

Your Ancestor's Goals, Motivations, and Stakes

Every main character in a story has a goal that is ultimately the purpose of the story. The reader wants to see the main character reach their goal..or not.

Before you begin to write your story, it's important to recognise the goals, motivations and stakes of your ancestor. They are critical in shaping your ancestor's story.

In a family history story, we need to turn to our ancestor's life to identify their goal. Was there a major accomplishment in their life? This achievement may come in the form of something material, such as money, land, or immigration. It could come in the shape of something emotional, such as freedom, love, fame or respect. Most human beings seek out both so don't be surprised if you discover both a tangible goal and an intangible goal in your ancestor's story.

Let's look at each of these elements individually

Goal - There is any number of material and or emotional desires we seek; these are our goals. Your family history story needs a goal, which means your Protagonist Ancestor needs a goal. Where do you find the goal of your ancestor? Look at the actions in their lives. Explore the events in their life. Did they emigrate, why? Did they own a great deal of land, did they fight in a war, did they become famous, or influential in politics, did they have a large family? Our ancestor's actions are clues to what they valued in life, their goals, the wants or desires that they put most of their effort towards.

Does your ancestor want something so badly that they are prepared to destroy or be destroyed to attain this goal? To make sacrifices? To take risks? Did they join the army because they believe in the cause? Did leave the country because they didn't support the cause?

Of course, not all goals are created equally, the bigger the goal, the bigger the story, the bigger the story, the more compelling the read. Try to find a goal that

you feel will provide a big story that will engage your family. Stop thinking of your family history as a chronological timeline of events, but rather a desire, a want, with obstacles to overcome on the path to it.

Motivations - Once you've determined the goal of your story, the next step is to understand the motivation behind that goal. Why did your ancestor have this particular goal? Each and every human being who walked this earth had wants, desires that were driven by a motivation. Through your research, you want to understand what that motivation may be. For example, if your ancestor's goal was to own land, what in their history, their past motivated that desire? Look at motivation as the back story to the want. Perhaps they came from a long line of peasants and lived in a country where class structure prohibited them from owning land. This would be the motivation behind their goal to own land.

Stakes - What happens if your ancestor does not fulfil his goal? The stakes are why we keep reading, if there is nothing at stake, no risk then there is little reason to keep turning the page. Of course, not all stories are life-or-death. Again big stakes produce big stories. While the risks may not necessarily be life or death, our ancestors faced some genuine stakes. For example – war, poverty, deportation, insurrection, jail, poorhouses are only a few of the outcomes that may have occurred if they had not taken actions towards their goals.

Identify the goals, motivations and stakes of your ancestor, and you have identified the heart of their story and the elements on which to shape your family history story plot. If your ancestor had several accomplishments, you may wish to fill out one of these worksheets for each one to help you identify the goal that would deliver the most impact in your story.

Ancestor Name: _____

Identify a major accomplishment in your ancestor’s life.

What obstacles did your ancestor overcome to achieve this goal

What motivated this goal? Why was it important to him or her

What would have happened if they had failed? What was a stake?
