



MEMORIAL MERITS

Sanctuary, not sales floor.

Obituary Template

How to Write a Meaningful Tribute

Writing an obituary for someone you love is one of the hardest pieces of writing you will ever do. It does not have to be perfect. It does not have to be poetic. It just has to be true. This template walks you through every section, shows you how others have approached it, and gives you space to write something that honors the person you lost.

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Free to print, share, and distribute.

Before You Begin

An obituary has two audiences: the people who knew the deceased and the people who did not. For the people who knew them, it is a tribute. For the people who did not, it is an introduction. The best obituaries serve both.

There is no required format. A newspaper obituary follows a traditional structure (which this template covers), but an online obituary, a memorial service program, or a social media tribute can be written in any style. Use the sections that feel right and skip the ones that do not.

This template provides the standard order of an obituary with guidance and examples for each section. The examples show three different tones: formal (traditional newspaper style), warm (personal but structured), and personal (conversational, first-person family voice). You do not have to choose one tone for the whole piece. Many obituaries blend formal structure with personal warmth.

If you are under time pressure (the newspaper needs it by tomorrow), skip to the Quick Draft section on the last content page. It gives you a condensed framework you can fill in within 30 minutes.

What You Will Need

Full legal name (including maiden name if applicable), date of birth, date of death, place of birth, place of death, names of surviving family members, names of predeceased family members, education and career highlights, hobbies and passions, organizations and memberships, service details (date, time, location), and a photo (for online publications).

What It Costs to Publish

Online obituary sites (Legacy.com, local funeral home websites, Ever Loved) are often free for a basic listing. Newspaper placement is where costs add up. Most newspapers charge by the line, column inch, or word count. A 200-word obituary in a mid-size newspaper typically costs \$200 to \$400. A longer obituary with a photo can cost \$500 to \$800 or more. Some newspapers offer a flat-rate package. Always ask for pricing before submitting, and ask whether the price includes a photo. You are not required to publish in a newspaper. An online obituary reaches more people at a fraction of the cost.

This document is part of The Funeral Planning Handbook toolkit. Visit memorialmerits.com/tools/resources for additional planning tools.

Section 1: Opening (Announcement of Death)

The opening line announces the death and establishes the essential facts: full name, age, city of residence, and date of death. Some families include the cause of death, others do not. Neither choice is wrong. If the death was by suicide, the family may choose to say 'died unexpectedly' or may choose to name it directly to help reduce stigma. There is no obligation either way. The opening sets the tone for the entire obituary.

Examples

Formal:

Margaret Anne Caldwell, 74, of Richmond, Virginia, passed away peacefully on March 12, 2026, surrounded by her family.

Warm:

Maggie Caldwell, beloved mother, grandmother, and lifelong gardener, passed away on March 12, 2026, at the age of 74.

Personal:

Our mother, Maggie Caldwell, left us on March 12th. She was 74 years old and still telling us all what to do until the very end.

Your draft:

Section 2: Biographical Information

This section covers the facts of the person's life: where they were born, where they grew up, where they went to school, what they did for work, and where they lived. It does not need to be a chronological resume. Pick the details that mattered most. If they were a teacher for 35 years, that belongs here. If they worked a string of jobs that were not central to their identity, a brief mention or omission is fine. The goal is to paint a picture of how they lived, not to list every address they ever had.

Examples

Formal:

Born on June 4, 1951, in Charlottesville, Virginia, to James and Eleanor Caldwell, Margaret graduated from Albemarle High School in 1969 and earned a degree in education from the University of Virginia in 1973.

Warm:

Maggie was born in Charlottesville and spent her childhood chasing fireflies in her grandparents' backyard. She graduated from UVA with a teaching degree and spent 32 years shaping young minds at Henrico County Public Schools.

Personal:

Mom grew up in Charlottesville, went to UVA (and never let anyone forget it), and taught fourth grade for over three decades. She said she retired, but she never stopped teaching.

Your draft:

Section 3: Family (Survivors and Predeceased)

List surviving family members first, then those who preceded the deceased in death. The traditional order is spouse, children (with spouses), grandchildren, great-grandchildren, siblings, then other family. You do not have to include every relative. You do not have to include anyone you or the deceased would not want listed. Estranged family members, ex-spouses, and complicated relationships are common, and the obituary is not the place to resolve them. Include the people who mattered.

Examples

Formal:

She is survived by her husband of 48 years, Robert Caldwell; her children, David Caldwell (Sarah) of Richmond and Lisa Morgan (James) of Charlotte; and four grandchildren: Emma, Jack, Sophie, and Will. She was preceded in death by her parents and her brother, Thomas Caldwell.

Warm:

Maggie leaves behind her husband, Bob, the love of her life for nearly 50 years; her son David and his wife Sarah; her daughter Lisa and her husband James; and four grandchildren who called her Gigi. Her brother Tom, who passed in 2018, is no doubt already giving her a hard time on the other side.

Personal:

She is survived by all of us, and we are not sure how we are supposed to do this without her. Dad, David, Lisa, and four grandkids who were her entire world.

Your draft:

Section 4: Personality, Passions, and Legacy

This is the section that transforms an obituary from a public record into a tribute. What did they love? What were they known for? What will people remember about them? Their garden. Their laugh. The way they told a story. The fact that they never met a stranger. The stack of mystery novels on their nightstand. The Sunday dinners. The volunteer work. This is where the person comes alive on the page. Do not be afraid to be specific. Specific details are what make an obituary worth reading.

Examples

Formal:

Margaret was a devoted member of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, where she served on the altar guild for over 20 years. She was an avid gardener, a passionate reader, and a dedicated volunteer with Meals on Wheels.

Warm:

Maggie's garden was her sanctuary. She could name every plant in it by its Latin name and its 'real name,' as she called it. She read a mystery novel a week, hosted Thanksgiving for 30 people without breaking a sweat, and believed that a handwritten thank-you note was the mark of a civilized person.

Personal:

Mom made the best tomato soup any of us have ever tasted and refused to give anyone the recipe. She read every Agatha Christie novel at least twice. She volunteered at the food bank every Saturday morning for 15 years, and she never once mentioned it because that was not why she did it.

Your draft:

Section 5: Service Details

Include the date, time, and location of the service, viewing, or celebration of life. If there is a reception afterward, include that too. If the service is private, say so. If it is open to the public, say so. If the family requests donations in lieu of flowers, include the organization name and how to donate. If there is no service planned, a brief statement like 'A private celebration of life will be held at a later date' is appropriate.

Examples

Formal:

A funeral service will be held at 11:00 AM on Saturday, March 16, 2026, at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, 101 Church Lane, Richmond, Virginia. Interment will follow at Hollywood Cemetery. The family will receive visitors from 5:00 to 7:00 PM on Friday, March 15, at Johnson Funeral Home.

Warm:

Family and friends are invited to celebrate Maggie's life on Saturday, March 16, at 11:00 AM at St. Andrew's, the church she loved. A reception will follow at the family home. Bring a story. She would have wanted that.

Personal:

We are holding a service on Saturday at 11 at St. Andrew's and a gathering at the house afterward. Come hungry. Mom would insist.

Your draft:

In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations to:

Section 6: Closing Line

The closing line is optional but gives the obituary a sense of completion. It can be a quote the deceased loved, a family saying, a religious passage, or a simple farewell. Some families skip it entirely, and that is fine. If you include one, keep it short. One to two sentences at most.

Examples

Formal:

The family wishes to express their gratitude to the staff of St. Mary's Hospital for their compassionate care.

Warm:

In Maggie's words: 'If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need.'

Personal:

We love you, Mom. Save us a seat.

Your draft:

Quick Draft: 30-Minute Obituary Framework

If you are working against a newspaper deadline, use this condensed framework. Fill in the blanks, assemble the sentences in order, and you will have a complete obituary ready to submit. You can refine it later for the online version or the memorial program.

[Full name], [age], of [city, state], passed away on [date of death] [optional: at location / surrounded by family / peacefully]. [He/She] was born on [date of birth] in [birthplace] to [parents' names].

[He/She] [one to two sentences about education, career, or life path].

[He/She] is survived by [spouse], [children with spouses], [grandchildren], and [other family]. [He/She] was preceded in death by [predeceased family members].

[He/She] was known for [two to three specific personality traits, passions, or legacy details].

[Service type] will be held at [time] on [date] at [location]. [Optional: visitation/viewing details]. [Optional: In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to (organization).]

This is a starting point, not a final draft. Expand any section that deserves more space. Remove anything that does not feel right. The only rule is that it should sound like it was written by someone who knew them.

Where to Share Your Tribute

Once the obituary is written, you need to decide where it will live. A newspaper listing is traditional, but an online memorial page reaches more people, costs less (or nothing), and gives family and friends a place to share memories, send flowers, and stay connected long after the service.

Post a Free Obituary on Memorial Merits

Memorial Merits hosts a free obituary and memorial page for anyone. There are no restrictions, no approval process, and no cost. You can memorialize a parent, a spouse, a child, a friend, or even a beloved pet. Visitors can send flowers, plant a tree in their name, sign up for text alerts, and leave memories and condolences. It is a safe, quiet space to write and remember.



Post a Free Obituary or Memorial

Scan to post a free obituary or memorial. No cost, no restrictions, pets welcome.

memorialmerits.com/obituaries

Create a Free Memorial Page on Ever Loved

Ever Loved offers free memorial websites where you can share an obituary, collect photos and stories from friends and family, organize event details, and set up a funeral fundraiser with no platform fees. The memorial page becomes a permanent online tribute that family can return to any time.



Create a Free Memorial Page and Fundraiser

Scan to create a free memorial page and fundraiser. No platform fees. Your family keeps every dollar.

memorialmerits.com/crowdfund

Other Publishing Options

Local newspaper. Traditional, charged by the line or word, \$200 to \$800 or more. Ask for pricing before submitting. Your funeral home can usually submit on your behalf.

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Legacy.com. The largest online obituary site. Basic listings are free through participating funeral homes. Enhanced listings have a fee.

Funeral home website. Most funeral homes post an obituary on their site at no additional charge as part of their services.

Social media. A Facebook post or Instagram tribute reaches the people closest to you instantly. Consider making the post public so it can be shared beyond your immediate network.

Church or community newsletter. Often free. Reaches the local community the deceased was part of.

Notes

Use this space for additional memories, quotes, stories, or details you want to include. You can also use it to collect input from other family members before writing the final version.

What Happens Next

Once the obituary is written, decide where to publish it. Online obituary sites reach more people at lower cost. Newspaper placement is traditional but expensive. Your funeral home can usually submit it on your behalf. If you need help with other parts of the planning process, your toolkit has worksheets for every stage.

Your full planning toolkit: [memorialmerits.com/tools/resources](https://www.memorialmerits.com/tools/resources)

Talk to Solace any time, day or night: [memorialmerits.com/solace](https://www.memorialmerits.com/solace)

Need Someone to Step In and Help?

Care Bridge is a free service from Memorial Merits. Submit a request and our team will respond within 24 hours to help with casket selection, price comparison, document questions, or anything else your family needs. No cost. No obligation.

Request help: memorialmerits.com/care-bridge



Your Full Planning Toolkit

Scan to access every checklist, worksheet, and guide in The Funeral Planning Handbook toolkit.

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