



Tips for Writing an Obituary

In the obituary we want to present the significant events and attributes of the deceased, to note that person's impact on the world around them, and acknowledge the family members they held dear.

An obituary can be interesting and compelling - especially if it focuses more on the life lived than on the notice of the death. For many people, their obituary may be just about the only thing that is ever written about them. The obituary can be the defining statement about that person for the family, friends, and community. An obituary can be read now, and saved for generations. All the more reason to make it lively and significant.

Important Facts to Include

Obituary writing must always include the full name of the deceased and a nickname if he or she had one. The town or city of residence, the person's age and the date he or she died, including the year are all important facts to include. Many people wonder whether to give out the cause of death in an obituary. Ultimately, the cause of death is the business of the immediate family, and no one else's. Please keep in mind, however, that if the circumstances of death were sudden, announcing the cause of death, either in the obituary, or in some other manner may keep you from having to explain what happened over and over to every friend and neighbor.

When it comes to writing about the person's life, include the important events in their life such as the date and place of birth and the person's parents. Include siblings, close friends and information about the person's education, if they attended a college, university or technical school. Include information on notable awards or other achievements, where the person worked, business colleagues, notable career events, hobbies, interests or other activities. If the person was involved with charitable or religious activities include those as well. If the deceased had an unusual life or attributes, add these when obituary writing.

The obituary that is the most meaningful is the one that is a well thought out work of the heart; one that is informative, expressive, and easy to read.

Listing Family Members

List key family members in the following order: List the spouse first, include the town or city where the spouse lives, children in the order of when they were born and their spouses, if any, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, in-laws, nephews or nieces, all listed in birth order. Include friends and pets, if the person was particularly fond of their pets. List those who have preceded the deceased after living members in the same order, i.e., spouse, children, grandchildren and more. Nieces, nephews, in-laws, cousins, grandchildren and greats are often numbered, and if you not sure you have all the names, use a number or say 'many grandchildren' to avoid leaving anyone out. List relatives with their first name, spouse's first name in parenthesis, then surname. If the spouse's surname is different, or the couple is not married, include the partner's surname in the parenthesis along with their first name.

Memorial or Funeral Information

Include the place, day, time and date of the funeral or memorial service. If the funeral involves a viewing, include the dates and times for guests. If there are plans for a graveside service, include the site, day, time and date. Let readers know the funeral home in charge of arrangements and whom to call for more information if there are no services planned.

The Final Part of the Obituary

Sometimes family members set up memorial accounts with a charity especially when there was a debilitating disease, accident or crime involved. Let people know where they can send their memorial donations by including the address or website in the obituary. Last, give thanks to any special people, institutions or groups that were particularly helpful to the deceased. Include a favorite poem or quotation of the deceased and a few words that summarize the person's life.

The Words to Use

Now that you know the important information to include when obituary writing, there are other tips on writing an obituary that go beyond the mere facts. Make the obit compelling by using words that show instead of tell. Dry facts will tell the story, but it won't compel people to read on.

Instead of writing "he served in the military," try something like this instead: "after Korea and two tours in Viet Nam with the U.S. Army that resulted in a Purple Heart and a Distinguished Service Cross, Joe retired from active duty in 1978." Also think of a way to sum up the person's life in three to six words, something that would resonate with friends and family members. These phrases typically appear as the epitaph on a cemetery headstone or inspire those who might be participating in the eulogy.

Proofreading, Editing and Revising

Accuracy and completeness are most important. This sounds obvious, but it is not easy. Errors can slip in, names can be misspelled, dates can be wrong, and information can be missed. The best way to ensure accuracy is to proofread, and then to proofread again.

If it's hard to proofread and edit, have a trusted friend or family member review the obituary to catch any misspellings or to verify facts. Proofreading avoids errors in the obituary when it goes to the newspaper. Once it's printed, it cannot be changed. Review the details carefully. The written obituary serves as a record of the deceased's life; it will also be used by family generations to come for genealogical research.