

CULTURE

The Value of Life, Measured by Word Count



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AP/Branden Camp

My stepfather passed away a few years ago. His death came suddenly and without warning—he went into the bathroom one morning, and my mother discovered him unresponsive on the floor a short time later.

Like most people in my family, he didn't have life insurance. He also didn't have a bank account or assets of any kind (we don't use the word "estate" in my clan). We made all our decisions about his memorial solely by financial cost. Direct cremation—with no casket or funeral—is the cheapest option, so that was our default choice. Even that was beyond the budget for my mother, who doesn't have a checking account and whose sole income is a meager Social Security check. A few family members somehow managed to scrape together \$1,000. I'm not sure

how they did it, but my family handles money with a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.

Then we moved on to the obituary. In our town, as in many places, obituaries aren’t free. Our local newspaper charges by the column line, with a minimum charge of \$30. Photos cost extra, and large pictures and color come at a premium.

It was my job to write the obituary, and I had to weigh every word and sentence carefully. Including a photo was out of the question, and listing grandchildren by individual name was a luxury we couldn’t afford. His obituary mostly contained just the basic facts: my mother’s name, and those of his children, along with the number of grandkids. We did manage to squeeze in a dozen words to mention that he loved Elvis and left behind his beloved dog—but up until we ran the numbers at the last minute, we weren’t sure if even that brief sentence would make the cut.

When every dollar counts, so does every word.

The cost of a printed obituary can vary widely, depending on the pricing structure and location. Some newspapers charge by word count, while others calculate a price based on column inch. Funeral directors [quoted by National Cremation](#) say an average obituary can easily run between \$200 and \$500. Alan Mutter, who teaches media economics at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, [called obituaries](#) “among the most highly profitable advertising format in a newspaper.” Even online, self-service obituary platforms, such as Legacy.com, come at a cost. The expense catches many grieving families, including ours, off-guard. The [Print Obituary Pricing Study](#) conducted by AdPay and Legacy.com found that the actual cost of an obituary was considerably more than what consumers expected to pay, especially in large cities.

That’s partially because we don’t think of obituaries as an ad—we think of them as a public record. They’re a distillation of the most important things about someone’s life, stripped of its flaws until the only thing left is a gleaming statement of value. So we automatically assume that the longer the obituary, the more meaningful the person’s life must have been.

The most significant and impactful contributions in a person’s life can often be summed up in a few short yet powerful words: “He earned a Purple Heart for his valiant bravery in saving fellow soldiers,” “She dedicated herself to her work as a hospice nurse, providing comfort to patients in their final hours,” or even something as simple as, “She worked as a kindergarten teacher for 30 years.”

The longer obituaries, more often than not, don’t show more worth. But they allow for depth. They are filled with [amusing yet not-quite-essential tidbits](#)—the woman who could never balance her checkbook because her husband kept helping people pay their bills, or the man who went to trampoline class three times a week when he was 96. These are the things that help the reader feel like they truly knew the deceased person, that capture their personality and commemorate their quirks.

There weren’t many colorful bits in my stepfather’s obituary, which follows a family tradition. My grandmother

lived to her mid-80s and had seven children, but her obituary contained just 40 words—less than half a word for each of her years. The tiny notice listed the number of children and grandchildren she had, but there was no room to mention how much she enjoyed watching ice skating on television, or her addiction to *National Enquirer* (even though she didn't know who most of the celebrities were).

But that's how it goes. That final recognition is a luxury reserved only for those lucky enough to be able to afford it.