

# Helping Create a Meaningful Eulogy

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Planning a meaningful, personalized funeral is one of the most important tasks you will ever undertake. Think of the funeral as a gift to the person who died. It is your chance to think about and express the value of the life that was lived.

When personalized, the *eulogy* (pronounced EWE-luh-jee) is perhaps the most memorable and healing element of the funeral ceremony. This article will help you choose the right person to give the eulogy as well as offer tips for writing and presenting the eulogy.

## What is the eulogy?

Also called the *remembrance*, the eulogy is the speech or presentation during the funeral ceremony that talks about the life and character of the person who died. The eulogy acknowledges the unique life of the person who died and affirms the significance of that life for all who shared in it. The eulogy typically lasts 15-20 minutes, although longer presentations may also be appropriate.

## Who presents the eulogy?

The eulogy can be delivered by a clergy person, a family member or a friend of the person who died. Instead of a traditional eulogy delivered by one person, you may choose to ask several people to speak and share their memories. There is also a growing trend toward having people attending the funeral stand up and share a memory of the person who died. This works well, especially at smaller or less formal gatherings.

## What if the person presenting the eulogy didn't really know the person who died?

Keep in mind that the eulogy doesn't have to be delivered by the person leading the service. Only if your clergy person or another person facilitating the ceremony knows your family well and can speak personally about the person who died is this appropriate. If the clergy person didn't know the person who died, it's much more meaningful to have a family member or friend give the eulogy. Or you might ask several people to speak.

If your family would feel comforted by a religious sermon during the ceremony, ask a clergy person to give one. Just be sure to have someone else (or several people) deliver a personalized eulogy in addition to the sermon.


If you must choose someone who didn't know the person who died well, make an effort to share with him or her anecdotes and memories that are important to you. Ask yourself, "What stands out to me about this person's life?" "What are some special memories I'd like to share?" "What were some times I felt particularly close to this person?" "What were some admirable qualities about this person?"

## What should be said during the eulogy?

We have already emphasized that the best eulogies are personalized. They include memories and anecdotes of the person's life. They also try to capture personality. If the person who died was kind, the eulogy would give examples of this kindness. If the person who died had a good sense of humor, the eulogy might relate funny stories or expressions.

The eulogy doesn't have to cover every aspect of the person's life, however. In fact, often the best eulogies are those that focus on the eulogy-giver's personal thoughts and memories. Do try to acknowledge those who were closest to the person who died as well as important achievements in the person's life, but don't feel obligated to create an exhaustive biography.





Also keep in mind that the word eulogy comes from the Greek *eulogia*, meaning praise or blessing. This is the time to give thanks for a person's life and to honor his or her memory. This is not the time to bring up painful or difficult memories but to emphasize the good we can find in all people.

### Some tips for eulogy-givers

Writing and delivering a eulogy is a loving, important gesture that merits your time and attention. Though the task may seem daunting right now, you'll find that once you start jotting down ideas, your eulogy will come together naturally. Afterwards, many who attend the funeral will thank you for your contribution, and your eulogy will be cherished always by the family and friends of the person who died.

Here are some ideas to get you started.

- *Be brave.* The thought of writing a speech and presenting it in public makes many people anxious. Set aside your fears for now. You can do this. Focus on the person who died and the gift you will be giving to all who knew and loved him or her.
- *Think.* Before you start writing, go for a long walk or drive and think about the life of the person who died. This will help you collect your thoughts and focus on writing the eulogy.
- *Brainstorm.* Spend half an hour (longer if you want) writing down all the thoughts, ideas and memories that come to you.
- *Ask others to share memories.* A good way to include others in the ceremony is to ask them to share thoughts and memories, which you can then incorporate into the eulogy.
- *Look at photos.* Flipping through photo albums may remind you of important qualities and memories of the person who died.
- *Write a draft.* Once you've brainstormed and collected memories, it's time to write the first draft. Go somewhere quiet and write it all in one sitting, start to finish. Don't worry about getting it perfect for now—just get it down on paper.
- *Let it sit.* If time allows, let your eulogy draft sit for a few hours or a day before revising.
- *Get a second opinion.* Have someone else—preferably someone who was close to the person who died—read over your draft at this point. This person can make revision suggestions and help you avoid inadvertently saying something that might offend others.
- *Polish.* Read over your first draft. Look for awkward phrases or stiff wording. Improve the transitions from paragraph to paragraph or thought to thought. Find adjectives and verbs that really capture the essence of the person who died.
- *Present your eulogy with love.* Now you need to present your eulogy. You may feel nervous, but if you can keep your focus on the person who died instead of your own fears, you'll loosen up. If you break down as you're talking, that's OK. Everyone will understand. Just stop for a few seconds, collect yourself and continue.
- *Speak up.* It's very important that you speak clearly and loudly so that everyone can hear you.





## A Final Word

Again, the word eulogy means “praise or blessing.” Your willingness to help create a personalized, meaningful eulogy is, in fact, a very real blessing.

## About the Author

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T. is an internationally noted author, educator and grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine.

Past recipient of the Association of Death Education and Counseling's Death Educator Award, Dr. Wolfelt is an educational consultant to hospices, hospitals, schools, universities, funeral homes and a variety of community agencies across North America. Perhaps best known for his model of "companioning" versus treating the bereaved, Alan is committed to helping people mourn well so they can live well and love well.

Also a respected author, Dr. Wolfelt writes the "Children and Grief" column for *Bereavement* magazine. His many bestselling books on grief are listed under *Bookstore* on his Website. He has appeared on, and is a frequent resource for the media. Appearances include *Oprah Winfrey*, *The Larry King Show*, *The NBC Today Show* and *Nick News*.

For additional resources, please visit the Center for Loss & Life Transition website at [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com).

