



Housing Action Illinois

A stronger Illinois begins at home

STARTING A STORYTELLING WORKSHOP

WITH RESIDENTS OF PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

GETTING ORIENTED

Think about how to be responsive to the interests, aims, and orientations of your particular participants. Ideally, the storytellers will take ownership of their individual participation and collective activity and will shape the group. Through telling stories, people often identify changes they'd like to see and how they can take action to bring them about. In a supportive housing setting, it may still be helpful to have staff coordinate workshop logistics.

There is no right or wrong way to facilitate a group. The approach outlined here is based on the idea that **the seeds of change are found in ordinary experience and that everyone has important stories to tell.** This approach is heavily informed by popular education and the Community Writing Project (communitywritingproject.org).

The aim is for participants to develop confidence in their creative storytelling ability and the value of their experiences. This happens when participants feel supported by respectful, attentive feedback from each other and the facilitator as they share stories from their lives. The process of conversation, writing, and sharing in a small group over a period of weeks helps to build intimacy, which is important for the group's success. Ideally, the group is nurturing experience, figuratively and literally—an important feature of each session, not to be underestimated, is a snack provided by a facilitator or organization. This helps create a welcoming, relaxed atmosphere, which aids the development of a community.

STRUCTURE

- **Meet weekly** at the same time. Provide drinks/food, as well as paper and pens/pencils.
- Often, groups will meet weekly for **8 – 12 weeks** to generate, develop, and revise a selection of stories. **Try to create writing prompts collectively**, based on participants' recent experiences and thoughts. Stories can be powerful and insightful whether they're about big, loud moments or small, regular routines.
- It's helpful for groups to be small, perhaps just **4 – 8 participants**.
- Establish **guidelines to create trust**. How do people want to feel about the group (encouraged, respected)? Is everything confidential?
- Although writing is often the default, think about and incorporate other ways of storytelling—such as **spoken stories, photographs, or drawing**.
- At the end of the workshop, **compile stories in a small publication** (a magazine or chapbook) and **hold a public reading**.

MORE RESOURCES: housingactionil.org/storytelling

QUESTIONS? IDEAS? GET IN TOUCH:

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SESSIONS

At each session, participants should be encouraged to discuss topics that are important to their lives. When it comes time to write, suggest one or two writing prompts based on particularly compelling issues the group has discussed and/or solicit prompt ideas from the group. However, participants are always free to write about whatever they choose.

Encourage participants to respond to the prompt by writing a personal narrative of their experience related to the topic (e.g., a time one was discriminated against, rather than one's opinion about discrimination.).

There are several reasons for this emphasis:

- Participants who generally don't think of themselves as agents of change or historical actors come to appreciate how interesting and meaningful their life experiences are
- Knowledge and opinions derive from experiences: we are all experts on our own lives, and our lives provide us with broader insight about the world
- Through personal narrative writing, participants develop the craft of recounting a good story, an effective way of sharing experiences, and offering counsel to others

Typically, participants write during the last 15 – 30 minutes of each session. The idea is not to create a final draft, but to generate a story that can be the basis for eventually developing a more polished one. Some participants will be more comfortable speaking, in which case it may be useful to record them talking and transcribe their stories. As the workshop progresses, you may want to include short writing exercises that focus on some facet of writing, such as dialogue, setting, or structure.

DISCUSSION

Encourage everyone to talk about the style and content of a story to help the teller become more effective. Some helpful ways to respond:

- Share something you learned from the story, or your main takeaway from it
- Indicate something you learned about the writer
- Pick a specific part of the story to discuss and share how it affected you
- Share what questions you were left with
- Identify specific words, phrases, or passages that were compelling and talk about why
- Discuss whether the story uses detail, repetition, dialogue, or other techniques
- Talk about where the story started and why



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WORKSHOP PUBLICATION

Seeing your story in print can be a very powerful experience. Creating a publication allows for the storytellers to share their experiences and thoughts with family, friends, and the community, as well as create the opportunity to become part of the public discussion about issues that matter to them. Storytellers may not wish to have their photos included in a publication, or may choose a pseudonym. Some participants may not be interested in being a part of the publication at all. The facilitator may choose to write or co-write an introduction.

Creating the publication itself can be done simply by printing, folding, and stapling paper. Ideally, storytellers receive at least a few copies to share with friends and family, and additional copies are available to distribute at public readings and within the community. Please share any publications with the Supportive Housing Providers Association (SHPA) and Housing Action Illinois—we would love to see what you've put together.

COMMUNITY READING

It's helpful if participants know from the time they start the workshops that they will have at least one opportunity to share their stories with family, friends, and the wider community through a public reading. At this public celebration, participants can read their pieces and answer questions about their stories. This reading is best held at a new location to distinguish it from the regular workshop sessions, such as a local coffee shop or library.

You may want to identify additional opportunities for participants to share their stories, such as at public forums, arts events, or meetings with legislators.

TAKING ACTION

Telling stories is a powerful way of creating change. Stories shape understanding, build connection, shed light on problems, and identify solutions. While this guide is primarily focused on the creation and sharing of stories, change is often a natural goal of workshops. Participants may decide individually or collectively that they want to do something about an issue. This should be driven by the group, not the facilitator, but the facilitator should support the participants in identifying ways to learn more, develop a plan, and take action. For instance, several public housing residents in a Community Writing Project group used the publication from their group to introduce themselves to local activist groups, which they joined. Together, they are working to preserve the rights of people living in the public housing complex.

A natural focus may be raising awareness of and advocating for supportive housing programs.

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PROMPTS

What is a change you'd like to see in the world?

I'd like to tell a story about _____ so that I can _____.

What is something someone said to you that you when you were little that you've never forgotten?

What is something you said to someone else that you hope has stuck with them?

Writing about Home

My favorite thing about living where I do is....

The most challenging thing about living where I do is....

Tell me about your home (or a place that feels like home). As soon as you walk in, what will I....

- See
- Hear
- Feel
- Taste
- Think, wish, or hope

Getting Started

- Start with something memorable someone said to you
- A moment when you defended yourself (or your family or community)
- A turning point in your life
- Making something out of nothing
- Biting your tongue
- Taking a risk
- Breaking with tradition
- Finding a silver lining
- An object you treasure

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