

## Graveyard Literature: The Art of Writing Epitaphs

An epitaph is an inscription on a tombstone or sarcophagus that pays tribute to the deceased or otherwise comments on that person's life and/or death. It may also appear in print as a *post mortem* tribute or condemnation. It often takes the form of verse and may express any of a variety of human emotions: grief, humor, remorse, pride, religious fervor, curiosity, disapproval, etc. The epitaph dates back to ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome but persists today as people pay homage to a heroic figure whose life inspired them or use humor to deal with grief or paint a personal portrait of the deceased to mourn the loss of a friend.

The following epitaphs appear on tombstones in various New England cemeteries and reflect the wide range of styles, tones, and subjects found in "graveyard literature".

Capt. Thomas Coffin  
Born Jan. 7, 1792. Died Jan. 10, 1842.  
He has finished catching cod,  
And gone to meet his God.

Here lies the body of Saphronia Proctor,  
Who had a cold, but wouldn't doctor.  
She couldn't stay, she had to go,  
Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

To all my friends I bid adieu,  
A more sudden death you never knew.  
As I was leading the old mare to drink,  
She kicked and killed me quicker'n a wink.

To write an original epitaph, choose a pet that died, a car that no longer runs, a famous historic figure whom you find intriguing, a bad habit that you have abandoned, or a deceased loved one whom you wish to honor. Brainstorm the qualities that you associate with your selected subject and perhaps the circumstances of its demise, and build your poem around these details. You may wish to write in metered verse as the examples illustrate with an AABB rhyme scheme, or you may wish to write in free verse. The following example illustrates an epitaph written for an inanimate object in the AABB rhyme scheme.

Here lies the remains of my faithful Zenith 386,  
A personal computer that time has licked.  
Not enough memory, not enough power,  
On the information superhighway it went only 10 miles an hour.

For additional examples of epitaphs, read Edgar Lee Master's Spoon River Anthology (New York: MacMillan, 1959), a book of free verse epitaphs that chronicle the lives of an entire fictitious town representative of the author's boyhood home in Illinois. Better still, visit an old cemetery and read the tombstone inscriptions for authentic graveyard literature.