

Here is a step-by-step guide to preparing all of the essential elements in an obituary:

1. Announcement of Death

We begin with the name, age, and place of residence of the deceased, along with the time and place of death. This identifying statement and announcement of the fact of death can be communicated in many ways. 'Passed away', 'died', 'went to be with his Lord', 'after a long struggle with cancer', 'surrounded by her family', are all common variations in this statement. Some people feel that 'died' is too blunt, others say that flowery phrases and euphemisms only get in the way of accepting the fact of death. Use what you feel comfortable with.

Many people wonder whether to give out the cause of death in an obituary. Certainly this is something many obit readers will be curious about. Ultimately, the cause of death is the business of the immediate family, and no one else's. If you are uncomfortable sharing the cause of death, you are under no obligation to list it in the obituary. Please keep in mind, however, that if the circumstances of death were sudden, announcing the cause of death, either in the obituary, or in some other manner may keep you from having to explain what happened over and over to every friend and neighbor.

2. Biographical Sketch

Sketch is the key word here. An obituary is not a biography, but a recounting of the most important events, qualities, contributions and connections in a person's life. Each life is unique, but among the most important universal milestones are: the date and place of birth, parent's names including mother's maiden name (ex: Bill and Barb (Maiden name) Green, date and place of marriage, birth name of spouse, education, work, and military service. An obituary is not a legal document, so if in your heart you feel that a step parent should be listed as a parent, that a divorce need not be mentioned, or that some experience should be omitted, follow your best judgment.

Listing events chronologically works well, but do not be afraid to put the more important information such as marriage before education, even if it took place afterward. A long list of honors and accomplishments is not often of interest to anyone outside the immediate family. Do mention significant contributions and recognitions, but if there are many, choose carefully and try to encompass as many as you can in as few words as possible. This summarization strategy works well for a person who was involved in many service and social organizations, places of employment, hobbies, or places of residence as well.

While we summarize to avoid long lists or chronological minutiae, we do well to give meaningful examples. A common utterance or specific example can illustrate and bring life to an obituary whether it is a quirky habit, a favorite recipe or a touching expression of love.

Many people prepare their own obituaries, and this can be a great exercise, but what those obits lack is mention of the impact that the deceased had on family members, and their community. Did her sense of humor brighten your life, did he always make time for the kid's games? Did she make guests feel welcome? Paint her picture in the obituary with these details.

3. Family

It is said that the funeral is for the living. The obituary is for the living too, and one of the most important parts is the listing of survivors and those who preceded your loved one in death (remember that preceded means to come before, while proceeded means moved through). This is a section that benefits greatly from forethought. In the confusion and preoccupation of grief, important relatives can be forgotten. It's unfortunate if we forget to mention a hobby or interest, but it can be painful if we forget to mention a step-child or sister.

In big city newspapers, relatives are often worked into the announcement in a standardized clichéd form; Roger, beloved son of ...loving father of....attentive grandfather of.... and there are no special sections for survivors and preceded. In other papers, and in the extended forms used on memorial websites, we list survivors first, starting with the closest relations: spouse, children, grandchildren, great and great-great grandchildren, parents, and siblings. If any of these relations are nonexistent or have died, skip and move to the next relation. Nieces, nephews in-laws, and cousins are usually left out, or simply numbered unless they were close to the deceased. Grandchildren and greats are often numbered too, and if you not sure you have all the names, use a number or say 'many grandchildren' to avoid leaving anyone out. List relatives with their first name, spouse's first name in parenthesis, then surname. If the spouse's surname is different, or the couple is not married, include the partner's surname in the parenthesis along with their first name.

4. Service Times

Once again, local traditions vary, so consult your local papers for the specific order of service times, or better yet, leave this part up to your funeral director. Here are the essentials: time, full date and place of service along with the name of the officiant; time, full date and place of burial or interment if applicable; and finally, time, full date and place of visitation(s). Please remember that an interment is placing remains in their place of rest, while internment is confining a person to a place against their will.

5. Special Messages

At the end of an obituary a special message is sometimes found, such as 'in lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to..' or 'Special Thanks to the staff at General Hospital for..' or 'We will always carry your memory in our hearts'.

Sometimes a short prayer or a line from a poem is placed at the end. These messages are optional, but can be a way of communicating something that did not fit into the body of the obituary.