

How to Write a Eulogy

Writing a eulogy for a friend or family member may be one of our toughest challenges. It may also provide one of our more rewarding experiences. The act of delivering a eulogy is one of love and kindness. It actually is a gift to the deceased, as well as, the family and friends gathered for the funeral.

What is a Eulogy?

Eulogy is derived from the Greek word eulogia meaning “good words”. Today it is used to define a speech or tribute spoken at one’s funeral. Eulogies are typically brief, three to ten minutes, depending upon the number of speakers and the full scope of the service.

But more importantly, a eulogy is an opportunity to reflect over a life lived. It represents an opportunity to punctuate the character and passions of the recently deceased while providing comfort and context to those paying tribute.

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Studies have revealed that, as a society, our fear of public speaking is greater even than our fear of death. The inevitable punch line then is that at a funeral, the person in the casket is more at ease than the one at the lectern.

As with most things in life, having a plan or approach is critical to successfully crafting a eulogy. The time following the loss of a loved one can be both emotional and stressful, which only increases the significance of having a specific and effective plan.

Your plan should resemble the following:

Gather Information – collect lots of information about the deceased. Talk to family, friends, or even co-workers. Although you might be tempted into thinking that you know everything about the departed, ask others about their favorite memories or stories. You may be surprised to learn something new and interesting that you'll want to include.

Organize and Outline Your Content – Group similar traits, stories, and events. Plan to use a variety so you're able to reflect the whole person. Be sure to illustrate with stories or anecdotes the qualities and characteristics held by the departed rather than simply inventorying them. For example, rather than simply sharing that your grandfather was a caring person, instead share a story of him teaching you to ride your first bike and bandaging your scrapped knee.

Write and Re-write – Start to put your thoughts down onto paper. Write in a conversational tone so it will sound natural and have a flow. This will prevent you from bouncing topic to topic. The most important part of good writing is the re-writing. Put your thoughts on paper and then re-read and re-write your content.

Rehearse and Fine Tune – Practice saying the words out loud. This will help with some of the emotions as some memories may be hard to say out loud. Speaking the words will also help iron out some of the language. Sometimes we write differently from how we speak. Further, you do not need to memorize every word but the practice or reading will help familiarize yourself with the flow. Recruit trusted friends or family to listen and offer their feedback from the perspective of the audience.

Deliver with Confidence – Be brave and poised when you step up to speak. Remember that you are giving a gift to both the deceased and the audience. Everyone in attendance is there to honor the deceased and they both appreciate and respect what you are doing. You are not selling or presenting a report as you

might in other public speaking situations, instead you are giving voice to the group and paying high honor to the departed. Your eulogy is a gift and only through your preparations can you give well.

Characteristics of a Eulogy

Your eulogy should reflect your personality as well as that of the departed. A blend of solemnity and humor is appropriate but find the appropriate balance that contributes to the memory.

Eulogies are typically short, three to ten minutes in length depending upon the number of speakers and the outline for the service. If you're delivering the eulogy you'll want to participate in these decisions or at least be keenly aware of what is expected.

An individual's faith plays a strong role in their life, but an even stronger role in their passing. As a remembrance of the departed, share the role that their faith played in their life. Without sermonizing – this too is a balance to strike based on the principals – share the comfort afforded the deceased through their faith and acknowledge the natural opportunity a funeral service is for others to consider their own mortality. Perhaps there is an opportunity to learn from the departed.

A funeral service is a time to both mourn the loss and celebrate the life. Humor, as noted, can play a role here but so too can happy stories, celebrations of faith, or even music.

Plan to touch upon multiple phases and components in the life of the departed – childhood, youth, education, marriage, family, work, hobbies and faith are all facets that weave together into the story of our lives. Pull threads from several of these to craft your best tribute.

How to Deliver a Eulogy

When the day of the service arrives, the bulk of your preparation should be complete. You have gathered information and prepared your talk. Perhaps you have not committed the speech to memory word for word, but you are familiar with your outline and anchor points. Now, there are a few last minute tactical steps you can take to finalize your prep.

Read through one more time aloud and practice your tone and tempo. You want to be over prepared to the degree possible.

Wear loose and comfortable clothing. Dress appropriate for the setting, but purposely choose an outfit that is not tight or restrictive. Any discomfort afforded by your clothing will be amplified throughout the event.

Keep a printed copy of your notes handy. Even if you think you have it memorized, have the notes available as a backup. They are there if you need them and they provide confidence if you do not.

Double space and use a large font when printing. You do not want to be squinting to read your notes.

Provide someone with a copy of your notes. Emotions may get the better of you in the moment. That is fine and perfectly understandable. With notes, someone else will be able to step in and share your thoughts, your gift, if you are unable.

Empty your pockets. You do not want nervous hands rattling car keys or spare change. Nor do you want a cell phone interrupting your moment of tribute.

Meanwhile, *have both a bottle of water and handkerchief handy.* Sweaty palms and a dry throat are common symptoms of

nerves. Knowing you can address both can provide an extra measure of readiness.

Take deep breaths. Filling your lungs with air will prevent you from taking shallow gulps of air. Take a deep breath before walking to the lectern and again as you steady yourself to speak. Pause to repeat while speaking either at natural breaks or as you need to regain your composure.

Most importantly, *remember why you are presenting the eulogy.* Either you were asked or you volunteered and there are clear reasons for either. You and the deceased shared a significant relationship and this is an opportunity to honor that bond. Know that they are proud of you.