

Family History Writers

Jan 2026

The Story We Lived

A Year of Stories — and What Comes Next

Reflections, Milestones & What's Next for Our Writing Community

Choosing Your 2026 Writing Path

Write the Story, Not the Timeline

The 10 Most Common Scene Mistakes (And How to Fix Them)

How to Write with Momentum in 2026



A Note From Lynn

As I look back on 2025, one word rises above all others: gratitude.

Gratitude for the stories you trusted me with.
Gratitude for the courage you brought to the page.
Gratitude for the moments we shared – in Zoom rooms, around retreat tables, and inside private coaching sessions where writing opened something new.

This year asked a great deal of you. Some of you wrote into emotion you had long avoided. Others faced ancestral stories you barely knew how to approach. Many of you showed up imperfectly but consistently – and discovered that consistency, not confidence, is what makes a writer.

I watched scenes deepen and voices strengthen. I saw quiet breakthroughs and steady growth. I witnessed moments of bravery that may never be public, but mattered deeply nonetheless.

Thank you for being part of this community.
Thank you for choosing your story again and again.
Thank you for letting me walk beside you.



As we step into 2026, I'm excited for what we'll build together – the stories waiting to be shaped, the scenes waiting to be written, the truths waiting to be discovered. I'll be here, guiding where I can, cheering you on, and believing in your work every step of the way. Here's to another year of courage, creativity, and connection.
With warmth,
Lynn



COMMUNITY MILESTONES

2025

We made memories in places we once only dreamed.

This year marked a season of both reflection and expansion within the Family History Writing Studio.

We began 2025 by celebrating a meaningful anniversary: fifteen years of the Family History Writing Challenge. What started as a simple invitation to write has grown into a shared ritual – one that continues to welcome writers at every stage and remind us that progress begins by showing up.

Throughout the year, writers stepped beyond familiar ground. In Ireland, stories were written in the presence of landscape, lineage, and history. Many participants stretched into emotional territory they had previously avoided, learning to hold memory, place, and feeling on the page with greater honesty and care.

The Writer's Field Guide became a companion for those ready to deepen their work, helping writers move beyond chronology into emotion, reflection, and meaning. For many, this marked a turning point – a shift from recording the past to interpreting it with intention.



At Tigh-Na-Mara on Vancouver Island, StoryMaker came fully alive. What had once lived as a framework on paper became embodied around retreat tables and within the rhythms of sustained writing days. Writers used a shared language to build scenes, manage complexity, and move forward without overwhelm.

For those who continued on into First Draft Academy, the commitment deepened. Over eight months of focused writing, participants moved their stories further than they ever had before – building momentum, developing confidence, and discovering that consistency creates transformation.

Within Mindset, writers learned to identify and remove long-standing obstacles: procrastination, self-doubt, and the belief that they needed permission to begin. What emerged was steadier progress, clearer intention, and a renewed sense of trust in their own process.

And for participants in the Virtual Story Starter Retreat, the results were immediate and tangible. Scenes took shape. Voices strengthened. Writers left with work that felt grounded, alive, and unmistakably theirs.

Each of these milestones represents something deeper than programming or place. They mark moments when writers chose courage – staying with a story long enough to see what it wanted to become.



AT THE THRESHOLD

Where research begins to lean toward story.



Some writers are standing at the threshold. They have research, notes, fragments — and a quiet pull toward story. What holds them back isn't doubt or lack of commitment. It's the uncertainty of how to begin without overwhelming the work or themselves. This is not the beginning of a draft. It's the beginning of understanding how stories take shape.

Story Foundations lives here. In the in-between space. After research is gathered but before the pressure to “write it all.” It was created for writers who want:

- to move thoughtfully, not hurriedly
- to understand structure before sentences
- to build confidence through clarity, not output

There is no demand to produce pages. Only an invitation to see story differently.

Inside this stage of work

- Short lessons that introduce scene thinking
- Templates that translate information into narrative choices
- Checklists that help you recognize when something is story and when it isn't
- A framework that allows meaning to emerge, rather than be forced

This is groundwork. The kind that makes later writing steadier, quieter, more sure-footed.





HOW TO WRITE WITH MOMENTUM IN 2026

Rhythms, habits, and community tools to keep you drafting all year long

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Consistency beats intensity every time.

Momentum is not motivation. This is the first truth writers must learn. Motivation waits for the perfect conditions: the clear desk, the quiet morning, the burst of inspiration. Motivation is fickle, emotional, unpredictable, especially when you're writing personal stories rooted in family history, memory, and inherited experience.

Momentum is different.
Momentum is rhythm.
And rhythm is built.

If you want 2026 to be the year you finally finish a draft, deepen your scenes, or start your book, you need to create structures that keep you moving even when the mood dips — especially when the mood dips.

Here are the practices that actually work.

1. Consistency beats intensity

Many writers attempt “big pushes” — 3-day sprints, weekend binges, or long sessions after weeks of not writing. This pattern creates burnout and shame.

Instead, choose micro-commitments:

- 10 minutes of writing
- 1 paragraph
- 1 scene element
- 1 small revision pass

Your brain learns to trust that you will return. That trust builds momentum.

2. Create a Writing Container

A Writing Container is a schedule, ritual, or protected boundary that signals:

“This is when I write.”

Examples:

- Monday + Wednesday mornings for 30 minutes
- Fridays after lunch for scene review
- Daily tea ritual before writing
- A specific chair or spot
- A timer you light like a candle

Your container makes writing predictable.

Predictability reduces emotional resistance.

3. Use “Emotional Bookends”

Writers lose momentum not because the work is hard — but because the emotions around the work are unregulated.

Before writing:

- Label your emotional state (calm, tense, avoidant, open).
- Set a tiny goal (“Write 6 sentences”).

After writing:

- Acknowledge what you accomplished.
- Close the session intentionally (a phrase, a breath, a tidy moment).

Your nervous system learns that writing is survivable — even pleasant.

4. Accountability isn’t pressure — it’s companionship

One of the biggest reasons the Scene Writing Summit and Mindset programs work so well is community rhythm.

When you write alongside others:

- You write more
- You write more often
- You stay emotionally regulated
- You stay connected to purpose

Find writing companions. Join a cohort. Attend retreats.

Momentum is amplified in community.

5. Break your year into Writing Seasons

Instead of trying to write consistently for 12 straight months (unrealistic), divide your year:

Winter: scene-building, reflection

Spring: drafting

Summer: deep work, retreats, breakthroughs

Fall: shaping, reorganizing, strengthening

Your writing aligns to a natural rhythm — not a grind.

6. Track progress gently

Track:

- scenes written
- hours spent
- discoveries made
- questions emerged
- breakthroughs
- emotional shifts
- research resolved

Do not track word count alone.

Word count rewards speed, not substance.

7. Momentum is a kindness practice

Writing family stories asks a lot of your emotional system. You're engaging with memory, loss, trauma, hope, identity, and lineage.

Momentum requires self-compassion.

Ask:

“How can I support myself emotionally so I can keep writing?”

- Maybe it's shorter sessions.
- Maybe it's more breaks.
- Maybe it's mindset coaching.
- Maybe it's a retreat.
- Maybe it's one scene at a time.
- Maybe it's giving yourself permission to not know everything before you begin.

Momentum grows when you stop punishing yourself for being human.



8. The Momentum Plan for 2026 (Your 7-Day Reset)

Day 1: Choose your Writing Container

Day 2: Set one micro-commitment

Day 3: Write for 10 minutes

Day 4: Identify one avoided scene

Day 5: Write a sensory-rich paragraph

Day 6: Attend a community session (live or replay)

Day 7: Celebrate your wins + reset

- Repeat weekly.
- Build rhythm.
- Watch your story take shape.

Momentum isn't magic.

It's repetition, rhythm, and relationship — with your story, with yourself, and with your writing community.

If you write imperfectly but consistently in 2026, you can transform your creative life. Just keep moving — one scene, one moment, one day at a time.

Sustain your momentum throughout 2026 with the...

Scene Writing Summit

A Quarterly Cohort for Writing Momentum,
Skill Expansion & Community Feedback

Some writers are already writing. What they need is focus. This path is for writers who feel stalled not from uncertainty, but from diffusion — too many ideas, too little protected time, and not enough feedback to know what's working. The desire is there. The commitment is there. The momentum isn't.

The Scene Writing Summit exists to bring writing back into the center through a focused week each quarter that includes

- Skill labs
- Real-time writing sessions
- Focused craft instruction
- And Gentle Feedback

The Summit creates space to work deeply and intentionally — scene by scene. It's not about rushing forward, but about making real headway in a way that feels sustainable and supported.

When Mindset Is the Real Obstacle

Most writers don't stop because they lack ideas. They stop because something quieter gets in the way. Self-doubt. Procrastination. Fear of getting it wrong. The sense that everyone else knows what they're doing—and you don't. These struggles rarely look dramatic. They show up in small, familiar ways:

- waiting until you “feel ready”
- avoiding the page because you don't trust what will come out
- starting strong, then quietly drifting away
- telling yourself you'll return when life is calmer, clearer, more settled

Over time, this creates a painful pattern: not because you don't care—but because you care deeply, and you're afraid to fail at something that matters.

Why Mindset Matters More Than Motivation

Motivation is unreliable. It comes and goes. Mindset is what determines what happens when motivation disappears.

When mindset is fragile:

- procrastination becomes protection
- perfectionism feels safer than progress
- avoidance masquerades as “being busy”

And none of this means you lack discipline or commitment.

It means you're working without enough structure, reassurance, and permission to be imperfect.

The Hidden Cost of Avoidance

When writing gets delayed again and again, the cost isn't just unfinished work.

It's the quiet erosion of confidence. Each missed week makes it harder to return.

Each abandoned plan reinforces the belief that you can't follow through. Each false start adds weight to the fear. Eventually, the work itself starts to feel heavier than it ever was.

This is why mindset struggles can't be solved by pushing harder. They require a different approach.

What Actually Helps When Mindset Is the Issue

Writers who move forward consistently—especially those who struggle with fear or self-doubt—usually have a few things in place:

- Clear, limited focus instead of endless possibilities
- Small, visible progress instead of vague goals
- Regular reflection instead of self-criticism

A way to adjust instead of starting over

In other words: structure that supports mindset, not pressure that overwhelms it

Planning as a Mindset Practice

Planning doesn't fix mindset on its own. But the right kind of planning changes how you relate to the work. When planning is thoughtful and realistic:

- fear has less room to take over
- procrastination loses its grip
- confidence grows through follow-through, not bravado

Weekly goals become promises you can keep. Reflection becomes information, not judgment. Progress becomes something you can see—not just hope for. This is where mindset shifts actually happen: not through affirmations, but through experience.

A Different Way Forward

If you've been stuck—not because you don't care, but because you care too much—there is nothing wrong with you. You don't need more pressure. You don't need tougher standards. You don't need to "try harder." You need support that helps you:

- clarify what matters now
- take manageable steps
- notice what's working
- rebuild trust in yourself as someone who can follow through

That's how confidence returns. Quietly. Gradually. Honestly. And once it does, the work becomes possible again.

Ready for Support with Mindset?

If mindset has been the thing holding you back—self-doubt, procrastination, fear, or difficulty staying consistent—you don't have to work through it alone. Mindset is a guided program inside the Family History Writing Studio designed to help you:

- build confidence through steady action
- understand the patterns that derail your progress
- develop habits that support consistency, not pressure
- return to your writing with clarity and follow-through

This isn't about fixing yourself.

It's about learning how to work with your mind instead of against it.

👉 **Learn more about the Mindset course:**
<https://lynnpalermo.kartra.com/page/mindset>

MINDSET PLANNER

Focus & Flourish



Mindset Includes our Focus & Flourish Planner

Focus & Flourish is the writing and mindset planner we use inside the Mindset program.

It was designed to support the exact challenges many writers face:

- unclear goals
- scattered focus
- stalled momentum
- difficulty following through

The planner includes:

- yearly, quarterly, monthly, and weekly planning pages
- habit tracking to support consistency
- reflection and review pages to help you adjust as you go

It is a coil ring binder so it lays flat for easy writing and access on your desk. Focus & Flourish gives you a clear structure for staying focused and making steady progress for an entire year.



FINDING YOUR NEXT RIGHT STEP

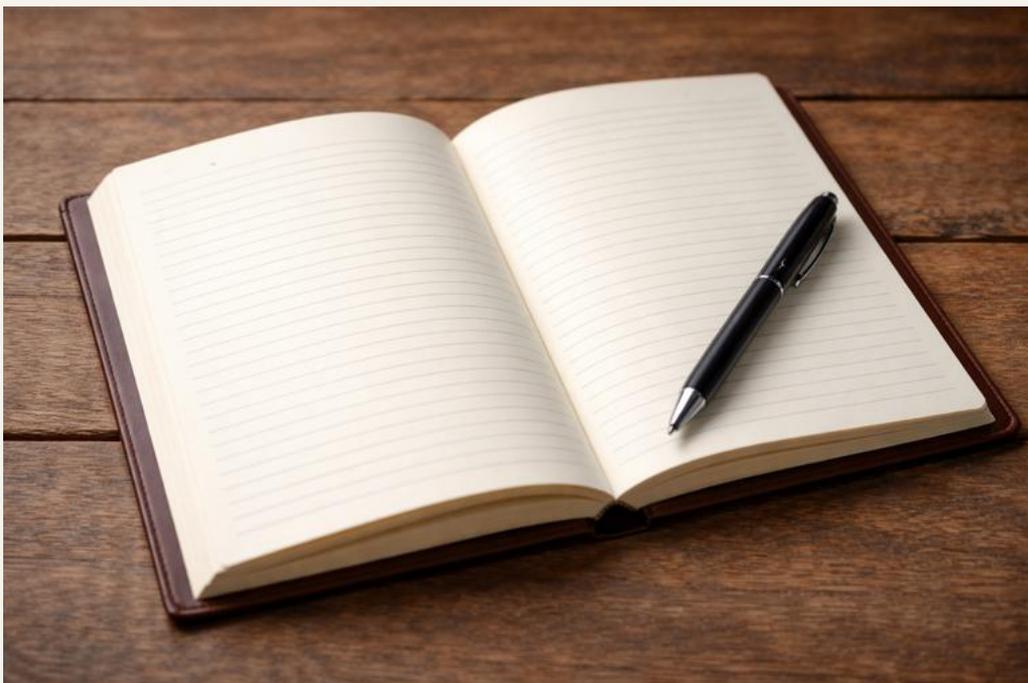


There comes a moment in every writing life when effort alone stops being the answer.

Not because you haven't tried hard enough, but because the work has shifted. The question is no longer What should I do next? but Where am I now – and what kind of support fits this moment?

Writing family history is not a straight path. It moves in seasons. Research deepens before it becomes story. Drafts take shape, stall, and find their way again. Confidence grows, wavers, and returns in new forms. Each phase asks for something different. January often arrives carrying expectations: new goals, fresh starts, decisive plans. But clarity doesn't come from forcing direction. It comes from honest orientation. From naming what's working, what feels heavy, and what you're ready to take on – without judgment.

This section is an invitation to pause. To reflect on where you are in your writing right now, without comparing your path to anyone else's. To recognize that needing focus, confidence, structure, or gentleness are all valid forms of readiness. When you begin with where you are, choices become simpler. Support becomes more effective. And the next step reveals itself – not as pressure, but as possibility.



"Clarity begins with knowing where you are."

We All Arrive Differently

Some are still in research. Some are writing but stuck. Some need confidence. Some need focus. All of these are valid places to be. No stage that matters more than another. No finish line you're late to reach. There is no urgency asking you to move faster than you're ready, and no comparison measuring your progress against anyone else's. Writing unfolds in its own time, shaped by the season you're in and the support you have around you. Wherever you find yourself right now is not a problem to solve — it's information. And when you begin from that place, the path forward becomes clearer, steadier, and far more sustainable.



You Don't Have to Guess

You don't need to figure this out alone. Clarity doesn't come from pushing yourself to decide, or from trying to predict the "right" next move. It comes from slowing down long enough to notice what's actually happening in your writing right now.

When you take time to reflect without judgment, patterns begin to emerge. What feels heavy. What feels stalled. What still carries energy. Identifying your stage doesn't limit you; it frees you from guessing. Support works best when it matches where you are — not where you think you should be. And when support fits, the path forward feels steadier. Not rushed. Not overwhelming. Just clear enough to take the next step with confidence.

THE NEXT STEP COMPASS

The Next Step Compass is a gentle check-in to help you find the support that fits. It was created for moments like this when you're not lost, but you're not entirely sure which direction to take next. It isn't designed to measure you, sort you, or rush you toward a decision. Instead, it offers a quiet pause. A chance to reflect honestly on where you are in your writing right now, and what kind of support would actually serve you.

What it does:

- It's not a quiz
- There are no right or wrong answers
- It helps you notice patterns in how you're working
- It points you toward support aligned with your current stage
- The Compass doesn't tell you what to do.
- It helps you notice what you need.

When you begin with clarity rather than pressure, choices become simpler. And the path forward feels less like a demand — and more like an invitation.

Begin with reflection. The Next Step Compass will guide you.

How It Works

You begin by reflecting honestly on your writing right now — without judgment, comparison, or the need to have it all figured out. As you move through the questions, you'll start to notice what resonates. Patterns emerge naturally: what feels heavy, what feels stalled, and what still carries energy. Nothing is scored as right or wrong. It's simply information. From there, you're invited to explore paths that match your stage — support designed to meet you where you are, not push you toward something you're not ready for. Identify where you are. Choose what you need.

Take the next right step — supported.

[Begin The Next Step Compass](#)





WRITE THE MOMENT NOT THE TIMELINE

How to choose the right scenes in family-history storytelling

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Documents give us facts.
Writers give those facts meaning.

Family-history writers are gifted collectors. We gather facts, dates, records, movements, births, migrations, tragedies, and triumphs across generations. We accumulate the pieces of our ancestors' lives the way others collect postcards or heirlooms. But when it comes time to write the story, those treasured facts can become a trap.

The instinct is almost universal: start at the beginning, list what happened, follow the chronology. Birth → marriage → children → move → job → death. A tidy, respectable timeline that captures everything. Except story does not breathe in timelines. It breathes in moments.

Moments are the places where something shifted. Where a character wanted something and the world pushed back. Where a decision was made. Where a consequence was felt. Moments are the sparks inside the long quiet stretches of history.

A scene is built from a moment, not a year, not a decade, not a list of events. And not every moment is equal. So how do you know which moments are “writeable”?

Look for your ancestor’s emotional pivots, the places where they were forced to choose, act, respond, or confront something inevitable. If you imagine the story as a path, these are the stones they had to step on. Three questions will help you locate these moments quickly:

““ *The story lives in the silence
between the records.*

1. Did something change?

Conflict, confrontation, discovery, loss, arrival, departure — change is the engine of scene work. If nothing changed in that moment, you probably don’t have a scene.

2. Does this moment reveal something deeper about the character?

Their values. Fears. Hopes. Wounds. Resilience.

If the moment exposes emotional truth, it’s scene-worthy.

3. Does this moment carry the story forward?

A scene should not exist just because it happened. It should exist because it matters to the character’s journey.

Let documents guide you, but not limit you

Historical records rarely offer scenes, they give us bones. It’s our job to supply the connective tissue: context, sensory detail, emotional resonance, the human stakes implied but unspoken. A ship manifest doesn’t tell you what an ancestor felt stepping onto the deck. A census doesn’t reveal the arguments that led to a move across provinces. A baptism register doesn’t disclose the grief behind a name choice. Your role as a writer is not to fabricate, but to observe the silences. Sometimes, the most powerful moments are hidden in what the record doesn’t say.

Finding the heartbeat of your story

Choose three pivotal documents or events from your ancestor’s life.

Now ask:

1. What happened just before this?
2. What happened immediately after?
3. Who else was present?
4. What was emotionally at stake?
5. What internal shift might have occurred?

This exercise reveals narrative pressure points — story-ready moments that can be shaped into scenes.

A writing prompt to try today

Take a document from your research and write the moment just before it was created. Not the fact, but the scene.

Before the passenger manifest → the decision to leave home.

Before the marriage record → the conversation where commitment became certain.

Before the land deed → the negotiation, the dream, or the fear behind the purchase.

These are the moments where story lives.

In the end...

You don't need to write everything that happened.

You need to write everything that mattered.

Story is not the sum of events.

Story is the sum of moments that shaped a life — one scene at a time.



Write the Stories Your Family Will Cherish

**Join the 16th Annual
Family History Writing Challenge**

Free • Guided • Supportive
January 21 – February 19

If you've been meaning to write your family history — but aren't sure where to begin, how to shape it, or how to keep going — this free challenge is a gentle place to start.

Join me for live writing sessions, short teaching moments, and quiet momentum that helps you turn research, memories, and half-formed ideas into meaningful family stories.

Save Your Spot — It's Free

THE TEN MOST COMMON SCENE MISTAKES (AND WHAT TO DO INSTEAD)

Scenes are where stories earn their meaning. And yet, this is where many writers feel the most unsure. Not because they lack insight or research—but because scene writing asks us to choose: what matters now, whose perspective leads, and what emotional shift this moment must carry. The mistakes below aren't failures. They're patterns I see again and again when writers are learning to translate information into lived experience. If you recognize yourself here, you're not behind—you're exactly where scene work begins.

1. The Scene Has No Emotional Shift

The scene ends exactly where it began emotionally.

Instead: Ask what changes—even slightly—by the final line.

2. Too Much Information, Not Enough Presence

Facts overwhelm the moment.

Instead: Let information surface through action, dialogue, or sensory detail.

3. The Scene Exists Only to Explain

The scene feels like a delivery system for context.

Instead: Anchor the scene in a want, tension, or dilemma.

4. No Clear Point of View

The camera drifts between people and perspectives.

Instead: Choose one emotional lens and stay there.

5. Dialogue That Explains What Everyone Already Knows

Characters say things for the reader's benefit.

Instead: Let subtext do the work. What's not said matters more.

6. The Scene Could Be Cut Without Consequence

Nothing downstream depends on it.

Instead: Identify what this scene sets in motion or complicates.

7. The Emotional Weight Is Announced, Not Shown

The writing tells us how to feel.

Instead: Trust gesture, silence, and restraint.

8. The Scene Is Too Big, Too Soon

High drama without foundation.

Instead: Build pressure gradually; let meaning accumulate.

9. The Writer Tries to Resolve Too Much

The scene ties everything up neatly.

Instead: Allow unease, ambiguity, or unanswered questions.

10. The Scene Serves Plot but Not Character

Events happen, but no one is changed.

Instead: Ask how this moment deepens the character's inner arc.



FROM KNOWING THE MISTAKES TO PRACTICING THE CRAFT

Each year, some writers choose to spend time inside scenes — not racing toward drafts, not fixing entire manuscripts — but focusing on the smallest unit where story actually lives.

The Scene Writing Summit exists as a shared space for that kind of work.

Over several focused sessions, writers examine what makes a scene hold:

- how tension is sustained,
- how emotional movement is shaped,
- how choices — small and deliberate — give a scene meaning beyond what's happening on the surface.

There's no expectation to arrive polished. Only a willingness to look closely, revise thoughtfully, and stay curious about the work.

At the summit, writers typically explore:

- How to anchor scenes in emotional truth
- Ways to avoid flat or mechanical scene structure
- Techniques for entering and exiting scenes with purpose
- How restraint, not excess, strengthens impact
- What revision looks like at the scene level — not the manuscript level

For some, the summit becomes a turning point. For others, it's a refinement — a chance to strengthen what's already forming. If your scenes are asking for more attention this year, this may be one place where that work continues — steadily, thoughtfully, and in good company.



WHO THIS GATHERING IS FOR

This gathering may be for you if...

- You have material, drafts, or fragments — but scenes still feel uneven or uncertain
- You want to strengthen emotional depth without melodrama
- You're ready to move beyond intuition and understand why a scene works
- You're revising and sensing that something important isn't landing yet
- You want focused craft conversations without pressure to produce volume
- You value thoughtful feedback, structure, and shared language around scene

No urgency. No performance.
Just steady attention to the work itself.

Registration for the 2026 Scene Writing Summit is now open.

WRITING IS AN EVOLUTION, NOT AN ARRIVAL

Many writers sit down at the page carrying an invisible expectation:

I should know how to do this by now.

They've read books. Taken classes. Studied examples they admire. And yet, when the words come out tangled or incomplete, frustration sets in. What's often missing isn't talent or commitment. It's an understanding of how writing actually works. Writing is not something you absorb all at once and execute perfectly. It's something you grow into—layer by layer.

The Myth of the Instant Masterpiece

It's tempting to believe that if you just learn enough, one more method, one more framework, one more insight you'll suddenly be able to write something fully formed and exceptional.

But writing doesn't work that way. You can't sit down, absorb everything you need, apply it all at once, and produce a polished, publishable book. Even the writers whose work appears effortless didn't arrive there fully formed. They built their craft over time. Not by mastering everything at once but by learning what mattered next.

Foundations Come Before Flourish

Every strong piece of writing rests on quiet fundamentals:

- knowing what you're writing about
- understanding scope and focus
- recognizing what belongs in the story — and what doesn't
- learning how to begin, sustain, and complete a piece

These aren't glamorous skills. They don't announce themselves on the page. But without them, writers often feel stuck, circling ideas, restarting drafts, or losing confidence halfway through.

Foundations give writers something solid to stand on. They allow you to write forward instead of sideways.

Learning to Write Is Like Learning to See

Early in a writer's journey, everything feels loud:

- every rule
- every technique
- every piece of advice

It's overwhelming because nothing has settled yet. With time and repetition, something changes.

The noise quiets. Patterns emerge. Decisions become easier. That's not because the writer has learned everything. It's because earlier knowledge has had time to take root. Writing skill isn't stacked by collecting information. It's stacked by absorbing, applying, and then returning—again and again.

Growth Happens in Stages (Whether We Notice or Not)

Most writers move through phases, even if they don't name them:

- Learning how to begin
- Learning how to sustain
- Learning how to shape
- Learning how to refine

Trying to skip ahead often leads to discouragement. Refinement tools feel useless when the structure underneath isn't stable yet. But when foundational skills are in place, higher-level craft becomes not only useful—but exciting. You start to recognize where your writing could deepen. You can see what's almost working. You know what to reach for next.

Why Mastery Is Built, Not Downloaded

No writer ever "finishes" learning to write. What changes is how they learn. Early on, writers need orientation—language, structure, and reassurance. Later, they need precision, ways to sharpen, nuance, and elevate what's already there. Each stage prepares you for the next. And each return to the page reveals something new not because the rules changed, but because you did.

Trust the Long Arc

Writing well isn't about doing everything right the first time. It's about staying in relationship with the work long enough for it to mature.

- To let early skills become second nature.
- To let new tools land when you're ready for them.
- To recognize that every stage has value.

You don't become a writer by arriving. You become one by continuing.

OFFICE HOURS: WHERE WRITING COMES BACK TO LIFE

Writing is often imagined as a solitary act—but momentum, clarity, and confidence rarely grow in isolation.

That's why Office Hours exist.

Available at no cost to all Masterclass, Story Foundations, and Skillbuilders members, Office Hours are a shared space for writers to reconnect with their work through conversation, curiosity, and community.

- They are not lectures.
- They are not critiques.
- And they are not about having the “right” question.

Office Hours are a working conversation, an opportunity to talk through what feels unfinished, uncertain, or just out of reach. Sometimes a writer arrives with a clear question. More often, they arrive with a feeling: this matters, but I don't yet know how.

That's enough.



Motivation through presence

Simply showing up—whether you speak or listen—can be motivating. Hearing other writers articulate their doubts and discoveries reminds us that uncertainty is not a failure of skill, but a natural part of the creative process. Momentum often returns not because a problem is solved, but because it's named.

Knowledge grounded in real work

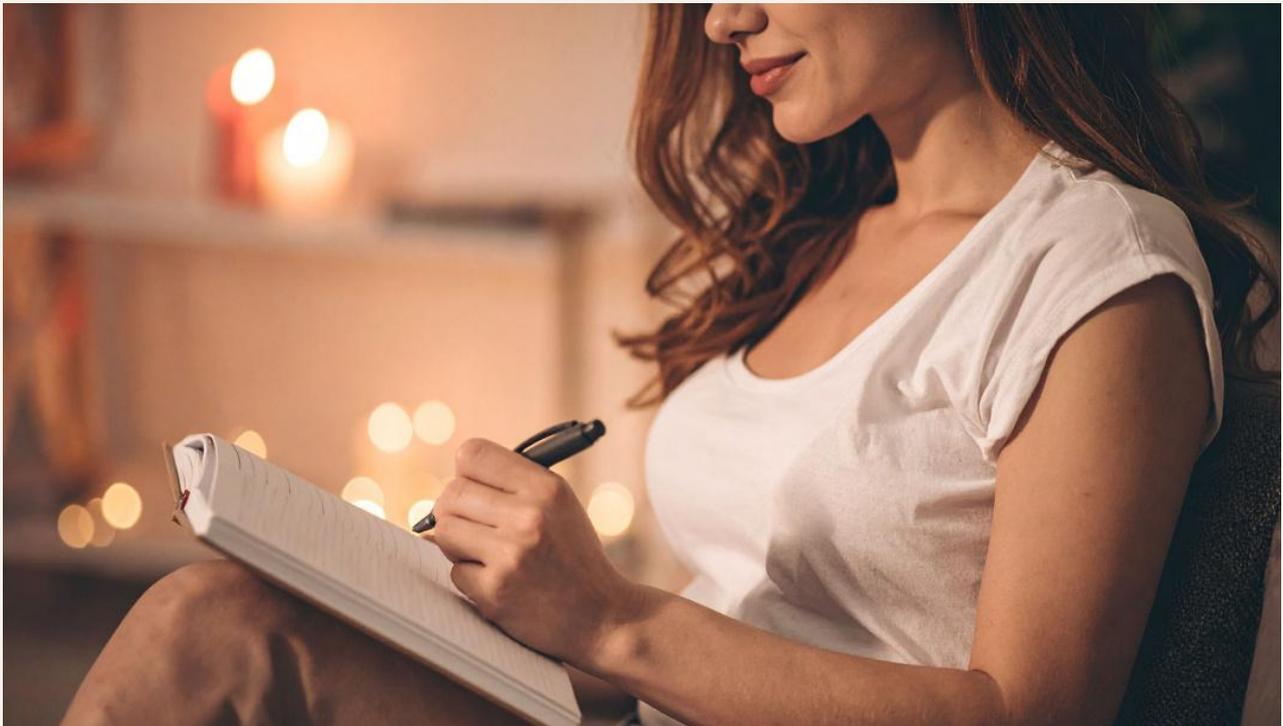
Office Hours bridge craft and practice. Questions arise from real scenes, real research, real stories in progress. Writers often discover that someone else's question unlocks insight for their own work—without ever needing to raise a hand. This is learning in context, not theory.

Community that sustains the work

Over time, Office Hours create rhythm. Familiar voices. Shared language. A sense that the work is held, even when it's difficult. Writing doesn't have to be lonely to be meaningful. You're welcome to participate in whatever way feels right:

- Ask a question live
- Post one in advance in the Student Portal
- Or listen and reflect

Office Hours aren't about performance. They're about staying engaged—with your writing, your learning, and the community that supports it.



WRITER

SPOTLIGHT

Stories in Progress

Every story takes its own time. Some arrive fully formed after years of research. Others emerge slowly, scene by scene. Some are completed and shared. Others are still finding their shape. All of them matter.

This section highlights writers within the Family History Writing Studio community not because they've reached a finish line, but because they've stayed with the work. Each spotlight reflects a different stage of the journey, reminding us that progress doesn't look the same for everyone. Linda shared these samples of her writing journey and I just had to share them with you.



Getting the Homestead

by Linda Simpson

The July sun beat down on Donald Lisle McDougall as he stood on the Pipestone, Manitoba station platform, his mother's hand clasped tightly in his in 1911. Although early the morning heat was already rising from the track ballast, and grasshoppers buzzed in the prairie grass beside the rails.

"You've got the address of that boarding house in Calgary, Lisle?" His mother's voice wavered slightly as she called him by his common name, straightening his collar one last time. She'd found it advertised in the Grain Growers' Guide (GGGC 1908-1928), carefully copying the details onto a slip of paper.

"Yes, Ma," Lisle replied, patting the breast pocket of his light cotton shirt where he kept the carefully folded paper. He also felt his return train ticket. The Colonist car fare had cost \$17.50, a fair bit of his savings but about half of the first-class ticket he wanted to purchase. His remaining savings felt heavy in his trouser pocket – enough for the land filing fee, boarding house rates, and food, he hoped.

The train's whistle pierced the summer quiet. Lisle watched as the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) locomotive rolled into view, heat waves distorting the air above its stack. He'd never been further west than Brandon, Manitoba but the stories of free homestead land in Alberta had filled his dreams all spring while he helped with the seeding.

The conductor called, "All aboard!" Lisle gave his mother one final hug. "I'll be back before you know it, Ma. Once I've filed my claim."

The journey stretched across two days and a night, the rhythm of the rails marking time as they clattered westward. Lisle shifted on the hard wooden bench of the colonist car, trying to find a comfortable position for the arduous journey.

Around him, other young men like himself filled the car, many with the same look of nervous anticipation in their eyes. A few had brought their own cushions – something he wished he'd thought to do.

The first major stop came at Brandon, where they waited forty minutes for a crew change. Lisle stretched his legs on the platform, watching workers check the locomotive's mechanisms and topped up the tender with water and coal. Every few hours after that, they'd halt at water towers standing sentinel beside the track. He learned to recognize the rhythm: the squeal of brakes, the hiss of steam, the hollow splashing as thousands of gallons of water poured into the tender. Fifteen minutes at Broadview for water, thirty minutes at Moose Jaw for coal and a new crew, and twenty minutes at Swift Current, where coal cars waited on a siding. Through the night, he dozed between stops, the locomotive's whistle announcing their approach to each lonely prairie station. As they passed through Saskatchewan. At Medicine Hat, dusk settled in as they took on their final coal and water supplies before the last stretch to Calgary, Alberta.

Calgary, with a population of 43,704, was bigger than he'd imagined, the streets bustling with horses, wagons, and automobiles. He found the boarding house on 11th Avenue, a narrow three-story building with a sagging front porch. Like most boarding houses it was much cheaper than a hotel often owned and run by widows. The landlady was stern but ran a clean house and served decent meals, though the stew never quite measured up to his mother's.

He shared a small room with a railway worker and another homestead seeker for three nights, swapping stories and advice over strong coffee.

After a restless first night, he made his way through the bustling streets to the Dominion Land Titles Office. The brick building was already busy with land seekers, some of whom looked like they'd been waiting since dawn.

Inside, Lisle joined the queue of men studying the township maps mounted on the walls. Each available quarter-section was marked in white, while those already claimed were shaded. He'd done his homework, knowing he wanted land near a rail line and one of the small towns popping up on the unbroken prairie. An older man with a beard pointed out how the numbers worked – Sections 2, 4, 16, 18, 20, 22, 28, 30, 32, and 34 in each township were CPR sections. The Hudson's Bay Company owned Section 8 and three-quarters of Section 26. That left the remaining even-numbered sections for homesteading.

After sleeping on this decision, he returned to the Land titles office the following day, lined up once again to study the maps on the wall before queueing up to pay. When his turn came, Lisle approached the clerk's counter with his ten-dollar filing fee ready. The process was surprisingly brief. He stated his intention to become a British subject (though being Canadian-born, he already was), confirmed he was over eighteen, and swore he hadn't already claimed a homestead elsewhere. The clerk had him sign the affidavit and hand over the fee. In return, Lisle received his entry paper for the northwest of Section 12, Township 32, Range 1, West of the Fourth Meridian – 160 acres of possibilities.

Finally, he was a landowner of a quarter near Loverna, Saskatchewan. The agent's words rang in his ears as he tucked the document in his shirt pocket and walked back to the boarding house: "Three years to prove up the homestead and earn patent. Build a house, break 30 acres, 20 of which must be cropped, and live there six months yearly."

After a final breakfast at the boarding house, Lisle gathered his belongings and made his way to Calgary's CPR station to catch the eastbound train. The return journey felt different, though it was no shorter or more comfortable. Lisle rubbed his precious homestead papers fastened in his pocket as he recalled, "Keep your entry paper safe – you'll need it to prove up." Already dreaming of the house, he would build come spring. The endless prairie outside the train window wasn't empty anymore – it was full of possibility. He imagined his own fields of wheat stretching to the horizon, a sturdy house, and maybe even a family someday.

When the train pulled into Pipestone, he smelt the sweet smell as haying was underway. His mother was waiting on the platform, just as she had been when he left along with his father, who couldn't wait to hear about Lisle's journey. But Lisle wasn't the same person who had departed just over a week earlier. He was a landowner now, with dreams as big as the Alberta sky.

He had until spring to gather supplies and prepare. The real work – the breaking of soil, the building of shelter, the long days of labour – all lay ahead. But for now, he had his piece of Alberta in his pocket.

He helped his father with summer work and the fall harvest. As they settled into the reduced farm work of winter, Lisle spent his evenings drawing plans for his homestead and making lists of supplies he would need. His sage mother taught him how to cook and bake bread, as he would also require those skills. Come spring, he would join the great wave of settlers moving west, carrying hope and ambition across the prairies like seeds scattered on fertile soil.

The Great Sod House Adventure

by Linda Simpson

When 20-year-old Lisle first spotted his quarter section six miles west of Loverna, Saskatchewan, in 1912, he had two immediate thoughts: first, that it was the most beautiful piece of land he'd ever seen, and second, that he had absolutely no idea how to build a house out of grass.

"Well," he muttered to his horses, who'd already developed a habit of ignoring his running commentary, "suppose we'll figure it out or freeze come winter." The horses flicked their ears sympathetically.

Choosing the building site took three days. Lisle walked around and tested the soil using the scientific method of "poke it with a stick and hope for the best." He finally selected a south-facing slope near a creek, though he swore the creek had moved twice just to spite him. The real entertainment began when he started cutting sod.

The newly acquired breaking plow seemed simple enough: drag it through the prairie grass, cut neat strips of sod, and build a house. What actually happened was more like: drag plow through grass, hit a rock, get jerked forward, face-plant, spook horses, chase horses, calm horses, restart. By day two, he had developed an impressive vocabulary of words his mother would definitely not approve of, along with a collection of bruises in places he didn't know could bruise.

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Cutting the sod into two-foot sections went smoother, primarily because the horses couldn't be blamed for anything. Each block weighed about fifty pounds, which Lisle discovered was exactly the weight needed to make a man question all his life choices. He developed a rolling technique that saved his back but sacrificed his dignity, as anyone passing by would have witnessed a grown man rolling chunks of dirt around like an oversized dung beetle.

The walls were another adventure entirely. "Grass side down, roots will bind together," he remembered reading. What they forgot to mention was that sometimes the roots had other plans. His first attempt at a corner collapsed with the dramatic timing of a vaudeville act, waiting until he'd just stepped back to admire his work. He stood there for a full minute, covered in dirt, thankful no one in Manitoba could see him failing as they couldn't understand his need to go west, especially by himself.

The roof proved to be the true test of his sanity. Balanced on top of the walls like a circus performer, he laid poplar poles, which he had bought in Macklin, Saskatchewan, across the top, trying not to think about how far away the ground was. The sod layers that followed required the flexibility of a contortionist and the patience of a saint. His first rain test revealed leaks in exactly the spots he'd been most proud of, naturally.

His one luxury was a window brought from Manitoba, which he'd wrapped so carefully for the journey west that you'd think it was made of spun sugar rather than glass. It took him nearly two hours to install it, mainly because he kept stepping back to admire how the light changed the entire feeling of his dirt home. The door he constructed from packing crates had a charming habit of sticking in rainy weather, which he chose to call a "security feature."

After two months of what he later called "the most elaborate dirt-stacking project in Alberta," Lisle had his home. That first night, he sat by his stove feeling rather pleased with himself, eyeing his bunk to get a good night's sleep, not seeing how small his one-room home was. Homestead rules indicated that the house had to be eighteen feet by twenty-four feet minimum. As most sod blocks were three feet thick, that would have made the interior of the house about fifteen feet by twenty-one feet. (not much bigger than a bedroom in 2024). Most soddies ceilings were about seven and one half feet high at the front, and low pitch sloped lower in the back.

Sure, there was a small leak in the corner that dripped with suspicious musical timing, and yes, maybe the floor was still a bit wobbly in spots, but it was his. All his. The house would faithfully serve him until he built his wood frame house, though it did develop "personality quirks." The thick walls kept summer heat and winter cold at bay, though they also harboured the occasional surprised mouse. Every spring, he'd climb up to patch the roof, having learned that prairie weather had a wicked sense of humour when it came to finding weak spots in sod construction. The sods needed to be mudded over with clay mud to close up cracks and make them impervious to rain and wind.

Lisle could not rest as he needed to build a small sod barn for his horses by the corrals that he had already constructed from sod before winter set in, along with all the other work needed to carve out his destiny and prove up his homestead.



**Linda
Simpson**

CRAFT & CONTINUITY

Skillbuilders

Some writers don't need a new beginning. They need ongoing refinement. This path is for writers who are already engaged with their work – drafting, revising, shaping – and who find that new questions arise as the story deepens. Craft becomes more nuanced. Choices carry more weight. What once felt clear begins to ask for greater precision.

Skillbuilders exists to support writers in the middle of the work. Rather than moving through a single, linear curriculum, Skillbuilders offers focused, topic-driven sessions that address specific elements of craft as they naturally arise: scene construction, emotional layering, structure, voice, historical pressure, and continuity across time. Each workshop invites writers to bring their current project into the room and apply what they're learning directly to the pages they're already writing.

There's no expectation to overhaul your process or keep pace with anyone else. This is about staying connected to the work – returning to craft with curiosity, steadiness, and respect for where you are in the story.

If you're looking for sustained craft support that grows alongside your writing without committing to a full program or retreat, this may be where you land.

Who Skillbuilders Is For

Skillbuilders may be right for you if:

- You are actively writing or revising a family history or memoir
- You want targeted craft guidance without enrolling in a long program
- You enjoy deep dives into specific storytelling techniques
- You prefer applying learning directly to your current project
- You value continuity and refinement over starting from scratch

Skillbuilders is offered as a monthly series.
Registration for the 2026 sessions is now open.

SKILLBUILDERS 2026 – MONTHLY TOPICS

JAN – Mastering Time

Learn to move across years, decades, and generations with clarity and emotional intention using compression, expansion, flashbacks, and future glimpses.

FEB – AI Scene Drafting: Sparsely but Powerfully

Use AI as a structural assistant without losing voice, nuance, or authorship.

MAR – Sculpting Scene Transitions

Create fluid movement between scenes, timelines, and emotional beats – especially in multi-era narratives.

APR – Writing Interior Weather

Express inner life through mood, rhythm, sensory detail, and metaphor – without over-explanation.

MAY – Creating Cinematic Moments Without Visual Overload

Build vivid, emotionally anchored scenes through movement, contrast, and clarity.

JUN – Writing Emotional Complexity in Real Ancestors

Portray ancestors with nuance – neither idealized nor judged – through honest emotional layering.

JUL – Writing the Weight of History

Embed cultural, political, and social pressure into scenes without info-dumping.

AUG – How to Use AI Without Flattening Your Voice

Develop a voice-protection workflow that supports efficiency without dilution.

SEP – Writing Work: Occupations, Labour & Daily Life

Use labour and daily routines to reveal character, tension, and theme.

OCT – Writing Faith, Ritual & Superstition in Historical Context

Integrate belief systems authentically into motivation, community, and conflict.

NOV – Framing Devices for Family History Narratives

Explore narrators, objects, documents, and structural frames that unify complex stories.

DEC – Writing the Researcher as a Character

Blend memoir and ancestry with intention – setting the stage for inherited story work

Choosing Support That Matches the Work

Some writers don't need a group. They need space — or a guide ; This path is for writers whose needs don't fit neatly into a cohort or calendar.

- Those working through complex material.
- Those navigating transition.
- Those who want focused, individualized support without distraction.

Solo retreats at the Farmhouse offer uninterrupted time to write, reflect, and reset in a quiet, intentional setting. With no schedule to keep but your own, the work can unfold at a pace that feels grounded and honest.

One-to-one coaching packages provide tailored guidance shaped around your story, your questions, and your momentum whether you're just beginning, revising deeply, or finding your way back to the page after time away. This is not about pushing harder. It's about listening more closely.

If you're seeking support shaped specifically around you, this may be where you land.



Learn more about [solo retreats](#) and [private coaching](#)

WHY ATTEND A WRITER'S RETREAT

Most writers don't struggle because they lack ideas. They struggle because there's never enough space. Space to think without interruption. Space to listen to what the work is actually asking for. Space to write without having to justify the time. A writer's retreat offers something increasingly rare:

1. Time Alone Isn't the Same as Time Away

You can carve out an hour here or there at home; early mornings, quiet evenings, weekends squeezed between obligations. But a retreat is different. When you step away from daily routines, something subtle happens:

- your mind stops scanning for what's next.
- you're no longer holding space for emails, meals, or errands.
- you're holding space for the work.

This sustained attention allows ideas to surface that rarely appear in fragments of borrowed time.

2. Retreats Shift You From "Trying" to "Listening"

At home, writing often feels like effort. At a retreat, it feels like attention. Without constant interruption, writers begin to hear:

- what the story wants to become
- what no longer belongs
- where the emotional weight actually sits

This isn't about producing more words. It's about making truer ones. Many writers leave retreats having written less than expected — but knowing far more clearly what matters. That clarity is invaluable.

3. A Change of Place Changes the Work

Environment shapes language. Light through a different window. Silence that isn't charged with responsibility.

Rooms that don't hold unfinished to-do lists.

A retreat setting gently removes you from old patterns:

- writing in the same chair
- thinking the same thoughts
- circling the same paragraphs

New surroundings invite new sentences.

4. Writing Is Solitary – But It Doesn't Have to Be Isolated

Even when writing alone, there is comfort in being among others who understand the work.

At a retreat:

- no one asks what you do for a living
- no one questions why this story matters
- no one needs you to explain why writing feels urgent

That shared understanding lowers resistance. Writers often take braver risks when they feel quietly witnessed – even without sharing a single word.



5. Guidance Matters – Especially With Personal or Ancestral Work

When writing draws from memory, family history, or inherited stories, it can stir more than craft questions.

Writers may encounter:

- emotional fatigue
- uncertainty about boundaries
- confusion about structure or scope
- fear of “getting it wrong”

A retreat that includes thoughtful guidance provides something essential: a steady hand on the compass. Not someone to tell you what to write – but someone who can help you see where you are.

6. Retreats Create a Natural Turning Point

Many writers arrive at a retreat carrying a quiet question: “Is this something I’m really going to do?”

Retreats don’t always answer that question with certainty — but they do answer it with experience.

After time away, writers often leave knowing:

- whether this project matters enough to continue
- what support they need next
- what can be released
- what must be protected
- That turning point alone can justify the journey.

7. It’s Not an Escape — It’s a Return

A writer’s retreat isn’t about leaving life behind. It’s about returning to yourself — the part that notices, remembers, listens, and shapes meaning. When writers come home, the world hasn’t changed. But they have. They write differently. They choose differently. They make room for the work in new ways.

Is a Writer’s Retreat Right for You?

A retreat may be right if:

- you feel stalled or scattered
- your work carries emotional or ancestral weight
- you want depth, not urgency
- you’re ready for focused, intentional time

It may not be about finishing something. It may be about beginning — properly.





A Writing Retreat | May 2026

The Art of Refinement

A quiet week to strengthen what you've already begun.

The work has already begun. Now it's time to listen. This retreat is designed for that moment.

Set in the quiet elegance of Niagara-on-the-Lake, our May gathering invites you to step out of momentum and into discernment. To slow down enough to hear what your work is asking of you next – and to refine with care rather than force. This is not a place to start over. It's a place to stay.

*“Refinement is not about adding more –
it's about seeing more clearly.”*

What You'll Work On

Reading your draft with fresh, supported eyes

Strengthening scene clarity, emotional pacing, and narrative flow

Identifying what to cut, what to deepen, and what to trust

Refining voice without flattening complexity

Learning to revise without losing the heart of the story

You'll move between guided workshops, generous writing time, and small-group conversations — all designed to support thoughtful, sustainable revision.

Our retreat home offers a rhythm that honors both focus and rest. Mornings shaped around craft and writing.

Afternoons open for quiet revision, walks through town, or conversation that continues what the page has stirred.

Meals are shared. Time is protected. The atmosphere is calm, collegial, and deeply respectful of the work each writer carries.



Who This Retreat Is For

- Writers with an active draft or substantial body of work
- Those ready to revise with intention, not urgency
- Writers who value depth, clarity, and emotional truth
- Anyone who wants focused guidance in a quiet, supportive setting

May Retreat • Niagara-on-the-Lake Registration is open.

Full details and registration at

<https://lynnpalermo.kartra.com/page/NOTLRetreat>





THE FAMILY HISTORY

Writing Studio

www.familyhistorywritingstudio.com