

How to Write a Good Obituary and Why it Matters

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for the Joseph Sr. and Polly Knight Family Reunion, 2020

Writing a good obituary creates a definitive summary of a person's life. It may be the only record that is immediately accessible to future generations, or the key to finding other documents connected to a person. It's worth thinking ahead about what should be included in obituaries for yourself and your loved ones. Planning a funeral can be traumatic. Save yourself the added stress of tracking down dates and details for the obituary by making notes ahead when possible.

Why publish an obituary in the newspaper?

Publishing an obituary in a printed newspaper is optional BUT highly recommended because it creates an archived public record. Other websites like funeral home memorials, Facebook pages, personal blogs, or other online resources are not permanently saved or searchable in the years to come.

Printed obituaries are commonly seen and shared by the general public. You might be surprised at the people who reach out after seeing an obituary: old neighbors, former co-workers or students, or extended family members. It can be tedious and painful to personally inform everyone of a death; let the obituary help make the announcement. A published obituary can also be readily shared online to spread the news.

Rates vary by newspaper and the number of days printed, the length of the obituary, and the number of photos. Some newspapers also use icons to show membership in various groups: military branches, religious affiliations, etc. Careful choices can create a good obituary (and the corresponding public record!) while limiting expenses. Longer versions of a life story can always be shared among family or on genealogy websites.

Where else can I print it?

Mortuaries sometimes post obituaries on their business websites. You can post funeral information on personal social media pages, or even just email it. Every obituary, printed in a newspaper or otherwise, should be posted later online on genealogy websites like Family Search, Ancestry, Find a Grave, or Billion Graves.

What photo should I use?

Your obituary photo will generally appear in black and white. Photos should be in good focus, with a solid background if possible, and show the person's full face. Some people

choose to print two photos: one from younger years, and one as a senior. Ideal photos show the deceased alone. You can always add more photos to Family Search or print them in albums to illustrate a person's life.

Consider scheduling a photoshoot with your older relatives or yourself just for the purpose of creating a good obituary photo! Let them choose the clothing, hairstyle, and pose they are comfortable with. You will never be younger, and health problems can arise suddenly. Take a great photo while you/they are free from oxygen tubes, dental issues, bruising, or other skin discoloration common in older years.

What should I write about?

Obituaries generally follow a format:

- Deceased's full name and commonly used nicknames
- Dates of birth and death
- Cause of death
- Biographical information
- List of survivors
- Funeral, burial, and/or memorial details

Obituaries can be collaboratively written, or completed by a single person. Discuss with your family about who will be writing the obituary and who will have the final say before printing. If you want to write your own obituary, do it and make it known!

1. Deceased's full name and common nicknames: Your loved ones may not use their legal names in everyday life. Include both so that future researchers can locate legal documents like birth and death certificates, property deeds, census records, educational degrees, or marriage records. Family and personal records will use nicknames--and you'll want to record that the man whom everyone calls Uncle Pete is really named Daniel.
2. Give the date of birth and the date of death, with locations. Many obituaries forget one date or the other. Don't write just "Thursday" when you need to say April 22. This helps later on to locate birth and death certificates.
3. Give the cause of death. It's okay to write that it's incident to age for the elderly but more medical information is really useful to posterity. Cancers, heart attacks, diabetes, etc. should all be tracked in families. Friends and family can give extra attention in cases of unexpected deaths due to car accidents, addictions, murder, or suicide. There is no cause for embarrassment in the manner of death.
4. Biographical information could include birth family information, places lived, education, career details, religious affiliation, volunteer work, spouse(s) and

children, and hobbies. Even stay-at-home mothers have lives before, during, and after raising children that are worth writing about! Ask questions of the living while you still can to most accurately represent their whole life later in an obituary. *See page 5 for more topics to consider.

5. List family members. Survivors are the family still living. Predeceased means the family who died before the obituary subject. If a person loses a spouse or child to death before their own passing, that is a significant part of their life story and should be included. Consider listing as many survivors as possible: spouse, children and spouses, grandchildren, or other close relatives or life partners. Some people choose to list children's spouses in parenthesis, and the current city of residence for children living elsewhere. If the posterity is numerous, you might choose to give the total number of grandchildren rather than list individual names.
6. Funeral information can indicate whether a funeral is private for family members only or open to the public, and give details about any services being held. Give complete addresses, dates, and times for memorial services. It's also important to note what happens to the body: is it being cremated or buried? Where is the body being buried? This is important for posterity who might want to visit a gravesite later on. Some people have requests for a dress code at the service, or for donations to be made in honor of the deceased to a specific charity.

Things that don't need to be included:

Not everything needs to be a public record. Here are some things to cut out:

1. Name of the mortuary handling the remains. Some of these providers will offer to help submit the obituary, and will often add their own name and/or logo to the bottom. This adds expense.
2. Special thanks to hired caregivers or doctors at the end of life. Some families spend a disproportionate amount of space thanking medical teams. Consider sending flowers or personal cards directly to the helpers instead.
*If Grandma went to live with a family member, or if one child took on extra responsibilities as caregiver, that's great to include. Just consider whether the oncologist should get as much public recognition as a spouse.
3. Condemnation for personal flaws or failings. Don't create a public record of your anger. That is not to say that obituaries should be falsified. Addictions, mental health problems, failed marriages, etc. can all be respectfully addressed. Just be gentle!

How do I submit the obituary for printing?

Contact the newspaper about printing deadlines. Mortuaries can assist you in submission, sometimes for an extra fee. Many newspaper offices are closed for major holidays or weekends, so work quickly to make sure you meet the submission deadlines appropriate for your memorial service. Decide which days you want the obituary to appear. Some newspapers share obituaries with another local paper; ask what the rates are to print in multiple papers if available.

The newspaper will ask for a digital version of the obituary to be emailed to them, along with photos. Send the highest resolution possible of any photos. Be specific about any headlines you want: names, dates, or sayings.

Before submitting, have several people read through the obituary and correct dates, spellings, punctuation, or other facts. Newspapers DO NOT edit obituaries and will print EXACTLY what is submitted, even if grammatically incorrect.

Most newspapers have a place online for comments. Review with the newspaper any options for online messages of condolence and how to view those.

Biographical details to consider for an obituary (or for a longer life history):

Full name, plus common nicknames

Date of birth and location

Parents' full names

Siblings full names and date of birth

Parents' occupations

Schools attended, with years and locations

Degrees/certifications earned, with institution name and year

Military service, with branch and rank, and location(s) and years served

Missionary service, with location(s) and years

Professional career: position(s) held, company name(s), responsibilities

Volunteer work, with position(s) held, organization(s), and responsibilities

Awards for professional or volunteer service

Publications of personal or professional work

Spouse(s) names with marriage dates and locations

Children's names, along with spouse's names and grandchildren

Places of residence

Membership in social clubs or organizations

Religious affiliation, with positions held and dates for important rites

Hobbies, crafts, or special talents

Favorite vacations or milestone achievements

Catchphrases or favorite sayings

Significant health challenges

Personality traits and individual values