

Writing a Family History with Claude

The Complete Kit

A three-part guide to turning your research into a documented book

The Guide · The Toolkit · An Annotated Sample

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Part One — The Guide

A Practical Guide for Turning Your Research into a Book

Part One of the Kit. How one family turned a century of records into a three-volume narrative — and how you can do the same with your own.

Before you start: what this is

This is a guide for people who already have the hard part done, or are well into it: the census pages, the wills, the deeds, the family Bible photographed leaf by leaf, the workbook with the dates that finally reconcile. You have the *record*. What you may not have is the *book* — the thing a grandchild will actually read, the version where your great-great-grandmother is a woman at a loom on a particular morning and not a row in a spreadsheet.

That gap — between the research and the reading — is what this guide is about. It is written from a real project: a three-volume family history that runs from a Tudor priory in England in 1490 to a homemade coffin in a Mississippi churchyard in 1920, roughly 240,000 words of finished narrative, written with Claude across many months. Every principle here was learned by doing it, and most were learned by first doing it wrong.

Two things this guide is *not*. It is not a way to skip the research; if anything it demands more of your records, not less. And it is not a button you press to get a book. It is a working method — a partnership between you, who knows the family and the sources and has the final say, and Claude, which can draft, check, and carry continuity across sessions in ways that would take a lone writer years. The book that comes out is yours. Claude is the instrument. You are the one holding it.

The two promises that make it trustworthy

Before any of the mechanics, there are two commitments that separate a family history you can stand behind from a nice-sounding fiction with your ancestors' names on it. Make these with yourself first, and then make Claude hold to them, because it will drift toward smoothness if you let it.

One: genealogy first, story second. The documented fact always wins. Not the more satisfying version, not the tidier chronology, not the emotionally perfect beat — the fact. When the census says your ancestor's age is off by six years from the family Bible, you do not quietly average them. You keep both on the page and let the discrepancy stand, because the discrepancy is itself true and often more interesting than either number alone. A good rule we used constantly: *do not let the coherence of an inference substitute for a page*. If a story hangs together beautifully but rests on a link you haven't actually found in a record, the beauty is a warning sign, not a green light.

Two: never invent to fill a silence. The record stops in places. A man rides out on business in 1775 and simply never appears again; there is a date he was last seen and a date his widow signs herself administratrix, and four years of dark between. The temptation — and Claude's instinct, unless you check it — is to write across that gap: give him a death scene, a reason, a grave. Don't. Where the record stops, the prose says so. A family history that respects its people has to respect the holes in them too. Some of the most powerful pages in our trilogy are the ones that name a silence and refuse to close it.

There's a companion idea worth naming, because it will save you from a common self-deception: **a blank does not become a fact just because you looked once.** A negative finding — "he never appears in that county's tax rolls," "she isn't in the marriage index for those years" — only counts when you have actually *read the pages*, not when an index came back empty. An empty index means the index is empty. Read the film. Then you can say the negative out loud.

Hold those two promises and one truth follows that surprises people: **the feeling is the deliverable, but only on a documented spine.** The goal of the book is that a reader's throat tightens — that your daughter, reading it, feels who these people were. That emotional landing is the whole point. But it is *earned* by the discipline, not bought around it. The scenes hit precisely *because* the reader can trust that the loom, the churn, the age on the certificate, the name the Bible couldn't decide on, are all real. Take the discipline away and the feeling goes with it, because the reader stops believing you.

What you need in hand before the writing begins

You can start drafting too early. It's the most common mistake, and it costs you more than waiting would. Before Claude writes a word of narrative, have these ready:

Your research, reconciled. The dates that agree, the dates that don't (and why), the chain of who-descends-from-whom with a source under each link. If a link is a guess, know that it's a guess. In our project, an entire volume's opening rested on one mother-to-daughter link; before we'd write the scene that leaned on it, we stopped and confirmed the link with a will and a family Bible. If we hadn't been able to, the scene would have been written differently — hedged, or not at all. Know which of your links can bear weight.

A workbook or master list. One place where every person has an identity, every fact has a source, and every source has a reliability grade (even something as simple as: *primary document* / *secondary source* / *family tradition* / *my inference*). Claude will lean on this constantly. If it lives only in your head, Claude can't check against it and neither can you at 11pm three months in.

The primary documents themselves, where you can share them. Photographs of the Bible leaves. The death certificate at full zoom. The deed. Claude reads these,

and — critically — *you* re-read the load-bearing ones yourself before trusting a transcription. We caught major errors this way: a death certificate we thought named a doctor and an undertaker turned out, at full zoom, to say *No Doctor* and *homemade coffin*. That single re-read reshaped a chapter. The lesson: for any fact the story leans on hard, look at the image yourself.

A sense of the voice you're aiming for. You don't need to define it in the abstract — that rarely works. Better: find one or two passages, from a book you love or from your own earlier writing, that sound the way you want your history to sound. Ours aimed at a particular blend — the documentary solidity of a serious historian with the warm interior life of a good novelist. You'll refine it as you go, but start with a target you can point at.

A plan for the book. Before the drafting starts, map the arc. For each chapter, name the opening scene, lay out the sequence of scenes inside it, and list the specific facts and sources each one rests on. This is the step that makes everything after it go smoothly — because once the plan lives in your project, it, not a fresh brief each session, is what tells you *and* Claude where the next scene is and which facts to pick up. You spend the drafting sessions confirming and steering rather than re-explaining. Build the plan with Claude if you like — it can help shape the arc and surface what the record supports — but you decide what goes in it. In our project a single planning document held every chapter's opening scene, its scene-by-scene sequence, and its documentary anchors, plus the order the chapters would be drafted in, and the drafting sessions simply worked down it. (Part Two of the Kit gives you a fill-in template for this.)

Setting up your workspace

Create a dedicated project (in Claude, a Project; the idea is a persistent space that remembers your work across conversations). Into it goes the durable material: your reconciled research, your workbook, your source documents, and — as you produce them — your drafts and your notes-to-self. The value of a project is that months of work accumulate in one place instead of scattering across dozens of forgotten chats.

A word on plans and privacy — worth settling before you invest months in this. A project of this size — hundreds of thousands of words, sessions spread across months, a persistent workspace that has to remember your research the whole way — is not something the free tier is built for. You'll want a paid plan for the higher usage limits, the longer sessions, and the persistent Projects that hold everything together; we used the top personal plan (Max), and honestly I doubt the free version could have carried a work of this scale. Plans, limits, and prices change, so check the current options rather than trusting any number you read secondhand. Just as important as cost is privacy, because you are about to feed a machine your family's private records. Review your data settings before you begin: on the personal plans, having your conversations used to improve the model is *opt-in* — you can decline and keep your

family material out of training — and the business and API tiers don't use your data for training at all. Whatever you choose, make it a deliberate choice rather than a default. (These policies have shifted before and may shift again; the durable advice is simply to look at your settings and decide on purpose.)

Then set the ground rules explicitly, at the start, in writing. Tell Claude the two promises above. Tell it the family's non-negotiables — the facts it must never soften, the people it must never turn into symbols. Nearly every family history eventually turns up ground the family would rather smooth over: an ancestor who walked out on a wife and children, a child born well before the wedding the record tries to tidy, a death the certificate quietly mislabels, a stretch in the poorhouse or the asylum that no one spoke of again. The discipline is to decide *up front* how you will handle that material — name it plainly, render the person with dignity, and never turn a real human being into a lesson or a symbol — and to make that decision a standing instruction rather than a case-by-case flinch. Write the rule down; it's the unwritten flinch, in the moment, that becomes the quiet omission later. Harder ground than this exists, and some family histories must cross it; when yours does, the same discipline is what carries you — decided in advance, written down, applied with more care rather than less.

Finding the voice

This is the step people underestimate, and it's the one that determines whether the book sounds like *a book* or like a competent report. Two practices carry it.

The voice anchor. Right before Claude drafts, have it read — in full, not in summary — a passage that already sounds right. Early on that's your target passage from someone else's book or your own writing; once you have a chapter or two that landed, use *those*. The reason is mechanical and worth understanding: Claude writes by pattern-matching against what's freshly in front of it. If the last thing it read was a clean, warm, well-pitched page, the new page tends to come out clean and warm. If the last thing it read was a rushed draft full of tics, the new page inherits the tics. So you deliberately put good writing in front of it, last, before it begins. This one habit did more for our consistency than any instruction.

Name what feeling you're after, scene by scene — but don't spell the feeling out in the prose. There's a discipline here that took us a while to trust: *if you have to spell it out, you've lost it*. The prose should let the reader feel that an old woman watching her granddaughter at the loom is watching the whole line come down to this, without the sentence ever saying so. You tell Claude the freight the scene should carry; the scene carries it underneath. When a draft starts announcing its own emotions — "it was a poignant moment that would echo through generations" — that's the tell that it's stopped trusting the reader. Cut it.

We had a private measure for whether a scene had landed. We called it the daughters test: *would this make the writer's own daughters feel who this woman was?* Find your version of that test — the specific reader whose feeling is the target — and hold every scene to it.

The drafting loop

Here's the rhythm that actually produces a book, as opposed to a promising fragment that stalls.

Work in scenes, not chapters. A chapter is too big to hold in one clean pass. A scene — one document-day, one room, one arrival of news — is the right unit. Draft one, get it right, then move to the next, working down the plan you made — the plan is what tells you and Claude which scene comes next and what it rests on. Our chapters were built from titled sections, each a single scene, each drafted in its own focused pass.

Draft, then check, then move — one scene at a time. Resist the urge to barrel forward through a whole chapter in one sitting. Each scene gets drafted, gets checked (see the next section), and only then do you open the next. There's a specific reason beyond quality: if a scene comes out drifted — wrong voice, full of tells — and you keep going in the same session, the *next* scene pattern-matches against the drift and comes out worse. Better to stop, fix or discard the bad scene, and open the next one fresh with a clean anchor.

Carry the handoff between sessions deliberately. This is the single most important mechanical discipline for a long project, and it's where most solo-plus-AI efforts quietly fall apart. Every time you close a session and open a new one, Claude has forgotten everything except what you put back in front of it. So you write a short handoff — think of it as a note to the next session — that says three things: *what got done last time* (the facts: which scene, what word count, what got resolved), *what to do this time* (the next scene, the facts to verify first, any decision you owe it before it starts), and *what good looks like* (the clean passage to read as the voice anchor). The Toolkit in Part Two gives you fill-in-the-blank templates for these. Keep them short and factual. Their job is to make session forty open as cleanly as session two.

One more handoff rule that saved us repeatedly: **when you hand a draft to the next session, say what it's for.** Is this scene *finished and to be built on*, or is it a rough version *to be rewritten from scratch*, or is it *to be ignored*? If you don't say, the next session assumes "build on this" and inherits whatever was wrong with it. One line — "this draft is rough; rewrite it fresh, don't polish it" — breaks the cycle where bad drafts breed worse ones.

Checking the work

A draft is not done when it reads well on the first pass. It's done when it survives four different kinds of checking, three of which Claude can help with and one of which only you can do.

The tells. Every AI drafting voice has recurring tics — pet constructions, filler cadences, a few overused words, a reflex for false profundity. Here's the part that isn't obvious, and that we didn't understand at first: *you won't know what your tells are until a draft shows you*. You cannot hand Claude a list of tics to hunt on day one, because the list doesn't exist yet. It's specific to this project, this voice, even this particular version of the model, and it only becomes visible once there's real prose in front of you and the same move keeps repeating and grating. So the discipline is discover-then-hunt, in that order. Read your early drafts with an eye out for the phrases and rhythms that recur and bother you; the moment one is unmistakable, name it and write it down. The list grows over the first handful of scenes — ours reached eight or nine named tics, plus a short set of "forbidden words" the prose kept leaning on as a crutch. *Once* a tell is named, Claude can audit every later draft against it and drive it toward zero, which is cheap and catches a lot. But the naming has to come first, and it comes from your own eye on a real page. No one — not you, not Claude — can supply the list in advance; the early drafts are how you find it. (This is also why you shouldn't borrow someone else's tic list wholesale: theirs came from their drafts, and yours will be at least a little different.)

Two real examples from our own hunt, to make it concrete. The first is a single overused word. In one volume's draft the word *small* turns up more than two hundred times — a small turret, a small manor, a small pension — and not one of those uses is wrong; you simply cannot see the problem inside any single scene. It shows up only when you count across the whole book. Once we saw it, *small* went onto the forbidden-words list with a ceiling (no more than about three per thousand words), and every later draft was audited against that count. That's the whole shape of the discipline: invisible in the scene, obvious in the aggregate, fixable once named.

The second is a construction rather than a word. Claude has a genuinely powerful move — a flat declarative that repeats a noun for weight: *the hand was the hand*. Used once, at exactly the right moment, it lands like a struck bell. Used three times in a chapter it becomes a mannerism and the bell stops ringing. So the rule we made was simple: one load-bearing instance, and no more; if it appears twice, one of them is a tic. Naming the construction is what let us keep the good one and cut the rest — which is the point of the whole exercise. You are not trying to sand the voice flat. You are trying to spend its best moves once.

The facts. Every date checked against a calendar. Every age reconciled. Every place-name and relationship verified against the workbook. Claude can run this pass, but it's checking against the sources *you* supplied, so its reliability is only as good as your workbook. For anything load-bearing, verify against the primary image yourself.

A worked example, because this is where the discipline earns its keep — and it's the last big fact we settled in the whole trilogy. Mary Jane Rorie Searcy was born on 21 November 1832 and died on 11 October 1920. Her death certificate — a state document, normally the strongest kind of source — gives her age at death as 87 years, 10 months, and 6 days. But work it out from her certified birth date and the true figure is 87 years, 10 months, and 20 days. The two disagree by fourteen days. The tidy move is to trust the official document and move on. We did the opposite: we kept both figures, showed the arithmetic, and let the gap carry meaning — because the household's count was the right one, down to the last fortnight of a life of nearly eighty-eight years, and the state's was fourteen days short. That is not a rounding error to be smoothed away; it is a small, true thing about who kept this woman's life accurately and who didn't. *The state said six, the household said twenty, and the household was right* does more work on the page than either number alone, and it does that work precisely *because* we refused to average them. When two records disagree, the disagreement is often the most human fact available. Keep it, show it, and find out which one is right rather than which one is tidier.

Continuity across scenes. This is the subtle one, and it's where a book quietly cracks. A single scene can be perfect in isolation while contradicting another scene forty pages away — the same object called two different things, a Bible in two places at once, a person's age that doesn't track across chapters. No single-scene check catches this, because each scene is locally fine; the failure is in the *relationship* between them. Periodically, and always before you consider a chapter or volume finished, do a pass that looks *across* scenes for the recurring objects and threads — the family Bible, the specific desk, the phrase you're planting across chapters — and make sure each is consistent and unambiguous everywhere it appears.

The slow read — the one only you can do. This is the irreplaceable step. You sit down and read the prose slowly, as a person, not as an auditor. It is the only check that catches the things no checklist can: the beat that's technically clean but emotionally false, the reference that's ambiguous in a way no rule would flag, the place where the writing is correct and dead. In our project the author's slow read caught errors that had passed every automated check — including a factual relationship that was one generation off, and a burial place that had been wrong for months. Nothing replaces this. Budget time for it. It is where the book actually gets good.

Putting the book together

Drafting the scenes is most of the work but not all of it. Assembling them into a finished thing is its own phase, and it has its own discipline.

Build up in stages: scene → chapter → volume → (if you're lucky) set. At each stage, something new becomes visible that wasn't before. Only when you assemble a whole chapter do you see whether its scenes balance; only when you assemble a

volume do you feel its overall shape; only when we put three volumes under one cover did we notice that the third lacked an opening and a closing the other two had. Expect each assembly stage to surface work the drafting stage couldn't.

The apparatus — the parts that aren't the story — matters more than you'd think. A working bibliography, organized by source and honest about how firmly each fact stands. A note on sources that states your discipline plainly. These are what let a reader — or a descendant, or a skeptic — trust the narrative and check it. Build them to the same standard as the prose. When we assembled our set, one volume's bibliography that had been "good enough" got rebuilt to match the strongest one, because the weakest apparatus sets the trust level for the whole book.

Hold the finished thing to the standard of your best prior work, not to "done." The most useful quality bar we found was simply: *is this as good as the last one?* A first-draft bibliography that's merely present is a failure if the previous volume's was excellent. The prior volume is the bar.

Handle your source files with a repairer's care, not a copier's. Real research files are messy — a transcription with a corrupted character where a hyphen should be, text wrapped oddly by some old export, a scanning artifact. Part of assembly is cleaning these up *without* altering the actual words. There's a bright line: repairing an obvious mechanical corruption (a mangled hyphen, a broken line-wrap) is fine; changing what a source *says* is not. When in doubt, preserve and flag rather than silently "improve."

Export last, and check what you exported. Getting the words into a shareable Word document or PDF — with a title page, a table of contents, chapters that start cleanly, page numbers — is the final step, and it's worth doing well because it's what makes the thing feel like a *book* to the person you hand it to. Whatever tool produces it, look at the result page by page before you trust it. Tables of contents especially have a way of looking fine and being wrong.

What only you can do

It's worth being clear-eyed about the division of labor, because the parts that are irreducibly human are the parts that make it *your* book and not a machine's.

You are the architect. You decide what the book is, what belongs in it, what the family will and won't have said about it. Claude drafts and checks within the frame you set; it does not get to decide the frame. When we faced a real structural choice — whether to add an opening and closing to the last volume — the right move was not for Claude to just do it, but to lay out the options and *wait* for the decision. Guard that authority. A good collaborator brings you the decision; it doesn't make it for you.

You are the verifier of last resort. The slow read is yours. The check of the load-bearing document against the image is yours. The judgment that a scene is emotionally true, or false, is yours.

And you are the one who knows why it matters. Claude can tell that a woman held a farm through a war and a widowhood for sixty years. Only you know that she's the reason you're here, and that the point of the book is that someone, a long time from now, opens it and knows whose hands carried the record this far.

That's the part no tool supplies, and it's the whole reason to do the work. The method in this guide is just how you get the machine to help you honor it — without ever letting it take the pen out of your hand.

Part Two of the Kit is the Toolkit: the copy-paste templates and checklists behind every step above — the setup checklist, the voice-anchor prompt, the session-handoff notes, the audit checklist, and the assembly checklist. Use this Guide to understand the method; use the Toolkit to run it.

Part Two — The Toolkit

Prompts, checklists, and blocks to copy

The copy-paste templates and checklists behind every step in the Guide. Part One tells you what to do and why; this tells you exactly what to type and what to check. Fill in the brackets, adapt to your family, and reuse.

How to use these

Everything below is a starting point, not a script to follow blindly. The blocks in boxes are meant to be copied, pasted, and edited — the bracketed parts `[like this]` are where your project goes. Nothing here is sacred; the point is to save you from starting each step from a blank page. Eight pieces cover the whole method:

1. The project setup checklist
2. The standing-instructions block — paste to Claude at the start
3. The chapter plan — the pre-planning that drives everything after it
4. The voice-anchor prompt — before each drafting session
5. The scene-drafting prompt — to write one scene
6. The session-handoff note — to carry from one session to the next
7. The audit checklist — to check each scene
8. The assembly checklist — to build the finished book

1. Project setup checklist

Before you draft anything, get these into your Claude project (the persistent workspace). This is a one-time setup that pays back for months.

- [] **Your reconciled research** — the family line with a source under each parent-child link, and a note on which links are solid and which are still inferences.
- [] **Your workbook or master list** — every person, every key fact, every source, each source graded for reliability (primary document / secondary source / family tradition / your inference).
- [] **The primary documents you can share** — photos of the Bible leaves, the certificates at full zoom, the deeds, the census images. Especially the ones the story will lean on hardest.
- [] **Your voice target** — one or two passages (from a book you admire or your own earlier writing) that sound the way you want the history to sound. You'll replace these with your own best pages once you have them.
- [] **The standing instructions** (next section) — pasted in and saved where every new session will see them.

- [] **A decision on privacy** — check your data settings before loading family records; decide on purpose whether your conversations may be used to improve the model (on personal plans this is opt-in; you can decline).

2. The standing-instructions block

Paste this at the start of the project and re-paste (or point Claude to it) at the start of any session where it seems to have drifted. Edit the bracketed parts for your family.

You are helping me write a documented family history. These rules override any instinct toward smoother or more dramatic prose. Hold to them every time.

GENEALOGY FIRST. The documented fact always wins over the better-sounding version. Never smooth a chronology, average two conflicting dates, or tidy a discrepancy. When two records disagree, keep both on the page and help me work out which is right — not which is neater.

NEVER INVENT TO FILL A SILENCE. Where the record stops, the prose says so. Do not give anyone a scene, a motive, a death, or a detail the sources don't support. If you are reconstructing something plausible but undocumented, flag it so I can see it and decide.

DON'T LET A GOOD INFERENCE PASS AS A FACT. If something hangs together nicely but rests on a link we haven't actually found in a record, say so rather than writing it as settled.

THE FEELING IS THE POINT — BUT EARN IT. The goal is that a reader feels who these people were. Get there through concrete, true detail, never by announcing the emotion or spelling out the meaning. If a sentence tells the reader how to feel, it's wrong.

HARD MATERIAL. Our family's record includes [name the sensitive material, if any]. Handle it with this discipline: name it plainly, render every real person with dignity, and never turn a real human being into a symbol or a lesson. [Add any family non-negotiables here.]

VOICE. I'm aiming for [describe: e.g., the documentary solidity of a serious historian with the warm interior of a good novelist]. Before you draft, I'll point you to a passage to read as the voice anchor.

WORKBOOK. My reconciled facts live in [file/name]. Check names, dates, ages, places, and relationships against it. For anything load-bearing, tell me to verify against the original image myself.

3. The chapter plan

This is the piece that makes everything after it easy, and it's the one most people skip. Before you draft, you and Claude work out a plan for the book — chapter by chapter — and it is *the plan*, not a fresh brief every session, that tells Claude where the next scene is and which facts it rests on. Building it is genuine collaboration: you know the

family and the sources; Claude can help shape the arc and sequence and surface what the record supports; you decide what goes in.

For each chapter, the plan holds four things:

- **The opening scene** — where the chapter starts, named.
- **The sections** — the scene-by-scene sequence through the chapter, each a sentence or two on what it covers.
- **The documentary anchors** — the specific facts and sources the chapter rests on, each named with its exact identifier (the page, the call number, the record).
- **A voice sample (optional)** — a short passage of real prose for the hardest scene, so the register is pinned before drafting begins.

A blank you can copy, once per chapter:

```
CHAPTER [N]: [title]
[scope / span – e.g., "John Nedham, the herald, and the marriage – 1547 to 1603"]

Opening scene:
- [where the chapter starts]

Sections (the scene sequence):
- §[N].1 – [what it covers]
- §[N].2 – [what it covers]
- §[N].3 – [what it covers]
- ...
- §[N].last – [the closing scene]

Documentary anchors (facts + exact sources):
- [fact – source with its identifier]
- [fact – source with its identifier]

Voice sample (optional, for the hardest scene):
- [a short passage in the target register]
```

Then add a short **drafting plan** — which chapters get drafted in which sessions, and in what order. You don't have to draft front-to-back; it's often better to start with the chapter whose voice matters most and let it set the standard for the rest.

Once this lives in your project, a drafting session no longer needs a brief written from scratch. Claude reads the plan, knows the next scene and its anchors, and you spend the session confirming and steering rather than re-specifying. (This is exactly how the real project ran: one planning document held every chapter's scene list and its documentary anchors, plus the session-by-session drafting order, and the drafting simply worked through it.)

4. The voice-anchor prompt

Use this immediately before drafting, every session. It's the single highest-leverage habit for keeping the voice consistent.

Before we draft, read this passage in full and let it set the voice for what comes next – the sentence rhythm, the level of interiority, the restraint:

[paste a clean passage – early on, from your voice target; later, from a scene of your own that already landed well]

Don't summarize it or comment on it. Just read it, then we'll draft the next scene in that register.

A note on *which* passage: once you have scenes of your own that landed, use those instead of someone else's writing. Claude patterns itself on what it just read, so feeding it your own best page is how the book comes to sound like itself rather than like its influences.

5. The scene-drafting prompt

With a chapter plan in the project (section 3), drafting a scene is lighter than it might seem — and this is the honest version of how it actually works. You don't hand-write a fact brief each time. Claude already knows from the plan where the next scene is and which documentary anchors it rests on; your job is to confirm the scene, check the facts it's about to use, add what only you know, and name the freight it should carry. In practice it's less "here is the scene and here are the facts" and more "yes, that's the next one — show me the facts you'll lean on before you draft, and here's what it needs to mean."

Let's draft the next scene in the plan – [confirm or name it: e.g., "\$2.5, the marriage at Beckenham"].

First, list back the documentary anchors you'll lean on – from the plan and the sources – so I can confirm them, fix anything off, and add what you don't have. Flag anywhere you'd be reconstructing beyond the record.

Then, once I've okayed the facts, draft it in the voice we just anchored. What it should carry underneath, without ever stating it: [the freight – the thing only I know it means].

Two things keep this honest rather than a shortcut around the discipline. Claude can propose the scene and its facts only because the plan and the real sources are already in the project — it is drawing from documented material you put there, not inventing a brief from thin air. And you still verify: the anchors get listed back to you before drafting, and for anything load-bearing you check it against the original image yourself. You stay the architect and the verifier; Claude does the assembling inside the plan you built together.

Then read what comes back, run it through the audit (section 7), and only then open the next scene.

6. The session-handoff note

Every time you end a session and start a new one, Claude has forgotten everything except what you put back in front of it. This note is what you put in front of it. Keep it short and factual — its whole job is to make session forty open as cleanly as session two.

```
HANDOFF – [date]

WHAT GOT DONE LAST TIME (facts only):
- Drafted [scene], ~[N] words, now at [file/version].
- Resolved: [any fact or decision settled].
- Still open: [anything left hanging].

WHAT TO DO THIS TIME:
- Draft [next scene in the plan].
- Verify first: [dates/ages/places to check before drafting].
- Decide with me first: [any question you need answered before you start].

VOICE ANCHOR:
- Read [this clean passage / this file] before drafting. Nothing else sets the voice.

DISPOSITION OF THE ATTACHED DRAFT:
- [ FINISHED – build on it / ROUGH – rewrite fresh, don't polish it / IGNORE – for
  reference only ]
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That last line matters more than it looks. If you don't say what a draft is *for*, the next session assumes "build on this" and inherits whatever was wrong with it. One word — "rough, rewrite it" — stops a bad draft from breeding worse ones.

(The full project we drew this from used several more specialized handoff documents as it scaled. You don't need them to start. This one note carries the great majority of the load; add more structure only when you feel a real one straining.)

7. The audit checklist

Run this on each scene before moving on. The first three parts Claude can do with you; the last part only you can do.

A. The tells. Ask Claude to check the draft against your tells list and drive each toward zero. You build this list yourself as tics reveal themselves in real drafts — so start with the near-universal ones below to prime the pump, then *add your own* as you catch them.

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Near-universal tells to check (starter list):
- False-profundity closers – sentences that announce the moral or emotion
  ("and in that moment she understood...", "some things are never truly lost").
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- Metronome transitions – the same time-cadence reused to open paragraphs ("At the close of that year...", "As the years passed...").
- The "the X was the X" weight construction – powerful once; a tic if repeated. Allow one load-bearing instance per chapter, no more.
- Throat-clearing – "It is worth noting that...", "Perhaps," "In many ways."
- Emotional over-narration – telling the reader how to feel instead of showing.
- Rule-of-three overuse – everything arriving in tidy triples.
- Elegant variation – reaching for a fancier synonym to avoid repeating a plain word.

YOUR PROJECT'S TELLS (fill in as they surface – this is where the real ones go):

- [overused word: _____] target: keep under ~[3] per 1,000 words
- [construction: _____]
- [cadence: _____]
- [_____]

B. The facts.

- [] Every date checked against a calendar.
- [] Every age reconciled across sources — discrepancies **kept and shown**, never averaged.
- [] Names, places, and relationships verified against the workbook.
- [] Load-bearing facts verified against the original image, by you.
- [] Any negative ("no record of...") stated only if the actual pages were read, not just an index.
- [] Anything reconstructed beyond the record is flagged as such.

C. Continuity across scenes (run periodically, and always before calling a chapter or volume done — no single-scene check catches these).

- [] Recurring objects consistent everywhere they appear — same name, same location, same custody (the Bible, a desk, an heirloom).
- [] The timeline holds across scenes and chapters.
- [] Each person's age and description tracks across the whole book.
- [] Planted phrases or motifs land where intended and aren't over-repeated.
- [] Apparatus matches body: table of contents ↔ headings; bibliography ↔ the chapters it cites.

D. The slow read — only you.

- [] Read the prose slowly, as a person, not as an auditor.
- [] Mark anything technically clean but emotionally false, or correct and dead.
- [] Mark anything ambiguous in a way no rule would flag.
- [] Budget real time for this. It is where the book actually gets good, and nothing replaces it.

8. The assembly checklist

For building the finished book, once the scenes exist.

- [] **Assemble scene → chapter.** Check the scenes balance; adjust length and order.
- [] **Assemble chapter → volume.** Feel the overall shape. Note what's missing — an opening, a closing, a bridge between sections — that only became visible at this scale.
- [] **(If a multi-volume set) assemble volume → set.** Make the volumes parallel: consistent structure, a shared front matter, one table of contents. Decide framing (a preface/epilogue for the whole set vs. per-volume).
- [] **Build the apparatus to your best standard.** A working bibliography organized by source, honest about how firmly each fact stands; a note on sources stating your discipline. The weakest apparatus sets the trust level for the whole book — hold it to the level of your best volume.
- [] **Repair source-file messiness without changing the words.** Fixing an obvious mechanical corruption (a mangled character, a broken line-wrap) is fine; altering what a source says is not. When unsure, preserve and flag rather than silently "improve."
- [] **Export and verify.** Produce the Word file or PDF — title page, table of contents, chapters starting cleanly, page numbers — then look at it page by page before trusting it. Check the table of contents especially; it has a way of looking right and being wrong.
- [] **Hold to the prior-best bar.** The question at every stage is not "is it done?" but "is it as good as the last one?"

That's the kit. Part One for the method and the judgment; Part Two for the exact moves. Between them, they're everything we used to turn a shelf of records into a book someone will actually read — and everything you need to do the same with yours. The one thing neither part can supply is the reason it matters. That part is yours.

Part Three — A Sample, Annotated

The whole method in one scene

What the method actually produces. One real scene from the finished work, the records it stands on, and notes on where the craft — and the discipline — are doing their work. This is the proof behind Parts One and Two.

How to read this part

Everything up to here has been telling. This part is showing. Below is a single scene from the first volume of the history — the moment the whole trilogy is named for — followed by the documentary records it was built on and a set of notes pointing at exactly where each rule from the Guide is operating in the prose.

Two honest things before you read it.

First: this scene was written *before* any of the method in this kit was named. There was no checklist. The disciplines were still being discovered, session by session. So don't read the annotations as "here's the rule we followed." Read them as "here's the rule we can now see was already doing the work" — which is, if anything, better evidence that the rules are real. They're what made the scene land, whether or not anyone had a name for them yet.

Second, and more important: this scene sits exactly on the hardest line the whole method is about — the line between what the record *documents* and what the prose *reconstructs*. Watch that line. It's the difference between a family history you can trust and a historical novel wearing your ancestors' names, and this scene walks it in the open.

The records it stands on

Here is everything the scene below actually rests on — the documented spine, with nothing dressed up:

- **Barbara Tempest Needham was baptized "Barbary Nedham" at Great Wymondley, Hertfordshire, in 1685** (parish register, via Findmypast). She was the daughter of **Maurice Nedham**, a younger son of a Hertfordshire priory family, and his wife **Letisia**.
- **Her mother's maiden name was Bowyer, not Wingate.** A widely-cited 1925 genealogy of the de Graffenried family (pp. 147–149) gave the mother as a "Wingate." That was wrong. A 1684 London parish register recording the marriage of *Maurice Nedham of St Bride's and Letisia Bowyer of Wymondley* is the primary source that corrects it. (The writer had himself first promoted the "Wingate" reading to "documented" on the strength of a Chancery suit — and had to walk it back when the register turned up. The error, and the correction, are both in the book's own prologue.)

- **Christopher VI de Graffenried** was the eldest son of a Swiss baron who founded New Bern, North Carolina, in 1710. The colony was devastated in the Tuscarora War of September 1711; Christopher survived it.
- **Barbara married Christopher at Charleston, South Carolina, on 22 February 1714.** The marriage — the date and the place — is what the record preserves, through the family's own account and the published de Graffenried genealogy. That a gentlewoman of twenty-eight crossed the Atlantic alone to make that marriage is the documented, astonishing fact the scene turns on.
- **What does not survive: any words between them.** No courtship correspondence has been found. There is no surviving letter in which Barbara wrote *I am coming* — and (the writer is now fairly sure) no surviving Bible inscription in which Christopher answered *She came*. Both phrases are the book's reconstruction: a matched pair, the promise and its answer, built to give the documented crossing a human voice at both ends. Hold that firmly reading what follows — the *act* is real; the *words* are the disciplined echo of it.

Now hold those facts in your mind, especially the last two, and read the scene.

The scene

From Volume I, Chapter 5 — "I Am Coming." Barbara, at the priory at Little Wymondley, the August before she sailed — reproduced exactly.

She wrote it in the morning, at the desk in the east window, on a clean sheet of the good paper her uncle bought in Hitchin. She did not draft it. She did not need to. She had been composing it in her head for three months and what was left to do, that August morning, was only to put it down.

She had, in her head, written it long. She had composed paragraphs. (She had composed, in the small hours of the previous nights, a careful explanatory letter — three pages of it — that began with a salutation and laid out the reasoning and named the ship and gave the date of expected arrival and closed with a courteous and explanatory and apologetic and loving signature, and that did, in the composition, all of the work a letter of this kind was conventionally required to do.)

She uncapped the inkwell.

She picked up the quill.

She dipped it.

She held it over the paper for what may have been ten seconds.

(The three pages were in her head. She knew them. She could have written them out without thinking. What stopped her, the quill in her hand and the morning light on the paper and the cloister visible through the window-glass green with

August, was that the three pages — the explanations, the apologies, the careful naming of the ship — were the same three pages that the Barbara of the previous April would have written. The Barbara of the previous April had not yet been in the room with her mother. The Barbara of the previous April had still been a woman who owed Christopher an explanation. The Barbara who was now sitting at the desk in the east window did not owe Christopher an explanation. She owed him an arrival.)

She wrote three words.

I am coming.

That was all.

She did not sign it. She did not date it. She did not write a salutation. She read the three words on the page and they sat in the centre of the otherwise blank sheet, in her own small clear hand, with no flourishes and no underlines, and she understood — the way she had understood the day before yesterday at the writing-desk that *I am going to be the part of it that is ready* had been the sentence the last two years had been writing inside her — that the three words were what the three pages had been trying to say all along. The three pages had been the surface.

The three words were what was left when the surface burned off.

What the scene is doing — and where the line is

1. The gut punch is a documented fact, not an invention. The reason the scene can hit as hard as it does is that the thing underneath it is *true*: a woman of twenty-eight, in 1713, with no husband and no fortune and a dead father, sailed alone across an ocean to a colony that had just been half-destroyed in a war — to marry a man, and it worked. You could not invent that and be believed. The prose doesn't have to manufacture emotion; it has to get out of the way of a real one. That's the first lesson: the deepest feeling in a family history usually comes from a documented act, not from the writing laid over it.

2. The letter itself is a reconstruction — and the book knows it. This is the line to watch. *No letter survives*. The three words "I am coming" are not a quotation from a document; they are the writer's reconstruction of the decision that the documented voyage *requires* there to have been. Barbara demonstrably chose to cross — the marriage record proves the choice was made — so the book reconstructs the moment of choosing. But notice what it does *not* do: it does not claim the letter exists, does not footnote it, does not invent a physical artifact for an archive to hold. It renders a human interior on top of a documented act, and it stays honest about which is which. That is "never invent to fill a silence" at its most demanding: you may reconstruct the *inside* of a documented event, but you may not manufacture a *fact* — a surviving

letter, a date, a source — that isn't there. (Handled carelessly, this same scene would be a forgery. The discipline is the whole difference.)

3. The feeling is never named. Read the last line again: *The three words were what was left when the surface burned off*. Nowhere does the prose say she was brave, or that it was a momentous decision, or that love had changed her. It shows a woman choosing three words over three pages, and lets you feel the whole weight of it through that single concrete choice. The moment it announced its own meaning — "it was the bravest thing she would ever do" — it would collapse. This is the daughters test passing: a reader feels who she was without being told what to feel.

4. The restraint is doing structural work. Look at the single-line paragraphs: *She uncapped the inkwell. / She picked up the quill. / She dipped it*. The prose slows to the speed of the hand because the sentence is about to do something irreversible. Then the three words land alone on their own line. This is craft you can steal directly — pace is meaning — but it's also the "spend your best moves once" discipline: this hush is used *here*, at the hinge of the volume, and not spent on lesser moments.

5. Genealogy first, visible in the foundation. The woman in this scene is only *this* woman — Maurice's daughter, a Bowyer granddaughter, baptized at Great Wymondley in 1685 — because the record was chased down and corrected. A popular printed source said her mother was a Wingate; the parish register said Bowyer; the register won, even though the writer had already talked himself into Wingate and had to undo it. The scene you just read is built on the corrected fact. Had the discipline lost to the tidier published version, it would be a lovely scene about the wrong woman's people. That is why the genealogy comes first: it decides *whose* interior you are even allowed to reconstruct.

6. Where the record is thin, the prose doesn't pretend. Small tell worth noticing: "for what may have been ten seconds." Not "for ten seconds." The reconstruction signals its own reach — it stages a plausible pause without claiming a stopwatch was running. That little *may have been* is the prose keeping faith with the reader about the limits of what can be known, even inside an imagined moment.

Why this is the whole method in one scene

Strip it down and this scene is the entire kit working at once. A documented act carries the feeling (Part One's first promise). A silence — the lost letter — is reconstructed on the record's frame without a single invented fact (Part One's second promise, at its hardest). The corrected genealogy decides who the people even are. The emotion is shown and never stated. The craft is spent where it counts and nowhere else. And every reconstructed edge quietly admits it's an edge.

The answer comes one chapter later, and it's two words long. Christopher meets the ship at Charleston, and after the wedding the book has him write, under her name, in a hand smaller than the rest: *She came*. And here is the truest thing this sample has

to teach: those two words are not a surviving inscription any more than *I am coming* was a surviving letter. Both are reconstruction — the two halves of one invented figure, the promise and its answer, laid over an act that genuinely happened. What is real is the crossing and the marriage. What is reconstructed is the voice given to them. The pair can carry the weight it does *without becoming a lie* only because the book knows the difference and never hides it: the act is documented, the words are honestly its echo, and the reader is never asked to mistake one for the other. (Getting that exactly right — never letting the reconstructed *She came* be cited anywhere as a real record — is the entire discipline, and it is the kind of thing only the author, who knows which line is which, can finally guarantee.)

Here is the thing to take to your own family. Somewhere in your records is a *She came* — a documented act that had to have a human decision behind it that no letter recorded: an ancestor who left, or stayed, or took the farm, or crossed the water, or didn't. You will never find the letter, because there wasn't one, or it's gone. What this method gives you is a way to honor that decision — to reconstruct its inside on the solid frame of what the record *does* say — without ever crossing the line into making it up. Get that line right, and a reader will trust you enough to feel it. That trust is the whole book. Everything in this kit is in service of earning it.

Appendix: the documentation underneath

A fair question after all of that: if the letter is reconstruction and the interior is reconstruction, what exactly *is* documented — and how would anyone know? The answer is the apparatus: the unglamorous files that sit under the prose and keep it honest. You do not need anything this elaborate to begin, but here is what "build it to your best standard" actually looked like, so you can see the machinery that lets a reader trust the reconstruction.

The bibliography is the reader-facing layer — every source, by category, with the exact identifier so anyone can find it and weigh it. A real entry from Volume I:

I. Primary archival sources — Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford - MS Rawlinson D. 775 (pay-book for 1532-3, 222 ff.) — Greenwich, Windsor, Woking, Dover, Westminster, Tower of London; includes works at Westminster Hall for the coronation of Anne Boleyn (ff. 173-201).

The sources memo is the private layer — a line-by-line audit that grades every fact and, crucially, *flags every reconstruction*. It opens with a key: **P** = primary source, **S** = secondary, **R** = reference, **T** = family tradition, **AR** = authorial reconstruction. Then it walks the chapter. Two real entries, back to back:

- Cattall Grove wood in South Mimms was acquired by James in December 1537 — **P** — Somerset Heritage Centre, DD\WHb/2628: final concord... dated 19 Dec. 29 Hen. VIII [1537].

AR — The image of James standing in the Hertfordshire field watching the carpenters is authorial reconstruction. We do not know whether he visited the worksite that summer. The narrative places him there on the strength of plausibility; the documentary record does not confirm or deny.

Look at what that second flag does. It names the reconstruction *as* reconstruction, in the project's own files, so that no one — not a descendant, not a skeptic, not the writer himself a year later — can mistake the scene for a documented fact. Elsewhere the same memo records softening a single word, "probably" to "quite possibly," because the timber's source was inference rather than record. That is the discipline operating at the resolution of one adverb.

And this is exactly where the scene you read connects. A sources memo for Chapter 5 would carry the same kind of flag on the letter: **AR** — *"I am coming" and "She came" are authorial reconstruction; the crossing and the 1714 Charleston marriage are documented; no correspondence between them survives*. The prose is free to render the letter as a scene precisely *because* the apparatus underneath refuses to pretend the letter was ever found. The freedom to reconstruct on the page is bought by the honesty in the file.

You do not need a memo this thorough to start — a simple note beside each scene, marking what is documented and what you have reconstructed, does the essential work. But that note is not optional. It is the difference between a family history and a historical novel, and it is the one piece of paperwork worth being strict with yourself about.