


Please note:

The information in this article is outdated, and is provided for its historical value. I wrote “How to Write Social Stories” in 1992. Since then, there have been many changes to the Social Story definition and the informal guidelines are now defining Criteria. Most of the sample stories in this article do not meet today’s Social Stories 10.2 Criteria.

Please keep the date of each resource in mind as you explore the history of Social Stories and these original documents.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Carol Gray", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.



HOW TO WRITE SOCIAL STORIES

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My sincere appreciation to the parents and professionals who have shared their experiences with social stories this past year with me. My special thanks to Joy Garand, a teacher of special needs children at Taylor Elementary School, Cincinnati, Ohio, for sharing her talent, experiences, insights: valued contributions which continue to help in the development of the art of writing social stories.

HOW TO WRITE SOCIAL STORIES

Getting Started...

Social stories describe social situations in terms of relevant social cues, and often define appropriate responses. Social stories present social information to students with autism, while minimizing the social aspects of teacher-student interactions involved in instruction. In this way, social information is presented as clearly as possible, with limited interference from the social interactions involved in traditional teaching.

Social Stories are written in response to individual student needs. These needs may be identified through:

- 1) observations of situations which are difficult for the student;
- 2) responses to questions about social situations which indicate the student is "mis-reading" a given situation; and/or
- 3) social skills assessments, curriculums.

Based on identified needs, social stories may:

- 1) describe any situation in terms of the relevant social cues and/or correct responses in a non-threatening format;
- 2) personalize or emphasize social skills covered in any social skills training program;
- 3) translate goals (possibly written by students) into understandable steps;
- 4) explain the "fictional" qualities of commercial stories/movies/etc., identifying realistically appropriate from inappropriate interactions depicted in those stories;
- 5) teach routines, as well as helping students to accommodate changes in routine or "forgetting";
- 6) teach academic material in a realistic, social "backdrop", assisting students in relating learned skills to real situations; and/or
- 7) other possibilities, limited only by creativity.

Social Stories may be written by:

- 1) parents,
- 2) professionals, and/or
- 3) peers.

To begin writing a social story:

A social story may be DESCRIPTIVE or DIRECTIVE, although most are a mixture of both. DESCRIPTIVE social stories describe a social situation. They contain objective information which describes what people do in a given situation, and why. For example, "The bell rings when recess is finished. The children line up at the door. They wait for the teacher to come." DIRECTIVE social stories are a sequential, step by step list of expected responses to a situation, for example, "When the bell rings, I will line up at the door. I will wait for Mrs. Brown to come."

To write a DESCRIPTIVE story, visualize a given situation. Objectively describe step by step what happens in that situation, what people do, and why. Describe the situation matter-of-factly, from the perspective of an **objective onlooker**. Do not assume the reaction of the observer. (For example, state, "The children play soccer at recess." not "Recess is always fun for everyone.") From this **objective** viewpoint, social stories assist/reinforce/support students as they learn to focus on relevant cues.

To write a DIRECTIVE story, start by writing down what a student needs to do to be successful in a given situation start to finish. Basically, the result should be similar to a task analysis comprised of clear, short, sentences. If writing about walking in the hall at school in a line, one step may be to walk quietly. Many of the steps in stories written by Joy Garand, a teacher in Cincinnati, are stated as goal statements, for example, "I will walk quietly."

Combine both DESCRIPTIVE and DIRECTIVE statements as is needed for an individual student. The more descriptive a story is, the more opportunity there is for a student to determine his own new responses to a situation. For some students, a totally descriptive story will be confusing, leaving the student at a loss for what to do or what is expected. These students will need directive statements in the story.

Guidelines for first time social story writers:

- 1) When writing a social story, write well within a student's comprehension level, using vocabulary and print size appropriate for a student's ability.
- 2) Usually, social stories are written in the present tense, as though someone is describing the events as they take place.
- 3) Social stories may be written in the future tense, to describe an upcoming situation to make it seem less threatening. Relating aspects of the anticipated event to a more familiar event, setting, or activity may be helpful.
- 4) Social stories may not need illustrations to be effective. In fact, illustrations may too narrowly define a situation. Joy Garand believes illustrations may be distracting to some students. Joy uses black paper as a background to the written portion of a story (a few sentences per page). This focuses attention on the written words, which appear at the bottom of the black sheet of paper. Photographs may also be effective.
- 5) Social stories often describe one aspect or one step of a social situation per page, to further define the separate steps of a situation. **Use only a few sentences per page.** This also allows the story to be used as a curriculum story, or an interactive story (two variations of social stories described in the next section).

Variations

Interactive Social Stories and Changes in Routine

Interactive stories are social stories which actively involve the student in practicing certain skills without the confusion of the actual situation surrounding them. At the hands of creativity and efforts to individualize, the possibilities are endless.

One example: Each page of a story describes a step of a daily routine. Each step of the routine is described on its own sheet of paper. At the end of the story, is a checklist of the steps comprising the routine, and the student "checks off" each completed step contained in the story.

By removing any selected page of the story, a step of the routine is eliminated. First, the student is given the

opportunity to remove a page, causing the character in the story to "forget" a step of the routine - which the student indicates when he reaches the final checklist and does not place a check by the missing step. The character receives "help" from the student as the student replaces the missing step and checks off the missing step.

Later, staff may "pull" a step from the story in the same way (by removing one of the pages). By paying close attention, the student identifies the forgotten step as he completes the checklist. The student must now request help from the teacher to replace the missing step into the story.

Through this process, a student learns to handle "forgetting" by asking for help first within the safer, less stressful context of reading a story. By reading the story several times, the student learns the routine described by the story as well, and may identify and handle forgotten steps more appropriately when actually completing the targeted routine.

Curriculum Stories

Many students, particularly those with autism, have difficulty applying academic skills to "real life" situations. The value or impact of a social story can be expanded by using a format to allow the insertion of a variety of related academic pages into the story, without changing the story line. The result is a curriculum story.

Curriculum stories incorporate various aspects of the academic curriculum into the social story, and keep social stories (which may need to be re-read a few times to be effective) interesting. Social stories can be written so curriculum pages can be easily inserted throughout the story. One example: after a description and photograph of children in line, a math insert may ask the student to count the number of children (or the number of girls, boys, or smiles) standing in line in the photograph on the previous page.

Academic curriculum inserts can address a child's specific academic objective, encouraging application of writing, math, or guessing skills, for example. Curriculum stories use targeted social situations (or any situation) from a child's specific life experiences as a "backdrop" to demonstrate the functional application and relationships between academic concepts and everyday life.

A Generic Social Story

Generic social stories can be useful in providing support staff with the needed confidence to write a social story. If social stories prove effective for a student, it may be difficult for a teacher or parent to keep up with the demand. One solution: the teacher or parent writes a generic story, an outline, and the support staff individualize and bring it to the final copy. With a generic story as a starting point, it is easier to write a final individualized story than to write a social story from "scratch."

A generic social story is attached. This story is written in a DESCRIPTIVE format. Parts of the story could be deleted, or altered to describe a student's specific environment and situation. Also, DIRECTIVE statements could be added to individualize the story. Basically, a generic story provides direction for writing an individualized story for a student.

The attached story is written about standing in line. For the purposes of this handout (i.e. to save paper), the story is divided into sections. Each section of the story should be placed at the bottom of it's own page with photographs to illustrate the story, or a black background. Notice the amount of copy per section (per page in a story developed for a student) is limited to one step or concept.

Other Ideas

Stories on Audio Tape

For some students, especially young students or students who cannot read independently, making a cassette tape to accompany a story may be helpful. Simply read the story aloud into a cassette recorder and ring a bell or other signal to indicate when to turn each page. Teach the child how to use the cassette player along with the printed story.

Stories on Videotape

To place a story on videotape, film each page. Allow enough enough time for the child to read each page. If the story is read aloud onto the videotape while filming, it will allow two options - for the story to be read to the child (volume on), or for the child to read the story himself (volume off).

It's Like Learning to Ride a Bicycle

It may be awkward to learn, but once "the hang of it" is mastered, it's easy. And, like riding a bicycle, it may save a lot of time in the long run. The best way to learn is practice!

LINES

BY CAROL GRAY
JENISON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Sometimes people stand in lines.

People stand in lines for different reasons.
There are standing lines, walking lines, slow
lines, and group lines.

Standing lines are for waiting. Sometimes
standing lines of people wait for everyone to
get in line. Sometimes standing lines wait
for the right time to start moving.

Standing lines don't always just stand.
Sometimes people get tired of standing, and
they move -- they might scratch their head
or move around a little. Sometimes when
they move they touch people around them.

Standing lines usually become walking lines. Everyone who was standing, starts walking. In a walking line, you follow the person in front of you. Walking lines are for safely moving people from one place to another. Walking lines are used to move children in schools.

Slow lines are lines that move once in a while. People in slow lines stand, then walk a few steps, and stand again. Sometimes, the lines of people in a grocery store are like this. Sometimes, the lines at McDonalds' are like this.

SAMPLE SOCIAL STORIES

Social stories can be used to address a limitless variety of situations and behaviors. The stories on these pages provide two examples. The story below was written by Joy Garand, a teacher of special needs children in Cincinnati, Ohio, to decrease the aggressiveness of one of her student's toward his sister's cat, Roshie. The story was effective within a very short time.

This story is printed here as it came out of the computer. Before reading it to Joy's student, the sentences were cut apart in one to three sentence blocks, and were placed on separate pages (one concept to a page). For each page of the story, each block was pasted to the lower section of black construction paper. These pages were inserted into clear plastic pages. Notice the use of short sentences, large print, and both descriptive and directive sentences.

On the back is a story Joy wrote to assist a student included in an art class. This story was also effective within a very short time. The black lines indicate a new page.

MY SISTER HAS A NEW BABY CAT.
A BABY CAT IS CALLED A KITTEN.
JACQUIE'S KITTEN'S NAME IS ROSHIE.
WHEN I PLAY WITH THE KITTEN I PLAY
NICELY.
I PET THE KITTEN GENTLY.
I DO NOT PICK THE KITTEN UP OR THROW
THE ROSHIE.
JACQUIE GETS UPSET IF I AM NOT NICE
TO ROSHIE.
I WILL PLAY NICELY WITH ROSHIE.
I PLA NICELY WITH JACQUIE.
I CAN GIVE ROSHIE A KISS "GOODNIGHT."
I LOVL ROSHIE.

ART CLASS

BY JOY GARAND
TAYLOR ELEMENTARY
CINCINNATI

I go to art on Tuesdays.
I walk quietly to art class.

I sit in my seat in art.

Mr. Rielag teaches art.
I listen to Mr. Rielag in art class.
I complete my work and sit quietly.

I always sit in my seat.
Today I made _____.
I was very proud of my work.
I walk quietly to room 135.