

Write Your Own Obituary

Robert Boyd

Many of our classmates have left little information behind about themselves and their lives. Often obituaries, if and when we find them, have scanty details about how our classmates lived their lives.

You don't literally have to write your own obituary but the time to get your life down on paper is now. This will be a great aid to friends and relatives who, at the worst possible time, find themselves having to gather the facts about your life for the funeral and local paper. My mother, Ruth Williams, wrote her own obituary and you can find it exactly as she wrote it on Andersons Funeral Home website: <http://www.andersonfuneral.net/obituary.asp?id=62>.

Let's get started.

Section 1, Your Death

The first paragraph lists the specifics of your death. Something like this:

Robert John Boyd, 77, died Friday, June 15, 2027, underneath some purple prairie clover by Lake Darling in Alexandria, Minnesota.

You don't need to worry about this section. Somebody else is going to write it.

Section 2, Story of Your Life

Subsequent paragraphs narrate the story of your life starting with your birth and going on to detail your education, military service, work history, marriage, children, changes in residences, etc. Have a current résumé? If you do, you are off to a decent start.

The first sentence details your birth including the date, your parents, and location:

Robert was born May 6, 1950 the son of John and Ruth (Bartz) Boyd of Alexandria, Minnesota.

Write a chronicle of your life starting with high school all the way to retirement. Events include your education, military service, work history, marriage, etc.

Write in terms of accomplishments or personal importance rather than just specifics. For example, instead of saying:

From 1975 to 1988, Robert worked as a computer programmer at Decision Systems, Inc. in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Think of what you accomplished or what that job meant to you and write something like:

As a computer programmer at Decision Systems, Inc. in Minneapolis, Minnesota from 1975 to 1988, Robert pioneered development of a timekeeping, billing, and accounts receivable application utilized by Twin Cities' law firms.

Even better, make it as a personal narrative. After all, this is the story of your life:

In 1975, Decision Systems, Inc. in Minneapolis, Minnesota was a small startup less than a year old with half a dozen employees. I got the assignment to write time, billing, and accounts receivable software for Twin Cities' law firms. Working directly for the owner of a small company is the best employment. It's a blast and because you're having so much fun you stay up all night making it work your way.

The first invoices printed by computer sent out by Twin Cities' law firms were the result of what I did. This is more interesting to read than simply saying I worked at such-and-such a job at such-and-such a company for whatever years.

Section 3, Who Are You?

The next paragraphs are about you as a person. This is your only chance to say who you are and what you think. If you don't make a statement about yourself, some relative is going to write something lame about how you loved small animals and helping little old ladies cross the street.

Up until the day you died, no one wanted to sit and listen to you prattle on about the things you like. But, you're dead now. You have a captive audience; they have to listen. Don't clam up now. Write it down!

So, how do you do that?

What are your passions? For many, work is their passion. If that is true of you, write down what your work means to you. For others work is the means to a paycheck they need to provide for themselves and their families with the necessities of life. If this case applies to you, your passions lay outside of work. And for a lot of us, both aspects of our lives are important.

Start by listing your hobbies, activities, and organizations you belong to. Think about what they mean to you. Activities could include things you do with your family. What satisfaction do you get from them? Write that down.

The easiest may be to relate some favorite memories. Two or three of these would speak volumes about who you are.

For example, I like reading and I can tell you why:

Robert enjoyed science fiction, mystery, science, economics, history, and philosophy. It was important for him to understand everything about the world, how it came to be the way it is, and how it ideally should be.

This works even better as a personal narrative:

I fell in love with science fiction in the 5th grade. I was fascinated by how men were able to learn to live in spaceships and on other planets. That led me to philosophy because philosophy seeks to answer the question how does one live right here and now on this planet. Besides answering this all important question, philosophy gave me a wider framework for understanding science, economics, history, etc. That led to my understanding of how the world came to be the way it is now and more significantly allowed me to think rationally about how the world ought to be.

Section 4, Survived by

Write a detailed list of relatives and significant friends that were still living at the time of your death. Since you cannot say whom that is going to be for sure, the important thing for you to do is make a list of all living relatives and significant friends. This list should include your spouse, parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, significant friends including spouses of same.

Section 5, Preceded in Death by

List all relatives and significant friends that have already died. If other relatives die, you can update this section and remove them from Section 4.

Section 6, Leave a Message

Is there something you always wanted to pass on to friends and relatives but the situation was never appropriate? This is the time to deliver it. You've got them cornered. You can leave a general message to all or specific messages to particular people.

It could be anything from an antismoking message to a statement of personal beliefs or philosophy. Write your best argument. Make your case. You haven't died yet. You have plenty of time to tweak it to perfection. For example:

Spend your life doing the things you like. Putting a roof over your head, clothes on your back, and food on the table are perks of the job—not a reason for working. Life is the journey—not the destination.

Leave behind a spouse or children that you love dearly. Tell them how you feel this one last time in print.

Confession time. Did you have a secret love you never admitted? Didn't really earn that Ph.D everyone thought you had? Confess now. On a more personal note, has there been some huge regret in your life? Spell it out here once and for all.

Getting Started

Begin by listing all of the information about your life:

- Full name
- Birth Date
- Birth City
- Your father's name
- Your mother's maiden name
- Branch of military you served, years served, places stationed, and services performed.
- College attended, city, degree, accomplishments, year graduated
- Employments or professions: cities, services performed, accomplishments, years employed
- Marriage: name of spouse, date married, children

- Hobbies, activities, organizations including significance or satisfaction gained from same
- Relatives living and dead, significant friends and where they reside including parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, significant friends and their spouses.

Take a good digital photo of yourself and send copies to your closest relatives.

If writing a narrative of your life is beyond the scope of your abilities, provide the list above to a friend or relative. With this list, you can sit down together and knock out your life story in short order.

If you do nothing else, write, type, or word process the above list of information. Provide copies to your closest relatives. It will be immensely helpful to them when they have to provide these facts about your life for your funeral and local paper. And, since you made the list, you know they will get your story straight.

All of us are guarded to some degree but you are dead, it doesn't matter anymore. This is what you do. Complete this project. It's between you and your computer. No one else need know.

You might be surprised when you're done tweaking that you might feel like sharing it. Otherwise, put in a sealed envelope and write the words, "To Be Opened Upon My Death," on the envelope. You could leave it in a top desk drawer or with your will.

Good Writing!