Funeral Terms Explained: A Plain-Language Glossary

If you are reading this, you may be in the first days after a loss, and you may be hearing words you have never needed before. This glossary explains them one at a time, in plain language. You can skim for the word in front of you and leave the rest.

Why do funeral terms feel so confusing?

Most people meet this vocabulary for the first time while grieving, so confusion is common and says nothing about you. Some words also overlap, and families, faiths and funeral homes may use them a little differently. “Visitation” and “viewing,” for example, are sometimes used to mean the same thing. Each term below is defined once, in the way it is most often used.

It is always fine to ask someone to explain a term in plain words. You might say, “Can you tell me what that means, and what it would involve for us?” A good funeral director expects that question.

> Nothing here tells you what to choose. These are definitions only.

Funeral vs. memorial vs. celebration of life: what's the difference?

Funeral.
A service held with the body present, often before a burial or cremation. It may be religious or not.

Memorial service.
A gathering to remember the person, usually without the body present. It is often held days, weeks or months later, which gives families time to travel and plan.

Celebration of life.
A memorial with a lighter, more personal tone. It can be held almost anywhere, such as a home, a park, a restaurant or a community hall, and may include favorite music, photos and stories.

Graveside service.
A short service held at the burial site, sometimes in place of a longer funeral.

Wake and vigil.
A wake is a time for people to gather with the family, usually before the funeral, much like a visitation (explained below). A vigil is a time of watching, prayer or quiet remembrance, and its form depends on the tradition. Customs differ, so it helps to ask what a particular family means by the word.

What is the difference between a viewing and a visitation?

Viewing.
A time when family and friends can see the person who has died. It can take place in a funeral home, a place of worship or another setting.

Visitation.
A gathering where friends and family offer comfort to the family, usually before the funeral. A viewing may or may not be part of it. Because the two often happen together, some funeral homes use the words interchangeably, so ask what a particular event will include.

Open casket and closed casket.
In an open casket service, the person can be seen. In a closed casket service, they cannot. Either is a personal choice, and neither is more respectful than the other.

Private family viewing.
Time set aside for close family only, often before others arrive. A public viewing is open to everyone attending. Some families have both.

Embalming.
A process that uses chemicals to temporarily preserve the body. It is often discussed when a viewing or a delay before burial is planned.

Refrigeration.
Keeping the body cool until a service, burial or cremation.

If you are weighing embalming against refrigeration, ask the funeral home which they would suggest for your plans and why.

What are the options for burial and cremation?

Some of these terms sound alike, so here they are side by side.

Cremation.
A process that uses intense heat to reduce the body to bone fragments, which are then processed into the remains returned to the family. A funeral, viewing or memorial can happen before or after, or not at all.

Direct cremation.
Cremation soon after death, with no funeral service beforehand. A waiting period and a signed authorization generally apply before any cremation, and the details depend on your state's rules, so ask your funeral director. The family can still hold a memorial or celebration of life later, with or without the ashes present.

Immediate burial.
Burial soon after death, without a viewing or formal funeral first. A memorial or graveside gathering can still follow.

Traditional burial or full-service funeral.
Usually a viewing or visitation, a funeral service and a procession to the burial site. This differs from the direct options, which leave those steps out.

Green or natural burial.
Burial that aims to have a lighter impact on the land, usually without embalming, in a biodegradable casket or shroud, and often without a vault. Not every cemetery allows it, and practices vary, so ask the cemetery or funeral home what they offer.

Body donation.
Giving the body to a medical school or research program after death. It is different from organ and tissue donation. Programs usually ask people to register in advance, have their own acceptance rules and may not be able to accept every donation. Many return the cremated remains to the family later. Contact the program directly about how it works.

Cremains or ashes.
Both words mean the remains after cremation. Families may keep them at home, place them in a cemetery niche or plot, scatter them where permitted, or divide them among relatives. Rules for scattering and for cemeteries vary, so check with the funeral home or the place involved.

Interment, inurnment and committal.
These are the formal words for placing a body in the ground or a tomb (interment), placing an urn in a niche or plot (inurnment), and the brief closing words said at that moment (committal).

What will a funeral home ask you to choose or sign?

Casket and coffin.
In everyday use these are often interchangeable. A casket is usually rectangular, and a coffin is traditionally six-sided and tapered. Funeral homes in the United States mostly say “casket.”

Urn and keepsake urn.
An urn holds cremated remains. A keepsake urn is a small one that holds a portion, so ashes can be shared among family members.

Vault or grave liner.
A container, usually concrete, that surrounds the casket in the ground. Some cemeteries have their own requirements, so ask the cemetery directly.

General price list.
A written, itemized list of the funeral home's goods and services. Under the Federal Trade Commission's Funeral Rule, you generally have the right to receive one when you discuss arrangements in person. You can ask what each line means. Prices vary between providers and are not stated here. For what the rule covers, see the FTC's consumer guidance or our summary of your funeral pricing rights.

Pre-need and at-need.
Pre-need means arranging services in advance, before a death. At-need means arranging them after a death has occurred.

Funeral director, celebrant and officiant.
A funeral director handles the practical arrangements, such as care of the body, paperwork and logistics. An officiant leads the service, and may be clergy or someone chosen by the family. A celebrant is a trained, often non-religious officiant who helps shape and lead a personal ceremony.

What paperwork is needed after someone dies?

This section is general information, not legal advice. Rules, fees and terms differ from state to state and can change, so check the official sources for your state.

Death certificate.
The official record of a death. Copies are usually requested from your state's vital records office or, in some places, a county or local office. Your funeral director can often help with the first steps. Our death certificates by state page links to state-by-state information.

Certified copy.
An official version of a record, issued by the agency, that institutions such as banks and insurers often ask for instead of a photocopy. Ask each institution what they need.

Next of kin.
The closest living relatives, such as a spouse, children or parents. In everyday talk it means family. In law it can have a specific meaning, so check with your state's courts or a qualified attorney.

Personal representative.
The person appointed to manage a deceased person's estate. Many state courts use this term, while others may say executor or administrator. A qualified attorney can explain how it applies in your situation.

Probate.
The court process for settling an estate, which includes confirming a will, if there is one, and handling debts and property. Whether probate is needed depends on the circumstances and your state's rules. Your state's courts or an attorney can say.

Obituary and death notice.
A death notice is a short announcement of the death and service details. An obituary is longer and tells something of the person's life. Many families write one, both or neither.

What do “eulogy,” “repast” and “in lieu of flowers” mean?

Eulogy.
A spoken tribute given during a service, usually by a family member, friend or officiant.

Pallbearer.
A person who helps carry or accompany the casket. An honorary pallbearer is someone named as a mark of respect who does not carry it.

Condolences and sympathy card.
Condolences are expressions of sympathy, spoken or written. A sympathy card is a written note, and short is fine.

In lieu of flowers.
A phrase in a notice that invites people to give to a charity or cause, a memorial donation, rather than send flowers.

Reception or repast.
A gathering with food after a service. “Repast” is the word used in many communities.

None of these customs are required. Families decide what fits them, and leaving something out is a perfectly good choice.

Frequently Asked Questions About Funeral Terms

Do I have to have a funeral before a cremation or burial?
No. Many families choose a direct option and hold a gathering later, or none at all. Each state has its own rules about authorization and paperwork before a cremation or burial. Ask your funeral director, or check with your state's funeral or cemetery regulator for official guidance.

Can we hold a memorial service weeks or months after a direct cremation?
Yes. There is no set timeline for a memorial, and waiting often helps relatives travel and gives the family time to plan. Some families hold it on a meaningful date, such as a birthday, and the ashes may or may not be present.

Is a celebration of life appropriate if the family is religious?
Often, yes. Some families combine the two, with a religious service followed by a more informal gathering. If you are unsure, your place of worship or officiant can tell you what your tradition allows.

What should I say if I don't understand a term a funeral home uses?
You can say, "I'm not familiar with that. Could you explain it in simple terms?" It is also fine to ask for the details in writing so you can read them later, or to bring a trusted friend to take notes.

Who is allowed to make decisions about funeral arrangements?
State law sets out who may authorize arrangements, and it often follows a priority order of family members or a person named in advance. The order differs from state to state. This is general information. Check with your state's funeral or cemetery regulator or a qualified attorney about your situation.

Is an obituary required after someone dies?
No. An obituary or death notice is a choice. Some families write a short announcement, some share news only with close friends, and some write nothing. Any newspaper or website that publishes notices will explain its own submission process.

Do I need to wear black to a funeral or memorial?
No. Dark, simple clothing is common at traditional services. At a celebration of life, families sometimes ask guests to wear a favorite color. If an invitation does not say, wear something modest and comfortable, or ask the family or host.