

COMPANION RESOURCE

OBITUARY INFORMATION CHECKLIST

What to Gather Before You Begin Writing

An obituary does not have to include every fact about a person's life. But before you decide what belongs in the final story, it helps to gather the information you may need.

Use this checklist as a starting point. Some questions will matter; others won't. Leave anything blank that doesn't apply, and don't worry about writing beautiful sentences yet. For now, you're simply gathering the pieces.

THE ESSENTIAL FACTS

- ☐ Full legal name
- ☐ Name they were actually known by
- ☐ Maiden name, former name or nickname, if appropriate
- ☐ Age at death
- ☐ Date of birth
- ☐ Place of birth
- ☐ Date of death
- ☐ Place of death, if you wish to include it
- ☐ Current city or community
- ☐ Previous hometowns or places that were important to them

FAMILY & IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS

Before making this list, remember that the people who mattered most in someone's life may not fit neatly into a traditional family tree.

- ☐ Spouse or partner
- ☐ Parents
- ☐ Children and their spouses or partners
- ☐ Grandchildren and great-grandchildren
- ☐ Siblings and their spouses or partners
- ☐ Other relatives who should be mentioned
- ☐ Close friends who were like family
- ☐ People who preceded them in death
- ☐ Pets that were an important part of their life

Double-check names and spellings. This is one of the easiest places to make an error - and one of the errors family members are most likely to notice.

EDUCATION, WORK & SERVICE

- ☐ Schools attended
- ☐ Degrees, certifications or training
- ☐ Military service
- ☐ Career or occupations
- ☐ Businesses owned or organizations founded
- ☐ Professional accomplishments or recognition
- ☐ Volunteer work

- ☐ Community involvement
- ☐ Religious or faith community, if appropriate
- ☐ Clubs, associations or organizations

NOW GATHER THE PART THAT MAKES THEM RECOGNIZABLE

The facts above tell us what someone did. These questions begin to tell us who they were.

- ☐ What did they love doing?
- ☐ What could they talk about for hours?
- ☐ What did they make, collect, grow, fix, cook or create?
- ☐ What was always in their refrigerator, pantry, purse, pocket, garage, workshop or car?
- ☐ What did they always order at a favorite restaurant?
- ☐ What television show, team, musician, movie or hobby did everyone associate with them?
- ☐ What phrase or expression did they say so often that the family can still hear it?
- ☐ What made them laugh?
- ☐ What made other people laugh about them?
- ☐ What did they do particularly well?
- ☐ What were they hilariously bad at?
- ☐ What tradition did they always insist upon?
- ☐ What small kindness did they perform without making a big deal about it?

ASK OTHER PEOPLE

You don't have to remember everything yourself. Consider contacting:

- ☐ Children, siblings and other relatives
- ☐ Longtime friends
- ☐ Neighbors
- ☐ Coworkers or former coworkers
- ☐ Members of clubs, churches or organizations
- ☐ Teammates, golfing partners, card groups or hobby friends
- ☐ Caregivers or others who were regularly part of their life

Ask each person a simple question: "When you think of _____, what is the first story or detail that comes to mind?"

Then listen. Especially listen when someone begins with: "I don't know if this matters, but..." Very often, it does.

STORIES WORTH WRITING DOWN

Before you start the obituary itself, jot down at least three memories.

A story that makes you smile:

A story that shows something important about who they were:

A small detail you never want your family to forget:

DECISIONS TO MAKE BEFORE YOU WRITE

- ☐ Will the cause of death be included?
- ☐ Are there sensitive family relationships to consider?
- ☐ Are there parts of the person's life that should remain private?
- ☐ Is there something difficult that belongs in the story because it was important to the person or shaped who they became?
- ☐ Are there family members who should review names, dates or other factual information?
- ☐ Who will make the final decisions if family members disagree?

You can tell the truth without telling every truth.

SERVICE & PUBLICATION INFORMATION

If the obituary will also serve as a death announcement, gather:

- ☐ Funeral or memorial service date
- ☐ Time
- ☐ Location
- ☐ Visitation information
- ☐ Burial or interment information
- ☐ Reception or gathering information
- ☐ Funeral home name and website
- ☐ Memorial contribution or charitable donation information
- ☐ Flowers or other family preferences
- ☐ Livestream information, if applicable
- ☐ Where the obituary will be published
- ☐ Newspaper or publication deadline
- ☐ Word-count or length restrictions
- ☐ Publication cost, if applicable

BEFORE YOU BEGIN WRITING

Take one more look at what you've collected.

The obituary does not have to contain all of it.

Your job isn't to squeeze an entire lifetime onto a page. Your job is to choose enough of the right details that someone who loved this person recognizes them - and someone who never had the privilege of knowing them gets a glimpse of who they were.

The dates are usually easy to find. The life between them is what we are trying to save.