Summing Up a Life: Meeting the Obituary's Challenge

Abstracted from: Chip Scanlan Posted, Apr. 9, 2003
[http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=52&aid=29333]

A definition: An obituary (the root of the word is "obit," the Latin word for "death") is a news report of someone’s death, often with a biographical sketch of the deceased. Think of an obituary as a capsule biography published after a person dies. "That’s what an obit is supposed to be—a picture, a snapshot. It’s not a full-length biography, it’s not a portrait. It’s a quick picture," observed Alden Whitman, specialist in obituaries at New York Times.

Over the years, newspapers have developed different reporting and writing strategies for different kinds of obituaries. On the most basic level, information was gathered at the funeral home from the family of the dead person. This could be passed along to the newspaper, where it would be reassembled into prose and placed in the paper, sometimes in a single short block of type, perhaps with a photograph. Prominent citizens and celebrities received different treatment, not the least of which was considerably more space in the paper...

Obituaries can be divided into three categories:

**NEWS OBIT:** The report of a death that is considered newsworthy because of the prominence of the individual or his or her place in the community.

**FEATURE OBIT:** The basic news report fleshed out with biographical information, including anecdotes, descriptions, quotes, reminiscences. Although feature obits are usually limited to prominent, influential or famous people, a new form -- dubbed the "common man" (and woman) feature obit -- emerged in the 1980s. .... **APPRECIATION:** An essay that explores the impact of a person's life -- and death -- often written by someone familiar with the person or the person's work......

**OBITUARIES: A PROCESS APPROACH**

Good writing demands a rational series of decisions and steps that every writer makes, regardless of deadline or genre. If we can isolate the conditions that exist when we write a good story, we boost our chances of repeating that success on our next assignment.

**IDEA:** ....Editors usually make the decision on treatment: whether the story will be a brief news obit or a feature obituary.....

**COLLECT:** Funeral directors generally obtain and disseminate the basic facts for an obituary to the news media, but the reporter will have to do additional reporting to flesh the story out. Who will be your best source? Often closest relatives are too distraught to be of much help. But a co-worker or friend of the deceased can often provide rich details.
An obituary contains standard information. Here's a checklist:

- Name of deceased
- Age
- Address
- Occupation
- Cause of death
- Memberships
- Education
- Military history
- Survivors
- Names and addresses of family members
- Donation information
- Funeral information

**FOCUS:** Although death is the obvious news peg, an obituary, like any story, needs a central point. What is the most newsworthy aspect of this person's life or death? Why is this person's death of interest to your audience?

**ORDER:** Obituaries follow a standard structure. The lead reports the identity of the person who died, the middle recaps his or her life in chronological order from birth to death and the ending provides information about survivors and the funeral.

**DRAFT:** The obituary lead includes: Name; a phrase that conveys the person's significance (i.e., "the inventor of the Slinky"); date of death (location, circumstances are optional); age; cause of death.

**REVISE:** Style is important, but accuracy is the top priority in an obituary. Obituaries are often the only time a person's name will appear in the newspaper. Obituaries, often laminated, become part of a family's permanent record. Mistakes can add lasting pain to already-grieving survivors. Make sure you've got it right: spellings, ages……

====================================================================

**YOUR MATH HISTORY TASK**

1. Read/skim the sample bios (Erdos, Dantzig, Doob) to get a general feel for the task……though I want more emphasis on the mathematics involved (for clarity).

2. Get the name of the deceased (via drawing in class)….do some background reading to gather information (facts, mathematics, honors, and “projected” historical significance).

3. Make decisions:
   - What information (mathematics, personal) is necessary?
   - What information (mathematics, personal) is interesting?
   - What information (mathematics, personal) is interesting but needs to be discarded?
   - What would be an appropriate heading or title?
• What would be a good opening sentence (to capture and keep reader’s attention)?

(4) Format:
• Heading
• By……
• Obit…..

(5) Write a first draft (V1)...Have some else read it.......revise it.......submit revised V1.

(6) Collect feedback from both a peer and myself.

(7) Write a final draft (FV)...Have someone else read it...revise it...submit “final” FV.

(8) Send me an electronic copy (Word file or PDF) that I will share with the rest of the class at an appropriate time later in the course.

Each student drew one name from the following

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pierre-Simon LaPlace</th>
<th>James J. Sylvester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Godfrey Harold Hardy</td>
<td>Kurt Gödel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph-Louis LaGrange</td>
<td>Sofia Kovalevskaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernhard Riemann</td>
<td>Jules Henri Poincare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierre de Fermat</td>
<td>Richard Dedekind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie Germain</td>
<td>Isaac Newton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.F. Möbius</td>
<td>Leonard Euler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl Freidrich Gauss</td>
<td>Janos Bolyai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georg Cantor</td>
<td>Marin Mersenne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gottfried Leibniz</td>
<td>Joseph Fourier</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>