

Media Guide

Working with
abortion
storytellers

Created and approved
by storytellers



Planned Parenthood Advocacy Fund of Massachusetts, Inc.

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Why we created this guide

Too often, media coverage about abortion policy disregards people who have had abortions, effectively erasing them from the narrative. The real-world impact of this erasure is reinforcement of abortion stigma — the social condemnation and negative judgments attached to abortion — and isolating people who have had or provide abortions.

When reporting on legal cases, laws, or policies that would expand or restrict access to abortion, people who have firsthand experiences are central to the effects of these laws or policies. While people who have had abortions can't always replace the technical expertise of reputable policy experts, researchers, or doctors, a piece is incomplete if it does not include the knowledge and experience of abortion storytellers.

Any piece of writing about abortion should prioritize and center the voices and expertise of people who have had abortions. Because of pervasive abortion stigma and accelerating attacks on abortion access, finding sources can be difficult for writers. This guide will provide advice from people who share their abortion stories (abortion storytellers) on how to connect with them, treat them, and report on their stories.

Abortion storytellers themselves provided all of the information in this guide. People who have had abortions generously shared their expertise to create this resource, so that writers, reporters, and editors can effectively incorporate the voices of abortion storytellers in every piece about abortion.

Toplines

- **Make every effort to include the perspective of someone who has had an abortion.**
 - Demonstrate empathy, respect, and appreciation for the risks and emotional toll to a storyteller who shares their story.
 - When a storyteller publicly shares their personal abortion story, **they could be risking personal and professional relationships.** Sharing their story always takes a lot of emotional work for the storyteller, too.
 - **Maintain and prioritize the storyteller's privacy and boundaries.** The consent of the storyteller is paramount.
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Organizations working with storytellers

These organizations may be able to help connect you with storytellers who can share their stories in news pieces. In addition to media relations staff, they may also have patient advocate coordinators who provide support and prep for storytellers throughout the process.

You may also have local abortion funds or sexual and reproductive health care providers with patient advocate groups. Some of these organizations may also be able to accommodate your request to speak with a storyteller.

Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts

Media line: 617-515-0531 or email jkaiser@pplm.org

We Testify

Use the form at wetestify.org/contact or email media@wetestify.org.

National Network of Abortion Funds

Use the form at abortionfunds.org/contact and note that you have a media request in the dropdown menu.

National Abortion Federation

Contact the NAF Communications Department at 202-918-7768 or press@prochoice.org.

Connecting with a first-person storyteller for sexual and reproductive health care

Interviewing a storyteller about abortion (or any aspect of sexual and reproductive health care) may be unlike interviewing other sources because of high levels of social stigma. Consider observing different procedures (like sharing interview questions beforehand) to maintain sensitivity to storytellers and help them feel more comfortable.

Connecting with a storyteller *cont'd.*

- Many reproductive health care organizations and advocacy groups run volunteer groups of patient advocates and storytellers who are willing to talk to the press.
- Once you're in touch with someone at the organization, work with their media contact to connect with a patient advocate or storyteller who can share their story. **Doctors cannot ask current patients to speak to the media.**
- Provide explicit detail about the piece you're working on, as well as why you're looking to talk to a storyteller. Media contacts will determine if a storyteller relevant to your objective is available.
- Always be clear and up front with the personal information you will need.
 - If you must include a full name, state that unambiguously. If you can use someone's initials or a pseudonym, make that clear so that storytellers know what to expect and can make an informed decision on whether they will participate.
- Share the intended piece length with your media contact so that they and the storyteller know how long and detailed the story can be.
- Media contacts will work with you to meet your deadline. However, **you may have to wait a few days to a few weeks** to be connected to a storyteller.
 - This time will help inform and prepare the storyteller, which helps prevent people having to withdraw from the interviews.
 - Media contacts will likely ask for a list of questions or specific topics to share with the storyteller before the interview.
 - A member of an organization's communications or patient advocacy staff will often be present at the interview to protect patient advocates, ensure they're comfortable, maintain their boundaries, and provide background information.
- While storytellers aren't owed this information, **sharing who else you're interviewing for the piece will give them a good sense of your direction and whether they'd like to be a part of it.**
 - *Example:* if the only other sources in a piece are anti-abortion, a storyteller might want to remove themselves from that piece.
- Allow people to speak with you over the phone or a video call from their own home. This can make someone feel safe in a vulnerable situation.

Note: if you're writing an opinion piece opposing abortion, do not ask storytellers to be involved.

Guidelines for interviewing

Always check and respect how a storyteller would like to be identified and what pronouns they use.

- Names, titles, pronouns, locations, etc. **must be reported only as they are made available and requested to be used.**
 - If a storyteller wishes to remain anonymous but your outlet requires pieces to cite a reason for anonymity, work with the storyteller to figure out how to identify that in the piece.
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Demonstrate empathy.

- Acknowledging the risk around sharing an abortion story in the press can be a valuable way to make a storyteller feel validated and safe.
- You don't have to say you would have had an abortion, too, but give some affirmation that you believe the storyteller did the right thing for them.
- If you are accompanied by a photographer or other people, remember the storyteller has no way of knowing who around them is safe to talk to. Everyone present should make an effort to demonstrate empathy and respect.
- Example: Saying "I wanted to do this piece because I was so moved by your story," "we don't hear enough patient stories," or "I know this could be risky for you" lets the storyteller know they're heard, trusted, and respected.

Structure the interview clearly and make expectations clear beforehand.

- Before you begin, share whether you'll ask questions throughout, if you prefer to hear an overview of a story and then follow up with specific questions, or if you'll use any other interview format.
 - When given free rein to tell their story with no questions, storytellers often worry that it'll be spliced into phrases that contradict the storyteller's own points.
 - Some storytellers appreciate having their interview recorded as reassurance that they'll be accurately represented.
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Avoid leading questions.

- Leading questions can be stigmatizing. Open questions don't rely on pervasive but inaccurate narratives about abortion and allow storytellers to speak freely and share their stories on their own terms, without being forced to respond to stigmatizing beliefs.
 - *Example:* Instead of asking "Did you feel regret after your abortion?", ask, "How did you feel after your abortion?"
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Let stories be complicated.

- Storytellers appreciate when reporters allow their stories and experiences to be complicated. People's lives are complicated; pieces should not flatten the nuances of someone's story.
- Sharing the intended piece length again before an interview will give the storyteller a sense of how detailed their story should be.

Writing a piece that includes someone's personal abortion story

Abortion storytellers themselves created the suggestions below to guide writing and reviewing pieces that include personal abortion stories. Based on their own experiences sharing their stories with reporters and media, they generously shared their knowledge to help ensure that public media featuring abortion stories considerately represents these stories and avoids stigma.

Centering the stories of people who've had abortions means interviewing and quoting legitimate, reliable sources and prioritizing the humanity of storytellers.

Organizations who can provide factual, on-the-record interviewees and accurate information include the Guttmacher Institute, the National Abortion Federation, and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

If you include quotes or information from anti-abortion activists or organizations, be sure to identify the purpose of their work. Representatives from organizations whose goal is to ban or restrict abortion, especially those with no medical credentials, should be identified accordingly.

Example: instead of identifying someone only as "the president of Susan B. Anthony List," include "the president of Susan B. Anthony List, an anti-abortion political advocacy organization."

Storytellers can fear repercussions from sharing their stories, including concerns for their own safety and of being cut out of their community.

Maintain respect and appreciation for the risk a storyteller took in talking with you. There are risks to sharing personal abortion stories.

Someone's personal story can't be used as a counterargument to someone else's story or perspective. Each person's story is their own.

Thoughtfully represent people who made different choices without using a point/counterpoint structure or by framing someone's story as an argument for or against any perspective.

Allow the storyteller to explain their own experience, and don't assume that factors in their lives that they didn't name influenced their decision.

Make sure that other parts of a storyteller's identity outside their abortion story do not take precedence over their abortion and how they represent themselves.

Example: if a storyteller tells you that it wasn't the right time to have a baby, do not write "It wasn't the right time in their career or their relationship to have a baby."

Following up

- If a fact-checker will follow up with a storyteller, **let the storyteller know in advance.**
 - Someone who hasn't shared their story with the media before might not know about fact checking practices or might feel alarmed or attacked by the check. It's important to let them know the fact-check is standard practice to bolster their credibility.
 - If the story is cut, contact any storytellers who shared their story with you to tell them.
 - It's a respectful acknowledgement of the work they did in sharing their story and a way to maintain a positive relationship.
 - Even if it's not typical to have sources preview a story before it goes to print, it's often DEEPLY appreciated to **let storytellers preview the finished piece before it goes to print.**
 - Remember that an abortion storyteller could be risking personal relationships and possibly their own personal safety.
Allowing them to see the final piece allows them to verify that their privacy is respected and their story is accurately represented.
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For editors:

Be sensitive to how abortion storytellers are represented in print.

- Abortion storytellers are already risking relationships and safety to share their story publicly. When we were gathering information for this guide, storytellers emphasized that ungrammatical stories reflect on the people quoted in them.
- Ensure that someone's story is given the respect it deserves by representing it in a polished context.

Ensure that the images that accompany a piece fit the abortion storyteller's own story.

- Make the image match the story you're telling — do not use political or graphic visual hooks.
- Do not use images of protests or of people later in their pregnancies on a piece unless the image features a specific person or event mentioned in the story. These images are inappropriate and misleading, misrepresenting the piece and the abortion story.
- Stock images of people later in their pregnancies, which often don't include the head or face of the pregnant person, are inaccurate and reinforce harmful narratives about abortion.