

Final Words: Writing an Obituary

By Jeanette Stehr-Green

An obituary is a written notice announcing a person's death. Rooted in antiquity and originally reserved for the rich and famous, obituaries have become a standard part of modern-day funeral arrangements, serving a variety of purposes.

An obituary is an explicit way of telling the community that someone has died. It clarifies the identity of the deceased and provides useful information to the public such as details about memorial services and names of survivors.

An obituary is an opportunity to honor the deceased in a lasting way. It can memorialize a loved one, celebrate their accomplishments, and spotlight their impact on others.

An obituary is a valuable source of historical information. With the inclusion of names, dates, and family connections, obituaries help families trace their lineage and learn more about their origin.

An obituary can also help with the healing process. As family members reflect on the life of their loved one, they often recognize what they had and what they have lost, moving the grieving process forward.

Writing an Obituary

A well-written obituary paints a portrait of the deceased: what they valued, how they lived, what brought them joy.

Although certain components are included in most obituaries (see sidebar), there is no set content, format, or approach. How you document your loved one's life and story is up to you, but the process is not always easy.

You might start by gathering basic, factual information about the deceased such as their full name, date and place of birth, date and place of death, and life milestones such as education, military service, marriage, children, and career. These are relatively straight-forward bits of information that should be relatively easy to collect.

Next, think about what made your loved one unique. How would you describe their personality? What were their core values, interests, and passions? Did they have quirks or habits that made them stand out? What did you love about them?

Using your answers to these questions, work with family and friends to identify meaningful anecdotes and memories that illustrate the unique qualities of your loved one. Such additions will shed light on your loved one's character and bring their story to life.

Finally consider the tone of the piece and how best to balance the sad reality of a death with the uplifting celebration of a life. Do you want the obituary to be serious – imparting core values or messages of wisdom – or humorous and witty?

Tips for Writing an Obituary

Keep the obituary as concise as possible. A length of 200 to 400 words maintains the reader's interest but allows for the development of key messages and themes.

In describing your loved one, avoid exaggerated praise and adjectives like "perfect," "legendary," or "flawless." Instead focus on your loved one's relatable human qualities and character traits.

Because obituaries can inadvertently expose families to scam artists and identity thieves, consider omitting exact birth dates (use just the year), addresses of the deceased or survivors, maiden names of surviving relatives, and names of young or vulnerable family members.

Always confirm names, dates, and locations included in an obituary and ask a family member or friend to proof it for spelling and other errors.

Should you write your own obituary?

Although most of us do not want to think about death, writing your own obituary (or helping a loved one write your obituary before you die) has benefits.

You know your life better than anyone and can prevent factual errors. You can also control the narrative and establish the tone of the piece.

If you prepare your obituary before you die, you spare your family at least one task as they attend to the many chores following the death of a loved one.

Finally, reflecting on key occurrences in your life and important relationships, a necessary step in writing an obituary, can give you a chance to audit your life and make changes while there is still time.

Writing an obituary – a few final words about a loved one – is a deeply personal process that combines factual details with meaningful storytelling. It's an opportunity to honor a life well lived while preserving a memory for future generations.

Jeanette Stehr-Green volunteers at Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County along with a host of other community members who provide respite care, grief and bereavement support, and access to free medical equipment.

SIDEBAR

Common Obituary Components

- Full name of deceased, nickname, residence, date and place of birth, and parents
- Age at death, date and place of death, and cause of death*
- College and post-graduate schools, degrees, and educational honors
- Military service and honors
- Name of spouse, date of marriage, and children's names
- Profession, job title, and employer name
- Church affiliations

- Personal character and interests
- Influence on the community
- Survivors
- Predecessors
- Place, date, and time of visitation, funeral services, and interment
- Special messages (e.g., a favorite quote or saying of the deceased, expressions of gratitude to caregivers, or a special request to honor the deceased)

*The cause of death is often omitted to protect privacy and avoid stigma and discomfort. It can, however, provide necessary context, especially if the death was unexpected. Including the cause of death can also raise awareness for a cause and provide closure.