



## Preparing a Eulogy Step-By-Step Guide

Writing and delivering a eulogy for a friend or family member is a wonderful way to participate in the funeral service. It is an opportunity to acknowledge the importance of the life they lived, and to remind everyone of the memories and legacy left behind.

A funeral is a very important occasion, and those in attendance are often emotionally fragile. So, preparing and delivering a eulogy can make those unaccustomed to writing and public speaking very anxious. You want to get things right. The most important thing to remember, as you go through this process, is to focus on the loved one, rather than your own nerves and concerns. If you can do that you will be able to write a heartfelt tribute that expresses your feelings about the life of the person you are there to remember and honor.

Here is a step-by-step guide to help you create and deliver a meaningful eulogy.

### **1. Learn stories and memories**

One of the most wonderful, and satisfying, things we can do when we lose someone we love is to learn something new about that person from others. So whether you are preparing an obituary for someone you know intimately, or for a colleague, it's a good idea to start out by gathering ideas and stories first. Set aside a couple of hours to share stories and talk about the deceased with family and friends. Learning these stories will go a long way towards preparing your eulogy.

### **2. Brainstorming and editing**

Brainstorming will be similar to your conversation with friends and family. Only this time it's just you. Write down any ideas that come to you about the deceased, whatever they happen to be. In this step you don't want to edit anything out. A small idea may lead to a great one. So just open up and allow any ideas to come out onto your paper. You're looking for stories, perspectives, memories, music and food associated with that person; mental images about the life of the deceased. After you've brainstormed for an hour or so, step back and look at what you've got, along with the notes you took when talking with family and friends. Look for things that can paint a picture in

the mind of the audience. Select the stories and images that stand out as being really representative of the personality of the deceased.

### **3. Create a theme**

The theme of your eulogy is a way to tie together some of the best stories, images, and impressions from your sessions into a somewhat unified piece. Don't feel as though you need to make sense of the death, provide some profound insight, or 'make things better' by finding some silver lining or rationalization for the death. No one expects this of you, and trying to do this can make others feel like their grief is being minimized. It's OK to just admit that the death is a terrible thing that we just don't understand; that we are sad, hurt, even angry about the loss, but we're gathered together to support one another and to remember our love for that person. Themes can be questions like:

- "Who was Larry Johnson?" A son, a husband, a brother, a pilot, a sports fan...
- "What makes a father special?" Giving you advice and letting you make mistakes on your own...
- "What would this town have been without Mary Wilson?" No soup kitchen, no arts club for seniors, kids who never learned how to read...

These themes ask a question. The question is answered by all the stories and memories you've collected. Other themes could be:

- "He was courage in the face of adversity"
- "He will live on through...",
- Metaphors, like "His life was like his garden"
- "All I know about life I learned from fishing with my Dad."

Themes are there if you look. Perhaps it's something like:

- "The kitchen was always the center of our family"
- "Share the seasons of her life"
- "He showed his love through his actions, not just his words"
- "She taught us all the importance of enjoying life"

Famous quotes that really apply always add solidity. Adding a quote or a reading to a eulogy can help organize the pieces and add another level and perspective to your piece. But, don't try to force your pieces together to fit the quote or reading. The quote should emphasize the story. The honesty of the

stories is more important than any theme. So, if the important ideas don't fit, choose a more loosely organized theme like:

- “All the different sides of Aunt Mary,” or
- “What I learned from my Dad”

You may find that more than one theme works best to present the material you have collected. That's fine too. Ultimately, the overarching theme of any eulogy is simply “the life of this person was important to us.”

#### **4. Weave your eulogy pieces together**

Now is the time to piece all you've got together. Write the draft out just as you would say it. Use your normal conversational vocabulary and tone, and avoid fancy or unfamiliar language. What's important is clearly expressing your thoughts.

A funeral is not the time to ‘set the record straight’ on contentious or unresolved issues. That would be a help and comfort to no one. It is important to work through these issues, but not at the funeral. Your eulogy needs to be a kind and respectful tribute, and it can be honest in spirit without going into detail about shortcomings of the deceased. If you feel that you cannot give your eulogy without announcing to the world that Jason had a drinking problem, or that Aunt Millie was unfaithful to Uncle Bob, let someone else deliver it.

Start out your eulogy with a statement of your theme; a quote or reading that illustrates your theme, or a story that does the same. “I remember a quote from.....that summarizes Jimmy's life....” Whatever your theme, think of it as an ‘argument’ that you ‘prove’ in the body of your eulogy. If your theme is a question, you will answer that question with various examples through your eulogy. Don't be afraid of getting things exactly right at this stage, just get it all down, then set it aside for a while, and come back to it later with fresh eyes.

#### **5. Add and edit**

As you read the draft of your eulogy, does it make sense? Do your examples prove the point of your theme? Have you included the most important positive accomplishments in the person's life? Don't include too many details. Would a quotation, a poem, or a prayer add something meaningful? Now is the time to make layout changes before you polish it all up. Think twice about anything that may be in questionable taste for what may be a mixed audience, or may

be too sensitive to discuss publicly. If you are in doubt about this, run it by someone you trust.

Important: Keep in mind is that, while the eulogy may mention many people including you, it needs to be focused on the deceased. If your eulogy mentions you more than a few times, you need to rework it.

## **6. Practice**

Once you are satisfied with all the edits and reading the eulogy over in your head, it's time to read it aloud. Practice reading clearly and slowly; giving your audience enough time to hear and understand all your hard work. Practice it several times. The more familiar you are with your piece, the easier it will be to look up from your notes and engage with your audience, and to put feeling and emphasis into your words. Time yourself to see if your piece is too long or too short. A good guide is about 15 minutes. If you go longer than 20 minutes, you may have to rework it, eliminating some things. If your eulogy is shorter than 5 minutes, you may not have said enough. It may seem you really don't have much "good" to say about the deceased.

## **7. Deliver your eulogy by speaking slowly and clearly.**

Make sure you have a copy of your eulogy written out in large enough type that you can read it easily. Put marks at places where you should pause to give listeners time to take it in before moving on.

Keep a glass of water, and Kleenex handy. If you falter, or are overcome with emotion, allow yourself to cry (no apologies are necessary) and resume reading when you can. Try to look at the audience at least occasionally and at the family as much as you can. Feel free to gesture with your hands, but try not to fidget. If there is a microphone available, use it. Delivering a eulogy is a great honor. Friends and family will be forgiving of mistakes, and grateful to you for your efforts and this gift.

Throughout it all, remember that this is about the deceased, not about you. Most eulogies are prepared and delivered by people unaccustomed to writing and public speaking. Great speaking and profound insights are not expected, and are not even the point of a eulogy. What makes a great eulogy is a heartfelt message of love, and stories reminding us of why we all share that love. If you deliver that message in a clear, straightforward manner, you will have been successful.