

Crafting a Meaningful Obituary

Common Pitfalls

1. Failing to have a plan
 - a. Set draft and final deadlines. Plan your research.
 - b. Write an outline or do whatever you do to organize facts and thoughts.
 - c. Start writing even before all the data is in. Leave a searchable symbol in areas waiting for details.
 - d. Best advice I found online: <https://www.nbcnews.com/better/lifestyle/how-write-perfect-obituary-according-professional-writers-ncna1055996>
2. Writing a boring lead
 - a. Don't let anyone tell you an obituary must begin with the decedent's name.
 - b. Ask yourself, will each sentence either reward the reader or draw them into the next one?
3. Letting strict chronological order obscure highlights.
 - a. Date and place of birth are hardly revelatory. How often does a biography or biopic start there? Don't bury the lead under ancient history.
 - b. Pre-adult history is a low priority unless you tie it to something important in later life.
4. Failing to capture the spirit of the deceased
 - a. Remember the tools:
 - i. Action words! Relating what the person *did* and its impact can help reveal who they were.
 - ii. Anecdotes
 - iii. The why and how of the decedent's life-shaping actions
 - iv. Quotes
 1. If someone uses an adjective in their quote, ask them for an example. Specific details matter!
 - v. Descriptive details
 - vi. Literary devices
5. Using clichés
 - a. Ironically, for all their power, literary devices lend themselves to clichés. Be original!
 - b. Too many to list, from "surrounded by family" to "lived life to the fullest." See https://www.obituaryhelp.net/Pitfalls_and_Cliches_to_Avoid_in_an_Obituary.php
 - c. Another excellent list: <https://saltwire.pressreader.com/article/281603833973900>

6. Making it about the loss rather than about the deceased's life
 - a. Is the obit's purpose to tell the audience about the survivors' grief?
 - b. Writing something separately, in a letter or a journal, can help with grief.
7. Providing excessive medical information
 - a. Cause of death is optional
 - i. If the decedent is old, the cause is probably not newsworthy. Consider putting it near the end of the piece.
 - ii. If the decedent is young, the details may be sensitive. On the other hand, disclosing it can eliminate a lot of questions.
 - b. If you provide the cause, "died of ____" is usually enough.
8. Thanking people
 - a. This isn't the place, and you might forget someone. Write a thank-you note and enclose a copy of the obituary.
9. Listing too many survivors
 - a. Let numbers and space guide you. Consider using counts ("...and seven grandchildren.") Excellent resource: <https://www.legacy.com/news/whom-to-include-in-the-obituary/>
 - b. Ex-spouses should be listed if they share children with the decedent. Other *étiquette* tips: <https://everloved.com/articles/obituaries-and-funeral-announcements/a-guide-to-obituary-etiquette/>
10. Writing hurriedly
 - a. Good writing takes time. Start early and write multiple drafts!
 - b. Tighten content. Avoid repetition. Make every sentence meaningful.
11. Failing to use an editor
 - a. Software editors (e.g., Grammarly or Microsoft's Editor) solve most mechanical issues, *though they are not infallible*.
 - b. Consult other stakeholders. Get a consensus on facts and appropriate content.
12. Including sensitive information
 - a. Identity theft is not limited to the living. I discourage the disclosure of exact birth date and birthplace as well as mother's maiden name. The credit agency Experian has an excellent page on this: <https://www.experian.com/blogs/ask-experian/what-you-need-to-know-about-obituaries-and-identity-theft/>
 - b. Burglars read obituaries to identify vacant homes, whether due to a passing or to a planned ceremony. It's far too easy to find someone's address. If you publish service details, make sure anyone mentioned knows of your plan and takes precautions.