Family History Starter Kit

Start with one person, one place or one turning point. A short story you can stand behind is a good beginning.

SOURCE

1962, perhaps spring.

DRAFT

Keep the date approximate.

CHECK

Leave the gaps visible.

Keep a source ledger

Give each letter, photograph or interview note an ID. Keep the original and record what it supports. A source ID is a working reference, not a substitute for a full citation.

Field	Example
Source ID	F01
Where it came from	A family note written in 2006
What it says	Ruth recalled moving to Leeds in 1962, perhaps in spring.
What remains uncertain	The month, the journey and the reason for moving.

Ruth and these records are invented for this exercise. They are not a customer story or historical research.

Your reader: _____

Person or period: _____

The question your story explores: _____

Material you already have: _____

What to ask next: _____

24 questions worth asking

Ask permission before recording. Explain who will read the story. Let the speaker skip a question, correct the notes or leave something out.

Ordinary days

1. What did a normal morning look like? 2. Which place can you still picture clearly? 3. Who did you spend the most time with? 4. What small job did you learn to do well?

The turning point

5. When did you notice things were changing? 6. Which choices did you consider? 7. What did you know at the time? 8. What did you only learn later?

The people

9. What did you see this person do? 10. Do you remember their exact words, or the gist? 11. Who might remember it differently? 12. Which names would you rather leave out?

The evidence

13. Is there a letter, photograph or dated record? 14. Who made it, and when? 15. Does it record the event, or describe it later? 16. Could this be someone else with the same name?

The gaps

17. Which date are you unsure about? 18. Do you remember what happened first? 19. Which detail did someone else tell you? 20. What should we leave unresolved?

What it means

21. What mattered most to you then? 22. What do you see differently now? 23. What would you like a younger reader to understand? 24. What should I correct or leave out of these notes?

Six details a draft can change

A smooth sentence can make a small guess sound like a fact. Here are six places to check.

An approximate date

In the notes: Ruth remembered moving in 1962, perhaps in spring.

Too much certainty: Ruth stepped off the train in April 1962.

A supported version: Ruth later remembered moving to Leeds in 1962, perhaps in spring. The month and journey are not established.

A gap in the timeline

In the notes: A 1964 card lists Ruth as a bakery assistant in Leeds.

Too much certainty: She found bakery work as soon as she arrived.

A supported version: By 1964, Ruth was working as a bakery assistant in Leeds. When that job began is still unclear.

An undated photograph

In the notes: An undated photograph shows Ruth with a blue suitcase.

Too much certainty: She carried that suitcase on the move to Leeds.

A supported version: An undated photograph shows Ruth with a blue suitcase. We do not know where she was going.

Conflicting memories

In the notes: One relative remembers 1967; another remembers 1968.

Too much certainty: Ruth returned home in 1967.

A supported version: The family disagrees about whether Ruth returned in 1967 or 1968.

Remembered words

In the notes: Notes record her excitement, but not her exact words.

Too much certainty: "The city felt like the whole world opening," she said.

A supported version: The interview notes describe her excitement about the city. Her exact words were not recorded.

An unrecorded motive

In the notes: The notes do not say why she moved.

Too much certainty: She left because she resented village life.

A supported version: Her reason for moving is still an open question.

A brief to work from

Use these rules with a word processor, a notebook or an AI drafting tool. Change the bracketed fields and add your notes.

Help me turn the notes below into a short family-history draft for [reader], about [person or period]. Use only the material I supply. Keep approximate dates approximate. Preserve disagreements. Do not invent dialogue, motives, journeys or events. Put my source IDs beside factual claims so I can check them. If you need a missing detail, leave a question in square brackets. Keep my present-day reflections separate from what I knew then. Use a warm, plain voice. Write only as much as the material can support.

My reader:
Person or period:
The question this story explores:
Source notes, each with an ID:
Details to leave private:
Tone and spelling preferences:

Check it with the notes beside you

Check names, dates, relationships and quotations. Mark each passage Keep, Revise, Ask or Omit. Let the storyteller read it where possible. Keep notes and draft together. Check photographs and print files separately.

Optional memoir drafting: https://www.imagineyourbook.com/book-generators/memoir

Current plans and card-required trial terms: https://www.imagineyourbook.com/pricing.html

Further reading: Family Tree Magazine, 23 AI Genealogy Prompts: Free Templates and Expert Advice. The questions and fictional examples in this kit are original.