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## How to Write an American Death Notice: Some Guidelines for Novice Obituarists

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Theory and Practice of Second Language Acquisition 2/2, 101-123

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2016

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## **How to Write an American Death Notice: Some Guidelines for Novice Obituarists**

### **Abstract**

The article aims at helping non-native speakers of English to write death notices, following the requirements of American tradition of the genre. It is based on the theoretical research into the genre, carried out by its author, who analyzed 1076 contemporary New York Times notices, according to Moves and Steps model of genre analysis by J. Swales and V. Bhatia. Having distinguished the death notice from the obituary, the author presents the communicative functions of the genre and its structure, consisting of seven moves, each made up of one to seven steps. Their presentation and brief analysis is accompanied by 100 patterns and templates, which allows intermediate (B1–B2) students of English to create their own texts successfully step by step.

*Keywords:* American obituary, death notice, genre analysis

### **Aims of the Project, Methodology, and Resources**

In the modern, globalized world, the issue of commemorating the dead worldwide has become significant: the rise of specialized websites, such as Legacy.com, dedicated to hosting obituaries and death notices has enabled anyone that is willing to commemorate the deceased that they loved, admired or respected, to create their own text, submit it to the online edition of a British, American, Canadian or Australian newspaper, or upload it to a memorial site. Therefore, it seems important that a non-native speaker of English should be able to write a short text that will comply with the standards of the genre, which is deeply rooted in British or American funeral tradition. It is not only the language competence, but first and foremost, cultural competence and

genre awareness that are required from a novice obituary or death notice writer (henceforward called an obituarist) so that his/her text could fulfill all fundamental requirements of the genre, since breaking the rules and principles, author's negligence, improper register and style, incorrect or misleading information may offend or hurt the feelings of the decedent's family, and meet with negative response of the community the deceased lived in.

Our article will concentrate solely on some basic communicative and linguistic aspects of the informative death notice, as we believe that, in comparison to that of the obituary, a text representing this genre is not only easier to prepare and write for a non-native speaker of English, but also more likely to be applied in a real life situation. Furthermore, we expect an average student of English at the intermediate level (B1–B2) to be able to create their own text, following the templates, patterns, and lexicon provided in our article.

The analysis is based on a larger project: the research into the contemporary American death notice (Cebzat, 2016), in which the author carried out the genre analysis of a corpus of 1843 texts, including 1076 informative death notices (the remaining texts represent other subgenres: anniversary, condolence, and farewell notices) by following two analytical frameworks: John Swales's (1990) rhetorical Move/Step analysis, and Vijay Bhatia's (1993) procedure for analyzing genres, and implementing the typology of the death notice, as proposed by Jacek Kolbuszewski (1997). The corpus contains all death notices published in *The New York Times* in the period October 1–December 31, 2012, and downloaded from Legacy.com website, the major provider of American obituaries and death notices. It should be remembered that all the structures, patterns, and templates proposed in The Moves and Steps Structure of the Informative Death Notice Section below, were implemented in authentic texts, and thus, they represent the real state of the American death notice. It is strongly recommended that the teachers who are willing to practice writing death notices should invite their students to download some authentic notices from Legacy.com and analyze their content, form, and function.

However, before proceeding to the analysis, we have to define the genre of the death notice.

### **Obituary vs. Death Notice—Confusable Terms**

In our analysis it is important not to confuse two related press genres: the obituary and the death notice (also known as the death announcement). Major traditional comprehensive dictionaries define the former as “a record or announcement of death or deaths, especially in a newspaper, usually compris-

ing a brief biographical sketch of the deceased” (‘obituary’ in *Oxford English Dictionary*) or “notice of the death of a person, published in a newspaper or other periodical, accompanied by a biographical sketch which may be brief or extended” (‘obituary’ in *Webster’s New International Dictionary*); however, surprisingly, they lack any definition of the latter. Only recently have the editors of the recent edition of OED Online altered their definition, stating: “A record or announcement of a death, esp. in a newspaper or similar publication; (in later use) (also) *spec.* an appreciation appearing in a newspaper or news broadcast, of an eminent or well-known person who has recently died, typically including a brief biography” (‘obituary’ in *OED Online*): its first part can roughly refer to the concept of the death notice, whereas the second might correspond to lengthy texts, written by professional obituarists. That distinction is clearly manifested in specialist dictionaries and encyclopedias; for instance, *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* states that an obituary “...can be described as a published notice of the details of a person’s death together with a biography cataloguing his or her life” (p. 334); whereas death notices “...are inserted in local newspapers by family and friends and are also known as paid obituaries” (p. 334). Nigel Starck, an obituarist and researcher into obituary practices in press, emphasizes that difference arguing that “this is particularly the case in the United States, where paid obituaries—in effect, lengthy death notices often incorporating a detailed life history—are common... that classified advertising headed Obituaries or Paid Obituaries is often applied to what are, in reality, death notices” (Starck, 2006, pp. 32–33). Therefore, for most British and American newspapers, the term ‘obituary’ has been reserved for staff-written texts, which can be seen as news items telling something of the deceased’s life story rather than simply supplying biographic information; on the other hand, death notices or death announcements are treated as paid advertisements, and are used to refer to short texts written by families, friends or colleagues of the deceased (or funeral directors); they usually provide very basic information about him or her.

### **Preliminary Considerations—Aims of Writing a Death Notice**

What an aspiring obituarist has to remember while setting about to write an informative death notice is the set of its crucial communicative functions, which involve:

1. Informing the reading audience about a person’s death, its causes and circumstances, major facts concerning his/her biography, and his/her predeceased and survivors.

2. Informing possible participants about the time, date and venue of services, donations and contributions.
3. Honoring the deceased by highlighting his/her most highly valued and memorable traits as well as the most significant accomplishments.

Yet, such a notice does not only provide the information about the deceased and his/her postmortem celebrations, but also may help its author(s) express feelings of loss and grief resulting from death and provide psychological closure by the actual process of writing a death notice. Furthermore, its publication establishes a community, which helps the bereaved family feel connected to other people that the deceased was related to, and if it is hosted online, at specialized websites, for example Legacy.com, other mourners are invited to share their memories of the deceased (e.g., by contributing to a memorial book dedicated to him/her. Optionally, its author(s) may thank particular community members (e.g., healthcare professionals, hospice staff, and friends) who might have helped in the terminal period of the life of the deceased. Finally, a death notice can perform other important social functions: educate the community about facts concerning the deceased that may be unknown to, respected and highly regarded by its members, and last but not least, create historical or public record of death for further scholarly or private research, and, consequently, be stored in family records and help future genealogical research.

Having established the communicative purposes of the notice we can now proceed to the presentation of its structure and contents.

## **The Moves and Steps Structure of the Informative Death Notice**

A great majority of analyzed informative notices consist of seven moves, of which only Move 1 and Move 2 should be regarded as obligatory; the remaining ones are typical yet optional; thus, they may be omitted: for example, Move 5 or/and Move 6, if an obituarist wishes to economize, or Move 7, if the funeral arrangements are unknown, unspecified, or the funeral has already taken place. Likewise, it is not necessary to include all the steps that each move is realized with: the only obligatory step in Move 1 (Identification Component) is Step 1 (the name of the deceased), as no notice can commemorate an anonymous person, other steps of that Move only provide additional identification of the deceased; similarly, the content of Move 4 (Biographical Component) depends on the person's biography, and, obviously, the obituarist's awareness of facts and details concerning his/her life.

**Move 1: Identifying the Deceased: Name, Age, Occupation, and Place of Residence: The Identification Component (IC)**

**Step 1: The name of the deceased.** As Alana Baranick et al. (2005, p. 36) argue, the primary function of any obituary (and it can be added here, of any death notice) is to identify the deceased to a wide audience of readers through biographical information. It can be stated that generally it is a person's name that can differentiate him/her from or confuse him/her with another person—presenting a reader with a regrettable situation that all obituarists wish to avoid. The majority of newspapers or websites require a notice to begin with the surname of the deceased, followed by his/her first and middle names, and optionally, by his/her professional or academic title:

(1) Doe—John David, PhD

In the case of a married woman, her maiden name can be given in parenthesis, preceded with the term 'nee':

(2) Doe—Jane Mary (nee Wilson)

Additionally, if the person was commonly called with his nickname or the diminutive form of his/her given, it can be mentioned in quotation marks:

(3) Smith—Joseph, known as “Little Joe”

**Step 2: Age at death.** The simplest way of informing about the age of the deceased is to follow the conventional press patterns of following a person name with digits within commas (optionally preceded by 'aged'), or with the dates of birth and death given in parentheses:

(4) Doe—John David, 87, or Doe—John David, aged 87,

(5) Doe—Jane Mary (Oct. 23, 1935—May 15, 2016)

Alternatively, the information may conclude the first sentence of the notice (Move 2) by means of the phrases 'at ... years of age' or 'at the age of...'" (see (8)).

**Steps 3 and 4: Occupation or profession, the recent place of residence.** Since a person may be well-known for his professional achievements, position or status, this information also helps identify him/her; it predominantly follows his name and age (and place of residence, if named):

(6) Doe—John David, PhD, 87, Professor of English at Harvard University,

The final piece of information to help readers of a notice identify the deceased is his/her place of residence; it follows the pattern: the name of the city and the abbreviated name of the state if s/he lived in the USA, or county (Britain); it seems advisable to provide the name of a voivodship if s/he lived in Poland. To sum up, Move 1 can be summarized as the following sequence (optional components are parenthesized):

(7) Surname + Given name(s) + (Professional title) + (Maiden name/  
Nickname/Diminutive) + (Age) + of + (Place of Residence) + (Occupation)

## **Move 2: Providing Information Concerning Death Circumstances (DC) The Choice of Verb**

It has been observed that obituarists notify readers about the death of a person by providing a set of details: predominantly, its date and/or day (93.2%), and less frequently its place (33.6%), cause (17.7%), and a manner a person died (21.4%) (Cebzat, 2016, p. 174). Customarily, the information is disclosed in a simple affirmative sentence (commonly the initial sentence of a notice), whose subject performs the identifying function, presented above as Move 1; its adverbials contain more or less detailed information when, where, from what, and how a person died. The analysis has also revealed that the commonest verbs are ‘died’ (44%) and, its euphemistic synonym, ‘passed away’ (26%); very few obituarists (only 2%) decided to use other euphemistic expressions: ‘departed this world,’ ‘left,’ ‘expired,’ ‘went to/entered eternal rest,’ or ‘was called to rest.’ In the case of notices for clergymen or devout Christians, it can be written that the deceased ‘was promoted to Glory,’ ‘began new life in the Kingdom of Heaven,’ or ‘passed into Life Eternal’ (Cebzat, 2016, pp. 175–179).

In almost every third notice the verb has been entirely omitted; however, such ellipsis does not hinder the correct interpretation of a text, and, since it is published in the obituary section of a newspaper or memorial website, the meaning of the sentence can be properly deduced (see pattern (11)).

**Steps 1 and 2: The date and place of death.** It is a common practice to provide readers with the full date of death, although the year can be omitted, as it is clearly evident, since an informative notice is customarily published within few days or weeks after death. The day of week can be added; yet rarely is the more precise information about the time of death necessary; it is sufficient to write: ‘on the morning of Wednesday, November 21.’ On the other hand, some obituarists tend to state only the day of the week, for instance,

‘died last Monday,’ as they assume that readers, knowing the date of publication, will calculate the date of death. We believe that such a practice may be highly inconvenient, particularly if the notice is to be hosted online, and might be read in the subsequent months or even years.

The information concerning the place of death is usually provided if a person died in a city or town different from his/her place of residence (see (11)). However, an obituarist may specify it, by stating ‘at home,’ ‘at his/her home,’ ‘at his Greenwich Village home’ (especially, if the deceased had more than one place of residence), ‘at Mount Sinai Hospital’; moreover, it can be combined with the information on the manner and cause of death (the latter is usually mentioned if a person died in hospital; see Step 3 and 4: The cause and the manner of death subsection below).

Thus, taking into consideration Move 1 and 2, we suggest that the initial sentence of a death notice might follow one of basic patterns exemplified below:

- (8) Doe—John David, PhD, Professor of English at Harvard University, passed away on June 5, 2016 at the age of 87.
- (9) Doe—John, 87, went to eternal rest on Sunday, June 5, 2016.
- (10) Doe—Jane Mary (Oct. 23, 1935 – May 15, 2016), a native New Yorker, died in Seattle WA.
- (11) Doe—Jane Mary, 81, of New York, on May 15, 2016 in Seattle WA.

**Steps 3 and 4: The cause and manner of death.** Presenting the cause of death remains a controversial issue, and a substantial number of obituarists decide either to omit it or deal with it in a most vague manner (Cebrat, 2016, p. 182). We should not expect to find in any notice that a person died from diseases regarded as “unmentionable,” such as AIDS or syphilis, or his/her death resulted from drugs or alcohol abuse. If an obituarist wishes not to mention the specific cause of death, or does not know it, s/he can refer to it with a vague euphemistic phrase: ‘after a brief/short illness,’ which might be interpreted as heart attack, stroke or cardiac arrest, or ‘after a long illness,’ which should be understood as a synonym of cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, dementia, or other chronic illnesses. An elderly person may die from ‘natural causes’ or ‘declining health.’ However, if s/he does want to state it, s/he can either write about it in a straightforward manner, for example: ‘died of/from complications related to pneumonia,’ ‘passed away on October 4th as a result of a sudden massive stroke,’ ‘suffered from heart attack and died,’ or more euphemistically, ‘succumbed to complications of cancer.’ In the case of cancer and other prolonged or chronic diseases, an obituarist may employ the metaphor ILLNESS IS WAR. A person lost his/her war and was defeated by death; nevertheless, an obituarist can emphasize the length of the decease (see (12)) or his/her perseverance, courage, and patience displayed while coping with the terminal disease s/he had to



endure, by means of a verb phrase ‘lost his/her battle/‘fight/struggle’; the noun can be additionally premodified with an adjective ‘brave,’ ‘brief,’ ‘courageous,’ ‘hard,’ ‘heroic,’ ‘long,’ ‘noble,’ or ‘valiant’ (see (13)):

- (12) Doe—Jane Mary, 81, of New York, on May 15, 2016, after a seven year battle with ovarian cancer.
- (13) Doe—John David, died at home on June 5, 2016, after a valiant, graceful, and dignified battle against the cancer.
- (14) Doe—Jane Mary (Oct. 23, 1935—May 15, 2016) lost her courageous fight with ovarian cancer.

If death resulted from a fatal accident, an obituarist may provide readers with more detailed information on its causes and circumstances. We argue that it seems to be the matter of the utmost importance, particularly if the deceased was a young person as his/her death is regarded as premature, unfair, and unjustified. Therefore, notice readers expect obituarists to provide them with more detailed information on its causes and circumstances:

- (15) Smith—Tom, aged 26, died on December 11, 2015 of injuries sustained in a motor vehicle accident in Yonkers, NY.

The way a person died can be expressed by means of an adverb, for instance ‘suddenly,’ ‘unexpectedly,’ ‘peacefully,’ or ‘quietly’: the first two terms may suggest that death resulted from heart attack or stroke, and can be regarded as a synonym of the phrase ‘after a short illness’; whereas the last two can be interpreted as euphemistic synonyms of a dying person being unconscious, asleep or comatose. Alternatively, a brief prepositional phrase can be used: ‘with dignity,’ ‘at/in peace,’ ‘in his/her sleep,’ ‘with clarity and vigor,’ or a clause, providing additional information that would account for unsuspected and unpredictable death: ‘s/he died suddenly on October 10th while preparing to go to work.’ If that is a case, an obituarist can emphasize the fact that death occurred in presence of a person’s family ‘in the company of his/her loving family,’ ‘surrounded by his/her family,’ ‘surrounded by family and friends,’ ‘with family at/by his/her side.’ Thus, pattern (13) can be extended into (16):

- (16) Doe—John David, died peacefully at home, surrounded by his family, on June 5, 2016, after a valiant, graceful, and dignified battle against the cancer.

Finally, to avoid a lengthy and clumsy statement, Move 1 and 2 can be expressed in two sentences, for instance, combining (6) and (16).

- (17) Doe—John David, PhD, Professor of English at Harvard University, passed away on June 5, 2016, at the age of 87. He died peacefully at home, surrounded by his family, after a valiant, graceful, and dignified battle against the cancer.

We strongly advise novice obituarists to avoid the collocation ‘died tragically,’ being literal translation of Polish ‘zmarł(a) tragicznie,’ and suggesting that death did not result from natural causes. In fact, death of each person is always a tragic experience for survivors.

### **Move 3: Presenting the Predeceased and Survivors: The Family Component (FC)**

Comparing obituary practices in the USA, Britain, and Australia, Nigel Starck comments on special attention paid by American professional obituarists to the concluding section of staff-edited obituaries, which is devoted to the family of the deceased: “The closing stages of American obituaries are magnanimous in terms of devoting space to surviving family. Offspring, and their home towns, are named; siblings are accorded similar recognition; grandchildren are enumerated” (Stark, 2006, p. 228).

This observation is shared by Isabel Marzol, who argues that the ‘Family stage,’ as she calls the FC, usually takes up one or two paragraphs, and comprises two pieces of information: “the trajectory of the deceased in family terms (marriages, divorces, offspring, and deceased members) and the surviving members” (Marzol, 2006, p. 70). We have observed that, contrary to that in staff-edited obituaries, the position of the Family Component in death notices is not fixed, and the FC hardly ever concludes them, as the common practice is to finish the notice with Move 7. If shorter texts (up to about a hundred and fifty words) are considered, the FC occupies a more prominent position and immediately follows Moves 1 and 2; however, in longer texts, in which obituarists concentrate on presenting and evaluating the life of the deceased, it is usually placed after Moves 5 and 6.

The survivors’ list may begin with the phrase: ‘S/he is survived by...,’ which can be reduced to ‘Survived by...’; or deleted entirely. Survivors are customarily enumerated in the order of importance: spouse, children (in order of date of birth, and their spouses), grandchildren, great-grandchildren, parents, grandparents (if alive), siblings, and other relatives. The list can be concluded with the names of friends—and pets. Dead family members are listed separately; in that case the sentence begins with the phrase: ‘S/he was predeceased by...,’ ‘S/he was preceded in death by...’ or ‘Predeceased by,’ or his/her name is preceded by the term ‘late.’ Each listed relative is presented with a phrase

denoting the relationship of the decedent to him/her; optionally, the place of survivor's residence can follow his/her name, according to the formula below:

- (18) Adjective/adjectives + kinship term + of + relative's/relatives' name(s)  
+ of + place of residence

It can be exemplified by the following imaginary example:

- (19) John is survived by his beloved wife Mary, dear son Frank of Washington, DC, adoring daughter Susan Smith of Chicago, IL. He was predeceased by his loving parents, William and Susan Doe of Houston, TX. He also leaves behind his beloved cat, Seymour.

If the survivors' list immediately follows the initial sentence, it can commence with 'S/he was...', which tends to be omitted; in that case, death notice readers do not have to be informed that the list contains survivors' names only; however, if obituarists wish to list the predeceased relatives, the phrase 'predeceased by' is obligatory to avoid confusion:

- (20) Beloved husband of Betsy. Devoted father of Sam and Nora. Cherished son of Shirley and A.J. Loving brother of Holly and Richard. Predeceased by sister Muriel.

If obituarists wish to include the names of present or former spouses of decedent's relatives or any additional information, they can insert them within parenthesis immediately after the relatives' names; additionally, in the case of the decedent's spouse, the period (in years) of their marriage can be stated as well. In the case of a complex network of family relationships, the survivors' list can be split into two or more sentences for the sake of clarity, as in the following example:

...Ellie is survived by her loving husband of 67 years Irving Lazaroff; her beloved children Daniel, Barbara and William; adored grandsons Cameron and Byron Lazaroff-Puck, (Barbara and former spouse Wolfgang Puck's sons) and Benjamin and Timothy Lazaroff, (William and daughter-in law Irene's sons); and John Hanwell, Barbara's loyal partner. Other surviving family members include sister-in-law Sylvia Berkowitz, (widow of Ellie's brother Harold), and their sons Barry Berkowitz, Ellie's godchild, (his wife Linda), and brother Douglas Berkowitz, (his wife Marleta); Diane Weiss Schildkraut and Edward Weiss (his wife Renee) children of her beloved late sister Jean and late brother-in-law Michael Weiss; dear first cousin Selma Solomon and her darling second cousins Robert Berke and wife Sheila,

along with many great nieces, nephews and cousins.... (Death Notice for Ellie Lazaroff, published in *The New York Times* on Oct. 4, 2012)

American obituaries and death notices share a tradition of modifying a kinship term with an appropriately selected adjective that subjectively appraises the relationship between the deceased and the survivors/predeceased. The set of adjectives used in the sub-corpus is limited: the commonest adjective, 'beloved' is predominantly used to refer the bond that, in the opinion of obituarists, was the most important and strongest, hence 'beloved wife/husband,' 'beloved mother/father' or 'beloved grandmother/grandfather'; 'loving' as well as 'cherished' are used more widely and can appear in a collocation with any kinship term. On the contrary, the use of other adjectives tends to be limited to representatives of particular generations, for example 'adoring,' 'adored,' 'proud,' or 'doting' are predominantly used while referring to parental and grandparental generations (including aunts and uncles), whereas 'dear' is mainly used to value relatives of the same generation (brothers, sisters, cousins) and friends. Likewise, the use of 'devoted' is generally limited to the closest relatives (wives, parents and children, in particular), 'caring' to the closest female relatives (mother, wife or sister), and 'loyal' to wives, brothers, friends, and partners (see Cebrat, 2016, p. 198, for the frequency of adjectives used in the FC).

#### **Move 4: Presenting the Deceased: The Biographical Component (BC)**

The Biographical Component either precedes or follows the Family Component (Move 3). The BC can comprise seven steps that highlight consecutive periods of a person's life, beginning with his/her birth and family background, through periods of education, military service, employment to retirement; and regard both his/her professional and private life; however, they are not necessarily sequenced in the chronological order.

**Step 1: Date and place of birth; Step 2: Parents and family background.** Presence or absence of particular steps depends entirely on obituarists' choices and preferences; they can focus on some and omit others, rearrange their order so as to emphasize those moments or aspects of a decedent's life, activities or achievements that, in their opinion, are worth commemorating. However, it is essential that obituarists collect and analyze all the necessary data before they set out to create that component of a notice so as to make the story of the decedent's life accurate, lively, and memorable.

If a person's biography follows a traditional chronological pattern, the information concerning the date and place of his/her birth, parents and (and, optionally, remote ancestors) should definitely begin the BC:

- (21) S/he was born + in + place on + date + to + parents' names  
 (22) S/he was born in + place + on + date. His/her parents were....

**Step 3: Childhood, education and marriage.** Information about education involves listing schools, colleges, and universities that the deceased attended, as well as diplomas and certificates s/he was awarded, and degrees s/he held. It may be limited to enumeration of names of schools, faculties, and degrees earned in each:

- (23) She graduated from SCHOOL/COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY in YEAR with a degree in + FIELD.  
 (24) He was a graduate of the public school system in CITY, he went on to earn his BA in from COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY, and his MA in FIELD from COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY. He also pursued doctoral work at UNIVERSITY.

Alternatively, it may emphasize exceptional achievements in sports and education, as well as membership in college sports teams and honor societies, such as Phi Beta Kappa or Sigma Chi:

- (25) He excelled in both SPORT and SPORT, and was an exceptional student. A graduate of HIGH SCHOOL in 1981, he then matriculated to UNIVERSITY, where he received undergraduate and graduate degrees in FIELD, graduating Summa Cum Laude and elected to HONOR SOCIETY.

To make a more vivid picture of the deceased an obituarist can also recall some memorable or joyful events from decedent's childhood:

- (26) She had fond childhood memories of going to ... with her mother, visits with her grandparents, swimming in ... River when visiting her uncle Samuel.  
 (27) He spent his childhood in ... where his paternal grandfather was a.... His summers were spent at the home of his maternal grandparents in.... There, he spent his days biking miles around the lake, fishing, and boating with his many cousins.

Finally, an obituarist can refer to the decedent's marital status, providing information on the name(s) of his/her spouse, date of their wedding or the length of their marriage, and the names of their children.

- (28) S/he married NAME, his/her high school sweetheart in YEAR. They had NUMBER children/sons/daughters: NAMES. They divorced in YEAR. S/he remarried in YEAR. Her/his late second husband/wife NAME died in.... S/he is survived by her/his third husband NAME.

This section of the BC can be reduced or omitted entirely if an obituarist intends to create an extended Family Component to be filled in with relevant information.

**Step 4: Military service, awarded medals and decorations.** If the deceased was a veteran, his military service and its details, such as its length and type, the dates of entry and separation, the dates of overseas service, the unit with which he served, the attained rank, as well as earned medals and decorations, should be included in the BC. That information can be expressed briefly in one or two sentences chosen from the following set:

- (29) During WWII, he served as Major in the United States Army.  
(30) During WWII, he was commissioned as Second Lieutenant in the United States Army Corps of Engineers and promoted to First Lieutenant.  
(31) His military service was a source of pride.  
(32) He was proud of his service in the United States Navy. He served from YEAR to YEAR and was Honorably Discharged.  
(33) He was stationed in France with the UNIT NUMBER/NAME.  
(34) He was wounded in the Battle of NAME on DATE and spent YEARS recuperating in Army Hospitals.  
(35) He was awarded the Purple Heart and the Bronze and Silver Stars.  
(36) He served in the US Army; earning the Purple Heart.

**Step 5: Employment, accomplishments, awards, honors and other recognition, retirement.** What follows the information about decedent's education and/or military service is the chronological presentation of his/her professional career, and/or government or church service. The amount of information varies, depending on the type of job, and number of places of employment, promotions, posts, and positions. As a minimum it contains the type of job and/or position, name of place, and period of employment, which can be presented in one or two sentences:

- (37) After moving to LOCATION in YEAR, s/he began working for COMPANY as a POSITION. S/he retired in YEAR.

Yet, if s/he held more positions, his BC may resemble his/her CV, emphasizing his/her promotions and accomplishments in professional career; if applicable, awards and other forms of recognition should be enumerated. The set of the following five templates is by no means comprehensive, and is up to the obituarist in charge to select which facts of the decedent's professional biography ought to be highlighted:

- (38) S/he enjoyed a long career as PROFESSION/OCCUPATION. Beginning in YEAR as POSITION, he worked his/her way into and up the FIELD. That was truly his professional passion and calling. He served as a POSITION, and was promoted to POSITION in YEAR. After NUMBER years, he became POSITION, retiring in YEAR. Marty was QUALITIES and was awarded with NAME OF AWARD.
- (39) His/her professional life began with POSITION in COMPANY NAME. He worked for COMPANY NAME before accepting a position as a POSITION with COMPANY NAME in YEAR. At COMPANY NAME, he successfully rose from POSITION (YEAR) to POSITION (YEAR) and, finally, to POSITION (YEAR).
- (40) After COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY his/her professional career included positions rising from instructor to full professor and chair of the Department of FACULTY at UNIVERSITY in YEARS, and dean of COLLEGE/FACULTY at the UNIVERSITY in YEARS.
- (41) Following the war, he joined the COMPANY NAME as a POSITION. After numerous positions, including time as POSITION at COMPANY NAME, he became Chairman and CEO of COMPANY NAME in YEAR, and held that position for NUMBER years before retirement. He was a director of COMPANY NAME. He served as Chairman of the NAME Board. In addition, he worked tirelessly for numerous civic organizations. He received an honorary TITLE from UNIVERSITY in YEAR.

Having completed the presentation of the decedent's professional career, an obituarist can proceed to describing his/her life after retirement:

- (42) After his/her retirement s/he served on the board of ORGANIZATION/CLUB/CHARITY.
- (43) After his/her retirement, s/he spent winters in Florida and travelled extensively visiting countries around the world.
- (44) After NUMBER years of outstanding contributions to the success of COMPANY NAME s/he and SPOUSE' NAME moved to their retirement residence in LOCATION, in YEAR.

- (45) S/he retired in the YEAR devoting his/her later years to travels around the world with his wife/her husband, including enjoying time at their second home in LOCATION.

**Steps 6: Voluntary work; Step 7: Private life: hobbies, sports, and/or special interests, activities, passions, and other enjoyment.** Apart from professional career obituarists may emphasize the importance of voluntary work, and decedent's membership in charities and other non-profit organizations: religious, fraternal, political, as well as his/her other affiliations, and the positions s/he held, both in employment and retirement period:

- (46) S/he began the first of many volunteer positions with ORGANIZATION  
(47) S/he continued her volunteer career at....  
(48) S/he was a founding member/trustee of....  
(49) S/he served in executive leadership or board member positions to many organizations.  
(50) S/he was honored to have served in....  
(51) S/he was a generous and anonymous patron/supporter of INSTITUTION(S) and countless local charities and foundations.  
(52) S/he often contributed his time and skills to....  
(53) S/he was always available to offer a helping hand to....

It is the best idea to conclude the Biographical Component by presenting the less formal yet more intimate picture of decedent's life: his hobbies, sports, activities, and passions that might have been unknown to general public. Obituarists may tell a funny anecdote, quote his/her favorite words or phrases, recall memorable events or speeches, interests or pastimes they shared. It has to be remembered that the style of treatment the private life of the deceased and his/her activities in a notice seems to reflect the attitude of its authors to him/her and the relationship between them; it may range from the solemn style of the notice written by decedent's co-workers or subordinates to intimate and heartfelt memories of the closest friends. Death notices can be a way to show their authors' unique perspective on decedent's life and to share a sense of humor. This is, perhaps, the most difficult and demanding component of a notice, requiring originality and imagination—therefore we do not suggest any fixed patterns or templates to imitate.



### **Move 5: Evaluating Life and Achievements of the Deceased by Presenting his/her Personal Qualities and Attributes: Evaluative Component (EC)**

Personal qualities and attributes of the deceased are listed after the presentation of the private life of the deceased; thus his/her BC may be concluded with a statement summarizing his/her personal traits, and evaluating his life and accomplishments in a single sentence:

(54) S/he was a(n) ADJECTIVE(S) man/woman.

Yet, obituarists are advised to provide readers with more detailed evaluation, by enriching their list of qualities and attributes with scenes of the decedent's life or anecdotes that will illustrate or exemplify the traits they have presented. They can emphasize the lasting and profound positive impact of the deceased, his/her life and attributes on the society s/he lived in, particularly on their families, colleagues and friends—and the obituarists themselves. They can also point at the decedent's unique qualities while referring to feelings of overwhelming grief and irreplaceable loss:

(55) S/he was beloved by friends for his/her...

(56) S/he leaves scores of relatives and friends who benefitted from his/her...

(57) Everyone s/he met was struck by his/her...

(58) His/her ... was remarkable and he made a positive impact on many lives.

(59) S/he was a profoundly spiritual person whose qualities were evident to all who knew her.

### **Move 6: Expressing Survivors' Emotions: The Farewell Message Component (FMC)**

The purpose of the Farewell Message Component (FMC) is to express emotions caused by a person's death (Step 1), promise to keep him/her in obituarist's memories (Step 2), and wish him/her eternal peace (Step 3). It is the only component of the entire text in which its author(s) can address the deceased, who is regarded here as a virtual reader of the notice, in contrast to real addressees, that is, living members of the community.

**Step 1: Expressing the loss caused by death.** The declaration of loss is expressed with active or passive structures with the verb 'miss,' optionally

preceded by an adverb ‘deeply,’ ‘greatly,’ or ‘sorely.’ It is either the whole person that is missed or his/her particular qualities; in the latter case Move 5 is either optional or can be combined with Move 6, so as to avoid repeating the decedent’s attributes and qualities. It is also worth remembering that this declaration is the only component within the notice that may reveal its authorship, since informative death notices remain, by convention, unsigned. Therefore, obituarists may optionally insert either their own names (i.e., survivors’ names; see templates below) or a collective term denoting the mourners’ group (e.g., business partners, colleagues, neighbors, friends, etc.) that submitted or uploaded the notice:

- (60) John Doe/You will be (deeply/greatly/sorely) missed (by SURVIVORS’ NAMES /TERM DENOTING THE MOURNERS’ GROUP).
- (61) Jane Doe was/You were a(n) ATTRIBUTE(S) person/woman who will be (deeply/greatly/sorely) missed (by SURVIVORS’ NAMES /TERM DENOTING THE MOURNERS’ GROUP).
- (62) John’s/Jane’s/Your PERSONAL QUALITIES will be (deeply/greatly/sorely) missed (by SURVIVORS’ NAMES /TERM DENOTING THE MOURNERS’ GROUP).
- (63) TERM DENOTING THE MOURNERS’ GROUP will miss your/his/her PERSONAL QUALITIES.

**Step 2: Promising remembrance.** Additionally, obituarists may declare that they will remember the deceased and/or his/her qualities; Steps 1 and 2 can also be joined into a single pattern, as in (64):

- (64) John Doe/You will be (deeply/greatly/sorely) missed and (always/forever) remembered (for PERSONAL QUALITIES) (by SURVIVORS’ NAMES /TERM DENOTING THE MOURNERS’ GROUP).
- (65) Jane Doe/You will be (always/forever) remembered.

**Step 3: Wishing the deceased eternal peace.** Optionally, the FMC, is concluded with a traditional religious expression, characteristic of inscriptions that appear on headstones and tombs (R.I.P.), wishing the deceased eternal rest and peace:

- (66) May s/he rest in peace
- (67) May you rest in peace
- (68) Rest in peace

Either of the abovementioned sentences can conclude the entire text of the notice if its author does not know the details of, or does not intend to inform its readers about the funeral arrangements.

### **Move 7: Informing about Funeral Arrangements: Funeral Information Component (FIC)**

Obituarists have to attach utmost importance to detailed and precise information concerning funeral arrangements, for, by publishing it, a decedent's family and/or other mourners invite notice readers participate in all or some ceremonies, inform them that they have already taken place or are to be held in unspecified time in the future, or, on the contrary, their participation in the funeral or other ceremonies is restricted, and only presence of certain categories of mourners is requested.

**Step 1: Providing information concerning the funeral and other ceremonies and attendance restrictions.** Funeral Information Component (FIC) is required to be highly informative, accurate, and detailed: notice readers are expected to find out the time and venue of the funeral service/mass, reception, the date and place of interment. Additionally, it may contain information about the persons, for instance, the name of an officiating priest. If the ceremonies are to take place, the structures should contain a verb in the future tense:

- (69) A memorial service/funeral will be held on DATE at TIME at VENUE.
- (70) Funeral on DATE at TIME from the ... Funeral Home, ADDRESS, followed by a Mass of Christian burial at ... Church, ADDRESS at TIME. Burial will be at ... Cemetery, ADDRESS at TIME.
- (71) Mass of Christian Burial will be celebrated on DATE at TIME at ... Church, ADDRESS by PRIEST'S NAME.
- (72) PRIEST'S NAME will officiate.
- (73) A special gathering to remember and celebrate the life of John Doe will be held on DATE at TIME at VENUE.

If deceased or his/her family demanded the funeral service be attended by the closest relatives only or there is no service at all, their wish is expressed directly in the FIC; in such a case, obviously neither time nor place of the ceremony is specified in a notice:

- (74) Services will be private for immediate family only.
- (75) In accordance with Jane Doe's wishes, there will be a graveside service for immediate family/ there will be no funeral service.

- (76) Burial/Interment private.
- (77) As John wished, his body will be cremated and there will be no funeral service.

In some cases the deceased expressed their special wish concerning the way their bodies should be dealt with, which provides the reason for the not holding funeral ceremony:

- (78) His/her body has been donated to Yale Medical School.
- (79) His/her ashes are to be placed at sea according to his/her wish.

If the ceremonies have already taken place, they should be referred to in the past tense and do not have to be so detailed:

- (80) His/her ashes were put to final rest in PLACE on DATE.
- (81) Services were held in PLACE, where he was laid to rest on DATE.

Finally, if the details of any ceremony has not been determined yet, such information should also be included:

- (82) A memorial service will be held in June, contact the family for location and time.
- (83) A memorial service/mass will be held at VENUE on a date to be determined.

**Step 2: Providing information regarding funeral home in charge.** The FIC may contain specific information concerning the funeral home that is to provide (or provided) funeral services for the deceased. Since contemporary funeral homes provide a wide range of on-line services, their directors inform the public about the possibilities their on-line services offer, for instance, webcasting of a funeral service, posting on-line tributes or condolences, sharing memories in a memorial guest book, accessing a full obituary, uploading photos and stories, etc. In such a case, the funeral parlor in charge provides the information about its services and e-mail address:

- (84) Services will be handled/made by...
- (85) Complete obituary, funeral details and online guest register are available at...
- (86) Please visit ... to sign the online guestbook.
- (87) For additional information or to watch a webcast of the service, visit...

**Step 3: Providing family/friends contact information.** Optionally, the decedent's relatives or friends provide their phone numbers or e-mail address in case notice readers have any inquiries about the funeral celebrations. They can also inform them about a possibility of sharing their recollections, memories or thoughts of the deceased, or request to have condolences addressed directly to them and not via a funeral parlor:

- (88) Any questions regarding the service please call/email....
- (89) Please email/call ... for details or celebration.
- (90) Remembrances can be sent to....
- (91) Thoughts, testimonials and condolences may be emailed to....

**Step 4: Suggesting donation.** In the final step of the FIC obituarists or the decedent's family can suggest a charity or a list of charities to receive donations, or suggest sponsoring a charity of decedent's own choice; thus, instead of purchasing flowers, mourners are expected to contribute unspecified amount of money to honor him/her. Their request should include the contact information (name, address, telephone number, email address, link to a webpage or a bank account):

- (92) In lieu of flowers, donations in his/her memory may be made to....
- (93) His/her family asks that in lieu of flowers, donations be made to....
- (94) To honor him/her, the family would appreciate donations be sent to....

Obituarists may additionally explain why a particular charity was chosen by the decedent or his/her family:

- (95) Contributions may be made in his/her honor to.... It was a cause dear to DECEDENT'S NAME heart.

Alternatively, mourners are free to contribute to a charity of their choice:

- (96) Contributions in DECEDENT'S NAME memory can be made to any of the causes s/he served and loved, and are much appreciated by his/her family.

Finally, they may suggest another, uncommon or original, manner of commemoration:

- (97) To honor DECEDENT'S NAME, please plant a tree in....

### Optional Constituents

Obituarists may include other non-standard components, for instance religious or literary quotations, or the decedent's expressions of gratitude to individuals (relatives, friends, physicians, nurses or caregivers) or communities (hospital or hospice staff) that cared for the decedent and helped them cope with his/her terminal disease; it can be inserted between Moves 5 and 6 or 6 and 7:

- (98) Special thanks (from his/her family) to ... /go to ... (for ...)
- (99) The family is very/eternally/deeply grateful to ... (for ...)
- (100) The family wishes/would like to thank ... /express/extend/their appreciation/gratitude to...

A quote may commence or conclude a notice; the choice of an appropriate text depends on the preferences of the obituarist or the decedent's family, and may range from a mourning psalm to lyrics of his/her favorite song.

### Some Conclusive Advice

We wish to conclude our analysis by providing a novice death notice writer with some final advice. While reading our article s/he should have noticed that this is a complex genre, as it combines a notice of a death, a story of a life, a record of the decedent's extended family, information about a funeral service, a request for memorial donations, and many more. Thus, s/he should remember that all the information must be covered, accurately and completely; s/he should check whether no important information is omitted, forgotten, or incorrect, and no names are misspelled. Thus, checking and proofreading before submitting or uploading the text is obligatory. It is also worth remembering that a death notice ought to comply with the classic requirement *de mortuis nil nisi bene*, and should not contain any negative aspects of the decedent's life, his/her failures, or disappointments. Nevertheless, it should not be boring, but compelling to read, so as to help its readers to find more about the decedent's life. For many deceased, their death notice might be the only text ever written about them in their whole life, which, moreover, will be stored in family archives for future generations. The final advice is aimed at teachers, who should always keep in mind that the topic of death and the practice of reading and writing death notices is a delicate matter: it may unleash in some students emotions that they may find difficult to cope with (for instance, we would strongly discourage teachers from making students write notices of each other—it is safer

to choose a fictitious character or historical figure). Additionally, it might be worth considering to precede those activities with discussion concerning emotions evoked by death and loss, and ways to cope with them, which include writing a death notice.

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### **Wie schreibt man eine private Todesanzeige im amerikanischen Stil – einige Hinweise für angehende Autoren**

#### Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag ist ein kurzer und bündiger Ratgeber für diejenigen, die aus verschiedenen Gründen eine solche Todesanzeige schreiben wollen, die den amerikanischen Anforderungen für diese Gattung entsprechen wird. In seinen theoretischen Voraussetzungen beruht er auf die von dem Verfasser im Rahmen seiner Dissertation durchgeführten Untersuchungen zu dieser Gattung in gegenwärtigen amerikanischen Zeitungen. Mit Hilfe des von J. Swales und V. Bhatia entwickelten Forschungsmodells von Bewegungen und Schritten (eng.: Moves and Steps) hat der Verfasser 1076 in der Tageszeitung *The New York Times* veröffentlichten Todesanzeigen analysiert. Er nennt solche Eigenschaften der Gattung, die sie von ei-

ner Traueranzeige (eng.: obituary) unterscheiden: die Kommunikationszwecke und die sieben Bewegungen umfassende und aus 1–7 Schritten bestehende Struktur. Der Analyse liegen 100 Modelle von Strukturen und Mustern zur Ergänzung bei, die dem Schüler der Mittelstufe im Englischen (Niveau B1 – B2) erlauben, seinen eigenen originellen Text zu schreiben.