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# Asking “What if” Being a Sleuth

by Denis Ledoux



**W**rite  
about  
(or at  
least think about)  
the *opposite* of  
some of your  
most closely held  
assumptions.

Many of the stories I first hear in lifewriting workshops are “official” family versions. Because they are writing family tales, writers tend to memorialize what they accept as truth without testing it against their adult perceptions of human nature or knowledge of psychology and history.

If you’d like to be a sleuth, challenge yourself to undo the often unconscious “cover-up” that families provide as a buffer between themselves and the world. Here’s an exercise you’ll find useful. Write about (or at least think about) the *opposite* of some of your most closely held assumptions.

As an example, let’s look at the story George wrote about how patient his grandmother was. In contrast, his story asserted, Grandfather was gruff and rude and always decidedly unpleasant. While I didn’t know either of these grandparents, I sensed a red flag going up. The characters were uni-dimensional, fixed in their opposing traits. Yet life, unlike fiction, is quite complex.

What if...Grandmother held a view that women should be sweet and accommodating and couldn’t accept her feelings of bitter disappointment in life while the Grandfather, also “programmed” by his culture and times, believed women were the center of the home. If she was disappointed in him, then he was a failure in life. His frustration was expressed in all the subtle and not so subtle ways that miscommunication in couples often is.

What if...he had dreams that she opposed for reasons of her own and the was passive-aggressive pattern of her forbearance made her a saint while he was left with all the negative expression of their long-standing battle of wills?

What if...Grandfather's medical condition caused him great pain?

To complete your exercise and reach the goal of a well-rounded character portrait and insight about family dynamics that follow from the real story of these characters’ interaction,

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it's not enough to speculate with your "what-if's." You must look for clues to substantiate the theories. For instance, did Grandfather once suffer an accident or have an illness? Did another family member live with the grandparents? How might s/he have effected the emotional climate in the house? Did Grandfather have a history of unrealized goals that were deferred for the practical realities of making a living and supporting a family?

**Y**our role as a lifestory writer and family history chronicler is to ask the "what if" questions that will push you to produce the most true-to-life manuscript you can.

Clues can come from many resources: medical records, relatives' memories, your recall of conversations, objects in the home, people's hobbies and interests.

In fact, Grandfather had a remarkable collection of atlases and maps he loved to take out and share with the grandkids. And despite hard times, he always subscribed to the *National Geographic*, which grandmother declared was a waste of good money. Can you deduce from these clues that he had dreams of traveling or living abroad which she dismissed as youthful fantasy because for her, home and family in their small town provided all her dreams' fulfillment.

As a "truth," this version of the saint versus the curmudgeon uncovers multi-dimensional, complex characters whose actions now speak of human drama at its most interesting.

The story George already knew was his mother's exasperated dismissal of her own frustration with the deadlocked struggle of wills that played out through the years of her childhood.

Your role as a lifestory writer and a family history chronicler is to ask the "what if" questions that will push you to produce the most true-to-life manuscript you can.

In almost every case when I have challenged a writer to be a sleuth, the story that results from asking "what if?" is immeasurably more interesting and provides insight and understanding at a deeper level than the "official" version.

Good luck as you become a detective hunting down the unofficial versions of your family stories!

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