

FINAL REPORT

Private sessions



Royal Commission
into Institutional Responses
to Child Sexual Abuse

VOLUME 5

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Appendix L The narrative writing process

The task

The narrative writer's task is to transform an audio recording of a private session into a short story that is:

- Faithful to the attendee's account
- De-identified
- Engaging and accessible.

Stories need to be short, so can't include everything. The writer's first and most important step when deciding what material to include in a story is to ask 'what is important to the attendee?' Additionally, there are many secondary considerations that a writer will take into account when writing a story, such as:

Useful things to include in the story

Background: where and when was the attendee born? Where did they grow up? Family structure? School? Church? Sporting or recreational clubs?

Incidents: where and when did the abuse take place? What was the attendee's relationship to the abuser? Who is the abuser (age, gender, role etc)? How many incidents over what duration? Were other children also abused? How did it end?

Disclosure then: did the attendee disclose the abuse to anyone at the time? If not, why not? If so, what was that person's reaction? How did the institution respond? How did the attendee feel about the institutional response?

Impact: how did the abuse affect the attendee at the time? How did its legacy affect their life? How have they managed to cope?

Disclosure later: did the attendee disclose the abuse to someone later in life? Who? When? Why? What difference did this make to their life?

Redress: has the attendee reported the matter to police? To the institution? Have they taken any legal action? If not, why not? If so, how did the attendee feel about the process and its outcome?

Now/Future: what is the attendee's life like now? Any examples of resilience? Any victories, achievements, good relationships or other positive things? Does the attendee have any recommendations? Why did they come to the Royal Commission? What are their hopes for the future?

Some guiding principles

Keep it clear and concise: you can write any way you like, so long as it's clear. But in general, favour short sentences and short paragraphs. Bear in mind what the story will look like on the computer screen and printed page. Large blocks of text are off-putting for most readers.

Get to the point: try to cover the abuse early in the story or otherwise hook the reader.

Address the Terms of Reference (TOR): roughly speaking, we only cover stories that fall within these TOR: *sexual* abuse of a *child* in an *institution* (or by a member of an institution). Sometimes attendees want to talk about other things. It's okay to include non-TOR things in your story but always include some mention of the issue that falls within TOR.

Use quotes: and when you do, be accurate always. A paraphrase is not a quote and **MUST NOT** appear in quotation marks. See style notes below for more detailed guidance.

Include a few unique details: they add colour to the story and help readers relate to the attendee's experience. But don't go overboard. Too much detail will render a story inaccessible.

Tell a story, not a parable: focus on the survivor's story and avoid overly moral, or judgemental words or sentences.

Avoid overly emotive language: these stories are powerful enough on their own; they don't need flowery add-ons such as 'Choking back tears she told the Commissioner the heartbreaking story of how...'

Follow chronological order: this is a helpful rule. Follow it and your stories will be easier to write and read. But feel free to break it when you have good reason. What's a good reason? A story might work best if you open with a vivid anecdote about the attendee's adult life and then 'flash back' to when they were a child.

Include the positives as well as the negatives: for example, what characteristics does a survivor display in times of extreme hardship?

Take care with graphic material: there is no hard and fast rule for dealing with graphic material. On the one hand, we must avoid being salacious; on the other hand we must honestly depict the horror of child sexual abuse and be faithful to the attendee's story as they told it. Usually a balance can be struck. If in doubt, put it to the team and have a chat.

Write with your own unique flair: Don't get bogged down by all these guidelines, and don't feel you have to mimic exactly the style of other stories. Diversity is good. Keep it clear, concise and compelling, but do it your own way.



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