

Writing Prompts from Family Tree University (adapted from Family Tree Magazine)

1. Select a family photo and write about who is in it, where it was taken, and why it was taken. What is the occasion? Describe the background and the objects in it.
2. Pick an ancestor's hometown and do some research on what it was like during your ancestor's time. Use historical pictures/postcards and city directories to learn about the town, then write a brief tourism ad for the locale highlighting the town's attractions.
3. Describe your ancestor's walk down the street. Invent his destination (work, church, market, etc.) and use a city directory and your imagination to describe who/what he might see on the way there.
4. Write a letter to an ancestor you've never met. Include questions you've always wanted to ask him or her, plus some that reflect what you've already learned about your ancestor (for example, "Do you enjoy your new job?" or "How are you coping with your father's death?").
5. Write an obituary for an ancestor. Include information about any surviving ancestors, the deceased's occupation, and his age at death. Use contemporary obituaries as a guide.
6. Write a scene that describes a block party in your ancestor's hometown, and invite everyone who appears on a page in a US federal census record. Use census data to learn ages, occupations, and relationships, and tap into your imagination for the rest. Who's talking to who, and what's the hot gossip?
7. Write a diary or journal entry that details your immigrant ancestor's journey. What are their impressions of their fellow passengers? Research passenger lists and ship descriptions to make your description more accurate.
8. Pick an ancestor from the 1800s, drop him into today, and (as your ancestor) write a letter to family members still in the 1800s. How would he describe today? What surprises him? What questions would he have?
9. Identify a major event that happened during your ancestor's life time, and (as your ancestor) write a first-person journal entry describing it. What would your ancestor have thought about it? Would he have found it exciting? Frightening? Frustrating?

10. Come up with a pitch for your ancestor's biography. Is it a sultry tell-all, or just-the-facts? What major theme(s) does it cover? Be sure to give the bio a title and sub-title, and write the book's summary as it would appear on the back cover.
11. Pitch a movie about one of your ancestors. What interesting event do you want the film to portray? What kind of film will it be? What actor/actress would play your ancestor, and who would play the other characters? Be sure to give your film a title and tagline. If you're feeling extra ambitious, write the movie's preview.
12. Review historical resources like the Sears Catalog and "buy" three Christmas presents for an ancestor. Why did you choose those three, and how would your ancestor respond to them?
13. Record a memory of one of your ancestors that you want to pass down to future generations—a parent, grandparent, sibling, aunt, uncle, cousin, etc. Set the scene: How old were each of you at the time? What happened? Why is this a memory you treasure?
14. Imagine your ancestor had access to the internet during his lifetime, and write a Facebook post or series of tweets describing something he's witnessing in real-time. Is there a contemporary (historical) issue he would feel strongly about or an event he wants to respond to? Or maybe he wants to air a family grievance?
15. Write a brief biography of yourself—everything an ancestor might want to know about you. After all, someday your ancestors will want to know as much about you as you do about yours!
16. Select a family heirloom (watch, quilt, Bible, etc.) and write a narrative from its perspective. Where has it been? How did your ancestor acquire it, and what would it have encountered throughout the years? What important family milestones might it have witnessed?