

Title: **Writing a Eulogy**

From page: [http://www.lastingpost.co.uk/nok/nok\\_memorial2.php](http://www.lastingpost.co.uk/nok/nok_memorial2.php)

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## **Introduction**

A Eulogy is the speech made at a funeral or memorial service about the person who has died. The speech is usually made by a close friend or family member. The purpose of the speech is to pay an uplifting and inspiring tribute to the deceased in which their life is remembered and celebrated.

If you are asked to make a funeral speech, you should take it as a great honour. However, it is an important responsibility and you may find it the hardest speech that you are ever asked to give.

The most important thing to remember is that there are no right ways or wrong ways with funeral speeches. A good analogy is that the speaker is painting a personal picture of the deceased for the audience drawing on aspects of the person's life including what they did, their family, their interests and their character. There is no doubt, the most touching and meaningful funeral speeches are personal ones written and delivered from the heart.

Any speech you make will be well received. The audience is on your side and you will be surrounded by family and close friends. In the circumstances, even a simple scorecard of the person's merits and achievements will be appreciated.

If your speech manages to capture the essence of the person's life then it will be long remembered. Whilst the person's enduring qualities and virtues must be recorded, it will be the character traits, the untold kindnesses, the laughter and the unusual foibles that you should try to celebrate and enjoy. These are what will bring the deceased most vividly back into the minds of your audience. When you find the audience is simultaneously smiling and crying then you know your speech has succeeded.

A good speech will also provide considerable comfort and reassurance to the person's close family. They will particularly appreciate the public affirmation that their loved one's life was important and meaningful to others.

To help you prepare your speech, we suggest four basic steps. These are as follows:

### **Gather the facts and information**

You should gather information and detail about the deceased by speaking to their family and close friends. Other appropriate people, such as ex work colleagues, will be able to supply alternative insights and a different perspective.

The information that you may find useful to compile includes:

- Parents, siblings

- Early childhood
- Education
- Family and friends
- Places lived
- Work/ career
- Special events
- Special accomplishments
- Hobbies and activities
- Favourite readings, books, poems
- Personal reminiscences, stories, anecdotes, jokes
- Characteristics, traits, qualities, foibles
- Preferences including likes and dislikes
- Typical behaviour, sayings, turns of phrase, nicknames.

## **Decide on a theme**

We recommend that you choose a theme for the speech. This will give it a definite and logical structure. Possible themes include a chronological narrative, a specific focus, a personal outlook or even a collection of the person's favourite poems or thoughts.

A chronological narrative is often a good one to choose as it is easy for the audience to follow. However, do avoid simply listing dates and facts as this can quickly become dull and unemotional. The format is much more successful when the focus is on those aspects that made the person's life unusual or different. This is particularly so if a side of the deceased's life is revealed that may not be familiar to everyone present.

Whatever theme you choose, you must make sure the speech is logical and concise. Most importantly, avoid references that won't be familiar to most of your audience.

## **Draft the speech**

A useful tip is to divide the speech into three; beginning, middle and ending. Start by drafting the middle part as this is where you will have most content.

### **The Beginning**

As there may well be people attending who do not know who you are, a good way to start is by introducing yourself. You should also recognise the honour of being asked to make the speech.

### **The middle**

The content of the middle section will depend on the theme you decide to use. However, there are some guidelines that you may find helpful:

1. Try and touch upon the essence of the person. Remember the way they lived their life, their values and their enthusiasms. Mark up the impact they made on the lives

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of others. Include examples of small kindnesses and generosity. Describe and celebrate the person's character, their spirit and personality. In short, explain what made them tick as a person.

2. Acknowledge the deceased in an honest and loving way. If possible, you should avoid references to controversial or difficult subjects. A funeral speech is not a confession. If you think that a negative statement is unavoidable then try and put a positive spin on it, for example, "he struggled with his demons and they sometimes got the better of him."

3. Tell stories that bring the person to life. You should share happy and touching memories and remember the poignant or funny moments. Include recollections and anecdotes of friends and family.

4. Use humour. Humorous qualities, funny anecdotes, an expression or a mannerism will be appreciated and will help relax the audience and involve them emotionally in your speech.

5. Highlight and share the person's accomplishments in the different areas of their life. Draw attention to a special skill, capability or achievement. This need not just be the successes but could be, for example, how they met a difficult challenge with courage and dignity.

6. Refer to the person's immediate family and explain what they meant to them.

7. Focus on the person's life and not their death. The speech is an opportunity to focus on the better times and the happy memories. This is particularly important when the person suffered ill health latterly.

8. A good way to finish this middle section is to dwell on the person's legacy. This could be their children, how their life changed other people's lives, a particular project or something worthwhile.

## The ending

The ending of the speech is crucial and should be drafted carefully. The most effective conclusion will be short, thoughtful yet uplifting and positive. Your choice will be personal but you may want to consider a final thought, a favourite reading or a poem.

## Useful tips

1. Remember that people speak less formally than they write. Your speech should sound as if you are having an informal conversation with some good friends. If possible, you should avoid reading the speech word for word.

2. Plan to speak for no more than 4 to 6 minutes. You should leave the audience wanting more not willing you to stop.

3. Avoid speaking too fast. One way is to write 'pause' on the left side of the speech at the appropriate junctures or 'breath' at the places where you should be taking a deep breath. You can even draw a smiling face next to a happy story.
4. Ask for feedback from trusted friends. You should also have the speech proof read by at least one member of the deceased's close family. This fine tuning process will ensure that you avoid factual errors or inadvertently offending someone.
5. Practice your delivery.
6. Communicate with other speakers to make sure that material is not duplicated.
7. Have a glass of water to hand and try to relax before you begin speaking. You will find that beginning the speech is the hardest part. If you become emotional you should not be embarrassed. You are surrounded by family and friends who will understand that your speech is a noble gesture and one they will appreciate and remember.
8. Arrange a backup speaker if you think you might be too upset to give the speech. In this case, you should prepare the speech in exactly the way it is to be spoken. Before the service, give the appointed person a copy of the speech and agree on a signal that indicates that they should step in.
9. Print out and bring extra copies of the speech. Family and friends might want to keep a copy.

**END**

Last updated: 07<sup>th</sup> January, 2009