

Choose your ingredients

A funeral ceremony is a public performance. It must, therefore, contain ingredients which will enable it to engage and hold the attention of the audience.

All the following ingredients form part of most religious worship. Religions have a long experience in staging events which appeal to the head, the heart and the senses.

The trick is to get the proportions of ingredients right. A celebrant can be an invaluable consultant in helping you to do this. Celebrants know what works and what doesn't.

The image of the cairn

A memorial cairn is a pile of stones, conical in shape. It may be made by one person or by many.

The Rev Roy Phillips advances the idea that one of the purposes of a funeral or a memorial service is "to place a cairn at the end of one human being's journey." This memorial cairn, he said "is made up of the memories, the thoughts, the feelings of all who are gathered in the one place together."

This is a useful image. You can think of creating a funeral as building a cairn, and of each ingredient as one of the stones.



Build your cairn

In order to create an appropriate sense of occasion and hold the attention of the audience you will need to choose from the following. Tick all the ones you think you like the look of now. You'll get a chance to make firm decisions at the end.

- a procession
- different speakers
- everyone joining hands
- silent reflection
- music
- poetry
- prayers
- displays of photos
- a multimedia presentation
- mementoes
- decoration of the venue
- candles
- flowers
- smells – incense, essential oils
- individual stems of flowers that people can put on the coffin
- funeral favours
- food
- dress code

Who is going to speak?

Many funerals are conducted entirely by a priest or celebrant, who writes or co-writes the script and speaks every word of it. There are two reasons for this practice. First, most people do not feel confident that they will be able to create and script a funeral ceremony and, second, they don't feel they'll be able to stand up and deliver it; they think that emotion will overcome them on the day. Better, therefore, to get an outsider in who is emotionally detached.

It can be boring to have to listen to one person talking all the way through and it may be unsatisfactory to have a stranger take the lead at what is a private and personal event.

If you talk yourself out of being able to talk at the funeral you definitely won't be able to. If, on the other hand, you see it as a powerful duty to the person who's died, you may get the strength from somewhere. You will, after all, be among friends willing you on. You couldn't ask for a more supportive and sympathetic audience than them. Who would you rather have a difficult emotional time on front of?

If you do not think that you will be able to lead the ceremony or speak at length, then try to introduce the celebrant yourself. To everyone else the celebrant is a stranger – the only stranger in the building. By introducing the celebrant you give him or her legitimacy and establish that this person is your representative; that their words are your words.

As a rule of thumb, the more people you can persuade to speak, the better.

And don't overlook children. They are likely to be more fearless than adults, especially girls.

Joining hands

When Christian churches first asked worshippers to exchange a sign of peace by shaking the hands of those within arm's reach the response was one of shrivelled embarrassment. The British don't do tactile. Over time, though, it's caught on and people now really value it.

It can produce a great sense of togetherness and solidarity when everyone at a funeral ceremony joins hands.

Silent reflection

Silence gives everyone a chance to think their own thoughts and muse on their own feelings and memories. If you are having a non-religious ceremony, here is an opportunity for religious people to say a little silent prayer of their own.

Prayers

If the person who has died had any spiritual views, you may like to offer up prayers which connect with those views.

If the person who died was spiritually neutral, you might like to include some prayers to satisfy those of the mourners who are religious.

If the person who died was an atheist, it will probably be best to leave religious mourners to say their own prayers. A good opportunity is during a silence or while a piece of music is playing.

Choose some music

The music you choose should express how you and everyone else feel. It should, of course, have a strong connection to the person who has died and is likely to include some of that person's favourites.

It may be a mistake to play music to cheer people up. This is quite different from choosing music which, however funny or anarchic, expresses the spirit of the person who has died and the spirit of the occasion. Such a piece of music may well cheer people up!

It may also be a mistake to have too much music or to expect people to sit and listen to long pieces of music. Something at the beginning, something at the end and perhaps a piece in the middle, lasting 3 minutes at most, will probably be quite enough for a half-hour ceremony. Seven minutes of a rock anthem, be warned, will feel, to the audience, like the wrong sort of eternity. If you want people to be able to listen to the music the dead person loved best, include a playlist in the order of service and they can do it at home – or share it on Spotify

- www.spotify.com

Music can be much more powerful and evocative than spoken words—and the words of a song far less meaningful than its tune and the way it is sung.

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If you want to play recorded music, most crematoriums now have the Wesley music system, which can download from the internet almost anything ever recorded. If you've forgotten the title but can hum a snatch of the tune down the phone to them, chances are they'll recognise it. Any crematorium which does not have the Wesley system may insist on original, not burned, CDs.

Live music works well, of course, and there are professional musicians out there of all sorts to play for you. Remember, though: a grandchild playing a recorder squawkily is likely to be far more touching than a stranger playing a harp like an angel.

- [Music for Funerals](#)
- [No Sad Songs](#)
- [Singers for Funerals](#)

If you want the funeral to move from sadness to a more celebratory or a lighter mood, choose your entry and exit music accordingly.

Choose the right music and not too much of it: that's the trick.

Find some poetry

Poetry has meaning far beyond words. People love it. Poetry speaks to the emotions and the senses. It speaks of mystery and the indefinable. It's not what a poem says that matters most, it's how it makes people feel.

This is why poetry works well in a funeral ceremony. And it provides a useful antidote to all that prose which everyone else has been speaking.

If you can't lay your hands on a good poem immediately, there are lots close by.

- Type 'funeral poem' into your search engine and you'll be spoiled for choice.
- Buy a copy of *Poems and Readings for Funerals* edited by Julia Watson, published by Penguin.
- Buy *Seasons of Life: Prose and Poetry for Secular Ceremonies and Private Reflection*, published by the Rationalist Press
- Buy *The Complete Book of Funeral Planning, Readings and Music* published by Foulsham.
- Search the [Poetry Society](#)
- Search the [Poetry Foundation](#)

Perhaps a member of your family or a close friend would like to write a special poem. Even if you don't think it's very good, it is likely to go down better than a 'real' one.

Sing a song

Bringing people to their feet to sing a song joins everyone together and enables them to play a part in the funeral. The problem can be getting people to sing.

There are very few 'traditional' songs for non-religious funerals and, for this reason, favourite hymns are still popular. People don't sing them for the words, they sing them because they have been singing them all their lives: they like the tunes. *Abide With Me* is still a funeral favourite, and *The Lord's My Shepherd*. They seem somehow appropriate. Any religious people at the funeral will, of course, welcome this chance to voice their beliefs, so hymns serve a double purpose.

However, all sorts of secular songs are suitable too – especially songs from shows: *You'll Never Walk Alone*, *Somewhere Over The Rainbow*. Most pop songs do not lend themselves to community singing,

so make sure that whatever you like the sound of is singable by lots of people at the same time. James Blunt's *You're Beautiful*, for example, almost certainly wouldn't work.

Gladden the eye

If your funeral venue is a crematorium, it is good to claim this institutional space and make it yours for the time you are there.

You make the space yours by playing your own music in it. You can also do it by displaying photos or, better still, one big photo of the person who has died, and placing it beside the coffin. A closed coffin depersonalises the person inside it; a photo alongside reassures everyone that the owner is in residence.

Lots of photos on and around the coffin work well.

So do mementoes. You can personalise the coffin with a favourite garment of the person who has died. A hat works well. So does a rug or a throw. You could lay a favourite coat over it.

You can display around the coffin emblems of the person who has died. Golf clubs. Motorcycle boots. A gardening tool. Pots of jam.

If the service is at the crematorium you need to get it all in and out smartly.

You can decorate the venue more extensively, of course, with drapes, banners or whatever. You will need time to set up, and then time to take it all down and out. If your venue is the crematorium, your best bet will be to book a double slot.

Flowers

Flowers have always featured at funerals. They are fresh and beautiful and, in the old days, yes, helpful in overcoming smells from the coffin.

Florists will supply all manner of 'floral tributes' in all shapes and sizes from a coffin spray to the name of the person who's died spelled out in flowery letters. Many will ingeniously make a horse's head in flowers for a keen gambler, a pint of Guinness for a drinker, a pipe for a smoker and, for a football fan, the badge of their team. In the West Midlands florists are skilled at delicately spraying flowers Aston Villa magenta.

Flowers are declining in popularity because many see them as a waste of money. In the case of a cremation that is arguably the case. You enjoy them for a few minutes then leave them behind. They are laid outside the following day and chucked in a skip a few days after that.

There is often an environmental cost, too—all that wire and oasis and cellophane.

A coffin spray lends beauty to the coffin which, otherwise, might look forbidding and unapproachable. It depends on the coffin and it depends on you. A willow coffin can have many flowers woven into it, top and sides. A minimalist approach would be to have just a single stem on top of the coffin. There is drama and beauty in that. A home made arrangement made of flowers from your garden is likely to be far more touching than a professional, production-line floral tribute picked from a catalogue.

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After the funeral you can take the flowers home. Or you can donate them to a hospice or nursing home. The problem here is that flower arrangements take time to deconstruct—too much time. And MUM spelt out in flowery letters has blooms shorn of stems and is therefore useless.

In the case of a burial, flowers find a fitting and entirely satisfactory destination on top of the grave. Do remove cellophane; it makes flowers swelter.

Instead of flowers, people often ask mourners for a donation to a favourite charity. You can collect cash at the funeral, or you can ask people to donate online. They give more this way. See our factsheet [Raising Money in Memory](#).

If you want British-grown flowers in simple, beautiful arrangements, we like [Great British Florist](#).

We also very much like [Stems of New Covent Garden](#). They are, most unusually, funeral specialists and serve London and the home counties.

Light some candles

Candles are pleasing to the eye. Lighting them can make for a beautiful ritual and involve other mourners. This is a particularly good way of involving children.

You will need something to display candles on. A small table might do, but is likely to be a little low. A flower stand works well with a circular tray—a pizza tray—gaffer-taped to the top of it. You may have to improvise!

You could have a single candle in a candlestick surrounded by many nightlights. The central candle can symbolise love, the nightlights memories. At an early part of the ceremony, invite people to light them. At the end of the ceremony, after the farewell, they will still be burning, making the point that, though people die, love never dies and memories never die.

Some crematoria reckon candles to be a fire hazard. If yours does, demand to see their risk assessment and speak to the fire officer. The purpose of a risk assessment is to enable something to happen safely. Some crematoria allow it, so all ought to. You may need to negotiate with remorseless diplomacy.

Incense

The right incense can create an ambience. Beautiful smells can evoke a sense of wonder and mystery. You can't do this at a crematorium, though; the next people may not like it.

Eat some food or drink a toast

If Granddad was famous for his love of Murraymints, why not invite everyone to suck one as they listen to people talking about him? Consider raising a glass of something to the person who has died at the goodbye moment when the curtains close.

Put something on the coffin

Whether the funeral is at the crematorium or a burial ground you can ask people to come forward at some point and put a single flower stem on the coffin, or a sprig of herb, or a last message. This can be very intense.

Funeral favours

On the whole we don't do funeral favours in the UK. But we do have wedding favours. Same idea. You can give those who come to the funeral a little keepsake to take home with them. It could be a single seed to plant in their garden. It could be a plant. It could be some little thing that belonged to the dead person and by which they will be remembered – a trowel for one person, a book for another. Little things, but full of personal meaning.

Dress up—or down

Ask people to dress in a way which will reflect and add to the sense of occasion. Ask the undertaker to do the same, if you wish. Undertakers are often very reluctant to do this, but can look absurdly out of kilter in their trad garb in a crowd of very informally dressed people.

Things that cost money

You will notice that you can accomplish all the purposes of a funeral ceremony at almost no cost.

Money can't buy a good funeral. Only emotional honesty can do that. It's what you do and say that count, not what you spend. Throwing money at a bad funeral will amplify its faults. But money well spent, if you've got it, can certainly enhance the experience of a good one.

In addition to Murraymints, candles, incense and flowers, you can spend as much money as you want on:

- **A multimedia presentation.**

A slideshow with music. Hugely effective. Requires equipment, and the screen must not be in direct sunlight. Some crematoria now have their own projection equipment, and about time too.

- **A piper**

For that haunting, Highland touch.

- Type 'funeral piper' into your search engine
- Consult your undertaker

- **A jazz band**

- Ask your undertaker or get googling.

- **Doves.**

Release them after the ceremony. They can symbolise the spirit of the person who has died. Source them by asking your funeral director or go to the International White Dove Society. Their website will put you in touch with doves near you.

- <http://whitedovesociety.org/>.

- **Balloons.**

They serve the same symbolic purpose as doves (or any symbolic purpose you want). They are cheaper and more easily sourced, but there are environmental drawbacks.