

# 'Elegy' vs. 'Eulogy'

How to speak about what is lost

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## What to Know

An *elegy* is a poem that reflects upon a subject with sorrow or melancholy. Often these poems are about someone who has died or other sorrowful subjects. A *eulogy* on the other hand is meant to offer praise. As part of a funeral service, a "eulogy" celebrates the deceased. Remember that an "elegy" is a lamentation while a "eulogy" is a commendation or praise.

Most of the time, *elegy* and *eulogy* aren't confused. But a person asked to explain the difference between the two might encounter some difficulty as both words conjure sadness and reflection, and are generally tied to loss. We think of a *eulogy* as the kind of thing you hear at a funeral, and *elegy* as referring to something that expresses sorrow in a reflective way.

*A 'eulogy,' despite its association with melancholy settings, is meant to offer praise.*

Occasionally they are presented in contrast:

Jennifer Homans has put her mourning into action and has written its history, an eloquent and lasting *elegy* to an unlasting art. It is, alas, a *eulogy*.— Toni Bentley, *The New York Times Book Review*, 28 Nov. 2010

## Meaning and Examples of an Elegy

Historically speaking, an elegy is a poem, one expressing sorrow or melancholy. Quite often, the subject is someone who has died. In Latin, *elegia* means "a poem in elegiac couplets"; *elegy* ultimately derives from the Greek *elegos*, meaning "song of mourning."

An example would be "Elegy for Jane", by the American poet Theodore Roethke (1908-1963), written to honor one of the poet's students, who died in a horse-riding accident. Roethke remembers the girl's "neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils" and "her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile." Then he writes:

My sparrow, you are not here, Waiting like a fern, making a spiney shadow. The sides of wet stones cannot console me, Nor the moss, wound with the last light.

Generally speaking, an elegy can be any work that considers a subject with a sense of reflection or melancholy, such as the title of J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, a memoir about growing up amid poverty in Appalachia.

In contextual use, the noun will often be followed by the preposition *to* or *for*:

Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* was a mournful book, an *elegy* for a wild nature irretrievably contaminated by civilization, and a prophecy about what would happen if we didn't get ourselves in hand.— Gary Greenberg, *Harper's*, September 2011

## Meaning and Examples of A Eulogy

A *eulogy*, despite its association with melancholy settings (such as funerals), is meant to offer praise. When it is part of a funeral oration, the eulogy celebrates the achievements and character of the person who has died.

A gifted architectural designer and welcoming hostess, Mary, 52, was universally seen as a giving woman devoted to her children, her friends, her husband, her charities and the Catholic Church. Her husband, 58, estranged since 2010, had only achingly kind words in his *eulogy*. "She was a genius at friendship," he said from the pulpit. But, he added, "she had this sadness that kicked her and chased her."— Jill Smolowe et al., *People*, 4 June 2012

The element of praise is hinted at in the Greek prefix *eu-*, which means "good" or "true" and is found in such words as *euphony* and *euonym* (a name that is particularly appropriate for something).

Are *elegy* and *eulogy* that hard to distinguish? It's hard to say. Certainly, there are times when *eulogy* is encountered in contexts that suggest that it is lamentation, rather than praise, that is being expressed:

With their auras of longing and loss, "Let It Die" and "Long Road to Ruin" could be heard as *eulogies* for his late pal Kurt Cobain—or simply the reflections of someone who's grown up gracefully without dousing rock and roll's adolescent fire.— Jon Young, *Mother Jones*, November & December 2007

When the words are blurred together, the general meaning is an expression of sadness for someone lost. This was kind of a heavy article, so here are some kittens to cheer you up. (Sorry, no kitties. Go find your own kitty!!) This article is from [merriamwebster.com](http://merriamwebster.com).