

How to Write an Obituary

Writing an obituary is both a great honor — and a great responsibility...

The person writing an obituary is being asked to create a document that is going to be read by many, many people. It will be read in newspapers for several weeks, and on the internet far into the future. It will be read by family members, loved ones, friends, acquaintances and many others who are simply interested in reading about neighbors who have passed away. For most authors, the obituary will be the most read piece of writing they have ever done – or ever will do.

Despite the above factors, most people who are called upon to compose an obituary are utterly unprepared to do so. And while there is a growing list of resources to support the novice obituary author, there is still a profound lack of practical, helpful, easy-to-use assistance.

Stevenson & Sons has prepared this document to help people who are called upon to create an obituary. It is designed to provide practical support in an easy to follow and use manner. Examples are provided, when they are appropriate.

Please note that all of the following steps do not have to be included. If all of the steps are included, it constitutes an *exceptional* obituary. Many times, an obituary must be much, much shorter due to any number of factors; including the inability to contact friends and relatives from early years.

Provide the readers of the obituary you write with whatever you can.

Instructions on How to Write an Obituary

Paragraph: The deceased's entire name. *This includes nicknames, middle names and extensions such a Jr., Sr. and III.*

EXAMPLE: William "Will" Harold Johnson, Sr.

• • • • •

Paragraph: The deceased's death information. *This includes the date (and approximate time, if available) of death; the location of the death and the cause of death. It is preferable, when applicable, to include the age at death and a personal comment such as "surrounded by family" or "comforted by his wife." **NB: Sometimes it is desirable to omit the cause of death – such as when death came as a result of extreme violence, or the carrying out of a court sentence.***

EXAMPLE: On the evening of May 15, 2012, Will passed away at St. John's Hospital in Billings, MT as a result of injuries received in an automobile accident earlier that day. Will was 75 years old.

EXAMPLE: On the evening of May 15, 2012, Will passed away peacefully of natural causes. Will was being visited and comforted by family members at the Shady Oaks Assisted Care Facility in Billings, MT at the time of his passing. Will was 75 years old.

EXAMPLE: On the evening of May 15, 2012, Will passed away after a three year battle with cancer; while being attended by familiar staff members at the Shady Oaks Assisted Care Facility in Billings, MT. Will was 75 years old.

• • • • •

Paragraph: The deceased's birth information. *This includes the date of birth (and the time, if available), the city and state (the county is optional) of birth and the full names of the parents.*

EXAMPLE: Will Johnson was born in the town of Montauk in Edmonds County, Idaho at 6:15 AM on February 15, 1937. He was the third child, and the first son, of Irene Margaret and William Joshua Johnson, Jr.

Now, a brief story about the deceased's life is told, usually in loose chronological order

Paragraph: Start telling the story as early in the life of the deceased as you are capable of. Family members and close friends are often quite happy to provide useful facts, anecdotes and information – all of which make the obituary more meaningful for those who read it. If you write about something a friend or relative has related to you, try to somehow, casually mention that person's name: "Aunt Sally said Will was the best fisherman she ever knew." An obituary must be factual, but the very best obituaries include personal insights, comments and observations.

Paragraph: Continue with the story of life. Include facts, use adjectives and adverbs to enhance your writing and to more personally describe the deceased to your readers. Don't forget hobbies, obsessions, favorite pets, games to play; movies; magazines; books and favorite sports teams. Important accomplishments, profession, special skills and military service can also be mentioned. Some people continuously use the same slogan or expression for most of their lives – and these are very good to include in their obituary.

Paragraph: Use as many paragraphs as it takes to tell the life story of the deceased to the best of your ability. The *life story* is a very important part of the obituary. Don't be shy about creating new paragraphs: people are more inclined to read and comprehend shorter paragraphs. Don't forget to mention any clubs, affiliations and charities of interest to the deceased: Boy Scouts, Masons, AARP, ASPCA and so forth.

Paragraph: List those relatives who preceded the deceased in death. Start the paragraph with the deceased's first name, and then "was preceded in death by:" followed by the list of names. Appropriate, immediate family members: wives, husbands, brothers, sisters and parents are customarily listed, but you can add as many names as you wish. Sometimes these lists are extremely long, and sometimes they do contain the names of people who were not relatives, but close friends.

Paragraph: List those relatives who survived the deceased. Start the paragraph with the deceased's first name, and then "is survived by:" followed by the list of names. Appropriate immediate family: wives, husbands, brothers, sisters and parents are customarily listed, but you can add as many names as you think are most appropriate.

Paragraph: Memorials and gravesite mentions. *Include where flowers and memorials, such as donations, may be sent. Include the name and location of the gravesite & monument, so that people can visit the grave and see the monument at a later time, if they desire to. Donations are customarily sent to large charities or local charities, but on occasion, the family will request that donations be sent to them to help cover the cost of final services.*

Paragraph: Special thanks. *This optional paragraph can include the names of people and/or institutions. Commonly included are the names of rest homes, private care facilities, hospitals and funeral homes. People who worked in those places, including doctors and nurses, as well as special caregivers, including professionals and relatives, are also in this paragraph.*

Paragraph: Where to send the family condolences, or make a final personal comment to or about the deceased. *Today, the name of the website, such as stevensonandsons.com, is usually quite adequate. If the family wishes it, a mailing address may be included, but this practice is not suggested. Phone numbers and private email addresses are never included.*

We hope this will help you create an obituary that you are proud of; one that does justice to the deceased's journey through life. An obituary that will inform, and be enjoyed by relatives and friends for many generations to come.

If you have any questions or require further support or assistance, please don't hesitate to contact us.