



AMERICAN COLLEGE HEALTH ASSOCIATION
Campus COVID-19 Vaccination and Mitigation Initiative

Storytelling for Health Communication

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Tap into the power of storytelling

Humans are natural storytellers. We tell stories about our lives to get to know each other, express our feelings, or relax after a long day. Music, songs, and books are all different ways to tell stories. And on social media, people gravitate to authentic and real stories.

Storytelling is also a powerful tool to **educate students about health topics and promote healthy behaviors**. When you draw people in with a story, they'll be more likely to listen and take action. In this guide, you'll learn how to use stories to create health communication materials that resonate with students.



What type of story do you want to tell?

You can use storytelling to **promote healthy behaviors** or **educate students about health conditions**.

PROMOTING HEALTHY BEHAVIORS

Let's say you want to encourage students to stay safe while out with friends. You could share a story about the time you gave your best friend your keys instead of trying to drive home after a night out. You could encourage other students to share their own experiences, too.

EDUCATING STUDENTS ABOUT HEALTH CONDITIONS

Personal stories can help people understand what it's like to live with a disability or health condition. For example, imagine you recently found out you have ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder). You could share your experience with getting an ADHD diagnosis and figuring out a study routine that works for you. Or let's say your friend has lupus — a chronic (long-term) health condition that can make it challenging to keep up with class, work, and social events. Your friend could share a story about how lupus affects their daily life and relationships.



Choose a topic

Ready to create your own story? Your first step is to choose a topic. Here are a few examples to help you get started.

HEALTHY BEHAVIORS

- Getting COVID-19 or flu vaccines
- Seeing a mental health counselor or therapist
- Staying home when you're sick
- Using protection during sex
- Building healthy sleep habits
- Making physical activity a part of your routine

HEALTH CONDITIONS

- Chronic health conditions — like diabetes, lupus, or long COVID
- Disabilities that affect mobility — like cerebral palsy or multiple sclerosis
- Mental health conditions — like bipolar disorder, anxiety, or depression
- Neurological conditions — like autism or ADHD



Learn about your audience

Once you've chosen a topic for your story, it's time to identify your audience: the people you want to reach. Do you want to create communication materials for all students at your campus, or for a specific group of students? **Get to know your audience** by asking questions like:

- What might your audience already **know or believe** about your topic? Do they have **experience** with the topic?
- Do their beliefs align with the **facts** you know to be true?
- Do they have **strong feelings** about the topic?
- Which **social media platforms** does your audience use most often?
- Do they **hang out** in certain places around campus?



THE BEST WAY TO LEARN ABOUT YOUR AUDIENCE IS TO TALK TO THEM!

Interviewing people who are a part of the group you want to reach is a great way to learn more about their wants and needs. You can interview people one-on-one or in small groups — or just chat with friends and classmates who are part of your audience. Use the questions above to guide your conversation.

Identify your key messages and call to action

After thinking through the questions on the previous page, you'll have some helpful information about your audience — including their knowledge, beliefs, and experiences about your topic, their go-to social media platforms, and places where they spend time on campus. Based on what you've learned, ask yourself these 2 important questions:

WHAT DO I WANT MY AUDIENCE TO KNOW?

What are the most important things you want people to take away from your story? These are your **key messages**. To avoid information overload, aim for 1 to 3 key messages.

WHAT DO I WANT MY AUDIENCE TO DO?

What do you want people to do next after hearing your story? That next step is your **call to action**. Be sure to make your call to action clear and direct.



Choose the right format

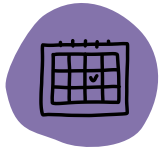
Next, it's time to choose a **format**: How will you tell your story?
Here are a few options to consider:



Share your story on **social media**. Focus on the social media platforms that your audience prefers. For example, if people are super into TikTok, time to make a video!



Create **posters** or **digital signs** to display on TV screens. Post them in areas where people hang out around campus, like the cafeteria or student center.



Host an **on-campus event** where students can tell their own stories — like an open mic night, in-person workshop, or group discussion.



Understand the risks of sharing your own story

Sharing your own experience can be a powerful way to educate others. But you may want to consider the **potential risks of sharing**, too.

If you choose to share your story online, keep in mind that **anyone** could potentially see your content — no matter what privacy settings you use! It's possible that people could potentially find your content years down the road. That includes potential employers, graduate schools, and other people or organizations who may have some control over your options in the future.



It's especially important to think carefully before sharing if your story deals with personal topics like sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, mental health, or substance use. Each person who hears your story has their own set of experiences, beliefs, assumptions, and biases. Unfortunately, some people may share negative feedback or treat you differently based on how they feel about your story.

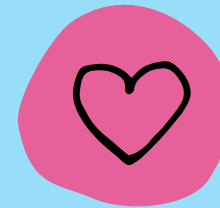
By sharing your experience, you can help to change the way people think about these important topics. But you might encounter bias or discrimination in the process. **You get to decide if the benefits outweigh the risks.**



Amplify others' stories

Amplifying other students' stories is another great way to educate your campus community about important health topics. By sharing stories that reflect the diversity of your community, you can highlight many different perspectives, including voices that are often unheard.

However, it's also important to recognize that some students — for example, LGBTQ+ students, students of color, and students who have disabilities — are more likely to experience criticism or discrimination for sharing personal experiences. Take time to **educate other students about the potential risks of sharing**, especially if you're inviting them to share stories that deal with personal topics. To help people feel more comfortable, you could also **create an online form** (e.g., using Google Forms or SurveyMonkey) and give people the option to submit stories anonymously. If you're leading an **in-person workshop** or group discussion, you could ask participants to write their story down on paper without including their name.



Treat each story with care. Always get permission to share other people's stories and clearly explain how and where you will use their words.

More ways to highlight student stories

Stories don't have to be long or focus on deeply personal topics. Even a **short quote** can lend a personal touch and capture people's attention. For example, if you're creating a poster about flu vaccination, you could include a student's quote about why they chose to get vaccinated. Be sure to pair quotes with a visual and a clear call to action (like "Get a flu vaccine"). You can also add a link for students to learn more about the topic (like a [vaccine locator](#)).



To get quotes, you can interview students about their experiences with the topic, create an online survey, or ask friends to share their thoughts. Remember to let people know how you plan to use their quote and ask permission before sharing their name or photo. You can also give people the option to share a quote anonymously.

In addition to featuring students' quotes, you can use what you've learned from interviews and surveys in other ways, too. For example, let's say you want to educate students about sexual health. Based on interviews or survey results, you could choose specific topics or themes to focus on in social media posts.



Use emotional appeals for good

If you've ever watched a commercial, a movie trailer, or a political speech, you've seen emotional appeals at work. Using **emotional appeals** means using words and images to influence people's feelings — and ultimately persuade them to take action.

Sometimes people use emotional appeals to manipulate others in more dangerous or inappropriate ways, especially on social media. Content that brings up strong feelings often gets more engagement (likes, comments, and shares) on social media. Some people deliberately create content that makes others feel angry, scared, insecure, or guilty to get a reaction. People have used these manipulative tactics to spread misinformation, or false or inaccurate messages, about vaccination and other health topics. (For tips on how to spot and address misinformation, check out our [Health and Media Literacy](#) guide.)



But you can use emotional appeals for good! Stories and quotes can bring up positive memories and emotions, motivating people to take action. The bottom line? Use emotional appeals in a constructive way and avoid using pressure or guilt to motivate people to take action. Watch out for people who use emotional appeals to spread dangerous misinformation.



Add relatable images

Authentic images that people can relate to don't just make your story look better — they also help people remember key messages and apply those takeaways to their own lives. If you're sharing your own story, you can include a photo or video of yourself — same goes for amplifying other students' stories. Otherwise, opt for stock photos that **reflect the diversity and values of your campus community** or the group of students you want to reach. You can download stock photos for a fee on websites like [Shutterstock](#) or search for free photos on sites like [Unsplash](#).

When you're choosing photos, keep these tips in mind:

- Choose realistic images over staged, glamorous-looking images
- Include diversity of age, race, ethnicity, gender expression, body type, ability, and more
- Show people in everyday situations
- Avoid showing things that could alienate or upset people (like needles or blood)



Want to get creative? Illustrations are sure to catch readers' eyes. You could even ask arts, graphic design, or marketing students for help to lend some artistic flair to your materials.



Pair stories with data

You can help people visualize important data related to your story by creating **infographics, graphs, or charts**. If you've ever read a textbook, though, you know these graphics can be tricky to understand. Try these tips to help readers avoid information overload and remember key takeaways:

- Narrow down your data — focus on 1 to 3 key facts your audience needs to know
- Choose the most important fact to be the “hero,” or the focal point, of your design
- Keep text to a minimum — write in short phrases instead of full sentences
- Include plenty of white (or blank) space
- Choose a few colors and use them consistently
- Design with social sharing in mind — for example, horizontal graphics are easier to share on social media



Storytelling resources

Check out these resources for more information and storytelling tips:

- [California Department of Public Health: Storytelling 101](#)
- [California Department of Public Health: Storytelling Ethics Checklist](#)
- [PHRASES: Strategic Storytelling for Public Health Messengers Toolkit](#)
- [World Health Organization Communication for Health: Storytelling Handbook](#)

