

From Documents to Sentences to Stories: Rebuilding Family Stories



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Turn findings into sentences

Extract all details from a record into simple, complete sentences

- Don't just cherry-pick the obvious details
- If you're afraid you may miss something, transcribe the entire record/entry
- Not sure which text is "boilerplate" vs. unique to your relative? Look at other entries

Story-building opportunities

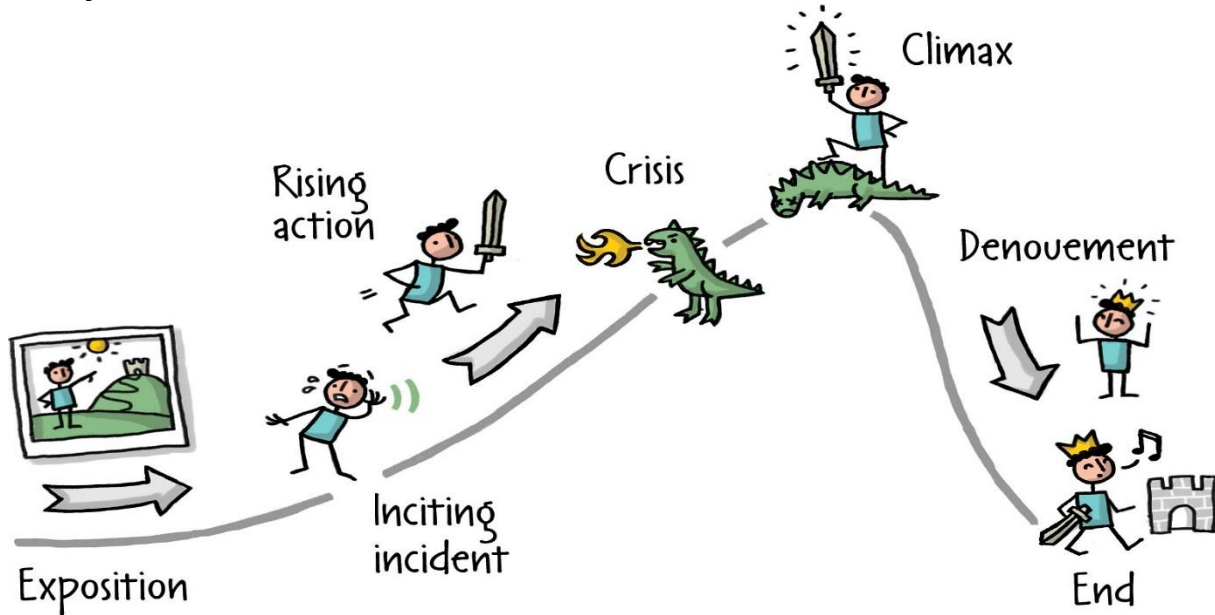
- **Moments of big change:** birth/adoption, marriage, divorce, adoption, migration, enlistment, death of loved one
- **Challenges:** war, poverty or job loss, injury, enslavement, natural disasters, discrimination, famine, family separation, violence, imprisonment
- **Unusual, poignant or tragic timing,** such as the deaths of three relatives in one month, or a death date that follows shortly after a marriage or birth.
- **Patterns of change or stability.** How long did they live somewhere? Watch for patterns or changes. How many jobs, marriages or children did they have?
- **New questions** that arise based on what you see, such as a realization that the family lived in a different place at each 10-year census interval.

Search for stories in records

- Follow them in repeating records, such as censuses, city directories and vital records
- Do the math and watch for patterns or changes. When were relatives born/when did they die? How long did they live somewhere? How many jobs, marriages, or children did they have?
- When were moments of big change?
- Create a timeline using all the records you have
- Watch for any "story arc:" what is the narrative that emerges over time?



Story structure looks like this:



"UJ005: Figure 2.3: Plot points on a story arc" by Rosenfeld media.
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Beginning: (exposition): Establish what "normal" was before the adventure starts

Middle: the action of the story

- Inciting incident: the change or event that makes things start to change
- Rising action: a series of events that deepens the drama
- Crisis: a serious setback
- Climax: the moment of peak drama, typically toward the end of the story
- Denouement: falling action, meaning everything is settling down

End: the new normal

This pattern is what an audience instinctively expects from a good story. If yours lacks crisis or a climax, it probably won't seem as interesting or feel like a story.

Shaping an ancestor's factual life experiences into a story format can be challenging. You may find yourself shaving off parts that don't "advance the storyline," in the interest of a good story. You might find yourself compressing parts of the story or telling it in a different sequence (not chronological).

The "so what" factor

Why does this story matter? How did that person or family change? How did their experiences impact future generations (even you)?