

# How to Write an Obituary

A template, a real example, and some notes from Adair Gellman

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Writing an obituary is one of the small jobs in the middle of a big week that no one is really prepared for. You might be on a flight, or sitting in a hospital waiting room, or at your kitchen table at 2 a.m. — and you have to put a whole person into about 250 to 500 words.

The funeral home may write it for you if you give them the facts on a form. If they ask you to write it yourself, this is what I'd suggest.

I wrote the obituary for my mom on the flight home from her funeral. I'd been thinking about it during the week of cleaning out her house, so when I sat down to actually type it, the structure came easily. The structure I used is below. My mom's full obituary as it appeared in the *Kansas City Star* is at the bottom of this document — along with a story I added to the funeral home's online guestbook that I think made the page feel more like her than a regular obituary ever could.

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## The template (with notes)

Here is the order of sections I'd recommend. Use the ones that apply. Skip the ones that don't.

### 1. Full name

Include the full birth name, any married names, and the name they actually went by if it's different. *Example: "Corinne Brandon Gellman Kirkham"* — that's three names my mom had over the course of her life. All of them mattered.

### 2. Dates

Birth date — Death date. *Example: "June 30, 1936 – August 9, 2019."*

### 3. The opening sentence

Where they lived, when they died, and (optionally) the cause. The cause is your choice — share if it feels right, leave it out if it doesn't. *Example: "Corinne Brandon Gellman Kirkham of Leawood, KS, passed away August 9, 2019, after a battle with COPD."*

## 4. Where they're from

Birth place, parents, any siblings worth naming. One short sentence. *Example: "She was born in Manhattan, New York, on June 30, 1936, as the daughter of Jean and Emil Brandon."*

## 5. Their life's work — the throughline

This is the longest part. Don't try to list every job. Pick the two or three things they actually loved, or that the people reading the obituary would recognize them for. For my mom: French teacher (her first vocation), software/programming team manager (her professional middle), tournament bridge (her lifelong passion and her third "job"). I wrote a short paragraph about each, in the order they happened.

The trick is to write the way *they* would have wanted to be described, not the way a résumé describes a person. My mom would not have called herself a "highly accomplished technology leader" — but she would have liked it being said that the NRC required her to manage the team for the contract to be renewed. Specific over abstract, every time.

## 6. The small details that make it them

A hobby. A quirk. A club they belonged to. A friend group. The thing they were famous for at the bridge table or the family barbecue. These two or three sentences are what turn an obituary into a portrait. *Example, mine for Mom: "She was known for her wicked sense of humor and she was famous for her speedy play, as she was always trying to complete the round early so that she could get in a quick smoke before the next round started. Many friendships started out of those smoke breaks between rounds."*

## 7. Notable distinctions or honors

If they served on a board, won a major award, or held a record, mention it. One sentence each. Don't pad — only the real ones. *Example: "Corinne and Jim were the only married couple to both amass more than 25,000 master points."*

## 8. Predeceased by

Spouses, parents, siblings, children who died before them. *Example: "Corinne was preceded by her husband, Jim, who passed in 2011."*

## 9. Survived by

This is the conventional next section: spouse, children, grandchildren, siblings, and so on. I chose to leave it out of my mom's obituary because of how my family is structured and what I felt comfortable making public. You can include it, modify it, or skip it — your call.

## 10. Charity / memorial requests (if any)

Many people prefer donations in lieu of flowers. If your loved one had charities they cared about, name them. *Example: "Corinne requested that if anyone wished to do anything in her memory that they contribute to one of the following charities: Disabled American Veterans, Vietnam Veterans of America, or Big Brothers, Big Sisters."*

## 11. Service details (if any)

When, where, public or private, RSVP info.

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## A real example: my mom's obituary

Here is the full text I wrote for my mom, exactly as it appeared in the *Kansas City Star*.

### ***Corinne Brandon Gellman Kirkham***

*June 30, 1936 – August 9, 2019*

*Corinne Brandon Gellman Kirkham of Leawood, KS, passed away August 9, 2019, after a battle with COPD. She was born in Manhattan, New York, on June 30, 1936, as the daughter of Jean and Emil Brandon.*

*Having received her bachelor's degree in French, her first job was teaching French in Alabama.*

*She began her second vocation as a programmer and technical team manager in the mid-1980s, for a company that did contracting for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The NRC thought so much of her that when the time came to renew the contract, they required her to continue to manage the team responsible for the work in order for the multi-million-dollar contract to be renewed.*

*Her third and final "job" took advantage of her life-long passion — her love of playing tournament bridge. Corinne and her husband, Jim Kirkham, were professional bridge players for many years. They travelled across the country and around the world. She was known for her wicked sense of humor and she was famous for her speedy play, as she was always trying to complete the round early so that she could get in a quick smoke before the next round started. Many friendships started out of those smoke breaks between rounds.*

*She served on the National Board of Directors of the American Contract Bridge League.*

*Corinne and Jim were the only married couple to both amass more than 25,000 master points.*

*Corinne was an avid reader, devouring mysteries as quickly as she got them and always searching for the next book, sharing them with her group of reading friends.*

*She enjoyed lunches with her Red Hat Ladies Club.*

*Corinne was preceded by her husband, Jim, who passed in 2011.*

*Corinne requested that if anyone wished to do anything in her memory that they contribute to one of the following charities: Disabled American Veterans, Vietnam Veterans of America, or Big Brothers, Big Sisters.*

That's it. Around 280 words. It tells you what she did with her life, what she was like, and how to honor her memory if you wanted to.

I deliberately left out the "She is survived by..." section. You don't have to include every conventional section — pick the ones that fit your situation.

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## The lighter side

Many funeral homes post the obituary on their website with a guestbook where friends can leave memories. I wanted people to actually share *stories* rather than just write "sorry for your loss," so I started the guestbook off with a story of my own. This was the first post:

*Hi folks. One of the bright spots over the last number of days has been the chance to speak with many people I haven't seen in many years.*

*I've been sharing the story from when Mom and I played in a [bridge] sectional in Rosslyn, Virginia, when I was 16 or 17 years old. We were playing against Scott Tumperi and Ransone Price, who were at University of Virginia at the time.*

*Ransone was trying to explain what he had done on the first board of the round... "Well, if THIS had happened and if THAT had happened and if she had done this..."*

*Mom leaned forward, turned to Ransone, and said, "My dear young man... (long pause)... if my aunt had balls, she'd be my uncle." Scott and Ransone just stared at one another and then looked at me, then back at Mom. They had NO response to that!*

*But that is just pure, classic Mom — a real wicked sense of humor. Anyone who knows her can just hear her say it. Thinking about it now, I am still laughing.*

Scott replied on the same page:

*Adair: I have told that story so many times. In fact, I have used it when my students say "if" from time to time.*

*One other part of that story from the first time I met your mom was that at the beginning of the round, I introduced Ransone and myself, saying we were from UVA, and I asked your mom where she was from. She responded that she was from Mars.*

*My first sectional ever and I was hooked!*

— Tump

I shared that bridge story with most of the people I called when I was telling Mom's friends she'd passed. Their first reaction was always laughter, and then they'd say "Oh yes, I can just hear Corinne say that." That's the point — a good story invites more good stories, and the guestbook fills with the person, not with condolences.

You don't have to do this part. But if it feels right for your loved one, give people a story they can react to. The page will fill with who they really were, instead of who an obituary makes them sound like.

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## A note from me

Don't try to make the obituary perfect on the first pass. Write it. Read it the next morning. Change what doesn't feel right. Get a sibling or a close friend to read it — they'll catch the thing you missed.

And give yourself permission to write it in the way they would have wanted to be remembered, not in the formal voice obituaries usually take. The funny ones get read all the way through. The honest ones get shared.

— Adair

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*This template is a free companion to **Honoring Their Wishes: A Commonsense Guide to End-of-Life Planning—Before and After** by Adair L. Gellman (Frog & Mouse Entertainment, LLC). © 2026 Adair L. Gellman. Available at [adairgellman.com](http://adairgellman.com).*