

how to write an obituary

How to Write an Obituary: A Thoughtful Guide to Honoring a Loved One

how to write an obituary is a question many find themselves facing during a challenging time of loss. Crafting an obituary is a meaningful way to commemorate the life of someone who has passed away, sharing their story and celebrating the legacy they leave behind. While it might seem daunting at first, writing an obituary can be a healing process that allows you to reflect on cherished memories and the impact the deceased had on their family and community. This guide will walk you through the essential steps, tips, and insights to help you compose a heartfelt, respectful, and informative obituary.

Understanding the Purpose of an Obituary

Before diving into the writing process, it's important to understand what an obituary is and why it matters. An obituary is more than just a death announcement; it's a tribute that highlights the person's life, achievements, relationships, and values. It serves several key purposes:

- Notifying friends, family, and the community of the death and funeral arrangements.
- Providing a summary of the deceased's life story and personality.
- Offering a written keepsake that preserves memories for future generations.
- Allowing others to pay their respects and celebrate the person's legacy.

Knowing these purposes will help you focus on what to include and how to present the obituary in a way that feels authentic and informative.

Gathering Essential Information

Before you start writing, collecting accurate and relevant information is crucial. This will ensure the obituary is clear, complete, and respectful. Here's what you typically need to gather:

Personal Details

- Full name of the deceased, including maiden names or nicknames if relevant.
- Date and place of birth.
- Date and place of death.
- Age at the time of passing.

Family Information

- Names of close family members, such as spouse, children, grandchildren, parents, and siblings.
- Sometimes it's appropriate to mention the deceased's relationships, such as "beloved mother," "devoted husband," or "cherished sister."

Life Highlights and Achievements

- Education and career highlights.
- Military service or notable public service.
- Hobbies, passions, and community involvement.
- Awards, accomplishments, or special recognitions.

Funeral or Memorial Details

- Date, time, and location of funeral or memorial services.
- Information about visitation or wake.
- Instructions for donations or memorial contributions if applicable.

Structuring Your Obituary

An obituary typically follows a clear structure that guides readers through the information smoothly. Here's a common format you can adapt:

Opening Announcement

Start with a simple statement announcing the passing, including the full name, age, and date of death. This sets the tone and provides the key facts right away.

Example:

"Jane Marie Smith, 78, passed away peacefully on March 10, 2024, surrounded by her family."

Biographical Summary

This section is the heart of the obituary. Share a brief life story that covers birthplace, education, career, and important life milestones. Be sure to include unique details or anecdotes that capture the individual's personality and values.

Family and Relationships

List surviving family members and those who preceded the person in death. This creates a connection to loved ones and acknowledges the family's loss.

Service Information

Provide details about upcoming funeral or memorial services, including date, time, and location. If the family requests donations in lieu of flowers, this is the place to mention it.

Closing Sentiments

End with a personal message or quote, expressing gratitude, love, or a final tribute. This could be a favorite saying of the deceased or a simple thank-you to those who supported the family.

Tips for Writing a Compassionate and Effective Obituary

Writing an obituary is a delicate task, and the tone you choose can make a big difference. Here are some helpful tips to keep in mind:

Keep It Personal but Respectful

An obituary should reflect the personality and spirit of the deceased. Use warm, respectful language that honors their memory without being overly formal or clinical.

Be Concise but Informative

Most newspapers or online platforms have word limits. Aim to include essential information and meaningful highlights without overwhelming readers with too much detail.

Use Positive Language

Focus on the good memories, accomplishments, and the impact the individual made rather than dwelling on illness or cause of death unless the family wants to share that.

Double-Check Facts and Spellings

Accuracy is important. Verify names, dates, and other details to avoid mistakes that can cause distress or confusion.

Consider Including a Photo

Many obituaries include a photograph of the deceased. Choose a clear, recent image that represents them well.

Where to Publish an Obituary

Once the obituary is written, deciding where to publish it is the next step. Traditionally, obituaries are printed in local newspapers, but there are several options to consider:

- **Newspaper Obituaries:** Most communities have local or regional newspapers that accept obituary submissions. Check their guidelines for word limits and submission deadlines.
- **Online Memorials:** Websites like Legacy.com allow you to create online obituaries that can be shared widely and remain accessible long-term.
- **Funeral Home Websites:** Many funeral homes offer obituary posting services on their websites, often linked to other memorial features.
- **Social Media:** While not a traditional option, social media platforms can be a way to share the obituary

quickly with a broader network.

Choosing the right platform depends on the audience you want to reach and the wishes of the family.

The Emotional Aspect of Writing an Obituary

Writing an obituary is often an emotional process, especially when you're close to the person who has passed. It's okay to take your time and seek help if needed. Sometimes, multiple family members can collaborate to ensure the obituary is comprehensive and balanced. Other times, hiring a professional obituary writer or working with the funeral home can ease the burden.

Remember, an obituary is a celebration of life, not just an announcement of death. It's a way to honor a unique individual and share their story with others who cared or will come to care.

Examples of Obituary Styles

Obituaries come in many shapes and styles, depending on cultural traditions, personal preferences, and publication requirements. Here are a few common approaches:

- **Traditional:** Formal, straightforward, focusing on facts and key life events.
- **Personalized:** Includes anecdotes, quotes, and expressions of personality.
- **Poetic or Literary:** Uses poetic language or excerpts from favorite poems or literature to convey emotion.
- **Brief Notices:** Short announcements mainly giving service details and immediate family names.

Choosing a style that feels right for the deceased and their family helps make the obituary more meaningful.

Writing an obituary is a unique opportunity to honor someone's life with dignity, honesty, and love. By focusing on the essential details, sharing heartfelt memories, and communicating with care, you can create a lasting tribute that resonates with all who read it. Whether you're writing for a close family member or helping a friend, understanding how to write an obituary thoughtfully is a valuable skill during difficult

times.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the key elements to include when writing an obituary?

An obituary should include the full name of the deceased, age, date and place of death, a brief biography, information about surviving family members, details about the funeral or memorial service, and any special messages or donations.

How long should an obituary be?

Obituaries typically range from 200 to 500 words, but the length can vary depending on publication requirements and how much information you want to include.

What tone should be used when writing an obituary?

The tone of an obituary should be respectful, sincere, and compassionate. It can also be personalized to reflect the personality and life of the deceased, often balancing factual information with warmth and affection.

Can I include personal stories or quotes in an obituary?

Yes, including personal stories, quotes, or memorable anecdotes can make the obituary more meaningful and provide a fuller picture of the deceased's life and character.

How do I handle sensitive or difficult information in an obituary?

When including sensitive information, it's important to be tactful and considerate. Focus on positive memories and achievements, and avoid unnecessary details that might cause distress to family members or friends.

Where can I publish an obituary?

Obituaries can be published in local newspapers, funeral home websites, online obituary platforms, and social media. Choosing the right platform depends on the audience you want to reach.

Is it necessary to include funeral service details in an obituary?

Including funeral or memorial service details is helpful for friends and family who may want to attend or send condolences. However, if the service is private, it's acceptable to note that or omit specific details.

How soon should an obituary be written and published after a person's death?

It's best to write and submit the obituary as soon as possible, typically within a few days after the death, to allow time for publication and to inform the community promptly.

Additional Resources

How to Write an Obituary: A Professional Guide to Honoring a Life

how to write an obituary is a question that many find themselves facing during difficult times. Composing an obituary involves more than just announcing a death; it is an opportunity to commemorate a person's life, achievements, and legacy in a respectful and meaningful way. For families, funeral directors, and writers alike, understanding the nuances of obituary writing is essential to produce a tribute that resonates with readers and honors the deceased appropriately.

Understanding the Purpose of an Obituary

An obituary serves multiple functions. Primarily, it informs the community of a person's passing, including essential details such as dates, funeral arrangements, and survivors. Beyond that, it celebrates the individual's life story, highlighting their character, accomplishments, and the impact they had on others. This dual role requires a balance between factual reporting and narrative warmth, which can be challenging to achieve.

Writing an obituary is not merely a formality but a historical record that may be preserved for future generations. As such, accuracy and tone are paramount. The obituary must be clear and concise while capturing the essence of the individual's life.

Key Elements to Include When Writing an Obituary

Essential Information

The foundation of any obituary includes the following critical details:

- **Full Name:** Include any nicknames or maiden names if applicable.

- **Date and Place of Death:** Specify when and where the person passed away.
- **Age at Death:** Helpful for context and record-keeping.
- **Birth Information:** Date and place of birth provide background.
- **Surviving Family Members:** List close relatives such as spouse, children, siblings, and grandchildren.
- **Funeral or Memorial Service Details:** Date, time, location, and any instructions for attendees.

Including these elements ensures the obituary fulfills its primary informational role.

Personalizing with Life Story and Achievements

To move beyond a simple death notice, consider incorporating a brief biography focusing on:

- **Career and Education:** Highlight professional milestones and academic achievements.
- **Community Involvement:** Note volunteer work, memberships, or civic contributions.
- **Hobbies and Interests:** Sharing passions brings a personal touch.
- **Distinctive Traits and Anecdotes:** Include qualities or stories that illustrate the person's character.

This section offers readers insight into the life lived, making the obituary a meaningful tribute rather than a sterile announcement.

How to Write an Obituary: Step-by-Step Approach

1. Gather Accurate Information

Accuracy is the cornerstone of obituary writing. Start by collecting verified details from family members, official documents, and funeral home representatives. Cross-check names, dates, and spellings to prevent errors that can cause distress or misinformation.

2. Decide on the Tone and Style

The tone should reflect the personality of the deceased and the preferences of the family. Some obituaries adopt a formal, neutral tone, while others embrace warmth and humor. Considering the publication medium—newspaper, online platform, or funeral program—also influences style and length.

3. Write a Compelling Opening

Begin with the person's full name, age, and place of residence, followed by the date and place of death. This opening sentence sets the stage for readers and succinctly communicates the most critical facts.

Example:

“Jane Marie Smith, 78, of Springfield, passed away peacefully on March 12, 2024, at her home.”

4. Develop the Body with Life Highlights

Narrate key aspects of the person's life, weaving together factual information with personal insights. Avoid excessive jargon or overly sentimental language; the goal is to create an authentic and respectful portrayal.

5. Include Funeral and Memorial Details

Clearly state the arrangements, including dates, times, venues, and whether services are public or private. If donations are preferred in lieu of flowers, specify the charities or causes.

6. Review and Edit Thoroughly

Proofread for grammar, spelling, and clarity. Confirm that all names and facts are accurate. A well-crafted obituary reflects professionalism and honors the deceased appropriately.

Common Challenges and Considerations in Obituary Writing

Balancing Privacy and Public Information

Families may have differing views on what information to disclose. Sensitive topics such as cause of death or estranged relationships often require careful consideration. Respecting privacy while fulfilling the obituary's informative role demands tact and discretion.

Length Constraints and Publication Requirements

Newspapers and websites often have word limits or formatting guidelines. This constraint necessitates prioritizing the most significant details and crafting concise yet impactful prose. Some publications offer tiered pricing based on length, influencing the content scope.

Handling Emotional Sensitivity

Writing an obituary can be emotionally taxing, especially for those close to the deceased. It is advisable to approach the task with patience and, if possible, involve multiple perspectives to capture a balanced and comprehensive tribute.

Digital Trends and Innovations in Obituary Writing

In recent years, the rise of online obituary platforms has transformed how these memorials are shared. Digital obituaries often allow for multimedia elements such as photos, videos, and guest books, enhancing the commemorative experience. This evolution requires writers to adapt traditional obituary formats to new media, focusing on readability and engagement.

Moreover, social media has become a venue for sharing obituaries rapidly with wider audiences. This trend underscores the importance of clear, respectful writing that honors the deceased while communicating essential details efficiently.

Final Thoughts on How to Write an Obituary

Crafting an obituary is a delicate task that blends factual reporting with heartfelt remembrance. Understanding how to write an obituary involves recognizing its multifaceted purpose: to inform, to honor, and to preserve memory. By approaching the process methodically—gathering accurate information, selecting an appropriate tone, and carefully composing the narrative—writers can create meaningful

tributes that resonate with readers and provide comfort to grieving families.

The skill of obituary writing lies not only in what is said but also in how it is conveyed. Thoughtful, clear, and respectful prose ensures that the life being remembered is portrayed with dignity, making the obituary a lasting testament to a person's journey and legacy.

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obituaries from her apartment in Daytona Beach, Florida. She loves her job even though it comes with one oddity: as she writes the obituaries, each spirit pays a visit, manifesting in unique ways. The ghosts succeed in creating humorous conditions, annoying pranks and scaring Holly's boyfriends. But one spirit in particular has another reason to visit, and Holly is on a mission to solve the mystery of who the ghost is and why she is visiting this apartment sixty-six years after her death. Whether being a friend to a young woman in an abusive relationship, enduring her drama queen mother's antics, or dealing with her own commitment issues, Holly's precious Chihuahua is an ever-present comforter and moral support. The perfect escape to humor, excitement and ghostly encounters, *WRITE OF PASSING* is the third book in Janie Owens' Daytona Beach series of cozy mysteries.

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paper to linger in', and 'writing that matters'. Entertaining, inspiring and informative, they serve as a legitimate instrument of history, and have enjoyed an extraordinary revival in popularity over the past twenty years. *Life After Death* investigates-and celebrates-the development of the obituary form in the British, American, and Australian press. Author Nigel Starck tracks down the earliest exercise in obituary publication (in 1622), then traces the evolution of the form over four centuries, from times when the obituary was the reserve of royalty and privilege to its contemporary egalitarian mode. Along the way Dr Starck delves into a multitude of lives, from the heroic to the comic, the saintly to the downright villainous, the exemplary to the eccentric. Meet, in the posthumous cast list, Major Digby Tatham-Warter, of Britain's Parachute Regiment, who carried an umbrella into battle just in case it rained; the absent-minded Australian barrister Pat Lanigan, who drove from Canberra to Sydney and then flew back, leaving his car behind; and the eccentric American publisher Eddie Clontz, whose newspaper reported (exclusively, of course) that 'tiny terrorists' were disguising themselves as garden gnomes. *Life After Death* also incorporates a connoisseur's collection of ten obituaries reprinted in full: the subjects include Helen Keller, Diana Mosley, Quentin Crisp, George Wallace, and Rosa Parks. Without doubt, *Life After Death* is a book that will outlive its author-as an enduring celebration of journalism's dying art. 'Canon Smith expired after suffering an unfortunate disagreement with his bishop.'-The Sydney Morning Herald, 1882 'Minnesota Fats died at his home in Nashville. He was eighty-two, or perhaps ninety-five.'-The New York Times, 1996

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writing by illuminating the practices of writers and writer-educators. Demonstrating solutions to problems in different forms and genres, the contributors draw on their professional and personal experiences to examine specific and practical challenges that writers must confront and solve in order to write. This book discusses a range of approaches to writing, such as the early working out of projects, the idea of experimentation, of narrative time, and of failure. With its strong focus on process, *Creative Writing Practice* is a valuable guide for students, scholars and practitioners of creative writing.

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