

Well chosen words

How to write a eulogy

Foreword by Sir Andrew Motion, Former Poet Laureate

The **co-operative** funeralcare

Central England Co-operative

*Eulogy (noun.) a funeral
oration in praise of a person*

About this guide

Writing and giving a eulogy is a way of saying farewell to someone who has died that, in a sense, brings the person to life in the minds of the congregation.

For some people, the opportunity to speak during the funeral service about the person they knew is a welcome one – but many of us still do not realise this is possible and believe that eulogies are just for the famous. As funeral directors, we know they are being delivered at all kinds of funerals every day of the year.

There is no right or wrong way to write a eulogy; each is as unique as the person giving it and the person it describes. But even if you are used to speaking in public, finding words

to say can be difficult because of the special circumstances of a funeral. You may be coping with your own grief. You may feel a heavy burden of responsibility to get it ‘right’, in terms of both content – what to say – and tone – how to say it. You may prefer to ask someone else to write it, or perhaps have them on standby to give it for you. Whatever your thoughts, you should not feel pressured into giving a eulogy or guilty if you feel unable to do so.

This guide is intended as a starting point for planning, writing and delivering a few well-chosen words that will be a fitting tribute. In producing this guide, we gratefully acknowledge the invaluable advice and contribution of the former Poet Laureate, Sir Andrew Motion, Professor of Creative Writing at Royal Holloway College, London University, and an award-winning poet and biographer. As Poet Laureate, one of his responsibilities was to compose a eulogy when there was a death in the Royal Family.

“

*He was a great man –
a crazy, wonderful genius.”*

Eddie Izzard on Spike Milligan.

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Foreword

Funerals make connections, as well as marking a separation. They bring families and friends together, and they link the living to the departed. The ceremony itself is crucial to this process of joining – and within the ceremony, the eulogy has pride of place. It is the moment at which the deceased is brought close, and also the time when he or she steps away. It is at once a greeting and a letting go.

This explains why people often find it difficult to give a eulogy. They feel a big sense of responsibility, and they also have to cope with their own strong feelings – which are likely to include nervousness as well as sorrow. Yet the value of eulogies cannot be over-estimated; they offer the speaker a chance to talk in personal terms about someone who has been important to them, and so bring them vividly into the minds of everyone listening.

This guide offers a number of very helpful suggestions about how best to prepare. There will be times when the service is traditional, and others when it is more contemporary – arranged around a particular and relevant theme, for instance. In every case, this ‘formal’ element can be trusted to carry a certain weight of emotion. The eulogy has a more flexible but no less focused job to do: it must be specific, particular, even intimate – and thereby seal the sense of occasion.

This is the secret of the eulogy’s power; it might move us to tears, but it will start to heal us too. It will help us get things in perspective, and to understand that we cope with loss not by forgetting whoever has been taken from us, but by finding out how we can best live with our memories of them. This is certainly something I have tried to keep in mind when writing elegiac poems as Poet Laureate. I want to express sorrow (my own and other people’s), but also to celebrate life.

This is not to say that eulogies are only for the famous. Eulogies are for everyone. They are a reminder that each of us leads a life of special interest and value, and that each of us is unique, with our own special gifts. These might be gifts of humour or kindness or energy, which we can all agree are admirable, or they might be quirkier things that are equally well worth commemorating. In every case, the eulogist’s task is to bring the deceased into the mind’s eye of the congregation – and to let us remember their voice and their manner, to let us share their interests, to let us appreciate their qualities, to let us enjoy their company a moment longer.

This guide talks about eulogies in terms of a prepared speech, but in placing its emphasis on the need to sum up the personality of the deceased, it also implies that eulogists might think about including a poem in what they say – either a poem they have written themselves (which of course will have particular value), or a poem by someone else.



Poetry, after all, is especially good at concentrating large thoughts into a little space, at getting to the heart of things, and of preserving memories forever.

As the word-picture comes to life, it gives honour where it is most deserved – to the deceased.

But it also serves two other purposes as well. It comforts the bereaved by distilling their thoughts – as if the eulogist were handing a photograph to everyone present, and allowing them to keep it when the ceremony ends. And it consoles them in a larger way, too. Everyone present knows that they must die one day, and every grieving person – however selfless they might be – is mindful of their own eventual destiny. As eulogists make their act of particular commemoration, they assert and dignify our common humanity.

Sir Andrew Motion

Former Poet Laureate

Thinking

Start by thinking of the people you are addressing, as well as the person you are describing: the eulogy is about the person, but for the audience.

Key thoughts about your audience:

- Who are they – family and close friends only or others too? There may be specific things to say or avoid.
- How will they feel? Listening to you will obviously be highly emotional for those closest to the person, and some people will be in tears. But this does not mean the eulogy should be mournful and depressing. People will be grateful if what you say is uplifting and inspiring.
- What do they want to hear? Most people want to hear good things about a person who has died, and forget the bad things. But people do not become saints just because they die. Your audience will want to feel you have captured the essence of the person – what makes them special. So be honest, but selective.
- How long should it be? Even in the circumstances of a funeral, many people find it difficult to listen to one person talking for a long time, so a eulogy should really be over in a matter of minutes – just how many is a matter of individual choice.

Think of the person

A good eulogy does not just tell the audience about the person – in a sense it brings the person to life in their imagination and gives them something by which to remember them.

You can do this by telling stories about the person: the happy things, the funny things, the sad things, the unusual things that happened, which sum up their life. Talking about these and the enduring qualities which describe what they were really like as a person, will help you build a picture for the audience with your words. Some suggestions:

Think big: What are the major moments in youth, middle or old age, at work or play, at home or away, alone or with others? What are the highlights of their life story? Were they committed to something? What were their talents?

Think small: What are the little characteristics – what he or she did or said, habits and foibles, pastimes and passions, likes and dislikes? One small detail can be worth a thousand words.

Think sad: What were the challenges, the difficult times? How did they cope and what does this say about them? Should reference be made to the manner of their death if it was particularly shocking or untimely?

Think happy: When were they at their best and happiest? What gave them pleasure?

Think inside: How do you feel about them? What were they to you? What sort of things did you do with them?

Think outside: Who else was close to them? How do they feel about the person?



I believe that if Bob was standing here today, his warm smile would be evident, and he would want to reassure all of us that the world will go on as usual, that this funeral is nothing out of the ordinary, and that, in fact, all is well.”

Eulogy given by Bill Mitchell at the funeral of Bob Lodge, past president, Wharfedale Speakers Club.

to speak to other people close to the person to get precise details and check your facts. You may have arranged the funeral as a friend of the deceased, not knowing too much about them and having no relatives to turn to for information, in which case you can base your eulogy on your impressions of them as a person. Once you have the material and have thought about it in relation to the people you are talking to, you are ready to start putting it together.



Writing

The hardest task in preparing any talk is often not so much deciding what you are going to say as deciding how to organise it into a structure with a beginning, middle and end. There are no hard and fast rules, but here are some suggestions about preparation.

Do I write it word for word?

Yes, if it helps. But if you do, speak it out to yourself as you are writing, otherwise your words may sound stilted when you actually come to deliver it. When we speak normally, we do not speak in perfect sentences. What is important is not the grammar, but the points you are making and the stories you are telling. So if you can, do not write word for word, but put key points on a card to have with you. An exception to this is where you are using a piece of poetry or song, in which case you may want the exact words to hand.

Where do I start?

If you don't know how to start, do not waste time worrying about it. Write the middle first – the main part – and think about how to begin afterwards.

How do I structure it?

Decide the best order for what you are going to say:

- **Chronological?** This would suit the life-story approach, beginning with their childhood and working through the highlights of their life.
- **Reverse chronological?** Beginning with the present or recent past, then working backwards.

- **Three-point plan?** Decide three key things to say and the order for saying them.
- **Theme?** Choose one big thing and give examples, anecdotes, stories to explain and illustrate it.

How will I begin?

Avoid clichés like “We are gathered here today . . .” and begin as you mean to go on, with something special to that person. In fact, you do not really need an introduction: people know who you are talking about and why everyone is there. It may be easiest and best to get straight to your point. For example: “There are many things for which she will be remembered, but what we will never forget is her sense of humour . . .”

How will I end?

If you intend to play a piece of music or give a reading after your eulogy, you can end by explaining why you have chosen it. If not, then a good way could be to end with a short sentence of farewell, maybe the very last thing you said to them – or wanted to say to them – before they died.

Who can help me check my facts?

Getting places, names and dates wrong can distract your audience, so make sure you check any factual information about the person.

“

Arne's great love of jazz has been spoken about today. Ever since I can remember, Arne has always been quite specific over two pieces he wanted for his funeral. As we came in, 'Oh didn't he ramble'. As Arne said himself, people will know the song is about me. And when we leave, 'Free as a Bird'.”

Phillip Thomason on his stepfather,
Arne Christiansen, retired naval architect.

Speaking

As with thinking and writing about the person, there is no right way to speak about them. However people sometimes do things, usually when they are feeling nervous or self-conscious, which can interfere with the audience's ability to follow and reflect on their words.

The following suggestions may help you, especially if you have never spoken in public before:

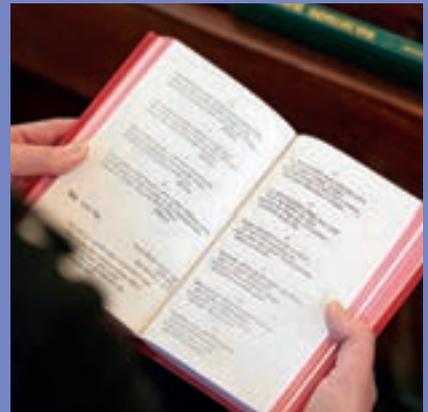
- Wear clothes appropriate to the occasion, the audience and the person who has died. If you look out of place, you will only distract people from your words.
 - Read your eulogy aloud as practice before the funeral ceremony, either to yourself or to a relative or friend – this could help you polish the text as well as giving you greater control over your emotions on the day itself.
 - Stand up to give the eulogy. Even though you may at first feel a little exposed, it helps people see and hear you better.
 - Stand still and be calm. Fidgeting and nervous gestures will only distract people.
 - Try not to read word for word. Or if you do, make sure you have written it to be spoken, not read.
- Speak slowly. When we are nervous, we tend to speak too quickly. By speaking slowly, you give yourself time to think and choose your words. You also give people time to take in and think about what you are saying. And if you are in a large room, speaking slowly helps you project your voice.
 - Don't worry if you find yourself losing your words or overcome with emotion. Pause, take a few deep breaths and carry on. There is no requirement on you to give a slick and polished talk and people will be supportive.



“

To simply say that he put fun back into what was, for many, a fairly dull school life, would be an understatement. He certainly had the knack of making even serious things good fun.”

Teacher Pete Davis on colleague Phil Furniss.



Checklist

Here are some prompts to help you get started:

- Who am I speaking to?
- How would the person like to be remembered?
- What made them special? Favourite pastimes and interests, likes and dislikes?
- When were they happiest?
- Who was really close to them?
- What did I really like about them? What did other people really like about them?
- What are the highlights of their life story?
- If I could say only three things about them, what would they be?
- Who can help me check my facts?
- Do I want someone else to give the eulogy on my behalf on the day?
- Is anyone else planning to speak about the person at the funeral? Do we need to avoid saying the same thing twice?

We care passionately about helping people arrange funerals which truly reflect the life of an individual.



Lives remembered



George had a real sense of humour – some of the best laughs I've had have been with George.”

Michael Palin on George Harrison.

In between takes, he was like an Irish storyteller in a bar – he wouldn't tell jokes, just stories and you would find yourself rolling around and crying with laughter.”

Kevin Whately on John Thaw.

He was a wonderful man. He was funny and dear and supportive and hilarious, and he was one of my heroes.”

Liza Minelli on Dudley Moore.

Lennon was a most talented man and above all, a gentle soul. John and his colleagues set a high standard by which contemporary music continues to be measured.”

Frank Sinatra on John Lennon.

Your greatest gift was your intuition and it was a gift you used wisely. This is what underpinned all your other wonderful attributes and if we look to analyse what it is about you that had such wide appeal, we find it in your instinctive feel for what was really important in all our lives.”

Charles, Earl Spencer on Diana, Princess of Wales.

If I could have one single wish and never have another it would simply be to have one hour and spend it with my mother.”

Jim Lees on his mother Janette Lees, retired office worker.

He was a selfless man who went through his life helping others. He was chivalrous and a true gentleman. He was a lovely man and we thank him for sharing his life with us.”

Phillip Bennett on his father, James, an electrical engineer.

Contacts

For details of your nearest funeral home please contact:

Client Relations

Tel: 0800 454 552

Website: www.centralengland.coop

Funeral Pre-Payment Plan enquiries

Tel: 0800 454 552

Other useful contacts:

*The Co-operative Legal Services –
Probate & Estate Administration*

Tel: 0800 603 5558

Website: www.co-operative.co.uk/legalservices

The National Association of Funeral Directors

618 Warwick Road, Solihull, West Midlands B91 1AA.

Tel: 0121 711 1636

Website: www.nafd.org.uk

*Department of Social Security/
Department for Work and Pensions*

Tel: 020 7712 2171

Website: www.dwp.gov.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care

Tel: 020 8940 4818

Website: www.crusebereavement.org.uk

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