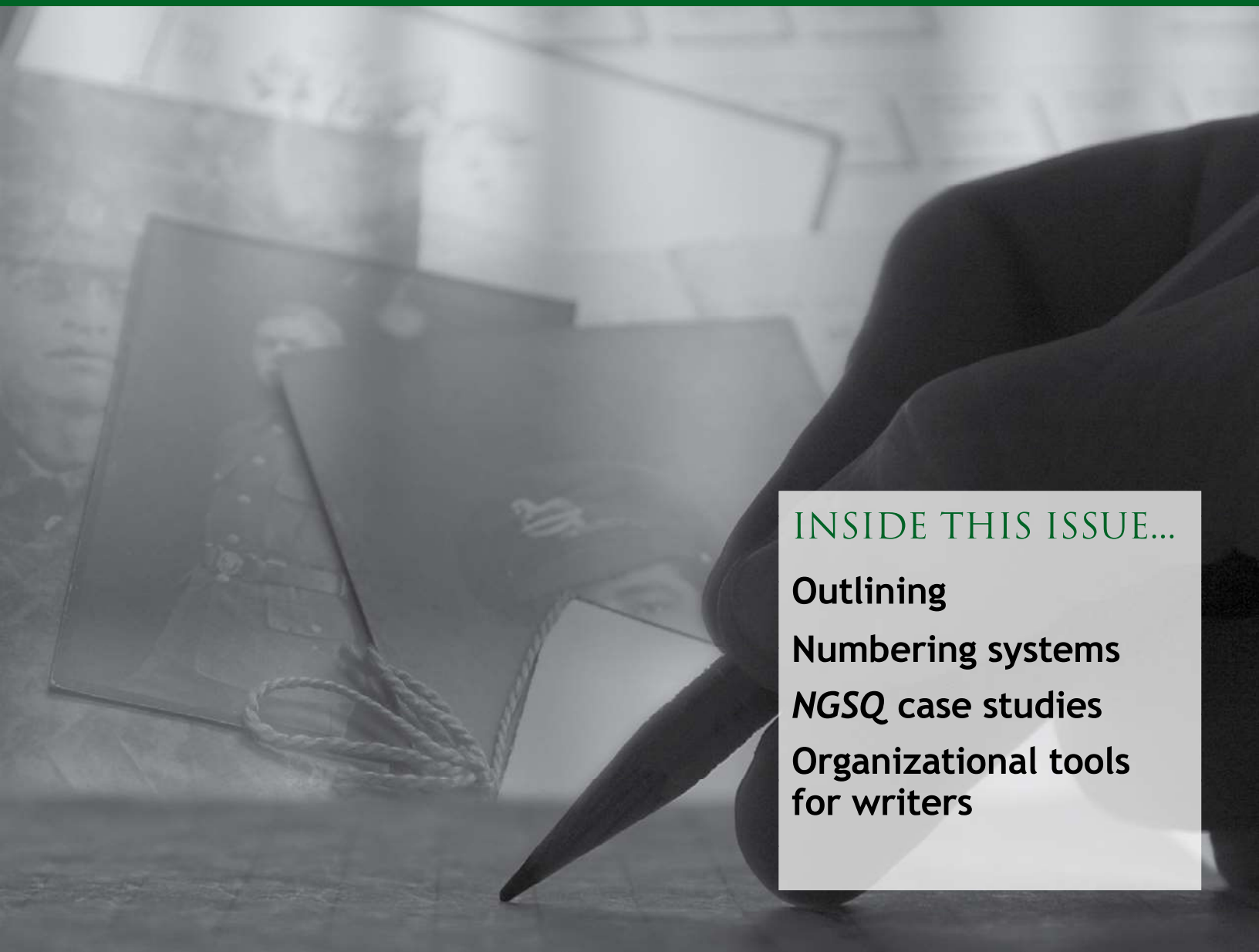
SPECIAL ISSUE
GENEALOGY & WRITING

NATIONAL GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY
FOUNDED 1903

NGS MAGAZINE

FOR GENERATIONS PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

VOLUME 41, NUMBER 4 OCTOBER–DECEMBER 2015



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NGS MAGAZINE
October—December 2015
Volume 41, Number 4

ON THE COVER

In this special issue of NGS Magazine*, discover strategies to enhance your genealogical research through writing. Not sure where to begin? B. Darrell Jackson's "In the Footsteps of Ancestors" on page 55 suggests tools that can aid in bringing the narrative of your ancestors' lives to paper.*

NGS Magazine (ISSN 1529-4323) is sent quarterly to all members as a membership benefit of the National Genealogical Society (NGS) and to libraries by subscription. Periodicals postage paid at Arlington, Virginia, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *NGS Magazine*, National Genealogical Society, 3108 Columbia Pike, Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22204-4370.

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Utilizing Outlining for Strong Genealogical Writing

By Paul Graham, AG, CG

Most people wrote their last outline in high school or in college at a teacher's request. The process likely seemed tedious and unnecessary, especially if you wrote a formal, numbered outline. You may have suspected that the teacher was using it as a tool to check up on procrastinators (very likely), but then you would have missed the many reasons outlining is essential to strong writing. Those reasons are especially important for genealogical writers.

Outlines may seem like an extra step in the writing process—why not just start writing if the ideas are already in your head? But writing is a complex process, and a good outcome requires a good plan. Your outline is part of the planning stages of writing and, like any plan, it will serve as your guide in the writing process.

An outline solves one of the most important challenges inherent in genealogical writing: separating big ideas from a multitude of small facts. With the outline in place, you've already committed the main concepts to writing, and you've arranged them logically (and major holes in logic are revealed). You know how all the pieces relate to the argument you're making, showing the progression of evidence leading to a conclusion. All of this can help reduce writer's block as well.

Get Started

The first rule of outlining is to not be afraid of outlining. Don't worry about formal outlining with roman numerals—just get your thoughts on paper. There's no immediate need to figure out whether two topics are of the same importance and whether something is a new topic or a sub-topic. That can come later. A single-page outline listing the topic of each paragraph is just as powerful as a three-page numbered and indented outline, and it will be more useful because you didn't get bogged down in formalities.

A Fluid Process

Writing as a process is often described in a way that makes it seem compartmentalized, but the reality is very different. The process is generally broken down into three parts—brainstorming, outlining, and writing. In genealogical writing, brainstorming has a lot to do with analysis and it's the time you spend wrapping your mind

around the evidence and any arguments you're making. (Remember the evidence analysis process map.) Then you create an outline to bring structure to your ideas. Finally, you write the narrative that will be read by others.

It's easy to get into a school-days mindset thinking you have to do each step in the writing process before proceeding to the next. That couldn't be further from the truth. The acts of brainstorming, outlining, and writing are fluid and reiterative. Although most of one step should be complete before seriously digging into the next, you could find yourself jumping between all three. Outline with complete sentences, rather than cursory notes. This forces you to write your thoughts more fully as you're thinking, which aids in writing later.

As key points come to light during brainstorming, they are then added to the outline. As the outline gets filled out, you may reveal holes in your evidence, argument, or narrative, which sends you back into research and brainstorming mode. During the brainstorming and outlining steps, you may think of a way one point should be expressed, so you go ahead and spend time writing. Don't be afraid to follow your mind's path, because it's easy to lose a good thought.

Making Your Outline More Formal

As the outline grows and you see the full structure come into view, pay attention to ways to make the outline a little more formal. This can only have a positive impact on the writing process. Here again, you shouldn't let using roman numerals scare you away because you're aiming for *more* formal, not English-class formal.

At its core, the outline is a list of the most important things you want to say. If you have that, you're most of the way there. The outline should also naturally fall into clusters of points that share a common theme or relationship. That's the whole point of the outline—to clarify where things belong in the article. A list of points grouped by relationship is the fundamental outline.

Three other tasks serve the purpose of formalizing the outline. One is to separate major and minor points. This is what a numbered outline accomplishes, but you can do it in simpler ways. You can just as easily underline the major points, or put a star beside them. In a genealogical article, your major points will likely become section headers and lead sentences.

Another task is to make sure all points and clusters are in order. This may seem obvious, but it is an important step to consider. Will your resulting article be arranged chronologically, or by increasing importance of the evidence? Maybe you're trying to tell more of a story, and the outline should reflect rising action to a climax.

Lastly, note transitions between sections and ideas. This may be a simple line between two words or ideas that you want to link in the final article. It may also be more substantial, by writing an entire transition sentence and including it in the outline. Understanding transitions during outlining speeds up the writing process.

Reverse Outline

Consider doing reverse outlines as a method for developing your outlining skills. A reverse outline is when you take a completed work and reduce it to an outline, revealing its organization. It's a great way to study other people's writing, especially in the world of complex genealogical arguments. You're simultaneously learning how the argument was structured and also practicing writing an outline.

Reverse outlines can also play direct roles in your own writing. Some of you are thinking to yourself, "I understand the role of outlines, but it's not worth changing my write-first method." In that case, maybe you should consider adding outlining toward the end of the process. Write the article, then deconstruct it by extracting the main points. Use the result as a way to identify gaps in logic or tangents in your argument.

An outline based on a final written product can be useful even if you outlined it before

writing, especially if you stopped modifying the original outline during the process. Comparing a reverse outline to the original outline shows how divergent the final product was from the plan. That, in turn, will help you better understand how you write and may reveal opportunities for being more efficient. Doing a reverse outline on a final article after going through peer review and editing can be a revealing and rewarding way to improve your writing process.

Tools for Outlining

Everyone develops their own writing process and gravitates to tools that fit them best and the same is true of outlines. Those who handwrite much of their work will likely find a piece of paper is their optimal tool. For the digital majority, multiple tools are worth exploring. Among the many benefits of outlining software, being able to incorporate images and other documents can significantly reduce the time moving back and forth between the outline and your evidence.

The numbered list feature in word processing software is probably the most familiar electronic outlining tool. For example, Microsoft *Word* and Apple's *Pages* include multiple built-in outline styles that can be customized based on your work style or project requirements. Indented lines automatically change to an appropriate letter or number using formal outlining rules.

OneNote is another Microsoft product useful for outlining, and particularly for organizing all of the information for a project. Projects in *OneNote* are called "Notebooks," and those are divided into sections, each with a set of pages. Each page can include whatever text or images you need under that topic. A good way to use *OneNote* as an outline is to label sections with the major topics, and the pages represent supporting points. Then, you can dump whatever content you might find useful into the pages. Sections and pages are easily rearranged.

Scrivener bills itself as "your complete writing studio," and it lives up to that claim. Among its many features is a robust outlining system designed for different work styles. The "corkboard" is a place to arrange content (text, images, diagrams, etc.) outside a traditional outline. However, the corkboard is tied to a traditional outline environment as well as the final text, while moving text in one moves it in the other parts of the software. *Scrivener* is even great for those who like to write first and then revise the structure later.

An additional option, though for Apple users only, is *OmniOutliner*. It focuses primarily on more traditional list-style outlining, with indenting and drag-and-drop rearranging. The user can also add custom columns to each line to help keep particular details in view. For iPad users, *OmniOutliner* is the best option, though *Scrivener* is working toward an iOS-compatible version.

Outlining Is Not Scary

Outlining helps keep track of the big ideas so you don't get lost in details. As a structured plan, it will make the writing become more efficient. Even if it feels too uncomfortable to start the writing process with an outline, make one in the middle or at the end. The clarity you get from seeing the structure of what has been written will still be of great benefit to the end product. Whatever approach you use, harness the power of outlines to strengthen and accelerate your writing process.

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