



Glenny Brock <glenny.brock@gmail.com>

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## A Bham request -- instead of a Twitter harangue

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Alan Blinder <alan.blinder@nytimes.com>  
To: Glenny Brock <glenny.brock@gmail.com>

Fri, Sep 25, 2020 at 12:37 PM

Hi Glenny,

I do remember you! And, honestly, the day at the Jefferson County Courthouse was such a blur that I don't remember much of anything five years later (except a ceremony I attended and the fact that I was supposed to be on vacation).

It's interesting that you flagged "in an interview for this obituary" because, apparently after you read the piece, I asked New York to cut that phrase. The interview was for an array of purposes, including the obituary.

To your broader question, we sometimes interview subjects for their obituaries, and by my quick count, we've published at least 20 this year that included advance interviews with subjects or people who know about them and/or their work. In some cases, we've recorded those interviews on video and [release parts of them after a subject dies](#).

All of that is partly a reflection of The Times's collection of advance obituaries, which assuredly number into the thousands. Margalit Fox, one of the finest obituary writers The Times has ever had, [wrote about this system](#) back in 2014. It has its quirks, of course, namely that subjects sometimes outlive writers.

As for how to craft an obituary, the best advice I've ever heard -- and it might have been from Margalit Fox, actually -- is to remember that you're writing about life, not death. Study the Graetz obituary, for example, and you will find very little about his death beyond its cause and when and where it happened.

Another crucial point to remember, perhaps the most crucial, is that someone writing an obituary for a news organization is still a journalist and not a public relations person. These are news stories, not advertisements, and I think the obligation is to capture a life in full: the achievements and the glories, but also, to the appropriate degree, the very human foibles and failings.

A few months ago, for example, I sat down to write [the obituary of Pat Dye](#), the indisputably great Auburn football coach. I talk about his talents at length, but in the very first paragraph, there is a reference to the issues that ended his career at Auburn, issues that I examined in greater depth later in the obit. Same thing with [Larry Langford](#). And I will tell you that I don't remember getting pushback from anyone, including supporters of Mr. Dye and Mr. Langford, for writing about their troubles alongside their achievements.

One other thing: Unlike a lot of other news stories, obituaries offer an extraordinary opportunity to write with flair and creativity. If you've got a good anecdotal lede, use it. If you want to sort of back into the story, that can be just fine, too. Got a snappy line that would be out of place in an inverted-pyramid story about some news of the day? Type it and see if it works (and realize that it might not given the sensitivity of the moment in which you're writing).

OK, one more one other thing: Cherish the opportunity to write an obituary. When I think back to my "favorite" stories over the years, I think back to some obituaries. They're a privilege to write precisely because you get to chronicle, as best as you can by deadline and within a word count, a full life, not just a moment or two or three within.

Hope this helps, and be well.

Best,

Alan

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