The Road from Research to Writing

Handout Notes for 8 Oct 2025 *by Michael A Blackledge*

Humans are the only creatures who can consciously create a legacy. As practicing genealogists, we are uniquely situated to leave behind written records of those who have gone before us. We know how to do the research; we have the notes and records – now how to create the legacy? The three of us today are sharing our diverse techniques and experiences on creating legacy through writing.

In 1972 when AGS began, self-publishing was a small fraction of the publishing industry. Self-publishing existed but was a niche and often costly endeavor, typically referred to as "vanity publishing." It required authors to pay significant upfront costs for printing and distribution, and the resulting books had limited reach. There were no digital platforms, and the market was dominated by a handful of traditional publishers who served as gatekeepers.

In contrast, today you are so fortunate! The landscape has been completely transformed by digital technology. The number of self-published books has exploded, with over 2 million new titles released every year. This number continues to grow, far outpacing the titles of traditionally published books.

The reasons for this dramatic increase include:

- **Ease of Access:** Platforms like Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing and IngramSpark or even Archive.org allow authors to publish their work for free or at low cost.

- **Print-on-Demand:** Physical books are only printed when a customer orders them, eliminating the need for large, expensive print runs.

- **Digital Formats:** The rise of e-books and audiobooks has created new and inexpensive avenues for self-publishing.

- **Creative Control:** Authors can retain full creative control over their work, from the cover design to the marketing strategy.

So how to publish your book? Can you just go to one 'full service' company, say Palmetto Publishing [www.palmettopublishing.com], and get it all done? There are many such companies out there who would love to help you – for a price. But you control the price which is primarily the cost to them of producing a book, plus any services you might require (or sign up for) such as creating a cover for your book or editing or formatting your book. Modern techniques such as Print on Demand and eBooks have greatly reduced the upfront costs.

The self-publishing landscape is vast and constantly shifting. The term "self-publishing company" can encompass a wide range of business models, from large-scale platforms to small, a la carte service providers. When AGS created its biography, *The First Fifty Years*, it chose **IngramSpark** as its publisher/printer. Let's categorize such companies to get a clearer picture:

- **Major Platforms (The "Big Boys"):** These are the largest and most well-known platforms that provide free or low-cost tools for authors to publish and distribute their books. They are more of a service than a "company" in the traditional sense. Examples include Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), IngramSpark, Barnes & Noble Press, and Draft2Digital. These platforms account for the vast majority of self-published titles.

- **Assisted or Hybrid Publishers:** This is the category that Palmetto Publishing falls into. These companies offer a menu of paid services—like editing, cover design, formatting, and marketing—to help authors create a professional-quality book. They work on a fee-for-service model, where the author pays for the help they need but retains their rights and royalties. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of these companies worldwide, ranging from small-scale operations to larger, more established firms.

- **Specialty and Niche Service Providers:** Beyond the full-service companies, there is a massive ecosystem of individual freelancers and small businesses that provide specific services. This includes independent editors, book designers, illustrators, publicists, and marketing specialists. You can meet some of these folks locally if you join Southwest Writers [www.southwestwriters.com] or New Mexico Book Association [nmbookassociation.org], both with annual dues on the order of AGS dues – worth it!

The self-publishing industry is an "open market," meaning that a new company can pop up at any time. While there may be a few dozen well-known assisted publishing companies, the total number of businesses and individuals offering self-publishing services is likely in the tens of thousands. The market is driven by the fact that anyone can write and publish a book, and the demand for professional help is high.

First step: get your content together! Is this to be a Family History constructed around one ancestor, or a hierarchy of family members? Or a complete genealogy? Outline what your thoughts are, and what some of the points of interest you wish to develop. From your outline, you can draft your Table of Contents. A 'fluid' Table of Contents can be quite helpful in focusing your intentions.

Once you have your outline, now to develop your book's content. Have you heard of 'the magic button'? Essentially every genealogy software program has an output feature to produce a narrative report. A great way to start. And last week, AGS guest speaker Nicole Dyer gave a presentation on Genealogy Writing and AI, describing how Artificial Intelligence tools like ChatGPT and Claude can turn research logs into reports, and timelines into narrative. Excellent! A video of Nicole's presentation is still available to you on abqgen.org, as well as her extensive handout.