



Obituary Policy Samples // Various sources listed below

It's one of those things you don't realize you need until you're in a tough situation: an obituary policy. However, being proactive can make for easy decisions if, and when, student journalists need to cover the death of someone in the school community.

What to consider when drafting your policy:

Develop a policy in advance, so a decision won't be based on a specific situation or as a reaction during an emotional time. Consider the news value and equity when forming a policy.

- **What's in an obituary?** Standard obituaries include the dates of birth and death, survivors, notable biographical information and information about a funeral service.
- **Who will the policy cover?** Only current students and staff? Former students? Retirees? What factors will be used to determine who gets covered?
- **Minimum coverage.** Be careful about what is guaranteed since page deadlines and subsequent coverage may make it difficult or impossible to give equal treatment.
- **How will you cover a suicide?** There is not a definitive opinion on whether to list the cause of death, unless the death occurred in a public place or the person was very well-known. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has guidelines at its Web site, www.afsp.org. Under the "About Suicide" menu, select "For the Media" and then "Recommendations." The Poynter Institute also has guidelines at its Web site, www.poynter.org.
- **Avoid dedications.** The staff should not dedicate the yearbook or have a tribute page to the deceased. Consider adding information to the advertising policy for memorial ads.
- **Deaths over the summer or after deadline.** Determine a procedure for covering deaths that happen after the yearbook is sent to the printer or after the final newspaper is published.
- **Family consent.** Use sensitivity in approaching the family of someone who has died. However, the newspaper or yearbook should not leave the decision of coverage to the family. Relatives may be consulted for additional coverage, special angles or if photos are needed.

Samples...

Model policy from Communication: Journalism Education Today, Winter 2000; Journalism Education Association

Should a student or faculty member die at any time during the current coverage period, the staff will treat the death in a tasteful manner. A short obituary with the individual's name, school activities, date of birth, date and manner of death (if appropriate) and any other information shall appear in the news section. This treatment will provide an adequate testimonial to the individual for those closely associated while not overemphasizing the death for other readers.

*The Orange & Black newspaper
Grand Junction (Colo.) High School*

In the case of the death or deaths of current or former students and/or staff, The Orange & Black will cover the death with at least an obituary.

The obituary will be journalistically written with an emphasis on the person's life and, if timely, give details of the funeral service and/or contribution details.

If a suicide is involved, the obituary will say "took his/her own life," but will not give any details of the suicide.

In addition, all stories/packages dealing with any form of death will contain information about death/grief counseling and/or resources.

The death may be covered more extensively if the situation warrants as determined by the staff with the guidance of the adviser. As with all content in The Orange & Black, the editor(s) will make the final decision about the extent of the coverage of the death.

*Catamount newspaper
Rancho Cotate High School
Rohnert Park, Calif.*

Should a student and/or school employee die, the staff will treat the matter in a tasteful, respectful manner.

The portrait of the individual will appear in a standard size, but the name of the person and dates or the birth and death will be set off in a 30% black screen.

Text of the obituary will not specify cause of death. This will provide adequate memory of the individual for those closely associated while not overemphasizing it for other readers.

*The North Star newspaper
Francis Howell North High School
St. Charles, Mo.*

- any current student, staff member, faculty member, or building administrator who dies during the year will be recognized in the school newspaper.
- the school newspaper will publish factual information (date of birth, date of death, survivors, organizations, hobbies and interests) in a 300-word obituary and include one mug shot if possible
- the school newspaper will first obtain permission from the deceased's family before publishing any information regarding the cause of death
- the school newspaper will treat all deaths in a tasteful and respectful manner
- an issue should not be dedicated to or in memory of the deceased.

*Excalibur yearbook
Francis Howell North High School
St. Charles, Mo.*

- any current student, staff member, faculty member, or building administrator who dies during the year will be recognized in the school yearbook.
- the school yearbook will publish factual information (date of birth, date of death, survivors, organizations, hobbies and interests) and one 1" x 2" mug shot if possible in a 1/8 page space
- the school yearbook will first obtain permission from the deceased's family before publishing any information regarding the cause of death
- the school yearbook will treat all deaths in a tasteful and respectful manner
- a book or any portion of it should not be dedicated to or in memory of the deceased
- cause of death will be listed at the discretion of the editorial board, however suicide will not be listed as a cause of death

Note: This and two other schools in the same school district have nearly identical policies. However, those publications have customized the policy for their own school communities. Francis Howell Central's specifies the obituary will appear on the first news page but not Page One and that the staff may also investigate deaths for newsworthy elements of interest to the audience. Francis Howell's says no cause of death will be listed, that parents may purchase ad space for memorials and that an autograph section will be donated to the family for signing. Photos where the deceased appears elsewhere in the yearbook are not changed or deleted.



Obituary Guidelines //

Tracy Anne Sena, Convent of the Sacred Heart High School, San Francisco

Sooner or later, every school will be faced with the loss of a member of its community. Because school newspapers and yearbooks are official records, obituaries are appropriate material for publication.

Even though a staff may assume everyone knows about a death, the story of a person's life — especially in a small school community — deserves to be told. Therefore, both the newspaper and yearbook could run a story, beyond just a picture with a pat "In Memoriam." If the death takes place over the summer, then the story should appear in the next issue of the publication.

Someone who is removed from the situation should write the story and be the consulting adviser. A good friend of the deceased is probably not the correct person for either job, as he or she may be grieving and therefore unable to keep an objective distance from the story.

The Interview

Most family members want to tell the story of the person whom they have lost. Explain to them that you are a member of the newspaper or yearbook staff and you are writing a story about the deceased family member. Approach family members and close friends with special sensitivity. If a family member says he or she is not ready to speak about the loss, ask if there is another family member who is ready to talk. Most families want to talk about a deceased relative. Allowing people to tell their stories helps them in their grieving process.

Throughout the interview remember that emotions are running high and you will need to show special sensitivity. People may cry; but the reporter must maintain composure (even if he or she tears up) without sharing in the grief, so he or she can report the story accurately. Be prepared for tears. Reporters should take an editor or even the adviser with them for additional support to interviews with family and close friends.

Begin the interview by thanking the source and acknowledging his or her loss. Explain as fully as possible the probable angle of the story. Be sure to communicate clearly with the subjects and all the sources.

If a particular sentence or phrase of the interviewee stands out, ask then if you may quote him or her. Take exceptional notes or use a tape recorder if it's OK with the interviewee — this is not the time to keep re-interviewing your sources.

The Story

Be factual throughout the story without using flowery language or reducing the story about a death to a cliché. Phrases such as "met his Maker," "loved one," "went to her reward," etc. should be avoided.

Educate readers with a sidebar or accompanying story about the cause of death. Teenagers will especially want to know if the untimely death of a friend could also happen to them, and if so, how it might be prevented. If a disease causes the death, explain the causes and/or what one can do to prevent contracting it. Accidental deaths, such as those caused by driving under the influence, can also have stories and factoids about prevention. However, if the cause of death was probably due to the deceased person's negligence, preventative stories should run in a current or future edition while considering timeliness and sensitivity.

Suicides should be treated as any other obituary, but usually do not mention the cause of death. Suicide prevention experts recommend keeping the obituaries short so as not to encourage copy-cat incidents from other people who may have suicidal tendencies.

A well-written story puts a death in perspective and helps the grieving process for the family and the school community. An added focus on the survivors gives hope to the readers in the face of a difficult situation.

Finish the story in time so that you can go over the facts and quotes before the story goes to print. Avoid inaccuracies or "surprises" in the printed story so that grieving families are not further traumatized.