Mary —.
    Incorrect: John Jones married about 1775 Mary (—). [The use of parentheses here is confusing. It might be interpreted that she was previously married.]

- Decide how you will show nicknames?

    Mary/Molly Jones
    Mary "Molly" Jones
    Mary ("Molly") Jones

Dealing with Dates

- In genealogical writing, the most widely accepted format is day-month-year (no commas required):

    10 December 1821   or   10 Dec. 1821

    If you do use month-day-year format, always add a comma after the year if in the middle of a sentence:

    John was born December 10, 1821, in New York City.

- Learn the rules for abbreviating inclusive numbers and years (per *Chicago Manual of Style*):

First Number	Second Number	Examples
Less than 100	Use all digits	3–10, 71–72, 96–117
100 or multiple of 100	Use all digits	100–104, 600–613, 1100–1123
101 through 109 (in multiples of 100)	Used changed part only, omitting unneeded zeros	107–8, 505–17, 1002–6
110 through 199 (in multiples of 100)	Use two digits, or more if needed	321–25, 415–532, 1536–38 1496–504, 14325–28, 11564–78

- Year ranges follow the same rules as listed above:

    Correct: the years 1875–1920   the winter sof 1800–1801 and 1807–9
                   fiscal years 1622–28   John was b. ca. 1782–83

    Incorrect: the years 1622–8   summer of 1800–01
                   John was born ca. 1782/3

- Don't convert unconventional dates. Add the clarifying information in square brackets:

    - 15th day of the ninth month [November] 1710 (*yes, November was the 9th month in 1710!!*).
    - In the seventh year of our independence [1782–83]
    - 3 George II [1729–30]

- Calendar Change: In 1752 England converted from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar. Under the Julian system, the new year began on March 25. March was the 1st month of the year and Feb. the 12th.
  - It is important that genealogists clearly indicate which calendar was being used for records created before the change. This is done with double-dating.
  - Double-dating is used for all dates between 1 January and 25 March, prior to September 1752. If the original record is not double-dated, use square brackets. If uncertain add a question mark.

    | **Certain:** | 10 Feb. 1730/1 | 10 Feb. 1730[/1] |
    | **Uncertain:** | 10 Feb. 1730/[1?] | 10 Feb. 173[0?]/1 |

    In double-dating, use only one numeral after the slash, *never* two.
- Date Modifiers: Genealogists often lack precise dates for events. When estimating dates, use the correct modifier to show your level of certainty:
  - About or circa, when you can place an event within a year or so based on a specific record:

    Census: Thomas Lord was aged 27 on the 1850 census (born about 1823)
    Gravestone: Andrew Jones d. 6 June 1817, in the 43rd year of his age (born circa 1774–75)
  - Say dates, when roughly estimating a date (include explanation):

    John Cawthon was married in, say, 1841 (eldest child aged 8 in 1850)
    Orange Throop was born say 1771 (if he was a few years older than his wife)
  - By, before, between, after, when we can put boundaries around a date:

    John Arnold d. between 12 July and 23 Nov. 1813 (dates his will was written and proved)
    Michael Hatch moved to Chelsea, Vt., after 1790, when he was enumerated on the census in Leyden, Mass., and before 24 May 1794, when he acknowledged a deed in Chelsea.
    William Taylor was deceased by 22 Dec. 1696, when his widow took administration of his estate.
  - Calculated dates, when you have a *precise age at death* that allows you to calculate a birth date (put "calc." in square brackets):

    Joseph Bates d. 28 Jan. 1899, aged 97 years, 6 months, 14 days. Joseph was b. [calc.] 14 July 1801.

Abbreviations

In genealogy, we use many abbreviations:

vital events: b., d., m., bp., bur.   places: Mass., Co., Cem., N.S.
months: Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept.   other: ca., poss., dau., Sr., Jr., Rev., J.P., Col.

Consistency is key. Don't abbreviate Mass. in one paragraph and write Massachusetts in the next. Several major journals avoid using abbreviations in the main text but use them in the children's section and footnotes.

Some rules for abbreviations:

- Don't use state postal codes, i.e., CT, MA, NM. Use the standard abbreviation, Conn., Mass., N. Mex.
- Don't abbreviate March, April, June, July, Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, **Maine**, and Utah. And the abbreviation for September is Sept., not Sep.
- Prefixes for most geographic names should not be abbreviated, i.e., Fort Fairfield, South Berwick, Mount Vernon, Port Arthur, Saint Cloud.
- Do not abbreviate given names: Benjamin (*not* Benj.) Franklin.
- Initials should be separated by a space: M. L. King, *not* M.L. King.
- Modern style includes no commas around Sr. and Jr.: "John Webb Jr. died 9 April 1782." If you do use commas, two are needed: "John Webb, Jr., died 9 April 1782."

Other Style Decisions

- Which comes first—name, date or place?

  John married in York, Maine, 25 Dec. 1836, Jane Abbott (traditional scholarly style).
  John married Jane Abbott in York, Maine, 25 Dec. 1836 (most computer-generated books).

  Be consistent in what style you choose but be flexible when it sounds awkward.

- Will you or won't you use the preposition "on" before dates?

  John was born on 3 March 1815.   or   John was born 3 March 1815.

- Will you use of "in" or "at" for places, or avoid it completely?

  John died in Portland, 16 August 1898.   Mary was buried in Restland Cemetery.
  John died at Portland, 16 August 1898.   Mary was buried at Restland Cemetery.
  John died Portland, 16 August 1898.

- Decide when to use the county name with towns or townships.

  John was born in Malden, Middlesex County, Massachusetts.

  It is often best to include the county name the first time the town is mentioned, but not afterwards.

- How will you handle multiple marriages?

  William married, first, Miriam Church and, second, Olive Johnson.
  William married (1) Miriam Church and (2) Olive Johnson.

- How to deal with unknown names?

  Joshua was a son of Thomas and Mary (—) Lewis.
  Joshua was a son of Thomas and Mary (-?-) Lewis.

- How will you treat serial commas

  Mary is a fan of her parents, Tom Brady, and Beyonce.
  Mary is a fan of her parents, Tom Brady and Beyonce.

Some Writing, Grammar and Typesetting Considerations

- The best writing is clear and concise. Avoid unnecessary words and clichés. Using too many words to say something simple makes a writer sound *less* professional. When possible, substitute the verbose expressions on the left with the shorter words on the right:

due to the fact that	because
I was unaware of the fact	I did not know
as a consequence of	because
at this point in time	now
the question as to whether	whether
for the purpose of	for
in all cases	always
It may, however, be noted that	but
a number of	many, some
it is clear that	clearly
in connection with	concerning
a majority of	most
previous to	before
irregardless	regardless

Don't dress up words by adding *ly* to them:

overly	over
muchly	much
thusly	thus

- Records can be dull. Make them interesting.

  <u>Deed</u>:

  26 Oct. 1737, James Abbot of Berwick, husbandman, buys for £21, from Moses Butler of Berwick, shopkeeper, 3 acres in Berwick bordering Little River; bounding land of Humphrey Chadbourne, Walter Abbott, and the highway.

  <u>Possible write-up</u>:

  "James Abbott, a farmer, owned only one small piece of land in his lifetime. In 1737 he purchased a three-acre parcel on Little River. Little River is a twenty-one-mile stream flowing southwest from Lebanon and reaching its confluence with the Salmon Falls River in Berwick. James's neighbors included his father, Walter Abbott, and uncle Humphrey Chadbourne. His wooded property had pine, maple, beech, and birch trees. The soil was sandy loam with good drainage, ideal for farming."

- Avoid unfounded conclusions.

  - Don't speculate about your ancestors' motivations/ character.

    Don't assume your Pilgrim ancestor came to America for religious freedom. He may have had other reasons.

    Don't claim your ancestor was an upstanding member of his community, unless you have strong evidence to support it (all of which you have cited).

  - Talk about trends and generalizations, but let the records tell us the specifics about our ancestors:

    "When thousands of men were heading west to seek their fortune in the gold fields, Valentine Bennett was on a wagon train passing through Kanesville, Iowa, on his way to California."

  - Just because most people living in your ancestor's community did something doesn't mean your ancestor did the same.

- Past or present? People did, documents do!

  "Thomas Warner *made* his will 10 Sept. 1659. He *left* his homestead farm to his widow Sarah. In addition to his wife, the will *names* his five children and two stepchildren."

  "Mary *recorded* the names in the Bible at a single sitting. It *lists* all her children's birth dates and birthplaces."

  [**Note: birth date = two words, birthplace = one word!!**]

- Beware of misplaced modifiers. (One of the following statements is definitely false. Only one can be true.)

  1. John was born, probably in Augusta in 1820.
  2. John was born in 1820, probably in Augusta.
  3. John was probably born, in Augusta in 1820.
  4. John was born in Augusta, probably in 1820.

- In modern typesetting there are three kinds of dashes, distinguished by their comparable lengths:

-	hyphen	
–	en dash	(MS Word shortcut: ctrl + dash)
—	em dash	(MS Word shortcut: alt + 0151)

Each of these has its important specific uses and they should not be confused, as shown below:

- **Hyphens:**
  - A <u>hyphen</u> indicates breaks within words that wrap at the end of a line:

    In the fall of 1833, Nathaniel Merrill followed his elder brothers and moved to western Massachu-setts with his family.

  - A <u>hyphen</u> connects grouped numbers:

    Phone no.: 555-860-5086   Social Security no.: 111-55-9999

  - A <u>hyphen</u> connects compound nouns and adjectives (but not for adverbs ending in *ly*):

    William left his pewter to his daughter-in-law.

    They found an eighteenth-century solution to a twentieth-century problem.

    Martha's grandfather was a poorly attired man (*not* poorly-attired)

  - When in doubt, consult your dictionary:

    Words formed with prefixes co, multi, non, post, pre, semi, trans are *not hyphenated*.
    <u>Examples</u>: coeditor, multifaceted, nonnegotiable, semiopaque, transoceanic

    Genealogists take note: There is no hyphen in *stepdaughter* or in *half brother*!

- **En-Dashes** (the length of the letter n in proportional typesets):
  - An en-dash is a substitution for the word "through" or "to." It connects continuing or inclusive dates, time, or reference numbers.

    John lived in Scarboro, where his first seven children were born 1757–73.

    The only female in Joseph's household was aged 30–40.

    York Co. Deeds, 80:138–40; *History of Kittery*, pp. 422–26; 10:30–11:30 am.

- **Em-Dashes** (the length of the letter m in proportional typesets):
  - An <u>em-dash</u> is a separator, used in place of a colon, commas, or parentheses.

    He could forgive every insult but the last—the snub by his eldest son.

    John's nephews—the sons of his late brother—were appointed executors.

  - In a genealogy-specific use, an em-dash is often used to represent an unknown name.

    Thomas married Susanna, daughter of William and Mary (—) Putnam.

- **Quote marks** are placed (most of the time) outside of commas and periods, but inside semicolons.

    John Cross was elected a "common brewer of ale."

    Styling himself a "gentleman," Phineas Stone wrote his will.

    Mary was a witness to "the accident"; it changed her outlook on life.

- **Footnote numbers** are normally placed outside of all punctuation:

    John Cross was elected a "common brewer of ale."[16]

    Styling himself a "gentleman,"[16] Phineas Stone wrote his will.

    Mary was a witness to "the accident";[16] it changed her outlook on life.

- Use **commas** to set off the elements in names of geographical places:

    Sarah was born in Portland, Maine, in the summer of 1842.

    Immigrants from East Anglia, England, made up much of the Great Migration.

- **Ellipsis points** are three dots marking the omission of a words from a quote:

    John conveyed "my share of land . . . within the township of Bridgewater."

    - The dots should be rendered with periods separated by spaces (non-breaking) spaces. Do not use the three-dot character in some font sets.

    - If what remains of a quote is a complete sentence, include a period before the three ellipsis dots:

        The visions troubled her on many occasions. . . . She learned to deal with them.

    - Include other punctuation as necessary on either side of the ellipses:

        The sounds of the trumpet, flute, . . . and all kinds of music could be heard.

    - If the beginning of the opening sentence of a quotation is deleted, ellipsis dots are unnecessary.

- **That** *vs***. which**: *That* is used for defining clauses, *which* for parenthetical clauses.

    The classrooms *that* were painted last summer are bright and cheerful.
    [Only the painted classrooms are bright and cheerful.]

    The classrooms, *which* were painted last summer, are bright and cheerful.
    [All of the classrooms are bright and cheerful.]

- **Numbers**: In your main text, spell out whole numbers between zero and one hundred; spell out whole numbers up to (and including) one hundred when followed by hundred, thousand, million, etc.

    nine, twenty-six, one hundred, 278, two thousand, 6819, one hundred million

    - At the beginning of a sentence, any number that would ordinarily be set in numerals is spelled out, regardless of any inconsistency this may create:

        One hundred ten men and 103 women will graduate this year.

    - When spelled-out numbers cluster thickly in a sentence or paragraph, it is better to use numerals:

        The eight members of the city council are aged 69, 64, 58, 54 (two members), 47, 45, and 35.

    - Do not spell out numbers in dates.

- **Very**, **rather**, **little**, **pretty**: Once source calls these words "the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words." Use your computer to search for these words and eliminate them all.

    After the exam, Mary tried to study ~~a little~~ harder.

    The weather turned ~~rather~~ warm, considering it was still March.

    Pat's genealogy gives a ~~pretty~~ good example of life in Colonial America.

- **However**: Avoid beginning a sentence with *however* if the meaning is nevertheless. If you must use it, put it inside the sentence:

    It can be speculated, however, that Mary was living with another family.

    When *however* comes first, it means "in whatever way" or "to whatever extent."

    However discouraging the prospect, they never lost heart.

- **Word spacing**: Use only one space after a sentence in proportionally spaced text.

- **Paragraph spacing**: If you want to add spacing between paragraphs, do not do so by hitting the enter key twice (i.e., double carriage return). The carriage return may float to the top of the next page, causing inconsistent top margins for your text. Instead, format your paragraph so that the space is added automatically after each paragraph as part of the paragraph style.