How to write a Social Story™ Guide

This fact sheet has been prepared for the City of Mandurah by ASA Access Consultancy for community members and groups to create their own social stories.

Background

A social story or social script uses storytelling techniques to explain new experiences and environments. Anyone who is nervous when attending a place or event for the first time may benefit from access to a social story.

In the 1990s, the pioneer of social stories, Carol Gray, first started to create social stories for children with autism. Nowadays, it is recognised that social stories can be used by anyone to help them understand a concept, an environment or prepare them for a new experience. This includes children, young people, and adults and people with intellectual, learning or cognitive disability.

We want everyone who interacts with the City of Mandurah to feel welcomed, accepted and understood. A social story is a tool that demonstrates our recognition of the importance of preparing for new experiences. It helps ensure people feel ready and experience a sense of physical, social, and emotional safety.

Creating a social story

Step 1: Understand your audience

Understanding your audience is one of the first steps to creating a social story. Make sure you do some research. Think about the who, why, what, when, where and how.

- Who will read the social story?
- Where will you find them and how will you connect with them?
- What information do they need to know?
- How will the social story help them to navigate the environment or understand a new concept?
- What information can you include to help them to feel physically, socially, and emotionally safe?

Engaging people who use social stories in the planning and testing phase is best practice and helps to eliminate assumptions. We call this consumer testing or user experience (UX).

The following groups and organisations may be able to help connect you with people who use social stories.

City of Mandurah Access and Inclusion Advisory Group
Email: cdo@mandurah.wa.gov.au
Website: https://www.mandurah.wa.gov.au/community/programs-and-activities/Access-and-Inclusion/Access-and-inclusion-advisory-group

People with Disabilities WA (PWdWA)
PWdWA is the peak organisation advocating for the rights and empowering the voices of all people with disability in WA.

Phone: (08) 9420 7279
Website: https://www.pwdwa.org/

Developmental Disability WA (DDWA)
DDWA is the peak organisation in WA for people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities and their families, and the organisations and people who support them.

Phone: (08) 9420 7203
Website: https://ddwa.org.au/

Autism Association of WA
Established in 1967, the Autism Association of WA is the largest specialist lifespan organisation in Australia providing services to people with Autism.

Phone: (08) 9489 8900
Website: https://www.autism.org.au/

Step 2: Select a topic

Social stories have a wide range of uses. Think about where you can use a social story. Ask people who use social stories to share their ideas.

Areas where social stories are commonly used include:

- Services (e.g., library, leisure centre)
- Events (e.g., exhibitions, festivals, annual celebrations)
- Places (e.g., parks, beaches)
- Learning a new skill (e.g., learning to swim, checking out a library book)
- Understanding something new (e.g., venue safety procedures, club rules).

Below are links to different types of social stories.

Access Ability Australia's social story library:
https://accessabilityaustralia.com/social-stories-library-page/

Amaze's social scripts:
https://www.amaze.org.au/training/social-scripts/

Carol Gray's social story sampler:
https://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/social-story-sampler/

City of Mandurah social story example:
https://www.mandurah.wa.gov.au/-/media/files/com/downloads/explore/events/christmas-in-mandurah/christmas-lights-trail-2023---social-story.pdf

Step 3: Use photos

To support the social story, you will need to collect relevant photos and images. This is a good opportunity to liaise with your communications and media teams. Check which photos are already available and whether there is an opportunity to take new photos to support the social story. Think about how the person will navigate the environment or experience.

Tips for using photos:

- Real photos where possible.
- Real places and people (e.g., MARC leisure centre, MARC lifeguard).
- If photos of people are used, represent diversity.
- Good spacing and consistency.

For universal access, it's good practice to also create an alternative text-only or Microsoft Word version of the social story. This may be easier to access for people who use read aloud tools or screen readers.

Step 4: Structure and content

Tips for structuring a social story:

- As with any story include an introduction, a middle and an end. Set the scene, describe and present the important information, and end the social story in a positive way.

  Example sentence for starting a social story: "This is a photo of the MARC. The MARC is the Mandurah's Aquatic and Recreation Centre."
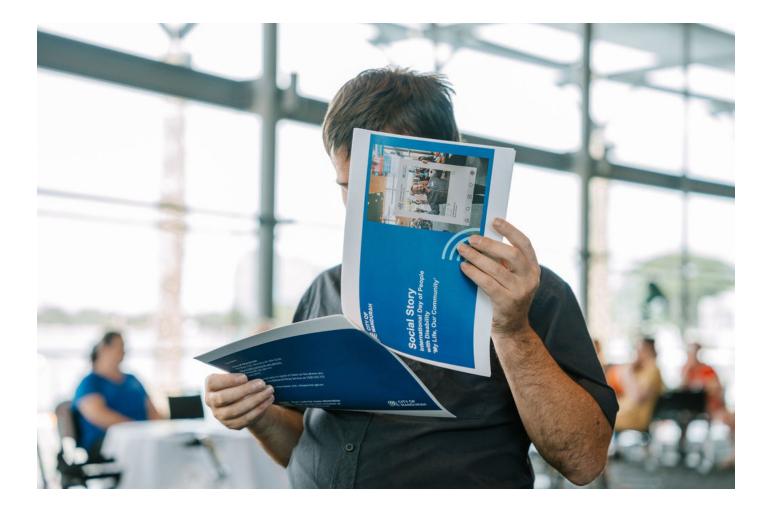
  Example of a closing sentence: "Going to the Mandurah Christmas Lights Trail is fun."

- Use a layout that is clear, concise and consistent.
- Use a large sans serif font size (e.g., 14pt Arial).
- Write the story about a single concept, event, or activity. Use each page to describe one aspect of the story.
- Write mainly in first person. Use first person (I, we) or third person (he, she, it, they) but not second person (you).
- One to four sentences per page.

It is good practice to use Plain English for all public facing resources.

Tips for using Plain English include:

- Being clear and literal.
- Avoiding the jargon and technical language.
- Avoiding double negatives (e.g., I am not, not going to allow you to go out to play).
- Defining unusual terms and acronyms.
- Using everyday language.

Step 5: Describe the scene

There are different types of sentences used in social stories. These include sentences that 'describe' and 'partial' sentences that 'coach'.

The aim of a **descriptive sentence** is to create an image in the mind of the reader. Examples of descriptive sentences include: "I am going to the MARC for a swim." "There will be a lot of lights at the event."

Descriptive sentences include writing about:

- a person or people
- an object
- a place
- an event

Coaching sentences are optional in a social story. The aim of a coaching sentence is to gently direct a person's behaviour or provide the person with options and choices. Coaching sentences can also be used to coach other people and groups.

Examples of coaching sentences include "I may have to wait my turn. I will try to wait patiently." "I may choose to swim or sit at the side of the pool".

Some social stories include **'partial sentences'** where the person can fill in the blanks. An example of a partial sentence is "I am going to the MARC for a swim on [date] at [time]".

Step 6: Include key staff

Where relevant, other people may be included in the social story. They may include reception staff, librarians, swimming instructors, lifeguards, volunteers and first responders. When describing other people, think about how the reader will identify the person and what their role is. Include a photo. It's a good idea to keep other people to a minimum and just include the key people who are relevant to the story.

"I may see volunteers. They will be wearing bright yellow shirts. A volunteer can help me if I have a question."

Step 7: Avoid assumptions

One of the biggest challenges in a social story is to avoid assumptions and stereotypes. We are all unique and have different wants, needs and choices.

One method to avoid assumptions is to use words like 'may' and 'might', where the term 'may' has a slightly higher likelihood of occurring than the word 'might'.

"I am going to Crabfest..."
- "I **will** eat some crab."
- "I **may** eat some crab."
- "I **might** eat some crab."

Step 8: Think safety

One of the main aims of a social story is to help the person feel physically, socially and emotionally safe. Understanding your audience is important, while also avoiding assumptions. Noting that while some people may be 'sensory avoidant', others may be 'sensory seekers'.

You may also include sentences aimed to reassure and comfort the reader, demonstrating understanding and acceptance.

Ask people who use social stories what helps to make them feel safe.

Examples of sentences that support safety include:

"There may be music and other sounds at Crabfest. I might bring my ear defenders."

"There will be a lot of lights at the event. This is okay, lights can be fun. To help me with the lights, I might bring my sunglasses."

Step 9: Include instructions

Think about the information you want the reader to know about how to use a social story. Include this information at the start of the story. You may want to direct some instructions to the support person for them to use prompts to monitor understanding.

You can encourage re-reading the social story after the event. This is a great way to celebrate achievement and to think about what to do next time. It may be that the activity such as a swimming lesson is repeated.

An example of what to include in is included below:

> *A social story uses storytelling techniques to explain new experiences and environments. Anyone who is nervous when attending a place or event for the first time may benefit from access to a social story.*
>
> *We recommend you follow these guidelines.*
> - *Read the social story preferably two weeks in advance of visit.*
> - *If reading to someone, help the person to understand key points.*
> - *Once the visit has taken place, re-read the social story to celebrate achievements.*

Step 10: Test and re-test

Like any story, it is a good idea to test the social story with the intended audience. You may end up with more than one review and re-write some parts of the story. This is okay, it's all part of creating the story.

After an event or activity, you can ask people for their feedback. For ongoing activities, like swimming lessons, it is a good idea to set a time to review the social story as some things may change over time.

Autism Awareness Training

Amaze has developed an online training resource 'What is Autism'. Visit the Amaze website to access this free training https://www.amaze.org.au/register-what-is-autism/.