On Selecting a Lecture Topic

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I once heard Doris Kearns Goodwin, famed Presidential Historian, comment on the topic of choosing research subjects. It seems she chooses very carefully the presidents she researches because she "will be living with them for a long time." She knows very well that when she commits to researching and writing on Abraham Lincoln that this will be a multi-year, all-encompassing endeavor. She knows she's going to have to be very interested in the subject to maintain that kind of commitment to her work and create a product she'll be proud of.

I think we can all relate to that feeling when we choose a subject on which to build a lecture. Even if you've already done the research or you are speaking from past experiences, there's still a substantial amount of time involved in crafting and presenting that you'll be living with the subject for quite a while.

How I Pick a Lecture Topic

Although I don't have a formal process or checklist to choose a topic, looking back at the classes I've developed I can see some common denominators in the selection process.

1. **A Subject of Interest.** It is my interest in a subject that always propels me into the research, and it is my interest that keeps me going throughout the presentation creation process. Invariably I have a list of questions that bubble up through my curiosity to which I want answers. It may be a particular moment in history that I find interesting, or maybe I stumbled on a technique that proves very valuable to me, or I really like a particular resource or repository. Regardless, I trust my own excitement about the subject as my guide to what others would enjoy and find beneficial. Oprah used to say, "doubt means don't," meaning that if she wasn't sure (read: excited) about a subject or project, she wouldn't go there. Interest truly is my guiding light.
2. **Something With Which I am Not Familiar.** I heard a well-regarded genealogy speaker say that if it takes more than "X" hours to write a presentation, you don't know your subject well enough. Taken aback, I wondered if I was doing this all wrong. Then I heard David McCullough, another famed historian, say he only tackles subjects he knows nothing about. While there is merit in both approaches, I tend to lean toward McCullough's approach. I like crafting presentations either while I'm learning a subject or shortly thereafter because I am acutely aware of what the learning process is at that time. I know from my own experience what vocabulary is new, what moments in history are unfamiliar, what techniques are most helpful, and what visuals would make a subject clearer to me. And using my own experiences as my best guide, I build a teaching model as I am learning. Besides, I don't know any time I am going to be more excited about a subject than when it is fresh, revelatory, and new to me. What a treasure if I can communicate that passion of discovery to my audience as I experienced it.
3. **Something of Value to Others.** I could write a lovely presentation on the life story of my grandmother, Cathryn Watson. But unless my sole intended audience is her family, I don't know if that in and of itself would have much value to others. Now if I told the history of my grandmother, then unpacked the sources I used, the techniques I employed, the social networking I conducted to recreate her life story, and demonstrated how the audience could do the same, then it would have value. The question I am always asking myself when choosing topics and building presentations is, "how could this be valuable to the audience?" What can they take away from this and use tonight? The better the

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This article originally appeared in the May 2014 issue of *Speak!*, volume 23, number 2, pages 6-7

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answer that comes back, the more I know I'm onto a good subject.

4. **Something More than a Bibliography.** I sat in on a presentation at a national conference five or six years ago, and while the presenter was very nice and well spoken, she presented a 60-minute bibliography. I'm not kidding. It was slide after slide of sources, each state-specific on one narrow topic. So if I was only interested in the resources in one state, I was obliged to listen or read about the other forty-nine states. It was then that I pledged to never do what I called a "bibliography presentation." Sure, almost every genealogy presentation has sources, and genealogists are hungry for them. But I see my role as offering more than a list of source citations—my handouts could serve that purpose. If I'm going to make a point of talking about a source, I want to add value to it. How did the author gather the information? Is it trustworthy? How is the data presented? When was it collected? How does the genealogist find the source? How does the genealogist USE the information? What would be the next reasonable research steps AFTER this source is used? Demonstrate the use of the source in a case study. And on and on. My role is to provide the value-added component to the source material I'm presenting. For example, if I'm talking about tax records, I would want to explain who was taxed, under what circumstances, in what geography, and what does the record say or imply about those not taxed? Value-added.
5. **Something Unique.** I suspect genealogy lecturers all struggle with the battle between doing very popular, large-appeal classes and unique, targeted subjects. I bet every genealogy speaker has a "Beginning Genealogy" class in the portfolio, while I doubt many of us have classes on railroad records. And I'm sure there's a place for both in a lecture portfolio. I think it is important to have a good foundation of general subject classes, but my stronger recommendation is to go where your passion is and most assuredly that will lead you to unique subjects—subjects that will stand out and get noticed in a pool of Call for Papers submissions. For example, I found fascinating the plight of War of 1812 veterans in their attempt to obtain bounty land. Similarly, I was captivated by the story of prisoners shipped from English jails to America. I followed my interests and ultimately created some unique classes that I believe have been well received by conference organizers and genealogists alike.

While no one can tell you what topics to choose for a genealogy lecture, I hope to have offered some suggestions that might guide you productively in your quest.

This article originally appeared in the May 2014 issue of *Speak!*, volume 23, number 2, pages 6-7