

COMPANION RESOURCE

QUICK-START OBITUARY WORKSHEET

From a Blank Page to a Meaningful First Draft

You have gathered the names, dates and facts. You may also have more stories, memories and opinions than you know what to do with.

Now comes the part that can feel intimidating: deciding where to begin.

Don't try to write the obituary perfectly from beginning to end. Use this worksheet to identify the pieces first. Once you know what matters most, the writing becomes much easier.

1. START WITH THE PERSON, NOT THE FORMULA

If someone asked me what _____ was really like, I would say:

Now choose three to five words that describe this person:

-
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ Mostly
 - ☐ I'm not sure - I should ask someone else

2. WHAT MADE THIS PERSON RECOGNIZABLE?

Finish any of these sentences that bring something immediately to mind.

Everyone knew _____ loved:

You could almost always find them:

They never went anywhere without:

They were known for making, cooking, collecting, fixing, wearing or doing:

Something they said all the time was:

Something about them that always made us laugh was:

One small kindness people may not have known about was:

If they walked through the door right now, the first thing I would notice would be:

3. FIND ONE STORY

You do not need ten anecdotes. One good story or specific detail can reveal more about a person than an entire paragraph of adjectives.

Think of a story that makes you say: "That was so _____." What happened?

What does the story reveal about the person?

Could you tell this story briefly enough to include it?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No, but there may be one detail from it worth using

4. GATHER THE FACTS THAT ACTUALLY BELONG

Now return to the factual information you collected. Which facts help explain this person's life?

- ☐ Birth and hometown
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Military service
- ☐ Career
- ☐ Marriage or partnership
- ☐ Children and family
- ☐ Accomplishments
- ☐ Community involvement
- ☐ Faith
- ☐ Volunteer work
- ☐ Hobbies and interests
- ☐ Places that mattered
- ☐ Other: _____

Does this fact help tell the person's story, or am I including it simply because obituaries usually do?

5. DECIDE HOW YOU WANT TO BEGIN

You don't have to begin with: _____, age ____, died on _____.

That opening is perfectly appropriate when it suits the obituary, but it isn't your only choice. Consider three possibilities.

THE TRADITIONAL OPENING - Begin with the person's name, age, residence and death. My possible opening:

THE STORY-FIRST OPENING - Begin with something immediately recognizable about the person. My possible opening:

THE MEANING-FIRST OPENING - Begin with the role the person played in other people's lives or what mattered most to them. My possible opening:

Which one sounds most like the person you're writing about?

- ☐ Traditional
- ☐ Story-first
- ☐ Meaning-first
- ☐ A combination

6. BUILD THE MIDDLE

You don't need to tell the story chronologically. Instead, think of the middle of the obituary as answering three questions:

What shaped this person's life?

What did they care about?

What will people remember?

Circle or underline the three most important ideas. Those are probably the heart of your obituary.

7. HANDLE THE FAMILY INFORMATION

Survived by:

Preceded in death by:

Before finalizing, have someone else verify every name and relationship.

8. DECIDE WHAT DOESN'T NEED TO BE SAID

A meaningful obituary can be truthful without being exhaustive. Is there anything you are considering including because:

- ☐ Someone in the family insists upon it?
- ☐ You feel obligated to explain it?
- ☐ It is technically true but no longer relevant?
- ☐ It could unnecessarily hurt someone who is still living?
- ☐ It would distract from the rest of the person's life?
- ☐ You are trying to settle something that belongs outside the obituary?

Write down anything you are uncertain about:

Sometimes the best editorial decision is simply to leave something out.

9. CHOOSE THE ENDING

An obituary does not have to end with funeral arrangements. Think about what you want the reader to feel in the final few sentences.

What will be missed most?

What did this person leave behind that cannot be listed as property or accomplishments?

Is there a saying, image, memory or final thought that feels particularly fitting?

10. NOW WRITE THE FIRST DRAFT

You have already done most of the difficult thinking.

Use what you've written above to create a first draft.

Don't stop every few sentences to scrutinize the wording. Don't worry yet about length. Don't try to satisfy every relative. Just tell the story.

When the draft is finished, put it aside - even if only for fifteen minutes - and then read it again.

Does this sound like the person I knew?

If the answer is yes, you're getting close. If the answer is no, don't immediately add more facts. Look for the missing detail.

ONE LAST TEST

Imagine someone who knew this person well reading the obituary. Would they say: "Yes. That's them."

Now imagine someone who never met them. Would that person finish reading with some sense of who they were?

If you can accomplish both, you have done something far more meaningful than simply recording a death.

You have written a little piece of a life.