

Family Histories in the Print-on-Demand Age

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Family historians can make creative use of print-on-demand technology to preserve their writings, photographs and research for future generations. It is essential to ensure good writing, editing and presentation. The small size of an intended readership is in no way an excuse to cut corners on a book's production.

Stage one: The research.

The question "Who is this for?" should steer you in your research as well as your writing. The actual audience for your work may be wider than you originally thought.

If your research is exclusively into the past and your intention is to show the past to those alive now, I suggest you widen your scope. By including more information about the current generation you can provide enhanced information to interest future family members. By detailing the present, you can help your future readers understand more of their own history than you would otherwise be able to achieve.

This is influenced by the era of print-on-demand by breaking the idea that a book is something difficult to create, permanent and unchanging, requiring a paying market, and a project that can only be begun when the research is over -- a line drawn in time.

The ease of creation of books or editions of a book now enables the family historian to publish his or her work in stages. A family history completed today can now be updated as significant events unfold in years to come.

Stage two: The writing.

"Who is this for?" Perhaps your reader lives in a very different world than yours. If you create a book it should, barring fires and floods, last many years. A book given to a grandchild today, might still be on a bookshelf in 2159.

There are difficulties the owner of that bookshelf may face in understanding your work.

The first is cultural. We read historical documents now and think, "How could they do that? What kind of people were they?"

The second is linguistic. We know that words change their meaning. Clinging as much as we can to our favorite words, we know that in a hundred years they may have acquired other nuances that we cannot predict.

What can a writer do about these?

With the cultural changes, not much. Be honest, be complete.

With the language we can do more. Write well. Write accurately. Write according to the norms and style that are current today. This will help a future researcher place your work, if its date is in doubt, and understand your words in the context of your contemporaries.

That is why I suggest it is essential to have your work edited. By 'edited' I mean the line-by-line copy-editing provided by an experienced person with access to, for example, the Chicago Manual of Style. There should be no words used incorrectly. There should be no spelling mistakes. Paragraphs should have one topic. Sentences should contain one idea. Sentences should be properly formed.

Authors cannot edit their own work; they are too close to what has been written to see it with fresh eyes. Friends and family are generally too kind to edit thoroughly, and are inclined to give the author the benefit of the doubt.

Stage Three: The Design and Layout

Most of us have clear ideas about how our work should be presented. There are several great page-layout programs available. MS Word, however, is not one of them. Layout should be built on programs that display a version of the page that exactly matches the printed page. Quark Express and Adobe InDesign do this, MS Word does not.

I recommend writing out your layout ideas on no more than a single page, and handing them over to an expert, with your manuscript. Don't micromanage the process. As with editing, this part of the book's production is best done by someone who, first, has done this kind of thing before, and second, is not related to the author. An unbiased eye will not overlook errors that might haunt the author once the book is printed.

Stage Four: The Printing

Print-on-demand technology allows several advantages over traditional printing for family stories and histories.

The first is allowing the printing of only the copies needed at any given time. With traditional printing methods there are great incentives to have the smallest number of print runs, usually only one. Print-on-demand allows copies to be produced over an extended time and in small numbers.

The second is, with the right balance, print-on-demand can be cost effective. If you think you will need a thousand copies, they can be produced quite cheaply in one

traditional run. If you wish to print a hundred copies each over ten print runs it will be prohibitively expensive by traditional means.

The individual cost per copy of a print-on-demand book will be higher than the cost per copy of a traditional print run but, depending on the number needed and the time periods involved, cheaper overall.

Related to this is the third advantage - preventing the production of unneeded books. A traditional print run can result in storage problems and waste.

In the case of family books, the ability to produce additional copies as new members of the family arrive cannot be matched by traditional means. In addition, as new research is done, corrections made, new chapters added, print-on-demand facilitates making changes or creating new editions in a simplified manner.

Summary

Authors of family stories and histories need not be shy of producing books. They are the tried and tested method of preserving our writings and will be around for a long while yet.

Print-on-demand allows the author to produce a small number of copies over perhaps a long period of time. It allows a new edition of an already printed book to be created to include enhancements and additions.

The author of a print-on-demand title can control the process and, with the judicious use of outside help, ensure a high-quality book.

Notes

Books that are offered for sale require an ISBN. A new edition of a book with an ISBN requires a different ISBN to distinguish it from the original.

If you have no intention of selling your book you do not need an ISBN.

All published writing should be protected by copyright, regardless of whether the work is for sale. Simply putting the copyright symbol in the front cover is not sufficient. See the Copyright Office's website for full details (in the U.S. - www.copyright.gov).