How to write a social story

A social story is a short, simple description of what will happen in a situation, written so the reader knows what to expect. This guide shows you how to write one for your place, step by step, with an example you can follow.

At a glance

- A social story describes what will happen, step by step, so the reader knows what to expect.
- Write about one situation, from arriving to leaving.
- Write as the visitor: “When I arrive, I will…”.
- Use short, literal sentences, with one idea in each.
- Describe more than you direct, and offer choices rather than rules.
- Include noise, lights, smells, busy times and a quiet space.
- Say what might change, and that it is OK.
- Add a short video of the real place, and keep it up to date.

What is a social story?

A social story is a short description of a situation, an activity or a visit, told step by step in plain words. It explains what will happen, who will be there and what it will be like, so the reader can prepare and there are fewer surprises.

The approach was developed by Carol Gray in the early 1990s. Social stories are widely used by people with autism, their families, teachers and therapists, and they help anyone who finds new places hard: people with ADHD, anxiety or a learning disability, people living with dementia, people with sensory sensitivities, young children and first-time visitors.

For a place such as a café, a church, a school, a clinic or a venue, a social story answers the question visitors ask most: “What happens when we get there?”

How to write a social story in 8 steps

Write about one situation at a time, from the moment someone arrives to the moment they leave, in the order it happens.

1

Choose one situation

Write about one visit or one event, such as “Visiting the café” or “Your first swimming lesson”. Give it a plain title that says exactly what it is about.

2

Walk the visit yourself

Go through it as a first-time visitor would, from the car park or bus stop to the way out. Note every step, who people meet, and what they see, hear and smell.

3

Set the scene

Start with where and when: the name of the place, where it is, and when it is open or when the event happens.

4

Write the steps in order, as the visitor

Use the first person and the present or future tense: “When I arrive, I will see a green door.” Keep to one idea in each short sentence.

5

Describe more than you direct

Most sentences should simply say what happens. Where you suggest what someone can do, offer choices (“I can say hello, or wave”) rather than rules (“I must say hello”).

6

Include the senses

Mention loud noises, bright lights, strong smells, crowds and queues, and where it is quiet. Say how long a loud moment lasts.

7

Say what might change

Use “usually” and “sometimes” for things that vary, like how busy it is or who is working, and say what someone can do if they need a break.

8

Read it aloud and test it

Read it in the place and check every detail is true. Ask someone the story is for, or their family, if anything is missing or unclear.

What to note when you walk the visit

Walk the visit slowly, as someone who has never been before, and write down:

- The way in: parking, the entrance, doors, steps and lifts
- Who people will meet, and what they might say
- Where people wait, and for how long
- Noise, lights, smells, crowds and the busiest times
- Toilets, quiet spaces and where to take a break
- How to order, check in or pay, if they need to
- How the visit ends, and the way out

Words that help

Choose plain, literal words that mean exactly what they say.

Use	Avoid
“I can…” and “I might…”	“I must…” and “I have to…”
“Usually” and “sometimes”	“Always” and “never”, unless they are true
Literal words: “I can sit on a chair”	Figures of speech: “grab a seat”
The same word for the same thing every time	Switching between “counter”, “till” and “desk”
Short sentences with one idea each	Long sentences joined with “and then”
Reassurance: “That is OK.”	Warnings: “Don’t worry if…”

An example social story

Here is a short social story for a visit to a café. It starts with where and when, follows the visit in order, and ends with the things that are good to know.

Riverside Café is on River Walk. It is open every day from 9 in the morning until 5 in the afternoon.

An example: Riverside Café

Visiting the café

1. When I arrive, I will see a green door with a bell.
2. I can push the door open. The bell will ring once. That is OK.
3. Someone at the counter will say hello. I can say hello back, or wave.
4. I can choose any free table. A quiet table is by the window.
5. When I am ready, I can go to the counter to order.
6. I can say what I would like, or point to it on the menu.
7. I will pay at the counter. I can pay by card or with cash.
8. When I have finished, I can leave my cup on the table and go out through the green door.

Good to know

- The coffee machine makes a loud hiss for a few seconds when it heats milk.
- It is usually busiest between 12 and 2.
- The toilet is at the back, past the counter.

Turning it into a video social story

A short video lets people see the route and hear the place before they visit. You can film it on a phone in a few minutes.

- Hold your phone upright. Stories play full-screen, like a phone story.
- Film at a quiet time, and ask anyone who appears if they are happy to be filmed.
- Start outside the entrance and film the route in the same order as your steps.
- Move slowly, keep the phone steady, and pause on the important things, like the door or the counter.
- Keep the real sound and don't add music, so people hear what it is really like.
- One to three minutes is plenty. Make separate stories for separate parts of a visit.

With Knowing Before Going, you upload the video from your phone, add your steps and good-to-know notes underneath, and print a QR code poster for your window. Visitors scan it and watch the story full-screen, with nothing to download.

Checklist before you publish

- [ ] The title says exactly what the story is about.
- [ ] It starts with where and when.
- [ ] The steps follow the visit in order, from arriving to leaving.
- [ ] It is written as the visitor, with one idea in each short sentence.
- [ ] It mentions noise, lights, smells, busy times and a quiet space.
- [ ] It says what might change, and that it is OK.
- [ ] It offers choices, not rules.
- [ ] Every detail is true today, and someone the story is for has read it.

Questions

How long should a social story be?

Long enough to cover the visit from arriving to leaving, and no longer. For most places that is between 5 and 15 short sentences. If it grows longer, split it into separate stories, such as "Arriving" and "Having lunch".

Should a social story be written in the first person?

Usually, yes. Writing as the visitor ("I will…") helps people picture themselves there. For a young child, or for someone who prefers it, the second person ("You will…") also works. Pick one and keep to it.

Is a video better than photos?

A short video shows the route, the sounds and the size of a place in a way photos can't, and it is quick to film on a phone. Photos work well in a printed story. You can use both: a video of the visit, with the steps written underneath.

How often should we update a social story?

Whenever something a visitor would notice changes, such as a new entrance, a different layout, new uniforms or new opening times. Check it at least once a year.

Can I write a social story for an event?

Yes. Describe the event in the order it happens, with times where you know them, and say what someone can do if they need to leave early or take a break.

Who should write it?

Someone who knows the place well, ideally with help from someone the story is for, or their family. They will notice things that staff no longer see.

Make your social stories into short videos with Knowing Before Going. Film on your phone, add the steps and put a QR code in your window. Visitors watch free, with nothing to download. £10 a month per location, or £99 a year when billed annually (save £21), with unlimited social story videos.

www.knowingbeforegoing.com