

## SECTION 4

# Using the Power of Your Resilient Voice to Bring Your Own Words to Life

Before we continue working on your story, let's first acknowledge your resilience as someone who has experienced sexual or gender-based violence. Take some time to check in with how you are feeling. Please remember to be compassionate with yourself. You are doing difficult and meaningful work. Incorporate ways to acknowledge and celebrate yourself and your journey. In this next section, you will have space to refine, redefine, and continue working on your story.

## Resilience

- \* Resilience is the process of adapting as best you can in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, or significant sources of stress.
- \* Being resilient does not mean that you don't experience stress, emotional upheaval, or suffering.
- \* Being resilient should not be equated with mental toughness. It includes working through emotional pain and suffering.
- \* You can learn to become resilient by being flexible, adaptable and committed to perseverance and by using a combination of inner strengths and outer resources. There isn't a universal formula – all people are different.

## Keep in mind:

- \* You can bring a new perspective to a story from your past, and to what comes after it.
- \* You can break your silence.
- \* You can keep rewriting and transforming.

## How can we use resilience as a framework to tell our story?

Thinking of yourself as the main character in your life story, not the trauma, can help you shift your perspectives on situations. Instead of staying stuck in the same storyline, you can break a common habit of telling stories about your life in a way that you forget you are not merely just a character in a story to whom things happen to, but one who likely has demonstrated bravery, courage, and resilience. You can be the creator of your story and tell a story that embraces the personal victories you have achieved that have built your character – like facing a fear, changing your attitude about yourself, or overcoming an obstacle. This, of course, does not excuse or undo the injustices you experienced, but it can support you in celebrating your character and your strength.

## Possible new ways to tell your story:

- \* Focus on how you moved forward positively from the emotional upheaval and crisis you experienced by focusing on the obstacle and challenges you overcame.

- \* Focus on how you can take care of the “unfinished business” of your experience and convey your feelings, expectations, and intentions for yourself and others.
- \* Focus on using a metaphor to tell your story using poetic writing.
- \* Focus on the affirmatives, like your awareness of your best qualities and strengths that you utilized to cope/ survive/ thrive, and how you want to live your life in the future.
- \* Focus on your legacy by writing about your values, what you most want to be known for, what major lessons did you learn that you want to pass onto others, what were your turning points in your recovery from sexual violence and what were any epiphanies that took place.
- \* Focus on who you are in the present as a result of what you experienced. You can achieve this by examining six aspects of mindfulness: your current awareness, what you give your attention to now, what you have come to accept, what you appreciate about yourself and your body now, and your current personal affirmation.

## Time to Freewrite!

The key to freewriting is to write non-stop for a set period of time without worrying about grammar or tone or “how it sounds.” Write what comes to mind. As you complete this freewrite, check in with yourself to see if your old story still serves you. The goal of this freewrite is for you to consider the resilience and reframing perspectives you explored earlier, as you write your story. Think about whether you can find a new perspective, one that will better support you.

- \* Find a comfortable spot.
- \* Forget about rules! Grammar, punctuation, and spelling should NOT matter. Just write.
- \* Write for at least 15 minutes.
- \* Write as often and as much you would like. Always giving it your best. Freewriting can become a regular practice.
- \* When you’re done, re-read and reflect on what you have written. You may be surprised at the stories or thoughts you hold within.
- \* Develop a personal writing practice that works for you. Every writer is unique, and by finding how you write best, you will grow your words and your voice.
- \* Everyone has a story to tell. Focus on your truth.

# ***FREEWRTING SPACE***



A large area of the page is filled with horizontal blue lines, providing a space for freewriting. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across most of the width of the page.



## Structuring your story

Now that you have worked through your story and experience in a number of different ways, you can take what you've written and brainstorm an outline for the story you want to tell on your terms. Where do you want your story to begin? And, where do you want your story to end? There is no right or wrong order regarding which of these questions to answer first. Generally, many people find that starting at the end can be helpful, as it can often serve as a north star for where you want your story to go. Take about 5-10 minutes to write for each of these sections to ensure your story has a clear beginning, middle, and end that feels authentic to the story you want to tell. It can be helpful for this section to ask yourself if you have turned to this workbook to share with yourself, a loved one, or a large audience. If the intention of sharing your story happens to be to spark action, this is something you can consider brainstorming for your ending.

**Beginning:** Review your prior writing. *What feels like the right place for your story to begin?*

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**Middle:** Often this can look like demonstrating how you overcame an obstacle using detailed language. *Is there a point like this that you would like to highlight?*

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**Ending:** *What feels like a powerful place to end your story?* Keep the action and resilience you may want to inspire in mind (if applicable).

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## What makes a story memorable and compelling?

Often, in general storytelling, for larger audiences the more details and descriptions that you can include in a story, the more you will place your reader or listener right in the moment with you. However, given that with sexual and gender-based violence we often don't want to re-trigger ourselves or others, we encourage you to think about what details and descriptions you feel comfortable sharing when writing your story. This may mean that certain details are left out - and that is completely okay. This is your story.

Here's some suggestions on using details and descriptions in safe ways when speaking about your experience.

**1. Show Don't Tell.** As much as possible, don't tell us what you did, show us how you did it. Showing often uses description and action words to depict a story for the reader/listener. Telling is a more general statement of what happened.

*Examples:*

**Telling:**

I was sad to see my daughter leave.

**Showing:**

I wiped the tears down my face as I watched my daughter board the airplane.

**Telling:**

She is scared.

**Showing:**

My sister wakes up screaming and starts shaking uncontrollably. I grab her and hold her close. I remind her that it is just a dream and that she is safe.

In the telling examples above, the reader or listener is told the emotions. In the showing examples, they are given a descriptive picture of what is happening that causes them to vividly see, follow, and be in the story with you.

**2. Use Your Authentic Voice.** Your story is yours—no one else's. It's important you stay true to yourself as you tell it. As you begin practicing, pretend you are telling the story to a friend or loved one in your life. If it's an option, it can be helpful to actually practice telling your story to people who are close to you so they can also give you feedback and help you feel more at ease if your intention is to later share with larger groups.

**3. Stay connected to why you may want to share your story (if you think you'll share it with anyone).** When sharing about sexual and gender-based violence, it's important to stay connected with what inspired you to come forward to share—as that will drive the tone and delivery of your story. Did you want to share for self-healing? Therapeutic practices? Inspiring other survivors? Educating others? Making people feel less alone? Getting lawmakers to take sexual assault seriously? Allow the passion and drive that brought you to this moment to support you in telling your story.

**Now that you have reviewed supporting frameworks, tips, and tools to shape your story, take your time and take a look back at ALL of your writing in this workbook.** Use the space on the next page to re-write your final story. You get to decide the message of your story and your audience. Is it for yourself? Friends and family? The public? There is no right or wrong answer. If you are thinking about sharing your story publicly for political or social action, be sure to review Section 5 before doing your final freewrite and Section 6 before sharing!



## SECTION 5

# Sharing Your Story, On Your Terms

This workbook was designed to meet every individual where they are in their healing process. This is in no way intended to influence people with where, how, or even if they should or should not share their story out loud. Deciding to share your story is a completely personal decision. You are in the driver's seat. **The following sections are here IF you have turned to this workbook because you are passionate about sharing your story to inspire political or social action.**

Some ideas for sharing your story in political and social contexts are:

- \* Encouraging others to seek help with their experience of sexual violence, by sharing your personal experience of recovery and healing, or highlighting challenges you experienced to improve services and resources to help survivors.
- \* Educating elected officials, leaders of institutions, policymakers, and others about the issues surrounding sexual violence and the needs of survivors.
- \* Speaking to the general public or the media to humanize the issues of sexual violence, reduce misconceptions and myths about sexual violence, and provide firsthand knowledge about your experience.

Before you shape your story to tell it publicly, be sure to consider how and when you want to share it and to think through the possible outcomes of doing so. The next section, *Making an Informed Decision About Telling Your Story, On Your Terms*, can help guide you.

### How do you tell a story for social change?

Everyone has their own ways of writing and telling stories for social change. There is no one-size fits all when writing about social inequities. Below are some guiding questions to ask yourself that will help you focus your goals.

- \* What is the message I want to share?
- \* Why is it important that we have more spaces to talk about this?
- \* Why is it critical that action needs to be taken?
- \* What does the action I want to inspire look like?
- \* How can I use my writing or personal story to give a face or name to the statistics?
- \* How can I write about this issue without it sounding too much like a lecture (ie. not talking **at** people but **with** people)?
- \* Am I speaking from my heart, and is this my authentic voice?

### Tips for telling your story publicly

Telling your story publicly can be challenging, but it can also be a release, a part of your

healing, or an empowering experience. It can be helpful to remember that the injustice you are speaking about is bigger than you - and while our stories are intimate, vulnerable, and about us, they are also a part of a much wider structural injustice. Our stories are our testaments to how the personal is still political.

For those of you that plan on speaking at public events, there is a world of public speaking tips that can help you. Below are some key tactical tips to support you in speaking at public events where your intention may be to share and also spark action.

**1. Be clear on what you want to share, and practice sharing**

Sometimes dipping your toes in the water can prepare you for the plunge! Make sure you have spent some time feeling comfortable with sharing your story, and remind yourself of any commitments you made on what you will and won't share. Then, try sharing your story with loved ones and trusted, supportive friends before speaking in a larger public forum. This can help put you at ease and help you get comfortable telling your story. It can also help to reduce any anxiety you may have.

**2. Have a storytelling plan in place**

Experienced presenters will often have markers in mind to help propel them through their presentation. This means being clear on the beginning, middle and end of your story. Think of this as your own personal story map that will give you a clear direction for where your story needs to go and help you get through any moments in which you add or forget something (in the case where you aren't reading prepared remarks from a page).

**3. Practice in front of a mirror or a recording device**

While it may seem vulnerable, practicing in front of a mirror or recording yourself on camera can support you by helping you become aware of your body language, tone, and speed. Practicing in this way will help you identify what unintentional mannerisms you may want to change and which ones you may want to embrace. Sometimes you may notice that your body is trying to communicate through your movements. Go with the flow. Your body is trying to support you in communicating your message. Don't be afraid to welcome its support fully and find ways to have it become a part of your practice.

**4. Practice with distractions**

It can be helpful to practice with distractions - i.e. maybe have the tv or stereo on in the background. This will support you with staying on topic, no matter what kind of movement or background noise there may be in the audience.

**5. Be intentional with your tone and projection**

Get in touch with what emotions you want to convey and find the places in your story where it feels natural to bring them out. While practicing, it may be helpful to note or highlight places in the margins where you want to stress or project something in a different tone. Practicing your tone and projection in this manner will support you with accessing the emotion naturally when you share your story.

**6. Speak slowly and incorporate silence**

When speaking publicly, our adrenaline can often kick-in making us unaware of how fast we may be speaking. Practice speaking slowly. Almost unnaturally slowly. Record yourself as you practice as it will help you hear your speed, but keep in mind that on



the day you may naturally speed up. Thus, it's important to practice speaking sl-ow-ly and to embrace silent pauses. The words you are saying are important and needed. It's critical that they get to be heard and that you fully believe that they deserve to be heard.

## **7. Embrace any nerves and anxiety**

Keep in mind, most people, no matter how seasoned they may be at public speaking, get nervous. It is natural to feel nervous before, during, or even after you speak. This in NO way means you will do poorly. That adrenaline rush can often just mean that you care about the subject you are speaking about. The rush can also support you in feeling more alert and present. It can be challenging for many of us to share parts of our experiences that are so intimate, personal, and vulnerable to a room of people. Try to view any nerves and anxiety as strengths instead of thinking of them as things there to harm you.

### **The 3-Minute Rule**

Here's how national and international poetry slam artist and co-creator of this workbook, Roxanna Azari, deals with public speaking anxiety: the 3-minute rule.

*People don't believe me when I tell them that I am shy. They always say things like 'Yeah right. You just performed in front of 1,500 people.' They don't know the amount of self-doubt, anxiety, and self-bullying that happens in the background leading up to the moment I step on stage. But that's my truth. As a teen, I created a system for myself. I called it my '3-minute rule.' I honestly still use it all these years later. What I tell myself is that for 3 minutes all my fears, anxieties, and worries are not as important as the message I am here to share. I say, the topic I am here to talk about today is much bigger and more important than my fears. So I negotiate with myself - I say for 3-minutes...all those fears need to take the back seat. I reassure myself that all the fears are welcome back after - but for those 3 minutes, they can't be more important than the social issue at hand. Now that I perform more and more, the 3-minutes have increased to 2-3 hours.*

No matter where on the spectrum of comfort you fall when it comes to speaking and sharing your story, Roxy's 3-minute rule may be a tool that can support you. The tool encourages you to connect with your impact and message - it acknowledges your fears are there, but it reminds you that your message is far more important.

## **8. Command the space**

Try your best to be confident in your vulnerability:

- \* Know your message and stay connected to why sharing your story is important.
- \* Own your story. Know that it is a powerful contribution to this movement.
- \* You, your experience, and your story matter. Speak with the intention that your words are here to move people to action.

## **9. Make eye contact**

Maintaining eye contact while speaking about something deeply personal can be difficult, but it is a powerful way to connect with the audience members who will feel you are talking directly to them. As difficult as it may be - prepare yourself by practicing looking up and around so that it can feel more natural the day of your share. Remember that eye contact helps create a connection.

## Finding places to share your story on your terms

Below are some suggestions for places to share your story on your terms when you are looking for public platforms to share.

\* **RAINN (Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network)** has a Speakers Bureau that connects survivors with opportunities to share their stories and educate the public through speaking events, school events, and media interviews.

**Contact:** [rainn.org/join-rainn-speakers-bureau](http://rainn.org/join-rainn-speakers-bureau) or [speakersbureau@rainn.org](mailto:speakersbureau@rainn.org)

\* **Take Back the Night.** Many colleges, universities, and rape crisis centers sponsor “Take Back the Night” rallies at which student survivors speak about their victimization. The Take Back the Night Foundation lists organizations across the country that hold events.

**Contact:** [takebackthenight.org](http://takebackthenight.org) or your local college or university’s women’s center

\* **The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC)** has a list of local anti-sexual violence organizations. April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month and many rape crisis centers host events during the month honoring sexual assault survivors. The events include rallies, press conferences, and workshops.

**Contact:** 1-877-739-3895 or [nsvrc.org/organizations](http://nsvrc.org/organizations)

\* **Rape Crisis Centers.** Volunteer at your local rape crisis center. Many rape crisis centers encourage survivors to become prevention educators or ask for their assistance in workshops and trainings.

**Contact:** Call RAINN affiliate at 1-800-656-HOPE

\* **Crime Victims’ Agencies.** You may also find it helpful to connect with these agencies where you can learn about special events and programs that could lead to speaking opportunities.

**Contact:** The Office for Victims of Crime at [ovc.ojp.gov/news](http://ovc.ojp.gov/news)

\* **Elected Officials.** If there’s a specific policy concern you may have or even a proposed law to address gender-based violence, consider reaching out to your local elected officials. Your story can be a powerful tool in getting legislation passed or in getting your legislator’s attention and moving them to action. Telling your story is a key part of effective advocacy.

**Find your representative:** [ballotpedia.org/Who\\_represents\\_me](http://ballotpedia.org/Who_represents_me)

\* **Organizations & Campaigns Accepting Online Stories.** You can also submit your written story online to any of the following organizations that collect and share survivor stories (consider whether or not you are comfortable using your full name, a pseudonym, or your initials):

**Out of the Shadows’** mission is to raise awareness and educate and activate the public on sexual assault and abuse issues.

**Contact:** [outoftheshadows.today/share-my-story](http://outoftheshadows.today/share-my-story)

**Darkness to Light** is dedicated to preventing child sexual abuse

**Contact:** [d2l.org/get-involved/share-your-story](http://d2l.org/get-involved/share-your-story)

**Break the Silence Against Domestic Violence** serves victims, survivors, and families affected by domestic violence

**Contact:** [breakthesilencedv.org/share-a-story](http://breakthesilencedv.org/share-a-story)

**World Without Exploitation** is a website dedicated to ending human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, collects stories of survivors of these abuses

**Contact:** [worldwithoutexploitation.org/share-your-story](http://worldwithoutexploitation.org/share-your-story)

**Survivor Stories NOW** is an online campaign collecting stories to illustrate the need for a strong Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)

**Contact:** [survivorstoriesnow.org](http://survivorstoriesnow.org)

## Explore

- \* Speaking Out From Within: Speaking Publicly About Sexual Assault, Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) @ [pcar.org](http://pcar.org)
- \* Your Voice, Your Choice: A Survivor Media Guide, Prince Edward Island Rape and Sexual Assault Centre @ [peirsac.org](http://peirsac.org)
- \* Visions, Values, and Voice: A Communications Toolkit @ [opportunityagenda.org](http://opportunityagenda.org)
- \* Storytelling for Social Change by Frameworks Institute @ [frameworksinstitute.org/storytelling.html](http://frameworksinstitute.org/storytelling.html)
- \* Story Circles @ <https://roadside.org/program/story-circles>
- \* Guide on Developing Your Own Public Narrative @ <https://roadside.org/porgram/story-circles>
- \* How to Build a Story Bank @ [https://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/free\\_range\\_2012\\_06.pdf](https://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/free_range_2012_06.pdf)