

AN RJI FELLOWSHIP PROJECT

**14 LESSONS
FROM
WRITING
ABOUT THE
DEAD**

KRISTEN HARE

Here are the steps I've learned to take:

1. **Read the obits**
2. **Make the pitch**
3. **Slow down**
4. **Research background**
5. **Search the archives**
6. **Cast a wide net**
7. **Ask for quirks**
8. **Use more photos, write better headlines**
9. **Use the captions well**
10. **Fact-check**
11. **Make space for feelings**
12. **Work with the social team**
13. **Stay in touch**
14. **Use your work as a calling card**



1

READ THE OBITS



I open up the Tampa Bay Times' site and go to obituaries. The Times uses Legacy's platform, and it's easy to skim over the obits in search of great stories.

I scan the websites of local funeral homes regularly for obituaries that aren't in the newspaper. This step helps me find the stories of people, often people of color and women, whose families don't take out lengthy and expensive obituaries in the paper.

I also get suggestions for people to feature from the newsroom and people in our community, who reach out and share ideas pretty regularly. To encourage this, my stories include a call to action that invites suggestions and a link to my email.

2

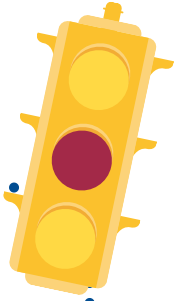
MAKE THE PITCH



If you're cold-calling someone who is grieving, lead with empathy. *I'm sorry for your loss.* Explain what you're doing with this work. And be explicit that you're a journalist and this is not a paid obit. Don't assume people understand how journalism works. Explain the process upfront.

3

SLOW DOWN



.....

This won't be a popular opinion among some news desks, but I think it's OK to give people a little time before reaching out to write about their loved one. If someone's death doesn't warrant a news obit because they're not famous, I usually try to give the family a few weeks or even a month. I might be sacrificing pageviews for that, but it's worth it.

4

RESEARCH BACKGROUND



.....

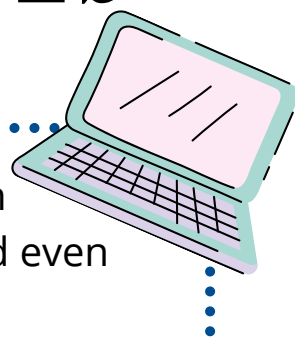
I'm lucky to get to work with Poynter's Caryn Baird each week. I send her a name and any details I have about a person, and she sends me back any background info I can't find on Google, including police, traffic and court reports. I want to make sure there's nothing hiding, like a history of abuse.

I Google them, too, to get a sense of them from a digital footprint. This also often helps me find family members, who are my first point of contact.

5

SEARCH THE ARCHIVES

The Tampa Bay Times' online archives and Newspapers.com are rich resources for me each week. I often find photos and even a person's own voice. I use these regularly.



6

CAST A WIDE NET



When I started this reporting, I asked a question again and again that always clunked — What are the stories you'll tell about this person in a few years?

I was trying to get past the platitudes people share after someone dies and capture what made them who they were — not just brave and giving and creative.

I want specifics, and those are hard to grasp just after death.

I started asking different questions, and I've found the stories I'm hoping for bubble up naturally. I always start with this: What do you want me to know about this person?

7

ASK FOR QUIRKS

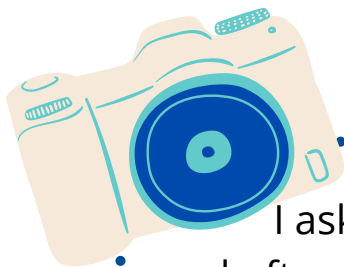


I can't, in 700 to 1,000 words, offer an accounting of a person's life or character. I also don't need to add polish to the tarnished spots. A gentle way to get a fuller picture of who a person was comes from asking about their quirks.

People often share silly quirks, but sometimes they offer more revealing ones.

8

USE MORE PHOTOS, WRITE BETTER HEADLINES



I ask families for as many photos as they're willing to share and often combine them into collages in the stories. I also try to workshop headlines in a dedicated Times Slack channel. We've found names don't perform well in headlines, but cities, businesses and neighborhoods do.

We took the word "Epilogue" out of our headlines. And we've learned to use the headline as a place for news and a promise.

Submitted photos and strong headlines don't change the heart of these stories. But they do give them a way better chance of getting read.

9

USE CAPTIONS WELL



There are often details people want me to know that aren't going to make the story: Where a person was born, the awards they received, even quotes I can't fit in. I've learned to use the photo captions as a place to put some of what would otherwise not make the story.

10

FACT-CHECK



This is something I promise upfront to the family members and friends I talk to. With one person for each obit, I will go over every detail I've learned and make sure the person they know is recognizable. I don't read it to them or send them a copy. But I do check both details and context.

This is also the right time to make sure you're using the language people want. Now is the time to get the details right.

11

MAKE SPACE FOR FEELINGS

I've learned to make space for slow interviews, fuzzy memories and frequent breakdowns. When interviewing siblings, I often ask if there will be issues from me not talking to each sibling or at least naming them. With combined families, I request photos that include all the kids and stepkids.



A question I sometimes ask is, "Who am I going to get an angry call from the day after this runs?"

And when I hear something about a subject from one person, I run it by the other people I talk to.

12

WORK WITH THE SOCIAL TEAM



I'm at a small disadvantage because I don't work full time at the Times, but I've started to learn how they work best and it's made a huge difference in how the stories perform. The advice here is to learn how your team works and work with it. These stories need an audience.

13

STAY IN TOUCH



After a story runs, I always send a link and the e-edition to anyone I spoke with. For key family members, I also ask them to let me know if I made any errors and that I will correct them. The benefit is a) It's the right and decent thing to do, and b) It puts a value on relationships over transactions.

14

USE YOUR WORK AS A CALLING CARD



When I cold call someone, offer sympathy for their loss, explain how the process works, and then often offer to email them links to other stories I've done. That always opens doors for people who are hesitant.

*14 lessons from writing
about the dead*

