

Writing obituaries

Death is news. When death occurs unnaturally — by fire, murder, accident or war — you write *news stories*, which usually print alongside other breaking news. But when death occurs naturally — by illness or old age — you write *obituaries*, which are often gathered together on an “obituary page” in most newspapers.

You may think obituaries are just a depressing public service that journalists provide for gloomy old readers. (Writing about *dead people*? How *creepy*. How *morbid*.) But keep in mind that obituaries are read more closely, and by more people, than any other part of the paper. They tell stories. They touch hearts. They honor and inspire.

“There’s nothing morbid about a good obituary,” a New York Times editor once said, “because a good obit is about life, not death.”



Q What’s the difference between an obituary and a death notice?

Obituaries, death notices, funeral notices — the terms mean different things at different newspapers, and they’re often used interchangeably.

Generally, death notices are brief announcements providing basic facts about a local person’s death (name, age, memorial service). Some publications charge for these; some run them in small type along the bottom of a page, like classified ads.

Obituaries are longer, providing more history and detail. Publications often charge for these, too. They’re frequently written by funeral homes or families, not staff reporters. Many short obits follow a standardized format that’s simple and goof-proof.

But when prominent citizens die, it’s news; their obituaries become news stories written by reporters. Forms from funeral homes provide the basic facts, but interviews with friends, colleagues and family members supply details that are crafted into a fuller story.

OBIT STYLE: WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

Most publications develop guidelines dictating how reporters handle:

◆ **Addresses.** An obituary may identify the deceased as *Jane Jones of 1234 Main Street*. But is that address necessary? Or does it alert burglars to houses that are now unoccupied? Some editors delete home addresses from obits to protect families from criminals, overeager real-estate agents and insurance salespeople.

◆ **Cause of death.** If a pop singer kills herself or an actor dies of AIDS, it’s juicy national news. But what if it’s a local cheerleader? Or a beloved pastor? Most families want embarrassing causes of death omitted from obituaries, and most editors agree. (In a national survey of managing editors, 62 percent said they never use the word *suicide* in obits.) Instead of committing suicide, someone “died unexpectedly”; instead of succumbing to AIDS, someone “died after a long illness.” Unsure about your newsroom’s policy? Check with an editor.

◆ **Past personal problems.** Not everyone leads a blameless life. But is an obituary the proper place to remind readers that John Jones was jailed for drunk driving 20 years ago? Why re-open old wounds for grieving families? Granted, you shouldn’t ignore crimes or mistakes made by public figures, but before you dredge up unnecessary dirt about private citizens, weigh the pros and cons. ▼

◆ **Flowery phrases.** Ministers and morticians like to use euphemisms to describe how “our dearly departed brother passed into the arms of the Lord” and now “dwells among the angels.” Most editors prefer simply to say “he died.” Avoid funeral-home clichés. Don’t speculate about the deceased’s celestial activities.

◆ **Other terminology.** Funerals are *scheduled*, not *held*. Masses are *celebrated*, not *said* (and *Mass* is capitalized). People die *unexpectedly*, not *suddenly*, since all deaths are sudden. People die *after* surgery, not *as the result of surgery*, unless the surgeon was at fault. A man is survived by his *wife*, not his *widow*.

CHECKLIST

INFORMATION THAT’S ESSENTIAL IN AN OBITUARY

Write an accurate obituary and families will treasure it forever; write one that contains a sloppy mistake and it’ll *annoy* them forever. Not all information sent to you by amateur clerks and funeral directors is accurate; whenever possible, verify it through phone interviews and library research, as you would with any other news story.

Whether brief or in-depth, all obituaries should include:

◆ **Name:** Use full names, including middle name or initial. Nicknames, if commonly used, can be added in quotes. *Please* double-check all spellings.

◆ **Identification:** Find a phrase for your lead that best summarizes who this person was or what he/she did: *John Jones, a prominent local dentist, or Jane Jones, author of 29 crime novels*. Later in the story, you can elaborate on the details.

◆ **Age:** State it simply unless the family asks you to omit it: *Jones, 57, died Monday*. Or say *Jones died Monday. He was 57*.

◆ **Day/place of death:** Give the day of the week. Omit the time unless it’s relevant for some dramatic reason. If the death occurred out of town, name the city; otherwise, give the local location (hospital, at home, etc.).

◆ **Cause of death:** Some publications omit this out of respect for the family’s privacy; some omit it only in certain cases such as suicide or AIDS (see “Obit style” at left). Most avoid grisly details, summarizing by simply saying *he died of lung cancer*.

◆ **Birth date/birthplace.**

◆ **Background:** Education, military service, honors, career achievements — the amount of personal history you include will vary. The more prominent the person, the more in-depth the obit usually is, incorporating anecdotes and quotes from friends, family and colleagues.

◆ **Survivors:** Name those in the immediate family: spouse, children, parents, siblings.

◆ **Funeral/burial information:** Include the name and phone number for the funeral home, so readers can call for details. (You should call, too, to verify that your facts are correct.)

WRITING A STANDARD NEWS OBITUARY

Life isn’t fair. There just isn’t room, or time, to write a story about everyone who dies. That’s why obituaries are generally reserved for prominent or influential people — though in a small town or a school, that may include nearly everybody.

That’s also why, in the lead of a news obituary, you want to emphasize the person’s significance:

Edward E. Hughes, founder of the city’s oldest and largest law firm, died of pancreatic cancer Tuesday at Mercy Hospital. He was 78.

OR: Clifford E. “Dubey” Tucker, 101, a classic swamp Yankee who dined on fried eels and delighted in reminiscing beside his potbellied stove, died Sunday at the Westerly Health Center.

NOT: Funeral services will be held Monday for Ophelia Pulse, of 1234 Main St., who died of pneumonia Friday.

The lead of a news obituary will usually supply the person’s name; major accomplishment or occupation; day, location and cause of death; and age. That’s a lot to include, which is why most writers arrange those facts in the same reliable but predictable sequence.

If the cause of death is *natural*, most of the story will focus on the deceased’s personal history. If the death is *unnatural* (crime or accident) or the circumstances are unusual, details about the death should precede the deceased’s background information.

ADDING DEPTH AND CHARACTER: THE FEATURE OBITUARY

Some reporters specialize in a popular new style of story: the “common man (or woman)” feature obit. Instead of celebrating the lives of prominent citizens, these tell the life stories of ordinary folks using techniques you’d never see in a standard news obituary:

She read her Bible and romance novels — nothing too explicit. Reading was OK, but she wasn’t much for sitting. TV? A waste of time.

She had no patience with people who weren’t productive. She asked what her children had accomplished. She was a little more lenient with her grandchildren. She took in any stray cat that wandered by — too many, actually.

She gardened in her flower bed: hydrangeas, daylilies, honeysuckle, roses and lilacs. Even late at night, there was Judy, out there planting by flashlight.

Notice the difference? The style is looser, friendlier, and full of curiously engaging details:

Ruby Anderson was a tomboy who ran barefoot through the Minnesota swamps, third daughter of a Norwegian dirt farmer. She used onion tops for straws, scared off lynxes while bringing home the cows and made tepees out of birch bark.

The more prominent people are, the more you should supplement their histories with quotations (both *about* and *by* the deceased) to both capture their personalities and assess the legacies they leave. Here’s an example from the obituary of Gene Miller, a legendary Miami Herald reporter:

Judy Miller, the Herald’s managing editor, called him the “soul and conscience of our newsroom.”

“I can’t tell you the depth of sadness in this newsroom and in newsrooms around the country today,” she said. “He came in my office practically every day he was here, saying, ‘Toss me a story.’”

After you’ve profiled the deceased — recounting all personal/professional highlights — list the names of survivors: spouse, siblings and descendants. (Some publications include “companions.”) List the number of grandchildren rather than naming them all:

Survivors include her husband of 53 years, Daniel Hohn of Madison; two children, Brooke E. Cooper of Lincoln and Jeffrey Darling of Tampa, Fla.; and 12 grandchildren.

Information about memorial services or burials usually runs at the end of the story, though some publications display those details in a separate “fast-facts” sidebar that accompanies the obituary. ▼

The best feature obits reveal intimate details — so intimate, you can’t believe the reporter *didn’t actually know the deceased* — along with a surprising candor that captures people as they really were, warts and all:

During the winters, he did lapidary work, leather craft, and painted by number — tasteful naked women.

... Although he adored his daughters, he intimidated his grandkids, and he sometimes drank. He could be ornery and mean, but he loved to sing and mixed up the words to songs: “Chantilly Lace,” “Purple People Eater,” “God Bless America.”

This illusion of intimacy would be shattered if every detail was attributed (*he sometimes drank, his daughter claimed*). So in an unusual departure from newswriting protocol, feature obits omit attributions.

That’s risky. But a reporter with reliable radar can, after multiple in-depth interviews with friends and family, discern which details are typical and true.

Amy Martinez Starke is The Oregonian’s obituary specialist whose stories are excerpted here. When she writes, she becomes “the god of omniscience,” Starke says — “because I know, having talked to enough people, that this is true.”

HOW TO TALK TO FAMILIES ABOUT THE DECEASED

Writing your first obituary may make you uncomfortable — especially the task of interviewing the family and friends of the deceased. But it’s important to verify the facts before printing any obit. Some tips:

◆ Don’t be squeamish. People are rarely too upset to talk; in fact, they may appreciate your interest and actually enjoy the opportunity to reminisce.

◆ If you’re not sure what to say, try reading from a script. Years ago, a staff memo from the Amarillo (Tex.) Globe-News advised reporters to open the conversation this way:

“Hello. This is John Smith with the Globe-News. I have the information about Mr. Lefode from the funeral home, and I wonder if you or someone could go over the facts with me to make sure everything is correct.”

◆ Be supportive. Sympathetic. Human. As veteran obituary writer Robin Hinch suggests, insert yourself into the conversation, when it’s appropriate, to let the family know you understand what they’re going through: “Yes, I come from a big family, too.” That may help put them at ease.

◆ “Be willing to listen to the longest, most drawn-out anecdotes or recounting of a long illness,” Hinch advises, “even if you know it’s stuff you can’t use. Good detail can come from those discussions and a comfort level develops for talking to you.”

◆ If you’re planning to write a long feature obituary, gather as much detail as you can by asking follow-up questions: *What kind of dog did he have? What was its name? What did they do together?* It’s the small, telling details that best capture someone’s true personality.

◆ Avoid the awkwardly obvious (“*Are you sad that he died?*”), but don’t be shy about asking personal questions.

“They can refuse to answer,” Hinch says, “but more often than not, they’ll tell you lots of interesting things.”

If people start to cry, ask a practical question: *What kind of car did she drive?* “It snaps them out of tears,” Hinch says.

