

Obituaries

Foundations of Journalism

Emerson College

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Obituaries

- News article that reports a person's recent death, including information about his/her life and usually funeral arrangements.
- Most formalized stories in newspapers.
 - Standard pattern
- Not to be confused with paid announcements.

Obituary Format

- Claim to fame
- Age and Cause of Death
- Supporting Claim to Fame
- Chronology
- Survivors
- Arrangements

Obituaries

- Claim to fame
 - The most significant thing the person did in his/her life.
 - Can be famous or infamous
 - This is what will lead the obit.
 - Claim to fame might be something from years past.

Obituaries

- Claim to fame lede is generally structured:

Name, who CLAIM TO FAME/a CLAIM TO FAME, died WHEN at AGE. CAUSE OF DEATH.

Obituaries

- Non-traditional ledes are becoming slightly more common on obits, but:
 - This is not a time to try to show off you writing skills.
 - The non-traditional ledes are still short (a single sentence or graf that in some way ties into claim to fame)
 - Then get directly into claim to fame (if more is necessary), when, age and COD.

Age and Cause of Death

- Both are expected in the story.
- Often funeral home will be able to provide you these details.
- Obits are still news.
 - “Readers deserve to know at what age and why someone died.”

Age and Cause of Death

- If COD is a sensitive subject, give what information you can confirm.
- Firmly, but politely push for age and COD.
- Make clear that family would not disclose additional information.

Age and Cause of Death

- With much older people, you may or may not include a COD.
- Goes directly after the lede.

Support

- As with all stories, you need to support the lede.
 - In this case, the claim to fame.
- Additional details regarding this specific part of the person's life.

Chronology

- BRIEFLY recap the person's life in chronological order.
- When and where
 - Birth, marriage
 - Degrees, key jobs, military service
 - Major accomplishments
 - Milestones, life-altering events

Survivors

- Obits include a graf naming person's closest surviving relatives (and often where they live).
 - Spouse (or closest relative) goes first.
 - Also always named: Parents (if surviving) and children
 - Sometimes named: Siblings
 - Not named: Grandparents, Grandchildren, Cousins, Pets, Aunts/Uncles
 - Number of grandchildren/great-grandchildren mentioned.
 - Previous marriages may be noted in chronology, but ex-spouses not listed among survivors

Funeral Arrangements

- Conclusion on a local obit will include funeral arrangements.
 - Who is handling the funeral
 - When and where
 - Donations in lieu of

Where to get information

- Funeral directors
 - They usually will call into the newspaper
 - Reporter can also contact them
- Clips
 - Past stories that have been done on the person
 - Past interviews he/she may have done

Where to get information

- Family and Friends
 - Try to seek out someone one person removed.
 - Not the spouse, but a sibling
 - Not a parent, but an aunt/uncle
- Claim to Fame affiliations
 - Those who worked/knew person in claim to fame capacity.

Obituaries

- “The best obit writers distinguish themselves through the thoroughness of their research, through the quality of their description and quotes, and through their ability to communicate the texture, as well as the highlight, of someone’s life.”

- *Writing and Reporting the News*

Obituaries

- Not that different from profiles.
 - Will be a tighter deadline.
 - It's basically a profile where you can't actually speak to the subject
- Still need to be honest in the portrayal.

Sensitivity

- Understand you are dealing with grieving people.
- Approach those involved with **sensitivity**.
 - Respectfully
- Can be difficult, but you still need to do it.

Obituaries

- Feel an added bit of responsibility for these pieces.
 - Person is being captured/written about following death. (You should feel a bit of weight about doing it right.)
- Check and re-check your facts.
 - Not only is accuracy paramount in journalism, but you're dealing with grieving families.

Obituaries

- Convey the “essence” of the person’s life.
 - Specifics and details where relevant
- Don’t avoid controversy if it exists.
- Make sure the person has died.

Quotes

- Obits may or may not use quotes.
 - Many obits do not.
 - Obits should not be quote heavy.
- Can come from the person in a past interview/news story
- Can come from someone who knew the person
- Quotes will almost always be related to his/her claim to fame.

Obituaries

- Don't editorialize.
- Don't confuse wording with "paid notices" with news editorial wording.
 - "Loving mother"
 - "Gone to eternal rest"
 - "Will be greatly missed"

Obituaries

- Many obituaries for prominent individuals are actually written in advance and held for when the person actually dies.
- Length can vary from a few grafs to a page.
 - Will depend on the person's prominence.

Obituaries

- Every paper has a specific obit section/page.
 - Usually end of front page or metro section.
 - If the person is higher profile, an obit can run on the front page of the paper or a given section.
- Occasionally called a “Tribute” story.
 - Just another word for obit.