

COMPANION RESOURCE

ONE LIFE, MORE THAN ONE VERSION

Your Obituary Doesn't Have to Do Everything

One of the reasons writing an obituary can feel so difficult is that we often expect one piece of writing to do too many jobs.

It needs to announce the death.

It needs to provide service information.

It needs to list the family.

It needs to document accomplishments.

It needs to capture personality.

It needs to tell stories.

And somehow it is supposed to do all of that within a newspaper's word limit - or while a funeral home is waiting for the final copy.

It doesn't have to.

The same life can be remembered in more than one version, each written for a different purpose.

1. THE PUBLICATION VERSION

This may be the version submitted to a newspaper or another publication with space limitations or per-word charges. Its job is primarily to provide the important information clearly and accurately.

- Full name and age
- Date of death
- Hometown or residence
- Important family relationships
- A concise summary of education, career, military service or community involvement
- A few details that make the person recognizable
- Funeral, memorial or visitation information
- Memorial contribution information

This version may need to be relatively short. That does not make it less meaningful. A single well-chosen detail can often do more than another paragraph of accomplishments.

2. THE FULLER FAMILY VERSION

This is the version that can breathe. It may appear on a funeral-home website, family website, memorial page or another location where length is less restricted. Here you have room for more of the person.

- Stories and anecdotes
- Humor
- Family traditions
- Favorite places, foods or activities
- Important relationships
- Career or community stories rather than simply job titles
- Quirks and habits
- Details that family and friends will immediately recognize
- Meaningful experiences that shaped the person's life

You still don't need to include everything. The goal isn't length. The goal is recognition.

3. THE MEMORIAL OR EULOGY VERSION

An obituary is written to be read. A eulogy or memorial remembrance is usually written to be heard. That difference matters. A spoken remembrance can be more conversational. It can include pauses, humor, shorter stories and language that sounds natural when spoken aloud.

It may begin with a memory rather than an announcement. It may focus on only a few parts of the person's life rather than trying to cover everything.

And it can include something an obituary often cannot: your relationship with the person.

Instead of simply saying that someone was generous, you might tell the story of the time their generosity changed something for you. Instead of listing twenty characteristics, you can tell one story that demonstrates three of them.

4. THE ONLINE REMEMBRANCE

An online memorial can continue long after an obituary has been published. It can also become collaborative.

- Photographs
- Videos
- Stories
- Recipes
- Letters
- Favorite sayings
- Memories
- Audio recordings
- Family history
- Stories that surface months or even years later

This version does not have to be finished immediately. In fact, it may never really be finished. It can become an evolving collection of a person's life.

5. THE PRIVATE FAMILY VERSION

Not every meaningful story needs to be published. Some stories belong primarily to the people who loved the person.

- Longer family stories
- Personal letters
- Memories contributed by grandchildren
- Stories about difficult periods in the person's life
- Family history
- Inside jokes
- Photographs and captions
- Stories attached to treasured objects
- Things the family wants future generations to know

Sometimes the most important writing you do will never appear in a newspaper. That doesn't make it less valuable.

ONE STORY DOESN'T HAVE TO CARRY THE WHOLE LIFE

If you're struggling because something important doesn't fit, ask yourself:

Does it need to fit here?

Perhaps the newspaper obituary needs to be 500 words. Perhaps the funeral-home version can be 1,200. Perhaps the funniest story belongs in the eulogy. Perhaps the longer family history belongs in a document saved for the grandchildren. Perhaps a sensitive experience deserves to be remembered privately rather than published publicly.

Giving yourself permission to create more than one version can make every version better.

BEFORE YOU DECIDE WHAT TO CUT

Don't immediately throw away the material that doesn't fit.

Create a file called something like: STORIES TO SAVE

Place the extra memories there. Keep the story someone emailed you. Save the photograph that triggered another memory. Write down the strange little detail you couldn't work into the obituary.

You may use it in a memorial service, family history, online remembrance or something you haven't even thought of yet. And even if you never publish it anywhere, someone in your family may someday be very glad you saved it.

The goal is not to fit an entire life into one obituary. The goal is to keep the life from disappearing between the facts.