

## Writing Practices in a Life Filled with Death

Gabby Haskell

Gabby Haskell has heard about funeral service her whole life. She has been exposed to death since birth and has lived in two funeral homes! Recently, she came to the realization that some people do not have an understanding of the funeral industry. Gabby decided to look at writing practices performed in funeral homes through key ISU Writing Program concepts, discuss the steps she took to write her article, and explain how a funeral home functions as an activity system.

Many of the daily conversations I have are about death, caskets, and funerals. I'm sure many of you probably don't discuss these topics with your family on a regular basis, but death has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I grew up with both my father and, eventually, my mother working in the funeral industry. We sometimes refer to it as the "crazy funeral home life." I thought my life was fairly normal, but apparently it isn't. Most families don't discuss funerals, graveyards, and deceased individuals at the dinner table. Also, most kindergarteners don't include a funeral home in their drawing of a city, but my brother and I both did. Now I know what you're thinking: what does a funeral home have to do with writing? I questioned this too, but quickly realized there are several writing practices in the house of death. Also, I discovered that funeral homes are a real-world example of an activity system.

### Where It All Started

At the age of eighteen, did you ever think about your own obituary? I have, and I've actually written one for my future self. One of the first assignments

I completed in college was to write my own obituary. Pretty morbid, right? Many may have thought the assignment was depressing; the last thing most college students have on their minds is obituaries. I remember being fascinated by this assignment because obituaries were a familiar genre about which I had antecedent knowledge. A **genre** is a group or category of writing that is recognizable based on its common features. **Antecedent knowledge** can be described as prior knowledge that affects a writing situation. Unlike most people my age, I'm knowledgeable about death and funeral service. I have had firsthand experience with obituaries from proofreading them for my parents. I have been exposed to death my whole life; when my parents brought me home from the hospital we lived in a funeral home! This obituary assignment was fairly simple for me to complete because I had been previously exposed to this genre. To complete research for this assignment I referenced obituaries for inspiration. I also had my parents read over the assignment since they both write obituaries almost every week.

When brainstorming topic ideas for my *Grassroots* article, I knew I wanted to pick a nontraditional topic that would intrigue many people. I rarely hear others talking about the funeral industry and death, so I decided to write about this topic that is commonly avoided. Oftentimes picking a topic is one of the hardest obstacles when writing. I looked back through the ENG 101 materials I acquired from my freshman year at Illinois State University for inspiration, and that's when I saw my obituary project.

From this point, I thought of other genres similar to obituaries like the writing on headstones, death notices, and funeral home websites. Then it hit me: I should write about literate practices in the funeral industry and analyze them with key terms such as cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). CHAT is a concept used by the Writing Program at ISU that gives people a lens to investigate genres and writing practices in the real world. Relating the funeral industry to an activity system was another goal of mine. An **activity system** can be defined as the people, writing, and tools that collaborate to achieve a common goal (Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program). The Writing Program website provides five things that everyone should know about activity systems, namely that activity systems are: "historically developed," "inherently social," "in constant conversation," a collective effort, and constantly evolving (Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program).

## Step by Step

When completing my writing research, I referenced the "Publishing with the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*" by the *GWRJ* editors, which is featured

in every journal. This article provided me with a starting point and was a great resource when writing my article. I went through the ten steps in the “Researcher’s Process” section and developed new ideas. Some of the main steps in this process that guided my writing were steps one, two, and three.

***Step One:***

- Question: “What is it about writing in the world that interests me?” (115, Fall 2018 Issue)
- Answer: My thoughts pertaining to this were that writing practices are used in almost all aspects of life, so why not explore writing when it comes to death? Whenever I bring up the funeral home, or what my parents do for a living, people become engaged and interested. I have had several lengthy conversations about funeral service with my friends, peers, and acquaintances, so I decided to pick this topic as I knew it would interest others.

***Step Two:***

- Question: “How will I go about finding what I want to know?” (115, Fall 2018 Issue)
- Answer: I found a wealth of information for my article through my parents and online research. I already knew about several aspects of funeral service since it is a part of my everyday life. However, there was information about the writing practices that funeral directors perform that I was not aware of. This is where I went to my dad and asked him to take me through an average workday in the life of a funeral director.
- Question: What research practices are “needed to gather data as well as the style of article that will be most appropriate?” (115, Fall 2018 Issue)
- Answer: After picking a topic, I read through *GWRJ* articles from various issues. I looked at the tone the authors used, the research they completed, and the graphics or pictures they included. I went online and looked at obituaries, funeral home websites, and blog posts written by funeral directors. I knew my article would be somewhat different from others, as most authors explore writing through the scope of the living. In regards to the style of my article, I had to put myself in the shoes of an ordinary person who did not know anything about funeral service; I had to assume that no one had previous knowledge on this topic like I did.

## Funeral Home Lingo

Since you're probably unfamiliar with the funeral industry, it might be useful for me to acquaint you with some of the common words or lingo that are used. The National Funeral Directors Association, or NFDA, has a web page for consumer resources that defines commonly used words in funeral service.

Funeral Home	“A building used for the purpose of embalming, arranging and conducting funerals” (nfda.org)
Funeral Director/ Mortician/Undertaker	“A trained and licensed individual who provides support to the bereaved during initial stages of their grief; arranges and directs funeral ceremonies; arranges for the removal of the deceased from the place of death; prepares the body according to the wishes of the survivors and requirements of the law; secures information for legal documents” (nfda.org)
* funeral director is the preferred term	
* undertaker was a term used “following the Civil War to describe those who ‘undertook’ the preparation of the dead for final rites and burial” (nfda.org)	
Funeral Celebrant	“A person who serves as the leader of a funeral service; may be an ordained member of the clergy or a lay person who has received specialized training on rituals and funeral traditions. Utilizing the services of a funeral celebrant who is a lay person can be an option whether the service is intended to be of a religious nature or not, depending on the type of the service desired” (nfda.org)
Embalmer	“One who is trained and licensed in the surgical procedure of disinfecting or preserving deceased human bodies by the injection or application of preservatives and antiseptics” (nfda.org)
Eulogy	“A form of public speaking at funerals or memorials used to honor and pay respect to the deceased” (nfda.org)

Casket vs. Coffin	<p>Casket: “A container designed to encase human remains for burial; can be constructed of various materials including steel, stainless steel, copper, bronze and/or wood.”</p> <p>Coffin: “A six-sided container designed to encase human remains, usually constructed of wood” (nfd.org)</p>
Coroner	“A public official whose duty is to investigate the cause of death if it appears to be from other than natural causes, or if there was no physician in attendance for a long time prior to death” (nfd.org)
Death Certificate	“A legal document, signed by a medical professional or a coroner, certifying the death of an individual” (nfd.org)
Hearse	“A specially designed vehicle provided by the funeral home to transport remains” (nfd.org)
Monument	“Monuments can take on various forms; they are engraved with the names of the deceased and dates of birth and death; anniversary dates, names of children, favorite sayings, poems, scriptures or songs may be included; sometimes called a headstone, tombstone or gravestone” (nfd.org)

Many of these terms work together to form the funeral industry into an activity system. For example, the funeral director works within the funeral home alongside the embalmer, other funeral directors, the funeral celebrant, and outside entities like the coroner to achieve a common goal. Their purpose is to assist grieving families in stressful situations and honor their loved one. Now that you’re familiar with some of the common terminology used in the funeral industry and how it all works together to become an activity system, let’s talk about what a funeral director actually is.

## What Is a Funeral Director?

I decided to interview my parents, Bert and Veronica Haskell. My dad has worked as a funeral director for twenty years, and my mother is a certified funeral celebrant and a licensed preneed agent. We discussed the writing practices that take place from the first phone call notifying the funeral home of a death to the final burial or cremation.

To become a licensed funeral director in the state of Illinois, attending mortuary school is required. It's a two-year, hands-on program where students are taught how to embalm, fill out documentation, and communicate with families. Funeral laws and practices are also studied. After schooling, boards have to be taken and an apprenticeship is completed. Mortuary science students are participating in an activity system before they even start their career. Schooling itself is an activity system because professors are working with their students to help them achieve a common goal of education. Obtaining a degree, passing boards, and getting an apprenticeship are some goals for students that instructors help them achieve.

An interesting fact about funeral service is that each state has different requirements for someone to be considered a licensed funeral director. In Colorado, anyone can be a funeral director because no licensing is required (CFDA). However, in the state of Illinois, an Associate's degree, licensing, and an apprenticeship are required to be considered a funeral director.

## Behind the Scenes

There is much more to fulfilling the title "funeral director" than formal schooling and licensing. Funeral directors have to be of emotional support to the family they are serving in their time of need and cater to their wishes. This career is best for individuals who are able to be compassionate and empathetic to others in times of duress. My dad embodies both of these qualities, and I have seen them in him through the way that he cares for others.

Death is a topic that many people do not want to talk about, so what goes on behind the scenes in the funeral industry is rarely discussed. I'm here to tell you that, although funeral homes may seem creepy and a profession based on others dying may seem gory, it is actually one of the most interesting and complex careers. I'd like to address a few myths about funeral service. First, funeral directors are not creepy, sad men who are solemn. They are actually compassionate individuals who put others before themselves to ensure they provide the best service possible. After growing up in this industry, I realized



Figure 1: Old school funeral directors from Doncaster History.  
<https://doncasterhistory.wordpress.com/local-history-3/doncaster-funeral-directors/>

that a majority of the time other people's families have to come first. My dad has left Thanksgiving dinner right as he sat down to his meal because his presence was needed by another family after their loved one passed away.

Next, funeral directors are not all men: sixty percent of students in mortuary college are female. This statistic is astonishing, because in 1971 only five percent were female (Mansfield). Finally, funeral homes are not a scary place. Yes, death itself may cause fright and nerves, but most funeral homes are warm and inviting places. Flowers usually surround the room, music is played, and pictures from happy times are displayed. As I stated earlier, I have actually lived in a funeral home. I can promise you that they are not as terrifying as others make them out to be.

Now that I have covered some common misconceptions about the funeral industry, I can discuss the **writing processes** (or the ways that certain texts are created) that funeral service professionals go through when serving a family.

## 24/7/365

If there's one aspect of funeral service that the ordinary person should know, it's that funeral service professionals are on the phone all the time. In this activity system, they are communicating with their coworkers, the families they are serving, churches, florists, medical professionals, coroners, and many other entities. From personal experience, I can attest to this: my dad has his phone on him at all times, no matter the circumstance. Until just this past year, we still had a landline phone in our house as a backup just in case his cell phone wasn't working. If I hear his phone ringing and he is not answering the phone call, I will pick it up myself and state the

name of our funeral home, then “this is Gabby speaking.” I have heard this phrase spoken by my dad since I was little, so it is second nature to me. It is crucial for funeral directors to answer phone calls right away, as there may be an urgent message for them. The fact that there is a person “on call” at all times is a necessary part of the funeral home activity system. People who need assistance can enter into the system at any time—someone they love has died, or they’ve changed their mind about some aspect of an upcoming service. So, my dad fulfills his role in the system in part by being available to families he is serving. In the following sections I’m going to discuss some of the many communications that are part of the funeral service activity system as well as share some of the most important aspects of the writing practices that go into the work of the funeral director.

### **Funeral Service as an *Activity System***

The first phone call funeral directors receive is usually from the location of the deceased individual; this may be from a hospital, nursing home, the coroner, or the family themselves. Upon this notification of death, or the “first call,” funeral directors will grab their pen and paper to document several pieces of important information. The director will ask the name of the deceased, their date of birth, place of death, time and date of death, next of kin and their contact information, and lastly the name of the doctor signing the death certificate. This writing is usually informal and is taken in note style. I am aware of everything that needs to be asked in this first phone call because my dad usually gets this call at least once a week. We have an ongoing joke in my family that whenever my dad puts his Chicago Bears sweatpants on, he will get called out. It seems like every time he puts them on and sits down after a long day, he has to leave again unexpectedly to go back to work.

Next, the funeral director will notify the other directors of the death through a text or phone call. Once the director on call gets to the location of the deceased individual, they have to sign a release form stating that they have the individual in their care. If the family is at the location, an arrangement conference will be scheduled. After this, embalming or other preparation of the body is completed. An embalming report is filled out documenting the condition of the body, their clothing, and any marks such as tattoos or scars. If the deceased is cremated, more documentation and authorization must be completed, such as the cremation permit. The next step is the arrangement conference with the next of kin, which is the family, friends, or the informant. In this meeting, the funeral, visitation, burial, or celebration



Case Number _____	Arrangement Date/Time _____	Director _____
Name _____	Age(Yrs) _____	Mos. _____ Days _____
Residence _____	TWP _____	County _____
City/State/Zip Code _____	Formerly of _____	
Informant _____	Relation _____	
Informant's Address _____		
Email Address _____	Cell _____	Home _____
Place of Death _____		
Date and Time of Death _____	Sex _____	Race _____
Date of Birth _____	Place of Birth _____	
Father's Name _____		
Mother's Maiden Name _____		
Married to _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Never Married	<input type="checkbox"/> Divorced
Where married and date _____		
Wife or Husband Deceased <input type="checkbox"/> Date _____	Where _____	
Previous Marriage _____		
S.S. _____	Education _____	
Last Occupation _____	Retired _____	
Employer _____		
Previous Occupation _____		
Previous Employer _____		
Military Service _____		
Year Inducted _____	Year Discharged _____	Flag <input type="checkbox"/>
Memberships & Interests _____		
_____		
_____		

Figure 2: Arrangement conference template.

of life is discussed. Many funeral homes have templates for the notes taken at this meeting; an example of this template can be seen in Figure 2.

The writing on this form is taken in question-and-answer format on paper, but some funeral homes choose to use technology like laptops or iPads. The funeral industry has evolved in many ways over the past fifty years, especially when it comes to writing. In years prior, every piece of writing that funeral homes completed was on paper. Typewriters were also used instead of printing. Even though funeral professionals today use computers to perform a majority of their writing, handwriting is still essential in this industry because technology isn't always reliable. My parents still have a typewriter to address letters for this reason, and I remember being very confused and asking why they still had a typewriter since I hadn't seen people use them in a long time.

Often, during the arrangement conference, the obituary is planned. An obituary is a piece of writing published in the newspaper that notifies readers of a death. In order to write an obituary, the funeral director will ask the family a series of questions. Documentation of important events, moments, and accomplishments are noted. Memberships and organizations that people belonged to, as well as family history, funeral service information, and burial time, are often included. The content in obituaries varies depending on the individual's background. Age, religion, and geographic location often determine the style of obituary. For example, a young individual who lived in Hawaii may have a different obituary from an elderly person living in the Midwest.

As you can see, the technologies and texts that are involved in the funeral activity system can be complex. Many people might be involved in making decisions, and information has to be recorded correctly in order for the events surrounding the funeral to take place successfully. A funeral can require many people and tools and includes a range of different writing activities.

## **Mistakes Can't Be Made**

After the obituary has been proofread several times by the funeral director, funeral staff, and family of the deceased, it is sent off to the newspaper and posted on the funeral home website. This action can be explained by both socialization and distribution. In ISU's version of CHAT, **socialization** includes the interactions of people as they are creating a text. The funeral directors ask for others to read over what they have written and share their opinions. My parents have asked me to look over obituaries even though I didn't work for the funeral home. Sometimes it is helpful to have an outside perspective and a fresh pair of eyes. These interactions with others may change the writing that has already been completed. Proofreading is crucial in the funeral industry because once a document has been sent to the newspaper and then to printing, it can't be fixed.

## **Traveling Obituaries**

**Distribution** can be defined as where a text is sent and how people use it. The obituary is sent to the newspaper through an online portal, unlike many years before when it had to be faxed, transcribed over the phone, or delivered to the newspaper directly. Advances in technology have aided funeral homes

tremendously. Sometimes, obituaries are distributed through Facebook and other forms of social media instead. Many people today do not receive newspapers, so obituaries may not be seen. Families have the option of not publishing the obituary in a newspaper, which also saves money, and sharing it with others through social media. Some funeral homes have a section on their website where people are able to view the obituary and write their condolences online, rather than sending a letter in the mail. This is another way that funeral homes have to change constantly and adapt to new norms in order to best serve their families. And it relates back to the activity system concept, as “They are always changing and adapting to meet the needs of participants within the system” (Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program). Once the obituary is completed, stationery and memorial folders are prepared for services. Memorial folders often contain a picture of the deceased or a stock picture, the name of the deceased, date of birth, date of death, service time, and pallbearer information. Poems, a prayer, or a verse from the Bible are often included, too.

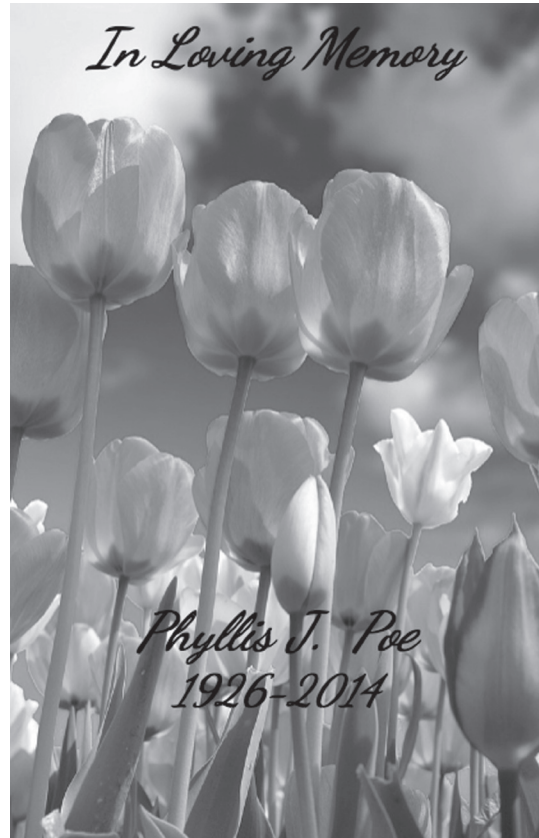


Figure 3: Memorial folder.

Memorial folders are created by the funeral staff and handed out to attendees of the visitation and funeral. People who attend funeral services often take these as a keepsake. My mom created a shadow box containing a rose from her grandmother’s funeral along with the memorial folder. **Reception**, the way a text is taken and used, pairs with this act, as my mom took the memorial folder and rose to hang in our home. The funeral home may have not intended for their writing to be repurposed in this way.

A guestbook is placed near the entrance of the visitation and funeral, so the family can have record of who attended the services. Attendees sign the guestbook once they arrive at the location of the service. Once the visitation and funeral are over, a burial or cremation takes place.

## Writing to Celebrate a Life

A large aspect of writing in the funeral industry is found in the actual funeral service itself. Families have the option of having a religious official lead the service and a loved one give the eulogy, or they can have a funeral celebrant officiate the service. A eulogy is usually written and presented at the funeral and can be described as “an opportunity to acknowledge the importance of the life lived, and to remind survivors of the memories and legacy left behind” (The Remembrance Process). The eulogy is used in addition to a traditional service. If the family chooses not to use a religious official, they have the option to have a funeral celebrant lead the service. You can see the definition of a funeral celebrant in the chart of key funeral service terms. Someone can become a funeral celebrant after attending a Certified Celebrant Training Program. After certification, funeral celebrants are capable of leading nontraditional funeral services. The celebrant will meet with the family and discuss important memories, milestones, and events that took place in the deceased’s life. Pictures and stories are often shared, too. After this meeting, the celebrant will start writing the service and creating a story about the person’s life.

The writing for this service is usually typed on a computer and printed off for the celebrant to reference during their service. An outline could be helpful since this is a speech given to a group of people. This act of writing is very time intensive; I have witnessed my mom spending hours upon hours working on the service she was writing. The celebration is often the final goodbye; much effort has to be put into the service to accurately tell the story of someone’s life. This service is presented during the funeral and a slideshow is often included. A keepsake can be given away at the end of the service. For example, if the deceased loved Legos, a Lego piece could be given to each of the attendees for remembrance. In my opinion, the writing for the funeral or celebration of life is the most important act performed by funeral service professionals. Those in attendance are seeking words of comfort and closure from the service. This is their last thought or memory of their loved one, so it has to make a lasting impact. I asked my mom why she thought the writing in her career was important. She told me, “Funeral celebrant writing is important because you only have one chance to correctly reflect someone’s personality, lifestyle, and life history. In funeral service, there are no do-overs or second chances. It must be right the first time.” This encompasses the purpose of the funeral industry as an activity system. Many individuals are working together to honor someone’s entire life in a short period of time. Each step and writing practice that is completed along the way contributes to the final service.

## Tombstones as a Genre

Another interesting form of writing in the funeral industry is the writing on tombstones. When someone is buried, a tombstone or grave marker is placed on the site of burial for identification. Tombstones are physical memorials and a place for family members to honor their loved ones. If you visit a graveyard and look at a few different tombstones, you will quickly realize that they all differ. The **genre conventions**, or aspects of a writing that are commonly noted, of tombstones are typically the name of the deceased, the date of birth, and the date of death. Often, two or more family members, like a husband and wife, share the same tombstone or plot. Bible verses, quotes, family members' names, and pictures are also placed on tombstones. Some choose to have small plots or grave markers, while others have engravings on the tombstone and elaborate sculptures or benches beside it.

I realized that time has a great effect on what is included on tombstones. Tombstones from the early 1800s and before often included the name of the deceased, their date of birth, and date of death. Simplicity was most likely the norm during this time period, and it was cost efficient. Today, many more aspects are included on tombstones because of modern-day technology like picture printing. **Ecology** can be used to explain the writing and appearance of tombstones. Ecology consists of the “physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing” (Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program). Hundreds of years ago, monument companies did not have access to digital printing programs that allowed them to place images and writings in different fonts on tombstones. Several physical boundaries no longer exist in the making of tombstones due to technological advancements. This is another aspect of funeral service that



Figures 4–6: Different examples of grave markers and tombstones.

contributes to it functioning as an activity system. Activity systems evolve and develop as time goes on and they interact with current cultures and norms (Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program). Modern tombstones are a great example of this.

After the services and burial or cremation, the funeral home will write a handwritten thank you note to the family of the deceased. This piece of writing is a way for the funeral home to express their gratitude towards the family for selecting them to care for their loved one. It is written in letter format and is a formal style of writing; this letter is also personalized towards the specific family they are writing to.

## Social Media in Death?

The funeral industry is rapidly evolving in terms of social media. The days of using a typewriter and having obituaries published only in print are slowly fading. Many funeral homes have started using social media as a means to promote their services and connect with past, current, and future families. On Facebook particularly, funeral homes can post about any events they are hosting, facts and statistics related to the funeral industry, quotes, and celebratory pictures for holidays. For example, my parents posted a poll on

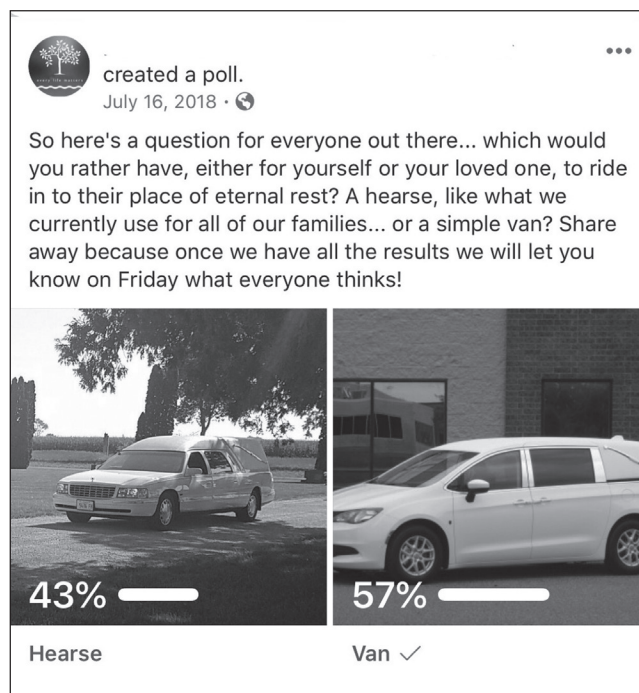


Figure 7: Facebook poll created by my parents.

their funeral home Facebook page to engage with their followers and allow people to voice their opinions. Participants were able to vote if they would rather have their loved one transported in a hearse or funeral van. Users also commented. This type of post allowed interaction, and my parents were able to informally talk with participants.

Social media posts have also become a means for family and friends to cope with death. People can share tributes, stories, and thoughts about their loved ones for others to see. The article “Social Media Grieving: How to Find Support in a Digital Era” in the Fall 2018 edition of the *GWRJ* by Colleen Keefe digs deeper into this topic and is a great article to read if you are interested in the correlation between social media and death.

### **Funerals, Coffins, and Morticians, Oh My!**

Although every funeral home differs and some are more contemporary than others, there are several writing practices that can be observed throughout the funeral industry. After interviewing my parents, looking at important documentation, and going through the writing practices that occur from the first phone call to the final burial, I can confidently state that the funeral industry is an activity system that is constantly evolving. This is actually true of most activity systems. They can exist anywhere people come together to accomplish goals, they can include many kinds of texts and activities, and they definitely change over time in response to people’s needs and goals. Most everyday activities we participate in are part of large activity systems. Something as mundane as ordering a pizza could be seen as part of a “fast food delivery” activity system, which involves phone calls, order forms, websites like Grubhub, cars, and computers (and pizzas). The funeral service is a system you might not have a lot of familiarity with, but this kind of analysis could be part of looking at many different kinds of professional activity systems, where writing can exist in unexpected places. Activity systems are important in the study of writing and writing practices because they show what goes on behind the scenes, all the collaboration that takes place, and how a final product is successfully completed. The funeral home activity system is a necessity because it provides emotional aid for those it serves. Its purpose is to be compassionate and supportive to others in a time when they need it most.

I hope after reading this article that you are more familiar with the writing in the funeral industry and how it relates to key Writing Program concepts at ISU. Maybe the next time you’re having dinner with family, you’ll discuss funerals, coffins, and morticians? Or it might just be me.

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