

## Construct the ceremony

A funeral ceremony needs to be written down from beginning to end. You could try doing it all just from notes, but that might be living dangerously.

By writing it all down you can keep an eye on timings. You'll want to use the time you have in the most profitable way, and to allocate more of it to some parts of the ceremony than to others. You can time your script using this measurement: 100 words = 1 minute. Remember, if you are using a crematorium chapel, the worst thing you can do is go on too long and keep the next funeral waiting.

Writing everything down also means that you can share what's been written with other people, invite their suggestions or input, and end up with something everyone agrees is just right.

If everything is written down and someone at the funeral finds they cannot carry on, somebody else can come up and take over. This is what families and friends do for each other.

### Lacking confidence?

If you feel that writing a funeral ceremony is too big a task, then engage a celebrant to help you or do it for you. Not many people would have the confidence to go it alone. You do not have to hand over completely to the celebrant. You remain in charge of the process and, of course, you have the last word on all decisions.

### How long should a funeral be?

The best way to calculate the correct length of a funeral ceremony is to write it, see how much time it takes, then use every minute of that time—anything between six minutes and six days.

Having said which, there's everything to be said for not going on too long. So: **make every minute work hard**. Too much of a good thing is a bad thing.

Keep the private separate from the public. Don't do in public what's best done at home. Don't do in the funeral what's best left for afterwards over a few drinks.

Half an hour is long enough to have a good funeral in most cases. A eulogy starts to get overgrown after 7 minutes. Think of all the other people who are going to be there.

Distil.

### A possible ceremony template

Here are some guidelines you may find helpful.

You will want the funeral ceremony to have a logical structure – a beginning, a middle and an end – and a sense of forward movement.

There is no right way to structure a funeral ceremony but here is a workable template. Follow it if you like it. If you don't like it, your reaction against it may show you the way ahead.

You can intersperse these sections with songs, poems, readings, a candle ceremony and music.

### 1. Welcome + notices

Thank everyone for coming and tell them what that means to you. Invite them to come along to refreshments / make a donation / attend the dove release afterwards.

### 2. Why we are here

Tell everyone what is going to happen and why. Describe the purpose of the funeral.

### 3. How we feel

Deal with the really sad bit now. Talk about the death and how you all feel about it. Once you have done that, you are free to give your entire attention to the life of person who has died and talk about nothing else. Consider concluding with a poem or reading about life and death.

### 4. Remembering

Tell the life story and celebrate the life. This is often called the tribute or the eulogy. It forms the big heart of the ceremony.

Recount episodes from the life of the person who has died which illuminate their virtues and uniqueness and unforgettability.

Find some tips on writing a tribute below.

### 5. Farewell

This is often called the committal. It is the part of the ceremony when everyone says goodbye to the body of the person who has died. At a crematorium it is customary, at this stage, for the coffin to be hidden by curtains, or for the coffin to descend. It is, of course, an intensely emotional moment. Many people assume that, once the coffin is hidden from view, it goes straight into the cremator. It doesn't. At most crematoriums it just sits there until you've gone.

The coffin does not have to disappear like this. A farewell can work just as well when the coffin stays in full view. At the end of the ceremony people can come up to it, touch it, place a flower on it, and say their own last goodbye. If this is what you want, be sure to tell people in advance otherwise they might think there's been a mistake.

If you decide you would like the coffin to disappear, and you have engaged a celebrant to lead the ceremony, do you want to push the button that operates the curtains? If not, why not?

At a crematorium the organist may ask you if you would like to have music play as the farewell words are spoken and the coffin descends. By this, he or she means a few blurry, atmospheric chords. Do you think this will be distracting or do you think it may add to the mood of the moment? Would you like to play your own recorded music? If you do, remember that everyone will probably be standing. You won't want to play it all; you'll have to fade it out. This can be unsatisfactory.

### 6. Closing words

Words which speak of acceptance and looking forward may, you feel, be an appropriate way to end the ceremony.

## Check the script

When you have written your script, check that it

- meets the goals you set
- has a beginning, a middle and an end, and a sense of flow
- will enable everyone present to participate
- doesn't exceed any time limit

## Is a funeral something you can look forward to?

It is customary to dread funerals and only to want them to be over and done with. A funeral, so the reckoning goes, has to be the ultimate forgettable event.

Hopefully, this is not now your view.

A funeral is a great occasion, a great rite of passage. It has all the elements of all the other rites of passage with the majestic addition of finality. It is arguably the greatest of them all.

You will know when you have created a really fitting funeral ceremony because that is when you will find yourself, yes, actually looking forward to it, and only wishing the person who's died could be there too. If this is not how you expected to feel, it is exactly how you should feel.

When the funeral is over you can expect to take huge pleasure in a job well done. It'll make all the difference in the days, months and years ahead.