

## How To Write An Obituary – A Step-by-Step Guide

<https://www.remembranceprocess.com/capturing-a-life-in-words/guide-to-writing-an-obituary/>

Preparing an obituary for someone you love is an exercise best approached with care and thought. Like the funeral service itself, an obituary acknowledges the loss of our loved one, expresses the pain of their loss and the joy that their presence among us brought.

### Essential Elements of an Obituary

It enlists the aid of our community, whose support we will need in the coming days weeks and months. Most immediately, the obituary serves to identify and communicate to the community the passing of our loved one, and to announce visitation, service, burial and memorial information.

In the obituary we also want to present the significant events and attributes of the deceased, to note that person's impact on their family and the world around them, and acknowledge the family members they held dear. Unfortunately, many of the obituaries we see in the newspaper and on the web fail to convey the personality or contributions of the deceased in a meaningful way. They are prepared in haste, in fog of grief, and the stress of meeting a newspaper deadline. Instead of a meaningful tribute, they often become a string of hackneyed phrases punctuated by fill-in-the-blanks of personal information.

Conventionality in formatting allows for readers to find the service times, and quickly determine whether the deceased is someone they know. In different areas of the country there are different conventions and standard formats for obituaries. The larger the population served by a newspaper, the more likely it is that a very abbreviated notice, giving only the barest of information, will be the norm. In more rural areas, the newspapers may not even charge for running obituaries, leading to more flowery phrases and the inclusion of more biographic information.

Today, many obituaries are published in two versions; an abbreviated form for the newspaper, and a more detailed version that is read online at the funeral home website, or on other memorial sites. When preparing an obituary it is wise to look over the conventional form used in your local paper and organize yours similarly; facilitating the clear communication of service times and survivors.

**Here is a step-by-step guide to preparing all of the essential elements in an obituary:**

#### 1. Announcement of Death

We begin with the name, age, and place of residence of the deceased, along with the time and place of death. This identifying statement and announcement of the fact of death can be communicated in many ways. 'Passed away', 'died', 'went to be with his Lord', 'after a long struggle with cancer', 'surrounded by her family', are all common variations in this statement. Some people feel that 'died' is too blunt, others say that flowery phrases and euphemisms only get in the way of accepting the fact of death. Use what you feel comfortable with.

Many people wonder whether to give out the cause of death in an obituary. Certainly this is something many obit readers will be curious about. Ultimately, the cause of death is the business of the immediate family, and no one else's. If you are uncomfortable sharing the cause of death, you are under no obligation to list it in the obituary. 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.

## **2. Biographical Sketch**

Sketch is the key word here. An obituary is not a biography, but a recounting of the most important events, qualities, contributions and connections in a person's life. Each life is unique, but among the most important universal milestones are: the date and place of birth, parent's names including mother's maiden name (ex: Bill and Barb (Maiden name) Green, date and place of marriage, birth name of spouse, education, work, and military service. An obituary is not a legal document, so if in your heart you feel that a step parent should be listed as a parent, that a divorce need not be mentioned, or that some experience should be omitted, follow your best judgment.

Listing events chronologically works well, but do not be afraid to put the more important information such as marriage before education, even if it took place afterward. A long list of honors and accomplishments is not often of interest to anyone outside the immediate family. Do mention significant contributions and recognitions, but if there are many, choose carefully and try to encompass as many as you can in as few words as possible. This summarization strategy works well for a person who was involved in many service and social organizations, places of employment, hobbies, or places of residence as well.

While we summarize to avoid long lists or chronological minutiae, we do well to give meaningful examples. A common utterance or specific example can illustrate and bring life to an obituary whether it is a quirky habit, a favorite recipe or a touching expression of love. Many people prepare their own obituaries, and this can be a great exercise, but what those obits lack is mention of the impact that the deceased had on family members, and their community. Did her sense of humor brighten your life, did he always make time for the kid's games? Did she make guests feel welcome? Paint her picture in the obituary with these details.

## **3. Family**

It is said that the funeral is for the living. The obituary is for the living too, and one of the most important parts is the listing of survivors and those who preceded your loved one in death (remember that preceded means to come before, while proceeded means moved through). This is a section that benefits greatly from forethought. In the confusion and preoccupation of grief, important relatives can be forgotten. It's unfortunate if we forget to mention a hobby or interest, but it can be painful if we forget to mention a step-child or sister.

In big city newspapers, relatives are often worked into the announcement in a standardized clichéd form; Roger, beloved son of ...loving father of....attentive grandfather of.... and there are no special sections for survivors and preceded. In other papers, and in the extended

forms used on memorial websites, we list survivors first, starting with the closest relations: spouse, children, grandchildren, great and great-great grandchildren, parents, and siblings. If any of these relations are nonexistent or have died, skip and move to the next relation. Nieces, nephews in-laws, and cousins are usually left out, or simply numbered unless they were close to the deceased. Grandchildren and greats are often numbered too, 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.

#### **4. Service Times**

Once again, local traditions vary, so consult your local papers for the specific order of service times, or better yet, leave this part up to your funeral director. Here are the essentials: time, full date and place of service along with the name of the officiant; time, full date and place of burial or interment if applicable; and finally, time, full date and place of visitation(s). Please remember that an interment is placing remains in their place of rest, while internment is confining a person to a place against their will.

#### **5. Special Messages**

At the end of an obituary a special message is sometimes found, such as 'in lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to..' or 'Special Thanks to the staff at General Hospital for..' or 'We will always carry your memory in our hearts'. Sometimes a short prayer or a line from a poem is placed at the end. These messages are optional, but can be a way of communicating something that did not fit into the body of the obituary.

#### **6. Photos**

Photos add to the cost of an obituary, but can be a pleasant reminder of the person we miss, and a useful way for readers to recognize our loved one among all the other obituaries. This value of identification is usually lost if a 40 year old photo is used. It's a great treat to see old photos and to be reminded of all the living that happened before old age and death, but if friends don't recognize the person in the photo, they may not read the obituary. If you feel that you must use a dated photo, include a recent shot as well. Like a miniature funeral, the purposes of an obituary are; acknowledging the passing of one of us, celebrating the gifts that the person's life brought to us, sharing parts of a life that we may not all be aware of, and expressing the grief of our loss. Like a funeral, what makes the difference in an obituary is the loving participation of the family. The obituary that is the most meaningful not necessarily the one that runs in the New York Times, or has the most column inches, but the one that is a well thought out work of the heart; one that is informative, expressive, and easy to read.

#### **Crafting an obituary**

Start off the obituary by announcing the death of the loved one. Provide the name and a very brief description, the age of the deceased, and the day of passing. You can probably squeeze all of this information into one sentence. For example:

*On Monday, September 4, 2017, John Doe, loving husband and father of four children, passed away at the age of 74.*

## **Provide general biographical information**

Include [some biographical information](#) such as birth date, upbringing, education, marriage information, accomplishments, and work history. Be compact and precise with your wording. Try to get as much meaning into as few words as possible.

*John was born on July 31, 1943 in Houston, TX to Bob and Jane (Smith) Doe. He received his law degree from the University of Texas in Austin in 1971, and he practiced business law for 31 years in Houston. On May 28, 1975, he married Grace Ann Lewis. They raised two sons, Nick and Joel, and two daughters, Alice and Lisa.*

## **Make it personal**

To write a great obituary, it's important to capture the spirit of the loved one who has passed. Compose a paragraph that describes not only what your loved one *did*, but also what your loved one was *like*. For example, focus on hobbies, passions, and personal characteristics. Remember, newspapers will charge you by line, word, or inch (depending on the publication), so don't write more than you can afford. A short, factual obituary might be all you need. But if you want to write a special, personalized obituary, include details like this:

*John had a passion for painting. He also loved to bird watch, and he combined his two favorite hobbies to create extraordinary art. His paintings of various birds were much admired not only by friends and family, but also by all who frequented the coffee shops where his paintings were displayed. He was also an avid music lover and a collector of Beatles memorabilia. He was known for his quick wit, his infectious smile, and his kind and compassionate spirit.*

Survivors

Funeral information

## **Funeral information**

Provide the date, time, and location of the funeral. Also include information regarding donations, flowers, or condolences.

*A funeral service will be held on Thursday, September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017 at the Church of Christ on Main Street at 1 o'clock p.m. Flowers or donations may be sent to 1234 St. Houston, TX.*

Put it all together, and you've got a complete obituary.

## **Sample Obituary**

On Monday, September 4, 2017, John Doe, loving husband and father of four children, passed away at age 74.

John was born on July 31, 1943 in Houston, TX to Bob and Jane (Smith) Doe. He received his law degree from the University of Texas in Austin in 1971, and practiced business law for 31 years in Houston. On May 28, 1975, he married Grace Lewis Doe. They raised two sons, Nick and Joel, and two daughters, Alice and Lisa.

John had a passion for painting. He also loved to bird watch, and he combined his two favorite hobbies to create extraordinary art. His paintings of various birds were much admired not only by friends and family, but also by all who frequented the coffee shops where his paintings were displayed. He was also an avid music lover and a collector of Beatles memorabilia. He was known for his quick wit, his infectious smile, and his kind and compassionate spirit.

John was preceded in death by his father, Bob, and his mother, Jane. He is survived by his wife Grace, his four children, Nick, Joel, Alice, and Lisa, his brother Paul, and several cousins, nieces, and a nephew. A funeral service will be held on Thursday, September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017 at the Church of Christ on Main Street at 1 o'clock p.m. Flowers or donations may be sent to 1234 St. Houston, TX.

Because newspapers generally charge by the line, it's important sometimes to encapsulate the sense of a loved one in short paragraphs. Writing about the passing of a loved one is never easy in any way or form. It takes a lot from you to even think about losing people you value so much; how much more if you are writing about them in short paragraphs or even [short sentences](https://www.examples.com/education/writing-a-newspaper-obituary-and-example.html). Although it is very challenging, sometimes we really need to push through the pain. [<https://www.examples.com/education/writing-a-newspaper-obituary-and-example.html>]