

# From scrap page to story: our writing tips

These are Openly Positive's 25 writing tips to encourage you to write your story. We have based these on our experience of writing and editing this story-telling series.

You can use these tips to write about HIV as one part of life and love, or you can adapt and use these guidelines for any kind of personal story-telling.

## Why is it important to write my own story?

### 1. What is my story?

When you tell your own story as a person living with or affected by HIV, you are writing a work of non-fiction – a true story, a story about parts or the whole of your own life to be read by the public in a book, a magazine or on-line. These are the events that you have experienced. These are your memories and feelings. These can include your poems, your drawings and your photographs.

### 2. Why am I writing?

Every person experiences issues and events that can be expressed in as many ways as there are people. You may doubt the value of your writing. Yet you have an original story to tell, even if your story covers similar ideas and themes to other stories. Your personal journey is unique and that's what makes writing your story worthwhile. Readers can learn from your experiences and your writing can entertain them.

## How do I start writing?

### 3. Where can I write?

Choose a place to write that is comfortable for you. You can write at a desk, on a couch or on your bed. Think of a space where you will feel inspired, for example, sitting outside under a tree or watching the sea.

### 4. When should I write?

Make time every day for an hour or two. Let your inspiration and energy guide how much you can manage. Your other work or commitments will also shape how much time you can keep for your own writing. For example, some people like to write early in the morning when they feel fresh.

### 5. With what do I write?

You can start with a pen or pencil and some scrap paper or a pad. Some people like to write straight onto a laptop or desktop computer. Other people like to write by hand first and then do a second draft on screen. Keep a notebook handy next to

your bed, in your car or in your bag on the train or taxi to jot down ideas when they come into your head.

## **6. In what language can I write?**

You can write in your mother tongue first and then translate into English. Or you can choose to write in English first if you are comfortable with this. Try to capture the spirit and feel of your writing when you translate into English or into your mother tongue.

## **7. How do I get going?**

Choose a style that suits you. You can make notes or write down some ideas for your story in a journal every day. You can cut up pieces of blank paper or tear up brown paper packets, and then write down key words, ideas or themes that could be part of the story you'd like to write. For example: *childhood memories, first love, student days, thinking about HIV testing*. These may come to you when you're not really thinking about it. Jog your memory with old diaries or letters, or chat with a family member or friend about old times.

## **What do I do next?**

## **8. How do I structure my writing?**

Begin to structure your writing once you have written down some notes, or by using the bits of paper or packets. Clear a space on the floor, the kitchen table, your desk, or on a wall. Spread out the pieces of paper or pages from a notebook or

journal. If you have a free wall, put them up with tape or press stick.

## **9. How do I get things in order?**

See which key words, ideas or themes look like the beginning, middle or end of a story – your story! Use different colour highlighters or pencil crayons on different pages: for example, blue for the beginning ideas, green for the middle of the story and pink for the end of the story. Now re-organise the bits of paper and shape them into a tree – the roots are the beginning, the trunk is the middle and the branches are the end of the story. Move pieces around or highlight text – let your hands and your feelings guide what goes where.

## **10. What do I do with my rough structure?**

Now you're ready to put the pieces together and write your story using these ideas. Follow the order from your highlighting or your tree, and start with the section that feels easiest to write about. Your writing should flow from paragraph to paragraph. You can check this by getting the last sentence of the paragraph to flow through to the first sentence of the next paragraph.

## **11. How do I pace myself?**

Take breaks if you are writing by hand. Print out at convenient intervals if you are working on computer, as you will pick up different things on a hard copy. Keep a back-up of your labours in case your computer crashes or there is a power cut.

Take a break when you are not inspired or feeling blocked, and come back to your writing with a fresh eye the next day.

## What makes for good writing as I develop my story?

### 12. Use a personal style

Write as if you are speaking and telling your story orally. Use the first person ('I did this') and remember the readers you are writing for. Humanise your story by using real names or make up names if it is too sensitive to give someone's real name.

### 13. Give your readers some background

Remember your readers may not know the place where you grew up. So give them some context, for example, introduce your family or the environment you lived in. Where it's helpful, give some dates and names, and make links between events and people.

### 14. Reach out to your readers

Try to touch your readers and help them relate to your world. Use dialogue to relive an experience – try to remember and recreate conversations between people in your story. Express yourself in everyday words and local languages to appeal to different readers – for example: 'Eish! That was tough.'

### 15. Break your writing into bite-size pieces

Try to imagine yourself as a person reading your story. Make it easier to read by using shorter sentences and paragraphs. Think of this: *one idea, one sentence and one theme, one paragraph*. Writing in very long paragraphs makes it much harder to edit your writing. Once you write a bit more, you can see how your writing can also break into different parts or chapters to guide your readers in sharing your life journey.

## I've written a draft – now what?

### 16. How do I get feedback?

Decide when you want someone you trust to have a first look at what you have written to give you some early feedback. The idea is for them to give you some direction of where to improve your writing. At this stage, this is just general feedback, not detailed editing.

### 17. How can I humanise my story?

You can add other elements to your story, such as poems and drawings, and then write some more around these. Photographs also help to personalise and make your story more visible. When writing around HIV, photos are a powerful tool to reduce stigma and help readers realise that HIV affects everyone. If you use personal photographs, get permission from people in them, just as you should if you use the real names of people in your story text.

### **18. What do I do with the feedback?**

Think about the comments you received and work out the best way of changing or adding to your story in a way that you feel comfortable. Once you've polished your story and done some more writing, you may feel ready to ask for more feedback from two or three more people you trust to read your story sensitively and not pass it on to others without your permission.

### **How do I get help with roadblocks on the way?**

#### **19. Who can help me technically?**

You may not have easy access to a computer. See if you can borrow a laptop or use an Internet café. Someone can interview you to get your initial thoughts down, or you can ask a friend to type up your handwritten story. Make sure you know how to back up your story on a memory stick.

#### **20. What happens if I get writer's block?**

Writing our stories can be hard. On some days the inspiration is just not there or you are feeling tired, so try another day. Sometimes we can't write our stories because we need strength to record difficult things that happened to us or to people we love. Writing makes us conscious of things we find hard to tell other people. Talking to a friend who has been down the writing road can help, for example someone else living with HIV who has already

written their story and will understand what you are feeling.

#### **21. How can I get emotional support?**

The writing journey can make you relive tough stuff or things you haven't fully worked through. You may need to stop writing for a while to get more in-depth counselling and support. Talk to a person who is a good listener, such as a counsellor, a minister, a close friend or a trusted family member you feel comfortable with. This can help clear some of the fog that is blocking you and may free your mind to start writing again.

#### **22. What can inspire me to get going again?**

Do some relaxing things like meditating, listening to music or taking a long walk. When you are ready to start writing again, you can light a candle while you write. The light of this candle will hold all the memories of the people or things you lost or issues you struggled with, and may help you process issues without forgetting that things were tough. A candle is a peaceful symbol that can help you pause and reflect as you write.

#### **23. How do I nurse myself when the going gets tough?**

When writing, and you hit that wall, talk to someone close to you on the phone or face-to-face. Don't avoid writing down the sad moments. Remember that you are a victor already by making the decision to write and share your story with the

world. Writing may sometimes feel like being asked to eat an elephant. We all know it's a huge animal – and yes, it can be eaten, but only in small bites, one at a time.

#### **24. How do I keep balance in my writing?**

Writing is exciting when expressing the good things in life, but harder when sharing the uphill times of your life. Try to have a good mix between the challenges you have overcome and the joys of love and life. Always remind yourself of the reason why you chose to write. For example, one of the reasons we write about living with or being deeply affected by HIV is to heal. So expressing your past by writing can bring you painful memories, but at the same time, you may feel a huge sense of relief and achievement after freeing your mind from things you have kept bottled up inside.

### What happens when I've finished my draft?

#### **25. What are the next steps towards publishing my story?**

When you are happy that you have finished a full draft of your story, think about getting someone to do a detailed edit to sharpen your story. Your editor may suggest that you rework parts of your story to improve it or fill gaps. You can now start to network and make contacts towards publishing your story. Talk to people who have published before and attend events like book fairs or book

launches to get ideas. For example, send your draft to a publisher, look out for calls that are made for people to contribute to short story collections or to magazine articles, or explore options like publishing your story on the Internet.