

A few guidelines on how to write a really good eulogy

The purpose of a tribute is threefold:

1. It is a precious gift to the person who has died.
2. It presents a portrait of the dead person. "He is dead, but look, there s/he still is!" There's an element of the miraculous in that.
3. It fixes memories and feelings, and establishes that they live on.

Tell the story of the life?

For a lot of people, the purpose of a funeral eulogy is to tell the life story. Three problems here. First, it can sound very like a CV or a series of and-thens – "And then she moved to Felixstowe and found employment with JC Whittle & Sons where she..." This sort of narrative can be quite boring and predictable – not a good look for a story – and a lot of people will know all or most of it. Lots of very interesting and loveable people have led uneventful lives. Nothing wrong with that. The second problem is that the storyline moves inexorably towards death. If you are celebrating the life, that's not where you want to be heading. The third problem is that it may give you too much to say, and you'll have to gabble to fit it all in.

Having said which, there's everything to be said for telling people things they didn't know – so long as they interesting and illuminate the person who has died. For example, many people may not know much about the early years, when the person who died may have had – this is the important bit -- important **formative** experiences.

A better place for the story of the life?

A better place for the biography of the person who has died may well be either the service booklet or even a separate, commemorative booklet which includes, also, photographs, extracts from diaries, recipes – you name it. That's the sort of thing people are going to take home and keep.

The life story of the person who has died is an important chapter in your family history. A funeral is a proper time to bind, especially, the young into the continuum of your family story. But the best way to do that may well be to write it down.

It'll also free you up to talk about the really important things.

So what *do* you talk about?

What people want to hear is

- What made the person who died the person they were – what made them tick.
- What the person who died meant to other people

Everyone's a one-off: what was it that made her/him unique? And special?

A good eulogy is an insightful character analysis packaged in a series of anecdotes which illustrate and exemplify the qualities, values and beliefs of person who has died. Not one big story, a series of little ones.

Don't talk in a straight line

There is no need to tell these anecdotes in the order in which they happened. Your listeners will be thoughtful and reflective. A slightly rambling narrative will suit their mood. A collage of memories works very well. Consider starting with a story from the middle of the person's life.

Tell the truth

No one likes to speak ill of the dead and, in truth, there are not many dead people who deserve to be badmouthed.

No one is perfect, though, and your tribute will lack emotional honesty if everyone knows that you are avoiding talking about something bad, if that bad thing was a large part of who that person was. Worse, because you're working so hard to avoid talking about it, that's all your listeners will be able to think about. It's better to confront the truth, or at least to touch on it.

Little faults and foibles are quite different. Everybody has those. They may be exasperating but they are probably also be lovable. Talk about them. Talk about the things that sometimes drove you mad. You will almost certainly be met with answering, sympathetic laughter from your listeners – affectionate laughter. Some people think you shouldn't laugh at a funeral but, if someone made you laugh in life, are they going to stop just because they're dead?

Humour, when it bubbles up naturally, does not trivialise or distract from the sadness of the ceremony: on the contrary, it enhances it and lends it a very necessary emotional dimension. A funeral is an occasion where everyone is trying to keep their emotions in check. Laughter acts as an emotional safety valve.

Content is more important than delivery

A funeral is not a time when people need to hear great oratory. In fact, a brilliant public speaker may distract attention from the person he or she is talking about. A funeral is no time for egos. The words must not upstage the person they're describing, nor must the person delivering them.

So it doesn't matter if you aren't an accomplished and experienced public speaker. So long as you can be heard, that's all that matters.

And so long as you speak from the heart and tell the truth.

Share the speaking

The purpose of a tribute is to paint a word-portrait and express what the person who has died meant and will go on meaning to everyone who knew them.

You may achieve this better if several people speak briefly from their own experience. They do not have to speak for long. Just one little story can say it all. Children are great at this.

Avoid the I-trap

You can think of a funeral as theatre. The star of the show is the person in the coffin. Woe betide anyone who upstages them.

People delivering a tribute can easily fall into the trap of talking about the dead person as someone who orbited their own life. "This is how I felt about her; this is what she meant to me, did to me, said to me; I remember that time when I..."

A Good Funeral Guide factsheet

Too much I, too much all-about-me. Audiences don't like that. At all.

A funeral is *for* the dead person and it is *for* those who mourn. But it is *about* the dead person and the dead person only. Minor characters are allowed, of course, but in peripheral roles only.

How do you finish?

The best way to finish is by looking ahead to the future and issuing a call to action – something like:

You will commemorate X best by keeping her memory alive. So go on telling the stories; tell them over and over; they'll never get tired or dusty or faded. Tell them to people who never met her. Because X's life story is the stuff of legend. Keep the legend alive.

Okay, so that's a bit over the top, but you get the message.

Speaking in public

There's lots and lots of advice out there about how to speak effectively in public. We've only one thing to add to it: Stand up and do your duty.