Writing Your Story

Your foodborne illness story is important and you want to do a good job, but an empty screen or blank piece of paper can be intimidating.

DON'T WAIT FOR INSPIRATION, START WRITING

Put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) and go. Though it's tempting to edit while you work, resist it if you can. We've all had the experience of having a thought cross our mind and thinking, "Oh, I'll get to that in a minute," and then a minute later when we want to recall it, it has slipped our mind.

Write Now.

Right now -- everything you're thinking – words & phrases, fragments of thoughts, questions, dates, names, and even whole sentences.

FACT FINDING, the WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, and WHY

Do you need inspiration? Try reading someone else's story. We suggest reading Aly, Dalton, Margo, & Laura on www.stopfoodborneillness.org/stories/ There are many good stories, but don't get distracted – you're here to tell your story.

I. OUTLINE is a general sketch, telling only the main points of your story.

II. FORMAT is the way your story is organized. The most common storytelling format is giving details in **chronological order.** Another popular format is to emphasize one or two obstacles that were encountered and then making the story revolve around them.

III. REVISIONS/EDITS occur when you correct or rearrange parts of the story. It may involve eliminating words or sections, or clarifying an idea and adding more information. We always suggest writing down all the bits that you know by heart, as well as the parts you're not sure you remember correctly. You can fact check when you edit and revise.

REMEMBER:

Personal stories are more powerful when they tell the facts AND show emotion.

The facts are important, but most people tend to be more interested in what happened and your response to it than they are with dates or places.

INTENDED PURPOSE: What is the most important thing you want to tell readers? What would you like them to take away and remember?

Here's a sample chronological template to help you tell your story:

INTRODUCTION: Where you tell the reader *Who, Where,* and *When*
- ✓ Name of person who got sick and their age at the time
- ✓ Where they were physically (home, college, camping, city, state)
- ✓ Timeframe (after retirement, 2 in the morning, in the fall, after Xmas)
- ✓ Add context by naming relationships of the people involved (mother, grandmother, best friend, neighbor, son)
- ✓ Create contrast by noting how the person was before the illness (played sports, walked everywhere, never went to the doctor, volunteered)
- ✓ Connect with readers by citing the ill person's involvement in their community (served on the PTA, coached little league, elementary school student, volunteered at the soup kitchen, tutored at the library)

BODY: Where you tell the reader *What*
- ✓ Place events in order
- ✓ Identify the pathogen
- ✓ Name the food/source (if known)
- ✓ Give details about the illness like:
    - *Length* (number of days' sick or in hospital, in ICU, taken off work)
    - *Severity* with details such as:
        - **Complications** (blood poisoning, HUS, seizures, motor loss)
        - **Procedures** (dialysis, transfusions, transplants, chemo)
    - *Current Status* are there long-term complications (arthritis, surgeries, diabetes, miscarriage)
- ✓ Quantify and Qualify the illness with details like:
    - *Cost in tangible terms –*
    - (medical bills, lost revenue not working, days spent away from family)
    - *Cost in intangible terms –*
    - (changes to daily routine, emotional impact on the family, required life changes, impact on the greater community)
    - *Scope of the problem –*
    - (was illness part of an outbreak, how many people were ill, time – hours, days, weeks – it took the PH department to ID the source)

CLOSE: Where you tell the reader *Why* and maybe *How* (to respond)
- ✓ Identify the failures that led to illness and if they were illegal or not
- ✓ Explain what went wrong (improper food handling, faulty production, source not traced, inspector failed to report the problem, no recall made)
- ✓ Persuade reader of need for change, and what changes you'd like to see
- ✓ Note how the experience has change you