

A Guide for Writing an Obituary

The public notification of death that appears in newspapers and on other electronic media is the obituary. An obituary is an account of the life of someone who has recently died. It is an attempt to give significance and honor to the life lived. An obituary can be as simple as a death notice that includes minimal information about the deceased or it can be as elaborate as the writer wishes to make it.

Today, almost all newspapers charge for running an obituary. Every newspaper sets their own billing policy. Some newspapers charge a flat fee for the obituary, but they may reserve the right to limit or edit the obituary to their publication standards. Others, like the Burlington Daily Times News charge by the line. The longer the obituary, the more expensive it is.

Typically the obituary will be written by the funeral home after they have met with the family of the deceased and gathered information. However, funeral homes are seeing more families that like to write the obituary themselves.

For those families that wish to write the obituary and to give all families an idea of what is included in a typical obituary, the following information is provided for your convenience.

Obviously every obituary will include the name of the deceased. The name can be written in a formal style, such as "Mr. John William Smith" or informally, such as "Rebecca Ann "Becky" Jones Smith. Salutations are nice, but not necessary. Nicknames are helpful in identifying the deceased to friends or associates that may not know someone's proper name.

Age is used in most obituaries, but occasionally it is omitted at the request of the family for various reasons.

Addresses are common in obituaries, but today, we see them in various formats. Families do not always wish to advertise that homes are going to be empty because of a death, so they may omit the house number from the street and in some cases, the street name itself. Institutions where the deceased has lived for a while are sometimes listed as the residence. It is not uncommon to list former residences, again, to allow readers to more easily identify the deceased. An example would be, "a resident of White Oak Manor, formerly of Davis Street."

The date, time and place of death are all optional items, but most families will include the information in the obituary. Sometimes the length of illness is included. Examples include, "after a lengthy illness" or "after a 10 month courageous battle with cancer." The nature of death is also sometimes included, especially in the case of a younger individual. For example, "from injuries received in an automobile accident."

Where a person is born and their parent's names are important items to include in an obituary, but the rule is that there is no rule. Many times you will see the words, "a native of". This refers to where a person was actually born, not necessarily raised. An example of proper use

would be, “Mr. Smith was a native of Columbia, South Carolina, but his family moved to Burlington shortly after his birth, where he was raised. “

If both parents are deceased, their names can be used in the following way, “she was the daughter of the late John William Smith and the late Jane Clark Smith.” If one is surviving, one example of proper use is, “she was the daughter of the late John William Smith and Rebecca Clark Smith, who survives.” Typically the birth parents are referenced as in the previous examples, but not every family is the same. Sometimes there will be adoptive parents and step-parents, maybe even foster parents. How they are mentioned is entirely up to the family. On some occasions, there are parents, children and siblings whose names are omitted intentionally from obituaries for reasons known only to the family.

Obituaries will almost always include the names of the surviving children, their spouse’s names and the cities or towns where they currently live. They will also include the grandchildren, great-grandchildren and in some cases, great-great-grandchildren. In most cases, newspapers will allow you to mention them by name, their spouse’s names and their city or town of residence if you want. Since most newspapers charge by the line, they may even encourage it. The same is true for surviving siblings and their spouses.

It is now considered acceptable to include the names of companions, life-partners, dear friends and fiancés or fiancées listed in the paper. The names of special aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews can also be included in the obituary. Cherished pets are sometimes mentioned.

The names of family members who have preceded the deceased in death are sometimes mentioned.

The obituary can include background information about the deceased. This information can include military service history, such as branch of the military, period of service and any special awards, such as medals; work history, such as current employer or where the deceased retired from, what type of work they did, any special work related awards; church affiliations, such as where the deceased attended church, their membership in the church, Sunday school classes, church organizations, offices or positions held in the church; fraternal or societal memberships, such as bridge or gardening clubs, civic organizations and special recognition for achievement or public service.

The service information should include the day and time of the service, the location of the service and if the family wishes, the name of the cemetery where final interment will take place. Traditionally services are labeled as funerals or memorial services. By definition, a funeral is a service where the body or cremains are present. A memorial service is a service without the body or cremains present. Some common terms used today are “Celebration of Life,” a “Tribute to the Memory of.” All are acceptable, the important thing is to use a term that accurately describes what you want the service to be.

If there is going to be a visitation, the obituary should include the families plans. The day, time and location of the visitation should be included in the obituary. Some families will also include where they will be when they are not at the funeral home. For example, “when not at the funeral home, the family will be at the residence./residence of the daughter, Mrs. Jane Smith, 333 Oxford Lane, Burlington, NC.

Including memorials is an important part of honoring the deceased and gives friends an option besides sending flowers to let the family know that they are being thought of. Information should include the name of the charity or organization and their full mailing address.

The obituary is a wonderful public vehicle for including special recognition of those who have been an important part of the deceased’s life. Not only are organizations recognized by inclusion in the list of memorials, individuals such as sitters, other caregivers and loyal friends can be publicly recognized for their devotion to the deceased and the family.

The “standard” format for an obituary in the Burlington area would loosely follow this order:

- Name
- Age
- Address
- Date, time and location of death
- Place of birth
- Spouse’s name
- Parent’s names
- Background Information
- Survivor Information
- Predeceased family names
- Service Information
- Memorials

It is important to recognize that this information is provided only as a helpful guide. All families are encouraged to make sure that the obituary is written in a manner that they feel honors the life of their loved one. Even if the obituary is written by the funeral home, it can be edited to include the information that you want in the paper.

If the family does elect to write the obituary themselves, it must still be submitted to the newspapers by the funeral home. Rarely will a newspaper take an obituary directly from a family. This is a direct result of fraudulent obituary information being submitted to newspapers in the past.

If you provide an obituary to the funeral home on paper, it will have to be retyped into a file that includes the funeral home’s obituary headers and billing information. You can greatly cut down the risk of errors caused by retyping by providing the funeral home a copy of the obituary in digital format. We, and most newspapers, will accept documents in Word or PDF format. If

you use PDF, it should be created in a version that allows for editing. We can also accept obituaries imbedded in email.

Photographs that are to be run with obituaries should be brought to the funeral home for scanning or emailed in .jpg format. Group photos are easily cropped to show only the deceased, but the better the original picture clarity; the better the image will be in the paper.

The Burlington Times News will bill in state residents directly for the cost of running the obituary. If you are an out of state resident, you will need to provide the funeral home with a credit card number to pay for the obituary as a cash advance, or we will accept payment by check. The Greensboro Record will attempt to contact families by telephone to obtain credit card information. If they are unable to do so, the obituary will still run, but billing will be to the funeral home and be treated as a cash advance. All other out of town papers, unless they will charge the family directly are treated as cash advance items and payable prior to the funeral service.

We hope that you find this information helpful. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us at 336 226-1622 or email us at info@richandthompson.com.