

From the Résumé to the Eulogy: Describing Ourselves

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How do we describe ourselves? Turns out there are several ways, and looking at the list can help us understand ourselves better. We can see how we can make a more complete record of our past, reflect more fully on our present, and help chart a better course for the future.

With definitions adapted from dictionary.com, here are some ways we use to describe ourselves:

Résumé – a brief written account of personal, educational and professional qualifications and experience; as in a job application.

Diary / Journal – a daily record of experiences, observations, and feelings. Usually private. Both words come to us from words relating to “day” or “daily.” Recommendation: if you keep one, decide what you want done with it after you die, and leave clear instructions.

Life Story – a short, informal summary of one person's life. (See: Write a Life Story.)

Memoir / Autobiography – a self-written history of one person's life. (See: Memoir Writing: Ten Tips.)

Family History – an account of the lives of a family group. (See: A Family History Writing Workshop.)

Legacy Letter – a message to the next generation. Formerly called an “ethical will.” (See: Ways to Leave a Legacy.)

One Story – one 500 to 1,000 word piece that sums up your life and legacy. (See: Having the Last Say: Capturing Your Legacy in One Small Story.)

Obituary – a written notice (for example, in a newspaper) of a person's death, often with a description of their life and work. (See: Writing Your Own Obituary Offers Chance for Reflection.)

Eulogy – a laudatory speech or written tribute, especially praising someone who has died. Usually spoken. Note: this is the only one always composed – or, at least, always delivered – by someone else! (See: Write and Give a Eulogy.)

New York Times columnist and author David Brooks has an interesting take on the difference between what he calls the “résumé virtues” and the “eulogy virtues.” He has elaborated on this difference in his column in the Times, his book *The Road to Character*, and in his Ted Talk: *Should You Live for Your Résumé or Your Eulogy?*

The résumé virtues are the ones we put forward in the work world, as we apply for employment and generally promote ourselves in society. The eulogy virtues are how others think of us, and relate to what kind of person we are.

“It occurred to me that there were two sets of virtues, the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues,” Brooks writes in his column. “The résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace. The

eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral – whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful.”

We spend our lives, Brooks notes, building up our résumé virtues. But really, we should be contemplating our eulogy virtues, which are more important in the larger picture. While we concentrate on the résumé virtues, others will take stock of the impact of our life – what they really thought of us – when they compose a eulogy.

We develop our résumé virtues, Brooks says in his TED Talk, by building on our strengths. In contrast, he says, we develop our eulogy virtues by fighting our weaknesses.

Describe ourselves? Understand ourselves? Become better people? Let us count the ways.

As a bonus, here is one more way:

Six Words – how about summing up your life in just six words? Many have found this exercise to be a lot of fun, and illuminating, too. (See: [Six Words To Describe A Life?](#))