

It's How You Ask!

Family heritage hobbyists over time become experts on knowing where to get information. Send the nominal fee along with a form or request to the proper government agency and records of births, deaths, marriages, and military service are yours. A wealth of information is gathered this way, but the stumbling block for many of us comes when we move beyond agencies, graveyards and the valued interview and information of close family and friends. What happens when we require the help of people we may only casually be acquainted with or perhaps don't know at all? Why is it that some people come away from such a situation with volumes of information while others are disappointedly stalled by unanswered letters or e-mails? The answer is in the approach. While we may be eager to explain all about our family research project and tell the person what we want from them, often we give that person no reason to want to help. It does, after all, take a measure of effort to dig out old documents or pictures and respond to letters and e-mails.

Although it might be tempting to pick up the phone and call the person whose help you need, unless it is someone you already have a relationship with, we recommend you make contact with a letter or e-mail. Being caught off guard by a phone call is likely to lower the person's comfort level with you and that's nowhere to start. So write and allow them to digest the contents of your letter and request at their own pace. Here are some helpful tips in writing that letter.

Start out by letting them know who you are, how you found them or who suggested you write to them, and why you are writing, which isn't the same thing as what you want from them. For example, you might say, "My name is James Gray and my Great Aunt Betty Young, who remembers your grandfather, suggested I write to you. I'm researching my family tree and it seems your Grandfather and mine were best friends before the War."

The reason for writing is the most important part of the letter because it is the only thing of interest, really, to the person receiving the letter. Remember you are a total stranger or no more than an acquaintance who the person may or may not recall. They have no interest, nor should they, in the research you're doing or what you need from them. What the reader of your letter wants to know is, Why are you writing to ME? not, What do you want of me? So the rule here is, the less you know a person, the more the letter must be about, or more precisely, directed at them. Make it clear what they have in common with you such as, their grandfather and yours were close friends, or their mother was your grandfather's half sister. After that, feel free to ask what it is you want from them. Often, asking for something specific will get a reply rather than something broad, like, "any information you have will be appreciated". It's always a nice touch to include a self-addressed, stamped envelope for their reply.

Finish up the letter or e-mail by again turning the focus back to them by saying how pleased you are to have discovered them by way of your Great Aunt (or however you happened upon them or their name) and that you hope to hear from them soon. Give them only what you wish them to have in the way of your street address, telephone number, or e-mail address.

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Even if the person doesn't have the picture you hoped to find, or the information missing from your research, if they reply to your letter, the door is open for more correspondence and sharing of information.

For more info:

Cyndi's List of Correspondence:

<http://www.cyndislist.com/correspd.htm>

Writing Successful Queries:

<http://www.lineages.com/FirstSteps/WriteQueries.asp>

Letter Writing:

<http://www.ancestry.com/columns/george/09-11-98.htm>

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