

LISA HUNT WOTTON

HOW TO WRITE A EULOGY

REGISTERED COMMONWEALTH CELEBRANT

You've been asked to write a Eulogy.

Eulogy means "good speech". We are told to speak only good of the dead, but a eulogist actually makes a speech in the dead person's honour. In essence, a eulogy should be a short biography or 'timeline' of the person's life. It is typically about 5 - 8 min long and can be serious, funny or somewhere in between. This can be delivered by the family, close friends, the celebrant or a mixture.

It is important that the eulogy capture the essence of the person's life, the highlights, and the low lights.

English poet laureate, Andrew Motion suggests:

'The eulogist should imagine they are handing a photograph to everyone present for them to keep when the ceremony ends.'

The eulogy acknowledges and affirms the significance of the person's life and how they have touched people's lives. It is the measure of a life lived.

One of the most difficult tasks of organising a funeral is trying to fit the life of a person into 8 min eulogy. You'll want to include the basics: birth date, any marriages or important relationships, the birth of any children, important career and life milestones, as well as the events surrounding the person's death (as appropriate).

In addition to these basics, the best eulogies tell **lots of stories as stories** are the way that we remember loved ones and keep their memories alive even after they are gone. The stories are what makes a life well-lived, and what makes a eulogy more personal rather than just a regurgitation of dates and facts.

Writing a Eulogy can seem very daunting.

The good news is that you don't have to go it alone. I have taken the time to create this comprehensive guide to writing a eulogy for you. In this e-book, you'll find what to include in a eulogy, you'll be able to model your eulogy using our eulogy template, and you'll discover how to write a great eulogy in a way that's both memorable and engaging for those who attend the services.

Also - ask others to contribute. Maybe give the first 0 - 20 years to siblings or a parent. Ask a work colleague to write a story about the work place. Ask children to contribute a story about the type of parent they were.

WHERE

to start

The First Section of a Eulogy

The opening section of your outline will be shorter than the main section, and it should cover several basics. Introduce yourself and your relationship with the deceased. Most people will probably know who you are. However, there are bound to be people in attendance whom you have never met, such as co-workers, distant relatives or people from his/her past. You may want to start with a quote, poem, scripture or song lyric that was meaningful to your loved one.

This opening can set the tone or theme for your speech. You may or may not know right away how you want to open your speech. If you don't know what your opening will be yet, you will likely discover it during the research and writing process.

After your opening, you'll want to specifically say whom you are eulogizing. Give their full birth name along with any nicknames, or other names they may be known by to those in attendance.

That's it!

That's your introduction. You're already part way there!

NEXT 0 - 20

Some things to include. You may choose some or all of these elements. You may also want to incorporate your own ideas to add to the authenticity of your eulogy speech.

When and where the deceased was born?

- Parents' names
- Any siblings and birth order
- Early childhood – where the deceased lived, and interests they had in those first 20 years.

What was the deceased like as a child?

- Nicknames and/or names they are known by others (then or now)
- Schools attended, awards earned
- Stories about childhood years
- Sports achievements

Next the Building Years 20 - 40

- Marriage(s), divorce(s), children, significant relationships
- Details of any war or military service

Did the deceased have faith or spirituality?

- Any occurrences of historical significance during the person's life
- Preferences, likes, and dislikes (*even if silly*)
- Details of other activities and interests (*e.g.sport, music, theatre, etc.*)

Hobbies or interests, crafts.

Travel opportunities (for work or pleasure)

Career achievements

- Special qualities that others admired
- Significant stories about their life
- Funny or insightful things they used to say
- Any other life milestones

General Topics

If you had to describe your loved one in three words, what would they be?

Resilient, shy, funny, wise, kind, warm, introverted, strong, mischievous, wicked, hilarious, reliable.

If you can, then add a story to demonstrate that value or quality.

If the deceased has any quotes they always used this is a great time to mention them. As my mother always used to say:

"A quick game is a good game."

WRITING

the eulogy

Opening:

Introduce yourself in the beginning and explain your relationship to your loved one, in case there are people in attendance who don't know you or your relation to the deceased.

What can I say about ____? As I reflect on the loss of ____, one certain thing comes to mind.

It's never easy to say goodbye to someone who has been such a rich part of our lives. After the person is gone, we are left with a hole where he/she used to be in our life. There won't be any more extended phone calls or lunch get-togethers or family outings (or other events specific to the deceased). Many of us are feeling this same loss today.

Some of you knew ____ better than others. But you are all here because ____ had a meaningful impact on your life, and you want to honour that importance. And because ____ did affect you in some way, it's not easy to say a final goodbye.

1: First Few Paragraphs.

For paragraphs 2 to 5 of the eulogy, give the funeral guests a short overview of the deceased's life.

First discuss when and where the deceased was born, who was in his or her birth family, significant family events, and any other interesting family details.

Example: "Jane was born in Auckland, New Zealand, on June 12, 1972. She was the youngest of three children. Her older sisters, Mary and Ann, travelled from New Zealand to be with us here today. Their parents, Mike and Hannah, moved to New Zealand in 1962 when Mike was offered a promotion with the electrical company."

Example: "Marilyn Davies was born in Shepparton in 1940 to father Max Mc Donald and mother Sylvia. Max was the local jeweller and watchmaker in Shepparton and Sylvia was a legal secretary. Marilyn enjoyed suburban life growing up in Shepparton. Marilyn was the eldest of two children born to Max and Sylvia. Baby Ian arrived into the family 3 years after Marilyn was born."

"Marilyn was described as a precocious child whose love of books and reading would remain with her throughout her life. Her idea of good school holidays was coming home from the library with an armful of books and reading to her heart's content".

2: Next FAMILY

If the deceased was married at the time of his or her death, talk about his or her spouse. Also, mention any children and grandchildren. What were they like as a grandparent? Add a story.

3: Include Special Memories

For paragraphs 6 to 9 of the eulogy, share special memories and stories about the deceased.

After you have covered biographical information about the deceased it's time to delve into any special memories or stories. You can use some humour here if you wish. But be careful to use humour that is appropriate and that others will find tasteful.

4: Next, talk about the deceased's life Achievements, talents, and passions. For example:

"Mary was a paediatric doctor for over 30 years. She was a wonderful mentor for many students, many of whom I see sitting in the congregation today. Many people don't know that Mary would volunteer her time and energy working with inner-city kids on weekends. Mary was generous and selfless, which was reflected in all that she did."

5: Finally, discuss the special qualities of the deceased—e.g. kind, funny, smart, selfless, generous, outgoing. For example:

- *"Anyone who knew Sandra knew that she never took life too seriously. She was always pulling pranks and cracking jokes. April Fool's Day was her favourite day of the year. I will never forget the time that Sandra flipped all the photos hanging in my house upside-down – every single one! Months later we were still finding random photos that were still hanging upside-down."*
- *"Joanne was a beautiful and intelligent young woman, primary school teacher, wife and mother. She was a campaigner for indigenous rights, nature lover, university graduate, academic historian, secondary teacher, student counsellor, loyal friend, an admirer of world art and culture."*
- *"Loving grandmother of seven beautiful and talented grandchildren".*

It's best to stick with positive, heartfelt, and enlightening memories of the deceased. You wouldn't want to use the eulogy to portray a negative memory of the person.

ASK FOR HELP

If you are comfortable handling the writing of the eulogy, you can ask for others' help along the way. Perhaps you can each tackle different parts of the person's life (E.g.: childhood, adulthood, work-life). Stick with what you know best about the deceased, then get help to fill in the rest of the blanks. And if you have the luxury of time, you may want to interview other friends and family members to get their perspectives on your loved ones' life.

*Feel free to include pieces of poetry, or quotes in your writing to support what you are saying.
Example:*

The book “Tuesdays with Morrie” is a moving account of courage and wisdom, shared by a mentor looking into the face of his own death. It is a book of great clarity that captures the simplicity beyond life’s complexities. Morris Schwartz wrote:

*“As long as we can love each other and remember the feeling of love we had,
we can die without ever really going away.
All the love you created is still there.
All the memories are still there.
You live on – in the hearts of everyone you have touched, and nurtured,
while you were here.
Death ends a life, not a relationship.”*

Ada’s death will not end your relationship with her. The idea is not to live forever but to create memories that will and will stay in your memories for as long as you live.

Example: I am reminded of what Gandolf said in Lord of the Rings:

*“No, the journey doesn't end here.
Death is just another path, one that we all must take.
The grey rain curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to silver glass,
and then you see it”.*

CONTEXT

I often like to start a Eulogy with some context of the era in which the person was born into.

Example: "When Burt was born, the Tasmanian Tiger still lived. The Australian frontier wars were not quite over. The Great Depression was in full swing. Many people had no job and no money. There were no antibiotics and no public health care. His generation did not have many luxuries. They were frugal, resourceful, champions of self-denial."

GATHER MEMORIES AND STORIES

Before you start make sure you have done some homework and gathered memories and stories.

CREATE A EULOGY OUTLINE

Now that you’ve gathered memories, it’s time to create a working outline of the eulogy. When your outline is as complete as you can make it, then take the time to flesh out each point with a short story behind it.

WRITE IT ALL OUT

For most people, it’s best to have the complete eulogy written out in full. It is an emotional time and you want to have a strong document to work from.

Also, the celebrant will want a copy of the eulogy to add to the completed ceremony so that they can follow along and be ready to step in if someone gets emotional. Or you may ask the celebrant to read the eulogy for you.

STAY POSITIVE

Above all else, stay positive. This is not the time to bring up grievances or family rifts. If the deceased was a difficult person to be around or if they had a troubled life, then trust that those in the audience already know those details and if they don't know, they don't need to find out at the funeral.

PRACTICE PRACTICE PRACTICE

Practice really does make perfect. I cannot stress enough how important it is to read your speech **OUT LOUD**. At least 20 read-alouds have been suggested in order to get a natural feel for your eulogy speech.

When you're not spending your time looking down at a piece of paper, then you are looking up at and interacting with your audience. This creates a better experience for those listening to you speak.

CLOSE WITH COMFORT

Be sure to close the eulogy with both words of comfort and a final, comforting goodbye to your loved one. Acknowledge their death and celebrate their life.

Emotions

Remember that emotions will make you slow down, pause for breath or cry, add a story or disappear down a rabbit hole in the memory. Allow for an extra minute or two in your eulogy timing for these emotional pauses.

Examples of Great Closing Lines for a Eulogy

- What a legacy, what a life. I invite each of you to keep my dad/mom [name] alive in your hearts.
- "Say not in grief 'he/she is no more' but in thankfulness that he/she was." – Hebrew Proverb.

