

## How to write a eulogy

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You have been asked to write a eulogy for a family member or friend. Admittedly, giving a eulogy can be a bit intimidating if not outright frightening. First, let us remind you what a privilege and honor it is to speak on someone's behalf. Know that there is a reason why you were chosen—perhaps others think highly of your ability to speak in public or you had a close relationship with the deceased, or both. Remembering that other people have confidence in you is encouraging, but then what? Whether you approach this task with humility or trepidation, if this is your first time to give a eulogy or the tenth, the following three questions are always worth reflection as you begin to organize your thoughts.

1. Is it possible to summarize a person's life in 5-10 minutes?
2. Where do I begin?
3. What happens if I become emotional?

### Is it possible to summarize a person's life in 5-10 minutes?

That's right, we said 5-10 minutes. From our perspective, 10 minutes is about all the time you should take to share your reflections. Typically, your eulogy is only one part of a larger ceremony. There may also be other speakers in addition to you. The truth of the matter is there is no way you can summarize anyone's life in such a brief amount of time, so don't try. Our point is, don't summarize. You do not need to give everyone a detailed outline of their life—facts by themselves are usually pretty boring anyway. If there are important dates or events that need to be mentioned, they can be printed in the order of service or memorial card. Think of it this way, your eulogy should offer snapshots of the person's life. Your job is to communicate three basic points: 1. This person lived within the context of a specific family, culture, time period;

2. Their life had an impact on other people (particularly you); and 3. They will be missed. Some facts are essential but what you want to give voice to is the emotional connection that those gathered feel for the deceased. We can do this best by sharing stories that give insight into the deceased's character and highlight their personal experiences. Try to capture the essence of who they were in one or two stories. You may want to mention the things you admired about the person. If they had a great sense of humor, use humor, if they were generous, explain how. Be honest—if they had faults you may want to simply acknowledge the fact that they were not perfect. Don't try to make them into someone they were not. However, this is not the time to air their dirty laundry or disclose embarrassing facts. Finally, you will want to communicate what you will miss the most about the person and acknowledge others who share in the loss.

### Where do I begin?

If you are wondering if you should *write it out vs. wing it*, we always advocate having a written text. However, we do not think you should read from your script verbatim, in fact we discourage that whenever possible. That being said, it is a good idea to at least have some notes which you should place on the podium prior to the start of the service. Having attended hundreds of funerals we can tell you that few people can give a eulogy without at least having a few notes. Speaking extemporaneously or "off the cuff" usually results in the person stumbling for the right words, forgetting an important point and talking way too long! Remember that good stories need a beginning, middle and end.

You were chosen to speak on behalf of those gathered. As you begin to organize your thoughts, you may want to speak to a few people who knew the person well and incorporate some of their thoughts. Their stories may fill in some details or times of

life for which you were not present. Choose two or three stories that capture what kind of person they were and will resonate with those gathered. As you are telling your stories, include details that place them in a particular time or place; “During World War II”, “After her youngest child was born,” etc. You might begin with a summary statement such as, “John was quite a character.” Then fill in the details and tell a story about why he was a character. Finally, you might conclude a particular story with your summary statement, “...and I think that’s one of the things that I’m going to miss the most.”

We can think of another reason why you will want to write out your text, people will want a copy of it. Funerals and memorial services can be emotionally upsetting experiences. They will treasure your reflections, they will want to revisit your words or possibly share them with someone who could not attend the service. You might even want to make a few extra copies and bring them with you to the service.

### **What happens if I become emotional?**

It is hard to speak from the heart about a loved one who has died and not become choked up. Those assembled may be tearful and seeing them cry may affect you as well. If you do become emotional, stop for a moment, take a few slow deep breaths. Your audience will be patient and understanding. You may want to have a glass of water placed nearby so that you can clear your throat and gather your composure. Practice many times in front of a mirror or with someone whose opinion you trust. If you have a chance to practice in the space where the eulogy will be given or with a microphone, all the better. The more times you practice, the more confidence you will have when the time comes to deliver it. If you become emotional remember this; emotions are perfectly acceptable at this point! Tears often speak more eloquently than words. Someone you care about has died. And in the event that you cannot

regain your composure, someone you have preselected can take your script and finish the eulogy.

### **A few more thoughts for your reflection**

You may have strong personal beliefs about the existence of an afterlife. Did the deceased and those assembled share the same perspective? You will want to use your best judgment as to whether or not you should express those thoughts. In most cases, we think it is best to leave that kind of theological reflection up to the minister who will share it in their sermon. It would be perfectly acceptable, however, for you to express a hope for the future. You may want to include your hope for a future reunion with this person and all those who have died, or simply that the memory of the deceased will continue to live on in the hearts of those who knew him or her.

On a practical note, if you have never attended a service in the deceased’s faith community you may want to check with a clergy person in advance to find out what to expect. You can also go to the library and check out a book entitled, *How to be a Perfect Stranger: The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook, Fifth Edition* by Stuart M. Matlins and Arthur Magida. It is a great book that reviews the customs of all the major faith traditions and offers instruction for how visitors should behave. You can also go online and read about the customs of various traditions before you attend. If the memorial service is not taking place in a religious setting, check with the person organizing for any pertinent details.

Finally, as you prepare your thoughts keep in mind that if you write from your heart, you are less likely to go wrong. As you prepare and then deliver your eulogy, you might imagine that you are speaking directly to the deceased, giving voice for all those who are gathered. Don’t worry so much about finding the right words. When you speak from your heart, those who are gathered will find comfort in whatever you say.