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The Magic Button

By Mike Blackledge



As this column has long proclaimed, we live in a golden age for genealogy research and publication. The Internet is a near-endless marvel. The Albuquerque Bernalillo Library system's Genealogy Center provides you everything 'free' from a scanner to Ancestry.com access. Our own Albuquerque Genealogical Society is at its peak now with near-monthly Research Days, this peerless Quarterly publication, a website that lists upcoming events and chronicles past 'gems,' a (new) Facebook group that allows members to post whenever, whatever, Special Interest Groups that further specific passions, and monthly programs and seminars that continue to inspire and educate us. A great time to be a genealogist!

*But the true organizational miracle, the tool that brings it all together, that makes our personal computers valuable and productive and furthers our research, is our own **software genealogy program**.*

We have populated previous columns [see: May 2007 and August 2007, always available at abqgen.org] with discussions, descriptions, and comparisons of software genealogical programs. Family Tree Magazine did a better job in August 2008 [see references]. And today even Wikipedia provides an excellent table/spreadsheet comparison of genealogy software programs, as well as a separate article on the subject itself [see References]. Wiki compares 23 genealogy programs: some for the Mac, most for Windows, some for free and several with a free trial or demo, provides their latest version number and corresponding latest release date, and – yes, this is a new world – whether they handle adoption and foster parents, single parent family, same sex marriage – everything you (or at least I) can think of.



For a print publication, one would often want a **narrative** report – a report that embeds your notes as well as the genealogical events you have captured, and that reads not unlike a commercial non-fiction book. Any software genealogy program worth its salt¹ has the capability to produce such reports – both Ancestor Narrative Reports and Descendant Narrative Reports. I refer to this feature as “**The Magic Button**” – you ‘push’ the button, and a book comes out! (well, at least a chapter!)

Plus you have considerable flexibility in your report. Here are the genealogy report format choices that RootsMagic gives you for creating this report “automagically”:

Modified Register
Register

¹ Only two of the 23 listed in Wiki do not provide this feature: GenEarth and Mac Family Tree

Outline (indented)
Henry (Indented)
D'Aboville (indented)

Now, **Rosemary** reminds us:

... even before selecting a type of report in our genealogy software, we must have everything already entered. I mean names, dates, places, sources--all verified. Run it through a reality or quality check. And of course stories--we have to have stories. I call them stories, but it is **life information** such as when they were naturalized, if they served the union or confederacy, or perhaps the Great War or WWII. We could also include family stories handed down. If we don't know exact details, we can cite the times/places they lived in. I included all this in my genealogy software before using the Magic Button.

After all that is perfected (ha!) we can do a Register Report (many choices here such as whether to bold descendants and spouses names, whether to trace back to the starting person, whether to include last name with every child (yes), how many generations to include, who the starting person is, etc. etc. etc.) and save it as an .rtf. Open it in Microsoft Word (another standard) and run it through spell check. Also now is the time to check for consistency, for example, abbreviations for circa and other abbreviations--make sure they are the same throughout. Ditto for date format. A person serious about publishing will want to run this through several times before getting it down. It's tedious, but worthwhile.

Then send it to a proofreader!

Rosemary has provided two pages of a sample Narrative Report in the Register Report format 'approved' by the NEGS (New England Genealogical Society). These samples are available at the AGS SIG for Writing and Publishing blog – see References. For your publication, you may want changes – changes you can make with your choices in the software, or choices you may have to edit in your word processor. Furthermore, the format of the report can be saved as Rich-Text Format (.rtf), Adobe PDF, Web Page (html), or Text File (.txt). Rosemary and I both suggest saving as Rich Text Format, as such a file captures all the formatting of your program (including indexing!) and can be opened and edited by any word processor.

The beauty of the narrative report is that you also have numerous ways to preserve or observe it – you can print it out, save it as a file, or view it on your computer screen. AGS Member **Lew Hartswick** recently demonstrated to me how easy it is to use the Magic Button in Legacy genealogy software. When your data has been entered into the program, you can select any individual in your resulting database and from the tabs at top of your screen, go to Reports > Publishing Center. This brings you to the Magic Button for Legacy! Your button is actually several buttons as Legacy provides a choice of several formats, to include: **Ancestor Book Report**, **Descendant Book Report**, and **Descendant Narrative Book**. These format choices correspond to Modified Register (for first two) and The Henry system where each child's line is followed down to the final known descendant (for the Descendant

Narrative format). Within each choice you have options for the font used, boldface, italic, or underlining in the titles or sections, etc. If an individual never marries, you can delete the marriage or relationship event for that person.

Regardless of the book (or in RootsMagic, 'narrative') report selected, the book is generated quite quickly. I usually start by looking at a preview of the report on my computer screen. I can quickly jot down a few items to correct – perhaps the notes do not fill across the screen, which tells me I need to select Word Wrap for that section of notes. Perhaps source citations show up in the notes, which tells me to change that entry to a Citation entry; or perhaps a copy of a newspaper article needs the Title bolded and centered, the paper's name and date italicized, and the article itself indented from both margins. As we say in the AGS SIG on Publishing and Writing, it's your book! Do what looks good to you, and is still readable for your audience!

Here are two example Narrative Reports captured from RootsMagic's Magic Button – the first is using **Modified Register** format:

2. **Patrick Verne WILSON** was born on 13 May 1961 in Atkinson, Holt Co, NE.¹

Patrick Verne WILSON and Laura Marie CORNHUSKER were married on 9 Oct 1982 in Omaha, Douglas Co, NE.^{1,3} They lived in O'Neill, NE in 1991. **Laura Marie CORNHUSKER**^{1,3} was born on 10 Jan 1960 in Omaha, Douglas Co, NE.

Patrick Verne WILSON and Laura Marie CORNHUSKER had the following children:

- +5 i. **Kelly Ann WILSON**, born 4 Jul 1989, Atkinson, Holt Co, NE; married Mark Thomas JACOBS, 18 Oct 2008, Omaha, Douglas Co, NE.
- 6 ii. **Christian Marie WILSON**³ was born on 19 Mar 1987 in Omaha, Douglas Co, NE.³
- 7 iii. **Bradley Allen WILSON**³ was born on 20 Mar 1995 in O'Neill, Holt Co, NE.³

And now the second example [from the same content], which uses the **Register** format:

2. **Patrick Verne WILSON** was born on 13 May 1961 in Atkinson, Holt Co, NE.¹

Patrick Verne WILSON and Laura Marie CORNHUSKER were married on 9 Oct 1982 in Omaha, Douglas Co, NE.^{1,3} They lived in O'Neill, NE in 1991. **Laura Marie CORNHUSKER**^{1,3} was born on 10 Jan 1960 in Omaha, Douglas Co, NE.

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- 4 i. **Kelly Ann WILSON**, born 4 Jul 1989, Atkinson, Holt Co, NE; married Mark Thomas JACOBS, 18 Oct 2008, Omaha, Douglas Co, NE.
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What is the difference between Modified Register and Register? In Modified Register, every descendant receives a descendant number. In Register, only descendants with the promise of their own line of descendants (i.e., marriage events) receive a number. I prefer Modified, as when you complete your

report and your last descendant is number, say, 465, you know you have found 464 descendants of the progenitor (#1.)

Why would you want to use The Magic Button to create your narrative reports in genealogy software – isn't that a bit like driving solely on Cruise Control? Back in 2008, Randy Seaver of the blog Genea-Musings discussed this question, as first brought up in this post by Elizabeth Shown Mills:

The only way to have "total control over the sentence structure" is to take a blank piece of paper--or a blank screen in a word-processing program--and start writing. Sure, in good [software genealogy] programs we can individually craft our own sentences for each event type. The result is that every time we enter data for that record type, the sentence repeats itself in the same format. On the 1860 census, taken 18 July of that year, Englebert was identified as a trapeze artist. On the 1870 census, taken 5 July of that year, Englebert was identified as a juggler. On the 1880 census, taken 1 June of that year, Englebert was identified as a sword swallower; the census taker then added a note that Englebert died later that day of gastrointestinal bleeding.



Sure, we can even go to the trouble to write "alternative" sentences for each record type, so that we can spice up our writing by varying them: Model A, this time, Model C next time. However, we cannot determine what structure we need for any given sentence without knowing exactly what is said in the sentence before it and after it--something that is not possible with genealogical databases because we're constantly adding new events in between those events where we already fed our data into Model X, Model P, and Model Y.

And, sure, dear Editor and Writer: You knew all this before I was born (well, I exaggerate some here :). But once we start "doing genealogy" using those wonderful databases that help us keep track of everything we've collected, we tend to forget that a paragraph is not just a collection of sentences plugged together until it seems to be long enough that we need to start a new paragraph--and that an account of a human life is not just a collection of pre-structured sentences with explanations or notes added between some of them.

Even in writing this message, as I wrote each sentence, my choice of what thought I'd express next and what words I'd use to express it depended entirely upon what went before it. And then, when I was done, I went back and revised some of the sentences to make them more coherent.

Why is it, when we "write genealogy," we tend to suspend everything we learned in school about the craft of effective writing?

Elizabeth

Elizabeth Shown Mills, CG, CGL, FASG

APG member, Tennessee

Writing narratives in genealogy software [posted by Randy Seaver]

There has been an extensive civil discussion on the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG) mailing list concerning writing narrative text, all or part of a person's life story, for genealogy reports, magazine articles or books. The critical post that set off the discussion was Elizabeth Shown Mills post [provided above]. Her preference is to write narratives in a word processor so that the author has full control over the result without "software-created" sentences.

In response, Bob Velke of Wholly Genes (which produces The Master Genealogist (TMG) software) claimed that his software could do exactly what Elizabeth said shouldn't be done. Terry Reigel chimed in with a link to an article he wrote that demonstrates the range of flexibility in adapting TMG capabilities to different facts and the use of end notes in creating "flowing narratives." My observation is that "it seems to take a lot of effort" to do it.

The need for writing "flowing narratives" is vital for client reports and publication in genealogy periodicals or books. One of the Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG) requirements is to submit a Narrative Report as a requirement for certification.

The issue is "can TMG, or any other software program, create this type of a report, complete with note callouts, footnotes with text, headings, bullet points, etc." Bob Velke and Terry Reigel think that TMG can do it, albeit with substantial custom text writing.

I have not written a report similar to the narrative example. But I think that I could use FamilyTreeMaker to generate all of the text, and footnotes, using the Facts, Sources and Notes capabilities of the software. I would then have to edit the result in a Word Processor to superscript the footnote numbers, to put the right footnotes with the right number at the bottom of each page, to modify the source citations as required (short forms for second and later citation of the same source), to indent, change font size, bold or italicize when necessary, etc. Other software, like TMG, may allow the user to do all or many of these tasks.

However, the folks who don't want software to "write" their narrative do all of that in their Word Processor document when they write their reports or narratives.

I think the issue is really "how many times do you write a narrative?" The ideal number is "once." It shouldn't matter if it is in your word processor or in a software program. The goal is to document your work in a clear and complete manner. The second issue is "how many times do you edit a narrative?"

My current preference is to write my narratives for an individual in the Notes section and include my source citations in the text body (either as cited, or numbered with a list at the end). Either method can be used to generate a genealogy report that can be edited. IMHO, the key is that I've typed it in only once, I have it saved in a place I can find it, and I can edit it if necessary. Once I put it into a word processor, then I may have to edit it to put it in a preferred format. At that point, the information in my word document and in my database are different.

Whether it is in a word processed document or in a database-generated report, the work product of my narrative will be generated by me using my so-called creative writing skills. If I submit it for publication, I expect it to be edited, polished as required, and submitted again. Whether I started in a word processor or my database really shouldn't matter.

Note: in the few years that have passed since Randy Seaver wrote the above words, almost all the software genealogy programs still on the market have advanced to where they can perform all those

functions Randy ascribed only to TMG. It no longer takes 'a lot of effort' to produce those reports. Furthermore, many genealogists realize today that the Magic Button is an important tool to quickly review our entered data for consistency, clarity, typos, and readability – but it should not be thought of as the be-all and end-all to create our final publishing products.

With today's versions of software genealogy programs, we can create a fairly uniform and readable report – however, as Rosemary pointed out earlier, it is all important to ensure that we have all of our pertinent research data entered correctly and completely, our citations are included, and a quality check has been completed (which may well involve pushing that Magic Button to check the quality, to include both appearance and content of our narrative report). As to the effort, it is rather comforting to realize that very typo corrected, every error removed, and every format implemented will be one more thing we don't have to contend with in our follow-on efforts. And then we will be ready to pick up the task in our word processor.

OK, then! Now that you know some of the benefits (and limitations) of The Magic Button – get out there and push it for yourself! As long as you do a "Preview on Screen" or save to a PDF file, it won't even cost you any ink or paper – and you will soon find yourself moving toward perfection in publishing!

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