

COMPANION RESOURCE

SENSITIVE DECISIONS WORKSHEET

What Belongs, What Doesn't, and What May Be Better Left Private

Every life contains things that are difficult to summarize neatly.

There may have been illness, addiction, estrangement, divorce, financial problems, family conflict, mistakes, criminal history, career disappointments, complicated relationships or other experiences that mattered deeply - but may not belong in a public obituary.

The question is not simply:

Is it true?

The better question is:

Does this truth belong in this particular telling of the person's life?

Use this worksheet to slow down the decision before something sensitive is included - or automatically left out.

1. WHAT ARE YOU CONSIDERING INCLUDING?

Briefly describe the issue, event or information:

Why are you considering including it?

- ☐ It significantly shaped the person's life
- ☐ The person spoke openly about it
- ☐ It helps explain an important part of their story
- ☐ The person used the experience to help others
- ☐ It would feel dishonest to omit it
- ☐ Other people are likely to expect it to be mentioned
- ☐ A family member strongly wants it included
- ☐ I believe it belongs for another reason

Other:

2. HOW DID THE PERSON THEMSELVES TREAT THIS PART OF THEIR LIFE?

Did they speak about it openly?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Never
- ☐ I don't know

Did they consider it an important part of their story?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Probably
- ☐ Probably not
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

Did they ever indicate how they would want it discussed after their death?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

If yes, what did they say?

3. DOES IT HELP THE READER UNDERSTAND THE PERSON?

If I remove this information, does an important part of the person's life become confusing or incomplete?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No

Does including it reveal something meaningful about their character, choices, growth, resilience or values?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No

Or does it mainly satisfy curiosity?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No

4. WHO ELSE COULD BE AFFECTED?

An obituary tells one person's story, but it may also reveal information about people who are still living.

Could including this information expose something private about:

- ☐ A spouse or partner
- ☐ A child
- ☐ A sibling
- ☐ A former spouse or partner
- ☐ Another relative
- ☐ A friend
- ☐ A coworker or business associate
- ☐ Someone else

Who?

Could the information cause unnecessary embarrassment, conflict or harm to someone who had little or no control over the situation?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Possibly
- ☐ No

If yes or possibly, is the information important enough to the deceased person's story to justify including it?

5. IS THIS ABOUT THE PERSON - OR ABOUT A FAMILY DISAGREEMENT?

Before including something controversial, ask: Am I trying to tell the person's story? Or am I trying to:

- ☐ Correct someone else's version of events
- ☐ Defend myself or another family member
- ☐ Assign blame
- ☐ Settle an old argument
- ☐ Make sure someone "knows the truth"
- ☐ Get the last word
- ☐ Respond to something another person wants included

If any of those feel familiar, the issue may deserve a family conversation - but not necessarily space in the obituary.

6. DOES THIS EVENT DEFINE THE PERSON?

A serious illness, addiction, bankruptcy, divorce, arrest, estrangement, failure or other difficult event may have played an important role in someone's life.

Was it part of the person's story - or are we accidentally allowing it to become the whole story?

What else was true about this person?

What happened before this difficult period?

What happened afterward?

Did the person change, recover, reconcile, rebuild, make amends or use the experience in a meaningful way?

A defining event may help explain a life. It does not automatically deserve to define the person.

7. COULD IT BE SAID DIFFERENTLY?

Sometimes the choice is not simply between saying something and saying nothing. There may be a third option: Say it with discretion.

Direct version:

More discreet version:

Version that leaves the detail out but preserves its meaning:

Which one feels truthful without revealing more than necessary?

8. CAUSE OF DEATH

You are not required to include the cause of death.

Did the person want the cause made public?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

Would including it help people understand what happened?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No

Could sharing it help others - for example, by increasing awareness, encouraging screening, reducing stigma or directing support toward a cause important to the person?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No

Would mentioning the cause of death overwhelm everything else written about the person's life?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No

Is the family comfortable making this information public?

- ☐ Yes
☐ Some are
☐ No
☐ We haven't discussed it

The cause of death may be part of the story. It does not have to become the story.

9. WHEN FAMILY MEMBERS DISAGREE

Different people knew different versions of the same person. Disagreement does not automatically mean someone is wrong.

Before arguing over wording, identify what the disagreement is really about. Is it:

- ☐ A factual disagreement
☐ A privacy concern
☐ A difference in interpretation
☐ A painful family history
☐ Concern about a living person's feelings
☐ Concern about how the deceased will be perceived
☐ Personal preference about wording
☐ Something else

If it is factual, verify the fact if possible. If it is personal preference, decide whether it actually changes the meaning. If it is sensitive, discuss the issue directly rather than endlessly revising one sentence.

Consensus on substance is more important than unanimity on every word.

10. WHO SHOULD MAKE THE FINAL DECISION?

Name:

Relationship to the deceased:

Why is this person best positioned to decide?

Whenever possible, the final decision should be made by someone who knew the person well, understands the family's concerns and can remain focused on the person whose story is being told.

THE FINAL TEST

Before including a sensitive detail, ask yourself five questions:

Is it true?

Is it relevant?

Is it necessary?

Is it fair?

Would I still include it if no one in the family were arguing about it?

If the answer to the last question changes your thinking, pay attention.

An obituary is not a courtroom, a confession or a place to settle unfinished business. Nor does it need to present a falsely perfect life.

The goal is something more difficult - and more worthwhile:

Tell the truth with enough honesty to recognize the person, and enough discretion to respect the life around them.

You can tell the truth without telling every truth.