

The Obituary - A Genre Analysis

John Martin

North Carolina State University

ENG 519

## The Obituary - A Genre Analysis

In this paper, I will provide evidence that obituary is a genre, and explore how its communicative purposes are not only manifested online, but actually augmented there. This migration, from printed text to digital media, is transforming the mere "obituary" to "the obituary experience."

Merriam and Webster (2005) define obituary as "a notice of a person's death usually with a short biographical account."

Swales (1990, p. 58) offers a dense definition of genre parsed in column one of the following table. The second column shows how obituary as a specific genre instance adheres to that definition.

Definition (Abstract)	Obituary (Instance)
"A genre comprises a class of communicative events..."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Date of deceased's death</li><li>• Date, time, and location of any services</li><li>• Age of the deceased</li><li>• Address of the deceased</li><li>• Survival lineage of the deceased</li><li>• Arrangements for the deceased</li><li>• Life history/interests/achievements/contributions</li><li>• Memorial donation wishes of the deceased/family</li><li>• Cause of death of the deceased</li><li>• Connection between deceased's family and deceased's friends</li></ul>

<p>"...the members of which share some set of communicative purposes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inform (who, what, when, where)</li> <li>• Educate (things not known about the deceased)</li> <li>• Honor (e.g., achievements)</li> <li>• Commemorate (e.g., memorials, donations)</li> <li>• Thank caregivers (e.g., physicians, hospice)</li> <li>• Provide some closure (psychological)</li> <li>• Create a public record (civil or legal)</li> <li>• Create community (deceased's family and friends)</li> </ul>
<p>"These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre.</p>	<p>Expert members who recognize the purposes include obituary editors, funeral directors, and bereaved relatives or families of the deceased.</p>
<p>"This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style.</p>	<p>The rationale is to provide notice of a person's death, usually with a short biographical account, and is usually accomplished in an "obituary column," which rigidly shapes the schematic structure and constrains the choice of content and style.</p>
<p>"Communicative purpose is both a privileged criterion and one that operates to keep the scope of a genre as here conceived narrowly focused on comparable rhetorical action.</p>	<p>The rhetorical action is narrowly focused around reading about the deceased, and taking some action based on the reading - most commonly sending condolences and attending services.</p>
<p>"In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience.</p>	<p><b>[City]-[Name]-{Age}-[Date of Death]-{{Date of Birth}}-{{Address}}-{{Parents}} -{Legacy}-{Survivors}-</b>  <b>{{Interests/Achievements/Contributions}}-{Memorial donation wishes}-{{Caregiver thanks}}-</b>  <b>[Arrangements/ Services]</b></p> <p><i>Notes:</i> Order is fluid, but this order is typical</p> <p><i>Legend:</i></p> <p>[ ] = Most standard "required minimum," typical of the unpaid obituary</p> <p>{ } = optional, most common, typically added in paid obituary</p> <p>{{ }} = optional, less common, also usually found in paid obituary only</p>

<p>"If all high probability expectations are realized, the exemplar will be viewed as prototypical by the parent discourse community.</p>	<p>Newspapers and funeral homes often have "How to Write an Obituary" handouts or website tutorials. The parent discourse community goes to great lengths to mediate the creation of obituaries.</p>
<p>"The genre names inherited and produced by discourse communities and imported by others constitute valuable ethnographic communication, but typically need further validation."</p>	<p>Though the study of obituary genre reveals something about obituary editors, funeral directors, and bereaved families, that alone is not sufficient enough ethnographic research to understand the community. Recognizing that obituary is a genre does not, for instance, tell you about the educational requirements of funeral directors, or the regulations that govern them.</p>

Having established obituary as a genre, I will now examine its communicative purposes in more detail, and then the effect on those purposes as the genre migrates to an electronic medium. Does obituary as a genre become diluted in the new medium, or is it enriched there? I content enriched, in that the communicative purposes are basically the same; however, the new medium expands and enhances the ways in which those purposes can be served.

As highlighted above, the discourse community served consists primarily of obituary editors, funeral directors, and families of the bereaved.

Some of the tasks that members of the discourse community undertake might be more closely aligned with one member of the

discourse community as opposed to another. An example of the distribution might look like this:

Purpose	Member	Communicative Task	Potential of Enhancement in Electronic Medium
Inform	Funeral director	Communicate the time and date of services for which they are responsible.	Low
	Family	Communicate time and date of service as well as biographical information about the deceased.	Low
Educate	Family	Teach people things they may not have known about the deceased.	High
Honor	Family	Highlight the life contributions of the deceased.	High
Commemorate	Family	Share memories of, and ways to commemorate the deceased.	High
Thank	Family	Thanking healthcare professionals, hospice care, and friends who may have helped with end of life issues.	High
Provide closure	Family	The actual writing of the obituary can help a family "take stock" of the purpose, or meaning, of their loved one's life.	Medium
Create a public or historical record	Obituary editor	Meet newspaper space requirements, provide a public record of death, and create an historical community artifact.	High
Create community	Family	Help the bereaved family feel connected to the people that their loved one was connected to.	High

Capital Funeral Home has a Guide to Writing Your Own Obituary (2005) section, complete with a sample obituary and a form designed to help an author conform the text to expectations. An Example Obituary (2005) delineates these

sections of an obituary: "Announcement, Biographical Information, Survivor Information, Scheduled Ceremonies and Gatherings of Remembrance, Contributions or Flowers, and Arrangements." This particular template is highly geared toward an obituary that will be printed. It does not do a good job of extracting information that could be exploited in an online obituary.

How to Write an Obituary Notice (2005) states two functions of an obituary, and three alternative functions possibly served, all of which correlate to the purposes enumerated above.

Examples are ubiquitous where members of the discourse community recognize obituary text as belonging to its class of communicative events. What is perhaps more interesting to look at is what happens when members of the discourse community recognize text in obituaries as not belonging to the class of expected communicative events.

On April 19, 2003, BMJ (British Medical Journal) published a "negative obituary" of David Horrobin, founder of Scotia Pharmaceuticals and the journal Medical Hypotheses. On May 17, 2003, Sharon Davies, the BMJ letters editor, published her own editorial letter stating,

"The response to David Horrobin's obituary is unprecedented for an obituary and among the biggest for any article.<sup>(original text contains citation)</sup> At the time of going to press (8 May) we had posted 108 responses, 59 of them within a week of publication in the paper journal. We posted responses on every day but two from the 18 April, when the obituary became available on bmj.com. By comparison, legalising euthanasia and physician assisted suicide received 110 responses, and defining a good doctor 102<sup>(original text contains citations)</sup>" (Davies, 2003).

As you might surmise, these responses were not in praise of the obituary. Their general theme can be summed up by a line in an editorial written by the BMJ editor himself, "My sins in the past two months include publishing an obituary seen by many as a hatchet job..." (Smith, 2003). The specific objections included,

"The response on bmj.com was heated—largely outrage and dismay—catalysing editorial debate on the role of medical obituaries and the ultimate tribute of a negative obituary. Respondents debated opinion dressed up as fact, defamation, and the competing interests of obituary writers and demanded a correction and an apology. As these seemed not to be forthcoming by 30 April, one respondent called for a complaint to be filed with the Press Complaints Commission. A week later another respondent reported that this had happened" (Davies, 2003).

This strong reaction to using an obituary for an unexpected communicative purpose is further evidence that the community does indeed recognize obituary text as belonging to a certain class of communicative events.

"In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content, and intended audience" (Swales, 1990, p. 58). In its traditional newspaper format, two exemplars are prominent: the "state obituary," published free of charge, and what's called the "paid obituary," supplied and paid for by the family of the deceased.

There are prototypically two state obituary notices. The first one simply announces the death, with a second notice typically posted on the day of the services, adding the time and place of the service.

"ANNA B. ARCEMENT, 92, Feb. 25. [Graveside 2 p.m., today, Snowden Cemetery, Maple.] Arrangements by Twiford Funeral Home, Elizabeth City. Obituary details: Anna B. (Arcement, 2005)"

In contrast, a prototypical paid obituary goes beyond a "bare bones notice" format to one that attempts to endear the person to the reader, including elements such as the deceased's



parents, surviving lineage, interests, achievements, contribution, what they will be remembered for, where memorial donations might be sent, and thanks to caregivers.

In more pronounced contrast, "the obituary experience" online exploits multiple elements of design. Shedroff (2000) states, "Information interaction design is the intersection of three different disciplines: information design, interaction design, and sensorial design." The traditional obituary has a terse, columnar, and static information design, while the online evolution adds interaction and sensorial design to make it more dynamic. In the online versions, these elements of interaction design now appear to expand the serving of the communicative purposes of obituaries: drop down menus to select last names, links to a funeral home's website and guest books, and links to a memorial sites, such as mem.com (Making Everlasting Memories).

Sites such as mem.com employ sensorial elements like music, still pictures, and even motion video in some cases. These elements can go a long way in the "creating community" purpose noted above, connecting the family of the deceased to not only friends of the deceased, but sometimes with other empathic "passers-by."

A good example of this is when one bereaved mother comes across the memorial entry of another mother's son, and comments,

"I wanted to tell you that I read your son's biography, tributes and looked at the pictures. My son, Joshua Jason Patterson, was a featured story at Christmas. Please take a look at his life. I know what you are going through. My son died on July 13, 2003. It still hurts so much" (Tribute to Justin Scott Vaughn, 2005).

In conclusion, there is much evidence of the obituary existing as a genre, and it is a genre that is evolving in online media by using technology to provide an even richer instance of several of its communicative purposes. Though the experiences of the communicative purposes are being enriched, the basic communicative purposes remain intact. *Obituaries are alive and well, and living as a genre enriched in the electronic age.*

## References

Davies, S. (2003). Obituary for David Horrobin: Summary of rapid responses. *BMJ* 2003;326:1089 (17 May),  
doi:10.1136/bmj.326.7398.1089-b. Retrieved February 27, 2005, from bmj.com Web Site:

[http://bmj.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/326/7398/1089-b?maxtoshow=&HITS=10&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=&fulltext=David+Horrobin&andorexactfulltext=and&searchid=1109464765012\\_15560&stored\\_search=&FIRSTINDEX=0&sortspec=relevance&resource\\_type=1](http://bmj.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/326/7398/1089-b?maxtoshow=&HITS=10&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=&fulltext=David+Horrobin&andorexactfulltext=and&searchid=1109464765012_15560&stored_search=&FIRSTINDEX=0&sortspec=relevance&resource_type=1)

*Example Obituary.* (n.d.). Retrieved February 27, 2005, from cremation.com Web Site:

<http://www.capitalfuneral.com/obit/example.asp>

*Guide to Writing Your Own Obituary.* (n.d.). Retrieved February 27, 2005, from cremation.com Web Site:

<http://www.capitalfuneral.com/obit/index.asp>

*How to Write an Obituary Notice.* (n.d.). Retrieved February 27, 2005, from <http://www.nbardal.mb.ca/obituaryform.html>

Merriam, & Webster. (n.d.). *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary.* Retrieved February 27, 2005, from Merriam-Webster OnLine Web Site: <http://www.m-w.com/>

*Obituary details: Anna B. Arcement.* (n.d.). Retrieved February 26, 2005, from  
<http://www.newsobserver.com/content/obits/index.html>

*Obituaries: Susan Bolding Clamp.* (n.d.). Retrieved February 27, 2005, from  
[http://www.legacy.com/charlotte/LegacySubPage2.asp?Page=Lif  
eStory&PersonId=3220209](http://www.legacy.com/charlotte/LegacySubPage2.asp?Page=LifeStory&PersonId=3220209)

Shedroff, N. (Ed.). (2000). *Information interaction design: A unified field theory of design*. In R. Jacobson (Ed.) *Information design*. (p.268-269). Cambridge, MA: MIT.

Smith, R. (2003). Editorial misconduct: Medical editors need effective self regulation. *BMJ* 2003;326:1224-1225 (7 June), doi:10.1136/bmj.326.7401.1224.

Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre Analysis*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

*Tribute to Justin Scott Vaughn.* (n.d.). Retrieved February 27, 2005, from  
<http://www.mem.com/display/Tributes.asp?ID=545353>