

FINDING HER

Biography Research Guidance

A guide for researchers, volunteers and contributors
Her Place Women's Museum · findingher.org.au

Hi Finding Her researchers,

This guide will help you understand how we write Finding Her biographies. The goal is to record women's lives in plain, accessible language — so their stories are understood and celebrated by as wide an audience as possible.

Not all women have the same amount of recorded history. Some have many sources; others have only family or community knowledge. That's okay — record what you can and respect the story you are telling.

Please remember: if a woman is commemorated in a public place, this usually means she is deceased. Grief and trauma may still affect families and descendants, sometimes for many years. Approach these stories with gentleness and respect, and be mindful of the complex feelings of those who knew her.

All published biographies can be found at: findingher.org.au

This guidance document is a companion to the Finding Her Biography Data Collection Form. Use the form to gather and record biographical information. Use this guide to understand how to approach that work — with the right spirit, the right questions, and the right care.

1 Types of Finding Her biographies

Finding Her biographies come in several forms depending on the available documentation and who contributed to the story. Understanding which type applies to your subject helps you calibrate your research and set appropriate expectations.

<p>Recently approved — family, council and GNV</p> <p>Examples: Carmel McKenna OAM, Nancie Kinsella, Hyllus Noel Maris, Henrietta Augusta Dugdale</p>	<p>These biographies have been recently verified with family input, approved through the council and GNV process (where applicable), and written in plain, readable language with sources cited. Family members have also contributed, adding personal depth to the historical record.</p> <p>They represent the best practice for a Finding Her biography.</p>
--	---

<p>Well-documented — widely known with many sources</p> <p>Edna Walling, Bella Guerin, Martha Clendinning</p>	<p>These women are widely known and have rich source material available. No descendants or family members' contact details could be located. Wherever possible, using the woman's original voice and using secondary voices to support. If family members emerge post biography, they are encouraged to contribute.</p>
--	---

First Nations and family-authored

Examples: Alma Roach, Kitty Johnson

Written by family or community, these biographies may have shorter resource sections due to limited formal recorded history — but that doesn't diminish their importance. They are often among the most significant biographies in the collection and come from oral histories and collective storytelling. Cultural protocols apply. See Section 2.

2 Permission and respect — before you write or share

A note from the Finding Her team

This section is not a formality. Permission and respect are the foundation of every Finding Her biography. Take time with this before you begin writing.

If you are ever unsure whether you have the right to include something, the answer is: don't include it yet. Ask first.

Check that you have permission

Different subjects require different approaches to permission:

For public figures

Permission is usually clear — their contributions are part of the public record. Even so, be thoughtful about how you tell the story.

For family or community knowledge

Confirm with family, community Elders or cultural custodians before including anything from personal or community sources.

For First Nations women

Some stories, knowledge or language may be sensitive, sacred or have cultural ownership restrictions. Only record and share what you are explicitly authorised to include. Engage with relevant Traditional Owner groups or Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) and family where needed.

Let the woman and her community contribute

Wherever possible, invite the woman's family, community or descendants to contribute to her story. They may hold knowledge, photographs, personal letters or perspectives that are not available anywhere else — and their involvement ensures the biography is accurate, respectful and theirs.

◆ Finding Her tip

If a family or community member asks that certain information not be included on the public record, discuss this request with all members associated with the biography to ensure consensus and respect.

First Nations cultural protocols

First Nations biographies require specific care:

- ◆ Engage with the direct line of family
- ◆ Engage with the relevant Traditional Owner group, RAP, or community organisation before beginning
- ◆ Seek free, prior and informed consent for any cultural knowledge, language, stories or images
- ◆ Recognise that some knowledge has spiritual significance and may not be appropriate for public record
- ◆ Co-develop interpretive material with community wherever possible — do not write about First Nations women from the outside in

- ◆ Follow community protocols for naming and referring to Elders and Ancestors
- ◆ Consult Finding Her’s Cultural Protocols Framework

3 Sources and bias

Good biographical research is only as strong as its sources – and an awareness of what those sources might be getting wrong.

Types of sources to look for

Written records	Newspapers, books, articles, official documents, annual reports, council records	Often the starting point – but check the date and context. Older sources may reflect the biases of their time.
Archives and collections	State Library Victoria, Public Record Office Victoria, National Library of Australia (Trove), university archives, institutional collections	Excellent for primary sources. Trove, in particular, can surface newspaper coverage that would otherwise be lost.
Family and community knowledge	Oral history, personal letters, family photographs, stories passed down across generations	Often the richest and most accurate source, especially for women whose lives were not formally documented.
Interviews and recordings	Recorded interviews, oral history projects, radio broadcasts, podcasts, community histories	Where they exist, these are invaluable. Let the woman speak in her own words wherever possible.
Published biographies and scholarship	Academic papers, Dictionary of Biography entries, local history publications	Use critically – check for dated language or framing that diminishes the subject.
Digital and online sources	Organisation websites, community pages, memorial sites, social media	Useful for recent and living memory, but verify through other sources where possible.

Being aware of bias

Many historical sources were written with the social values of their time. They may misrepresent or undervalue women – describing them through the lens of their relationships to men, minimising professional achievements, or using language that is now understood to be discriminatory.

Use these sources carefully. Include the facts they contain, but do not repeat outdated or unfair judgments. If a source reflects a clear bias, acknowledge it in your research notes or reframe it accurately in the biography.

Instead of repeating a historical source that says:

“She was the wife of prominent businessman John Smith, who assisted him in his charitable work.”

– A contemporary newspaper account, 1923

Write it as:

“She contributed significantly to community welfare and charitable initiatives in the area.”

Centre the woman's story

Let her voice, choices and achievements guide the biography, not the context provided by the social constructs of her time. If a source frames her primarily in relation to values of the time, ask: what was she doing? What did she think? What did she achieve on her own terms?

✦ Finding Her tip

Audio recordings, interviews, letters and self-authored books are the most powerful sources of all — they let her be the primary authority on her own story. Always look for these first.

Use quotes generously to show her voice, values and personality. A well-chosen quote can do more than three paragraphs of description.

4 The biography structure

Finding Her biographies follow this structure. Use it as a framework — not a rigid formula. Some sections will be rich; others may be brief or absent. That's okay. Record what you can.

Section	What to include	Why it matters
Short directory entry	150-word summary: name, location, key roles, legacy	This is what appears on the Finding Her map — it must be clear, compelling and concise
Overview	2–3 sentences capturing her main contribution and why she matters	The hook — many readers will not read further, so make these count
Early life and influences	Birth, family, childhood, early experiences, cultural background	Links who she became to where she started — context shapes achievement
Education and learning	Formal education, training, learning on Country, self-taught skills, life experience	Broadens what 'education' means — includes all forms of learning, not just credentials
Career, contributions and achievements	Chronological highlights, leadership, programmes developed, barriers broken, advocacy	The evidence of her significance — specific and verifiable where possible
Challenges and context	Obstacles she faced: gender, race, class, disability, cultural barriers	Humanises the story and shows what she achieved in spite of — not in the absence of — difficulty
Community impact and legacy	Institutions still operating, people influenced, awards and honours, ongoing benefits	Shows her story is not just historical — it has present-day meaning
Later life	Activities in her later years, date and place of death, enduring impact	Completes the picture — later life contributions are often overlooked
Commemoration	Roads, plaques, statues, events and scholarships named in her honour	Connects the biography to its reason for being — a public place that bears her name

On completeness

You will not always be able to fill every section. Mark anything unknown as 'Not recorded at this time' rather than leaving it blank – this signals to future researchers that the gap was noticed, not missed.

A short, accurate, respectful biography is more valuable than a long one that relies on guesswork or unverified claims.

5 Focus on life, learning and impact

Finding Her biographies take a deliberately broad view of what counts as a significant contribution. Formal credentials and public recognition are not the only – or even the primary – measures of a woman's importance.

Learning

Include all forms of learning – not only formal education and qualifications:

- ◆ Formal education, apprenticeships or professional training – and note if she was one of few women in her field
- ◆ Self-taught skills, experiential learning, learning through practice and observation
- ◆ Learning on Country – knowledge passed down through community, family and cultural traditions
- ◆ Life-long learning – how she continued to develop, adapt and deepen her expertise over time

Contribution

Don't limit 'contribution' to paid or credentialled work:

- ◆ Contributions to family, community and care – including unpaid labour that sustained others
- ◆ Grassroots organising, community activism, advocacy and social reform
- ◆ Cultural preservation, language maintenance, and knowledge-keeping
- ◆ Entrepreneurship, local enterprise and economic contribution at any scale
- ◆ Pioneering achievements – the first woman to do something, or to do it in this community

Impact

Think about impact at multiple scales:

- ◆ The immediate community – families, neighbours, colleagues and beneficiaries
- ◆ The local area or region – institutions, organisations and places still bearing her influence
- ◆ Broader social, cultural or political change – movements, legislation, practices she helped shape
- ◆ Future generations – people she mentored, trained or inspired

6 Tips for reading the published biographies

Before writing your own biography, read three or four published examples at findingher.org.au/directories – including at least one from each type in Section 1. As you read, look for these things:

What to look for

What it teaches you

How early life links to later achievement	The biography is not a list of facts — it builds a narrative arc. See how writers connect early influences to later contributions without over-explaining.
How learning and education are described	Notice that formal credentials are mentioned but not over-emphasised. See how informal learning, life experience and cultural knowledge sit alongside — and sometimes above — academic qualifications.
How challenges are described	Obstacles are acknowledged honestly but not dwelt on. The focus remains on what she did, not what was done to her. Challenges become context for achievement, not the defining feature of her life.
How quotes are used	A single strong quote can anchor an entire section. Notice how quotes are chosen for their ability to reveal character, values or voice — not just to confirm a fact.
The structure in practice	See how the overview, early life, education, career, impact and commemoration sections fit together in real biographies — and how much variation is possible within the same structure.
Tone and language	Finding Her biographies are written for a wide public audience — clear, warm, precise. They are not academic writing, but they are not casual either. Aim for the kind of language you would use to tell a friend about someone remarkable.

7 Mini checklist — before you submit

Run through this checklist before submitting a completed biography to the Finding Her team. Every item should be confidently ticked.

- I have recorded the woman’s key roles and achievements**
Specific, verifiable contributions — not just general praise

- I have included learning, training or life experience**
Formal and informal — all forms of learning that shaped who she became

- I have consulted family, community or other sources where possible**
Especially important for First Nations women and those without rich formal documentation

- I have used the woman’s own words first wherever possible**
Audio recordings, interviews, letters, self-authored books — let her be the authority of her story

- I have used quotes to show her voice, values and personality**
A well-chosen quote is worth three paragraphs of description

- I have noted the challenges or barriers she faced**
Described respectfully and as context for achievement — not as the defining story

- I have included legacy or commemoration if known**
What does the world look like because she was in it?

**I have marked 'Not recorded at this time' where information is missing**

Rather than guessing or leaving gaps, this helps future researchers

**I have recorded all my sources**

Newspapers, books, interviews, archives and recordings – all of them

**I have checked for and corrected historical bias in my sources**

Old language or framing that diminishes the woman or reflects outdated values

**I have confirmed permission to include everything in this biography**

Especially for family or community knowledge, First Nations content, and photographs

**I have respected any requests to exclude certain information**

If family or community asked that something not be published, it is not in this biography

✦ Next step: submit a nomination for formal place naming

You may also wish to explore formal place naming through the [Remember a Local – Name a Place campaign](#) on Engage Victoria. Nominations are reviewed by Geographic Names Victoria and may be shared with the relevant council for consideration, in line with Victoria's place naming rules.

This is a separate process from inclusion on the Finding Her map.

Remember

Every woman's story matters. Record what you can, but always respect permissions.

Approach each story with gentleness and respect, remembering that grief and trauma may still affect families and descendants – sometimes for many years.

A short, accurate, respectful biography that the family is proud of is far more valuable than a long one written without their knowledge or trust.

Thank you for your dedication. Every biography you write helps celebrate and recognise women's contributions to Victoria and ensures their stories are not lost.

Clare Reynolds Digital Curator, Her Place Women's Museum clare.reynolds@herplacemuseum.com

Related documents in the Finding Her Resource suite: [Intersections in Place Checklist](#) · [Finding Her Nomination Submission Form](#) · [Biography Template](#) · [Finding Her Family Invitation Letter](#) · [Finding Her Place – Guide to Commemoration](#) · [GNV Submission Readiness Checklist](#) · [Finding Her Cultural Protocols Framework](#)