

From Contributors to Costs: The Cultural Implications of Obituaries

Kristi McDuffie

In a quest to understand keepsakes about loved ones who have passed away, McDuffie explores the genre of obituaries in American culture. She finds what information is typically included in obituaries and what is not, along with who writes and pays for these publications. She also determines what this information reveals about our own culture and determines that obituaries are often insufficient mementos to adequately memorialize our loved ones.

Obituaries as a genre always used to seem pretty straightforward to me. They showed a picture of the person who died and described the circumstances of the death. They included funeral arrangements and names of family members still living. Growing up, I always saved the obituaries of loved ones as a keepsake, to help me remember them, and I still have several stored in a shoebox with all of the birthday cards my grandmother sent me every year. In more recent years, I have been able to find obituaries online and save them on my computer, but the information in the obituary has been roughly the same and I never thought twice about it.

But last year, I came across an article that discussed differences in obituaries between cultures. The author, Ann Johns, investigates the cultural variations that create differences between obituaries in different places.¹ Johns wrote,

If we think about obituaries only in terms of our own cultures, we might assume that texts from these genres are very similar in content, form, and purpose. However, after completing studies of obituaries from a variety of locations throughout the United States, Fielden (1995) found that there can be considerable variation even within

one country, particularly in terms of content. In small towns, for example, much of the text is devoted to blood lines and relationships: Generations of ancestors are mentioned, as are all of those in the family who survived the deceased. In larger cities, the focus is more on the profession and accomplishments of the deceased and the contributions he or she made to the community. (Johns 41)

In addition to these variations between obituaries within a country, Johns also describes cultural differences in obituaries across countries. One researcher, Pena, studied Brazilian obituaries and found that they were focused on describing the funeral masses or on giving thanks to people who helped during the person's final illness, without information on cause or time of death (Johns 41). Another researcher, Kishida, analyzed Japanese obituaries and found that the cause and date and time of death are included, probably because time is important to Japanese literary genres (Johns 43). Kishida also found that Japanese obituaries named the chief mourner and the home address of the family because the chief mourner is the "ceremonial family representative, who expresses appreciation to those who attend the memorial service and send condolences" (Johns 43). The home address is given so that people will know where to send condolences and gifts, which seems like a fairly formal practice because Kishida notes that Japanese companies will often assign someone to read and respond to obituaries of business acquaintances or politicians (Johns 43).

Johns' article alerted me to how much I have taken this common genre of the obituary for granted. With this understanding that the obituary is not straightforward, especially between different cultures, I wanted to look at my own family members' obituaries to see what kinds of genre conventions emerged and what that might reveal about my own culture (however that might be defined).

Since I couldn't find my keepsake shoebox (although I think it's at the top of a closet), I had to conduct this search online. I began by looking at the websites of newspapers that might have obituaries of my family members in Ohio, since I was born in Sandusky, Ohio, and much of my extended family still lives there. Thus I looked at the websites of the newspapers the *Clyde Enterprise* (my maternal grandparents still live in Clyde, which may be familiar to some readers because it is the "Winesburg" in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*), the *Findlay Courier* (a neighboring town), the *Fremont News-Messenger* (another neighboring town where my paternal grandparents lived), and the *Sandusky Register*. Sadly, I had no luck finding many family members' obituaries online, including my paternal grandparents. I'm guessing that they passed away too long ago for the obituaries to have been digitized. I did, however, find the obituary of my step-grandfather from Blissfield, Michigan,

because he passed away just last year. His obituary was helpful, but as I will discuss below, everything that I learned about obituaries in the search process is even more interesting.

To begin, many obituaries don't look like I thought they did. Of the four people included in the April 6, 2012 obituaries on the *sanduskyregister.com*, only two of the four had anything substantive written. Here is one of the cryptic obituaries:

05:40 PM
APR 06
2012

**OHIO, ROCKY RIDGE, SANDUSKY
SANDUSKY**

• **John "Jack" A. Mesner, 84, of Sandusky, died Thursday morning, April 5, 2012, in Stein Hospice Care Center, Sandusky. Visitation will be 4-7 p.m. Tuesday, April 10, at David F. Koch Funeral Home, 520 Columbus Ave., Sandusky, where other arrangements are pending.**

Figure 1: Sample Death Notice²

Upon investigating further, I learned that such short obituaries are part of a subgenre called "Death Notices." Death notices are only a couple of sentences and contain basic information about who has passed away, when, where, and what funeral arrangements are in the works. These notices are often written by the funeral homes. Full obituaries, on the other hand, are often 300-350 words and contain details about the person's life, including place of birth, parents, name of high school, marriage, military service, hobbies, family, and so forth. Almost always included in these longer obituaries are the names of both deceased and surviving family members, such as spouses and children. Funeral arrangements are included, along with a statement about where to send donations (in lieu of the tradition of sending flowers to the funeral home). Many obituaries also contain a photo, but not always. Longer obituaries are often written by close friends or family members, assisted by the funeral homes.

The genre convention that surprised me the most about obituaries was the alternate suggestions for people to make donations (often called contributions or memorial contributions) rather than send flowers to the bereaved, and this inclusion seems to be a staple in today's obituaries. This convention indicates to me that it became commonplace in American culture for people to send flowers to the funeral home or the deceased's family members. The few funerals I have attended support this idea, as the caskets were always surrounded by flowers and I always feel like I'm supposed to send flowers if someone close to me suffers a loss. But the trend of including alternative donations in obituaries reveals that people are finding this use of money wasteful, so instead, people are asked to make a donation somewhere

in honor of the deceased. Therefore, the obituaries include a line about where to send a donation, such as the deceased’s favorite charity (churches seem to be a common choice). My mother told me that she prefers to give a donation directly to the family, perhaps to a surviving spouse or a child, to help with funeral costs or other needs that they may have. This makes sense to me, since funerals are super expensive, but I suppose that such suggestions would not be appropriate in an obituary because it would sound as though the family were asking for money, which would not be well-received in our culture. Although I was a bit surprised to read that the family’s home address would be made public via an obituary in Japan, I like that the convention there makes it more acceptable (and perhaps even socially required) to send something like a donation to the family rather than somewhere else.

These genre conventions that I have detailed were supported by numerous obituaries that I looked at, but to demonstrate, Figure 2 shows my step-grandfather’s obituary, along with annotations about the genre conventions.

Dean Brubaker

ARTICLE | MARCH 1, 2011

Dean Wayne Brubaker, 75, of Blissfield, passed away at Highlands Regional Medical Center in Sebring, Florida, on Friday, February 25, 2011.

Dean was born August 3, 1935, in Blissfield, Michigan, the only son of Clarence and Alma (Walper) Brubaker. He graduated from Blissfield High School and married Shirley Braun on April 15, 1956.

Dean served in the United States Army and was stationed in Italy. Upon returning from the service, he farmed the family farm in Blissfield until his retirement in 2004.

He was also on the Board of Directors for both the former Blissfield Co-operative and the Blissfield State Bank. He owned and operated a buffing and polishing shop, D.W.B. Manufacturing, in Blissfield for 17 years.

Dean was a licensed builder. He built a speculation house, remodeled homes, and performed numerous home repairs for family and friends. Dean enjoyed traveling and saw much of Europe, the U.S., and Canada. Six days out of the week, he never missed his 6 a.m. coffee with his friends at McDonald’s. Dean was a loving husband, father, grandfather, great grandfather and friend. He will be missed.

Dean is survived by his wife of almost 55 years; four daughters, Linda Kohlenberg of Blissfield; Amy (Tom) Principe of Mount Morris, Ill.; Betty (Dan) Ganger of Bristol, Ind.; and Barbara (Kiernan) Mack of Arlington Heights, Ill; 10 grandsons and five granddaughters; five great grandsons and six great granddaughters; sister, Shirley (Jerry) Coolidge of Toledo; and many nieces and nephews.

He was preceded in death by his parents and two sisters.

The funeral service for Dean will be held at 11:00 a.m. on Saturday, March 5, 2011 at Blissfield Baptist Church with Rev. Thomas Frantz officiating. Burial will follow at Pleasant View Cemetery. Friends may visit the family at Wagley Funeral Home, Tagsold Chapel on Thursday and Friday from 2 to 4 p.m. and 6 to 8 p.m. In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to the Blissfield Baptist Church or the charity of the donor’s choice. You may also send condolences to www.wagleyfuneralhome.com.

The obituary opens with the standard date and place of death, date and place of birth, parents, high school, and marriage.
Military service is often included.
Occupation is sometimes included.
Details about friends and hobbies must have been supplied by the family because they are personal and extend beyond the types of facts normally included.
Preceding deaths and surviving family members are usually included.
Funeral arrangements are among the bare minimum.
Contribution suggestions are also common, and in fact may now be obligatory.

Figure 2: Brubaker Obituary³

Personal details beyond factual information seem rare in obituaries, although they do appear; consider that Tierney Schiewe’s obituary on February 4, 2012 in the *Sandusky Register* contains a description of this young

mother as “one of God’s brightest angels” who left behind “two beautiful angels of her own” and also included these additional details:

Her free spirit and bright smile brought joy to everyone she encountered. Her passions included her children, her family and friends, “Twilight,” and tweeting. She loved music, playing her violin and was a huge New England Patriots fan. “You touched so many lives and your laugh was so contagious, you will be greatly missed, always loved, and never forgotten — until we see you in heaven.”

Figure 3: Example of Personal Details⁴

These details and this tone are rare compared to the typical factual, objective tone of obituaries; this indicates that a family member wrote or at least contributed to the obituary, even though the author listed is a regular contributor for obituaries.

My research shows that the depth and length of the obituary depend primarily on whether the deceased’s family members want to write an obituary and whether they want to or are able to pay to publish it. (It also depends on the funeral home, since funeral homes help family members write and place them.) Famous people often receive free obituaries written by newspaper journalists because their deaths are considered newsworthy events, but for most people, substantive obituaries cost money. Although it can be difficult to find out how much newspapers charge because not all list their fees online, most charge by the line or inch. There is a wide variation in the amount—the *Idaho Statesman*, for instance, charges \$2.50 per line while the *Seattle Times* charges \$94.80 per inch!⁵ Most newspapers probably charge something in between, like the *Tampa Bay Online*, which charges \$8.21 per line.⁶ (Their website demonstrates that a typical obituary of 32 lines costs about \$200.) Photos often cost extra. In general, larger newspapers coming out of big cities charge more and are more selective about which obituaries they publish, while smaller newspapers in small towns are more likely to publish all obituaries and to publish them for free as deaths are bigger news events in small towns.⁷

Another model of charging for obituaries is based on what information is included. *TheCourier.com*, for example, publishes obituaries for free with the following information (which we now understand to be generic conventions for American obituaries), but charges for anything more:⁸

- name, age, residence, date, time, place of death, and former residence;
- survivors, including name, residence, and relationship;
- funeral type, date, time, officiant, place, and burial and visitation information;

- designations (which I assume to mean designations for donations); and
- contact information for the person submitting the form (which won't be printed).

The economics of obituaries has cultural implications related to the fact that all newspapers are trying to meet the demands of their constituents. Larger newspapers invest money in obituaries for famous people because it will help sell papers and they are selective about what obituaries to publish because they do not want to devote a large amount of space to describing people whom few readers will know. As Johns notes, obituaries in cities are more focused on accomplishments. In small towns, however, chances are better that readers will know the deceased and that their deaths will be of interest to their readers, so obituaries are more important, as indicated by the cheaper price and greater inclusion. Johns also pointed out that small town papers are more likely to focus on family members than accomplishments, which supports the greater sense of community. My grandparents' experience supports these findings; they have lived in Clyde, Ohio, for their entire lives and scan the obituaries daily for people that they knew.

To sum up my findings, this investigation tells me that in American culture, the quality and length of an obituary is largely dependent on the remaining family members doing the work to communicate with the paper, provide any additional details, and fund those details. Given obituaries' focus on fact-based details and funeral arrangements, I also deduce that in our culture (and maybe in most), the audience of obituaries is people outside of close family and friends. I used to consider obituaries keepsakes, and although they can still serve as reminders or sources of factual information (I'm thinking family trees here), I now realize they are not terribly useful in helping me remember details about my loved ones. My step-grandfather's obituary can't help me remember that he teased me incessantly, let me drive his golf cart around his farm, or let me eat cookies 'n cream ice cream before bed. The responsibility to remember those things is going to remain with me, not with any newspaper, regardless of the culture that I'm in.

Endnotes

1. Johns, Ann M. *Text, Role, and Context: Developing Academic Literacies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
2. Mesner's death notice was found at <http://www.sanduskyregister.com/ohio/obituary/death-notice> on April 7, 2012.

3. Brubaker's obituary can be found at <http://www.blissfieldadvance.com/article/dean-brubaker>.
4. Schiewe's obituary can be found at <http://www.sanduskyregister.com/sandusky/obituary/tieriney-j-schiewe-oct-23-1978-feb-3-2012>.
5. See <http://custserv.idahostatesman.com/reader/obituaries.php> and <http://services.nwsourc.com/ClassifiedWeb/ObituaryNotice.aspx> for the Idaho Statesman and Seattle Times obituary rates.
6. See <http://www2.tbo.com/static/obituaries/placeanobit/> for Tampa Bay Online's obituary rates.
7. See http://dying.about.com/od/obituaries/bb/obit_note.htm for general information on obituary rates.
8. The form can be found at <http://www.thecourier.com/news/obits/ObituaryForm.asp>.



Kristi is a Ph.D. Student in English Studies at Illinois State University with a concentration in Rhetoric and Composition. She misses her family members who have passed on, especially her grandmother Tillie, and wishes she had more than an obituary to remember her by. She is proud to publish this article in the last issue she is producing as Associate Editor of *GWRJ*.