

Writing Your Divorce Story for High-Conflict Divorce & Custody Battles

A Guide for Protective Parents

Purpose of this document: This template helps you organize your divorce story for both legal and personal purposes. It serves multiple functions:

- Provides clarity about what happened and why you're divorcing
- Creates a foundational document for your attorney and legal file
- Helps you recognize patterns you may have normalized during the relationship
- Prepares you for custody evaluations and court proceedings
- Validates your experience and helps you trust your own perspective
- Distinguishes between the "big picture story" and ongoing incident documentation

Important note: This divorce story captures the *history and patterns* that led to divorce. This is different from ongoing documentation of post-separation incidents, which should be tracked separately in a parenting app or incident log.

Note: The term "divorce" here includes any

Target length: Aim for 3,000-4,000 words for legal purposes. You can write more initially and edit down.

How to use this template:

- Write freely first - get everything out without self-censorship
- Use dictation/voice-to-text if writing feels overwhelming
- Come back and edit for clarity and focus
- Share with trusted friends or your coach before giving to your attorney if you plan to do this
- Remember: This is YOUR story in YOUR voice
- Start wherever feels easiest. You don't have to complete the whole template. It's a tool to help you, not an obligation.

In creating this template, I drew on the suggestions of Dr. Stephanie Han, as explained in these two videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqP76YqNjGQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tS1WHiBPoZg&t=53s>

I've adapted her suggestions specifically to people leaving an abusive marriage or relationship. **Please note that although the words “divorce” and “marriage” are used here, it can refer to the end of any romantic relationship, whether or not you were married.**

PART 1: THESIS STATEMENT (1-2 sentences)

What is your core reason for divorce?

This should be a clear, concise statement that summarizes the fundamental reason your marriage cannot or could not continue. In high-conflict divorces, this often relates to abuse, control, or safety concerns.

Prompts to consider:

- What core value or boundary was repeatedly violated?
- What pattern of behavior made the marriage unsustainable?
- What did you finally realize you couldn't live with?
- If you had to explain to your best friend in one sentence why you're divorcing, what would you say?

Examples of thesis statements for high-conflict divorces:

- "I am divorcing because my spouse's need for control has made it impossible to maintain my safety, autonomy, and the wellbeing of our children."
- "I am divorcing because a pattern of financial manipulation, emotional abuse, and coercive control has made an equal partnership impossible."
- "I am divorcing because despite years of trying to make it work, my spouse's behavior has created an environment where I cannot protect myself or our children."

Your thesis statement:

[Write here]

PART 2: THE EARLY DAYS (Brief - 2-3 paragraphs)

How did you meet? What initially attracted you to each other? What was the relationship like in the beginning?

Important caveat from Dr. Han: If writing this section makes you deeply sentimental or uncertain about divorce, you may not be ready yet. Be honest with yourself.

For high-conflict divorce context, also consider:

- Were there early red flags you ignored or minimized?
- Did the relationship move very quickly (love bombing)?
- Were you isolated from friends/family early on?
- Did you notice controlling behavior but explain it away as "caring" or "protective"?
- Were there early incidents of jealousy, monitoring, or possessiveness you normalized?

Your early story:

[Write here]

PART 3: FAMILY BACKGROUND (2-3 paragraphs)

Describe your family of origin and how it influenced your choice of partner and tolerance for certain behaviors.

People often choose partners who either:

- Repeat familiar patterns from childhood, or
- Represent a rebellion against those patterns

Prompts to consider:

- What was your parents' marriage like?
- What did you learn about relationships, conflict, money, or gender roles growing up?
- Were there dynamics in your family that you swore you'd never repeat - but did?
- Were there dynamics you thought were "normal" that actually weren't healthy?

- How did your upbringing affect your ability to recognize or respond to abuse?
- Did you learn to minimize your own needs, avoid conflict, or take responsibility for others' emotions?

For protective parents specifically:

- What was your understanding of what a "good parent" does or tolerates?
- Did you grow up believing you should sacrifice everything for your children?
- Were you taught that keeping the family together was more important than your own wellbeing?

Your family background:

[Write here]

PART 4: THE MAIN STORY - PATTERNS AND INCIDENTS

This is the longest and most detailed section. Write multiple paragraphs organized by themes or patterns.

Instead of a chronological list of every incident, focus on *patterns of behavior* that support your thesis statement. Each pattern should include specific examples with enough detail to be credible.

Guidelines for this section:

DO:

- Focus on observable behaviors and facts
- Include specific examples with approximate dates when possible
- Describe the impact of behaviors on you and the children
- Show patterns over time
- Use neutral, factual language (save the emotional processing for therapy)
- Include witnesses when relevant
- Describe how behaviors escalated or continued post-separation

DON'T:

- Diagnose or label your ex (no "narcissist," "sociopath," etc.)

- Use inflammatory language that makes you sound vindictive
 - Include every single incident (select the most illustrative examples)
 - Make assumptions about motives or what your ex was "thinking"
 - Bad-mouth your ex's character without concrete examples
 - Include information about your ex's family unless directly relevant
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Pattern Categories to Consider

You don't need to address all of these - choose the patterns most relevant to your situation. Each pattern should include 2-4 specific examples.

A. COERCIVE CONTROL

Pattern of behavior designed to dominate and control through intimidation, manipulation, and isolation

Areas to address if relevant:

- Monitoring and surveillance (checking phone, emails, location, social media)
- Isolation from support systems (restricting contact with friends, family)
- Control of finances and resources
- Using children as weapons or tools of control
- Threats and intimidation
- Rigid rules and constant criticism
- Silent treatment and withdrawal as punishment
- Demanding account of all time and activities

Example format: "Throughout our marriage, [name] maintained control through constant monitoring of my communications and whereabouts. For example, [specific incident with date]. When I [response], [what happened]. This pattern continued even after separation, as evidenced by [example]."

Your examples:

[Write here]

B. EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

Pattern of behaviors designed to undermine self-worth, distort reality, and maintain power

Areas to address if relevant:

- Gaslighting (denying things happened, making you question your reality)
- Constant criticism or belittling
- Blaming you for their behavior
- Raging and verbal abuse
- Name-calling and insults
- Humiliation in front of others
- Threats (to leave, contact a divorce lawyer, take the children, harm you, harm themselves)
- Manipulation through guilt or pity

Your examples:

[Write here]

C. PARENTING CONCERNS & COUNTER-PARENTING

Patterns that affect the children's wellbeing or undermine your co-parenting relationship

Areas to address if relevant:

- Deliberate undermining of your parenting decisions
- Neglectful supervision or care during parenting time
- Exposing children to inappropriate content, people, or situations
- Using children as messengers or spies
- Badmouthing you to the children
- Violating boundaries around children's schedules, activities, or medical care
- Making decisions about children without discussion
- Refusing to follow through on agreed-upon routines

Examples the children have shared (use observable facts):

- "Child reported that [specific thing child said]"
- "Child returned from visit and [observable behavior or statement]"
- "Child has expressed [specific concerns in their own words]"

Your examples:

[Write here]

D. POST-SEPARATION ABUSE PATTERNS

If you have already separated/divorced, this is your space for writing about behaviors that continued or escalated after separation, showing the abuse was about control, not the relationship

Critical for custody cases: Document how behaviors continued or worsened *after* separation, proving this was never about "high conflict between two people" but about one person's need for control. This section will form the basis of your documentation going forward and you're going to want to add to it as things come up.

Areas to address if relevant:

- Harassment through excessive communication
- Using court system to maintain contact and control (legal abuse)
- Violations of custody agreements or court orders
- Financial abuse (refusing court-ordered support, hiding assets)
- Smear campaigns (telling others false stories, making false CPS reports)
- Continuing surveillance or stalking behaviors
- Attempting to isolate you from support systems post-separation
- Escalating behaviors when you set boundaries

Your examples:

[Write here]

E. ALIENATION ALLEGATIONS

False accusations that you are turning children against the other parent, often used to deflect from their harmful behavior

Important for protective parents: Document when and how alienation was alleged, especially if:

- Children expressed legitimate concerns or fears
- Allegations followed your documentation of concerning behavior
- Allegations were made after children naturally pulled away due to the other parent's behavior
- Allegations are being used to seek custody changes

Your examples:

[Write here]

F. IMPACT ON YOU

How the relationship affected your physical health, mental health, sense of self, career, and wellbeing

Areas to address:

- Physical health impacts (sleep problems, stress-related illness)
- Mental health impacts (anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms)
- Impact on your career or education
- Financial impacts
- Loss of relationships with friends or family
- Changes in your personality or confidence
- Physical symptoms you developed during the marriage

Your examples:

[Write here]

G. WHY YOU STAYED / WHAT CHANGED

This helps counter the "why didn't you leave sooner?" question and shows your decision-making process

Prompts:

- What made you finally recognize the situation was not sustainable?
- What attempts did you make to fix the relationship?
- What prevented you from leaving earlier?
- What finally gave you the clarity or courage to leave?
- What was the "last straw" or turning point?

Your reflection:

[Write here]

PART 5: FINANCIAL MATTERS

This section treats the marriage as a business arrangement being dissolved.

Marriage is a legal and financial contract. Divorce is the dissolution of that contract. This section should be factual and detailed.

Information to include:

A. MARITAL ASSETS

- Real property (house, land, vacation homes)
- Vehicles
- Bank accounts (joint and individual)
- Retirement accounts
- Investments (stocks, bonds, cryptocurrency)
- Business interests
- Personal property of significant value

Your list:

[Write here]

B. MARITAL DEBTS

- Mortgages
- Car loans
- Credit card debt (especially important if run up by one party)
- Student loans
- Business debts
- Tax debt
- Any other debts

Your list:

[Write here]

C. INCOME & EARNING CAPACITY

- Your income and employment
- Your spouse's income and employment
- Any hidden income or unreported earnings
- Earning potential and education level of both parties
- Career sacrifices made during the marriage

Your summary:

[Write here]

D. FINANCIAL ABUSE OR CONCERNS

Critical for high-conflict divorces

- Hidden assets or accounts you discovered
- Debts incurred without your knowledge
- Financial control during the marriage
- Refusal to provide financial information during divorce

- Attempts to hide income or assets during divorce proceedings
- Refusal to pay court-ordered support
- Running up debt to reduce available assets
- Destruction of marital assets

Your documentation:

[Write here]

PART 6: SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR CUSTODY MATTERS

If you have concerns about custody arrangements, address these clearly.

A. YOUR PARENTING

- Your involvement in children's daily care, education, medical needs
- Your work schedule and flexibility
- Your support system (family, childcare)
- Your home environment
- Why you believe your proposed custody arrangement serves the children's best interests

Your statement:

[Write here]

B. CONCERNS ABOUT OTHER PARENT'S PARENTING

- Specific concerns about the other parent's ability to meet children's needs
- Pattern of behaviors that affect children's wellbeing
- Any safety concerns (be specific and factual)
- Why you believe your proposed custody arrangement is necessary

Important: Frame concerns in terms of *children's needs and safety*, not your grievances against your ex.

Your concerns:

[Write here]

C. CHILDREN'S EXPRESSED PREFERENCES OR CONCERNS

Only if age-appropriate and relevant

- Have children expressed concerns or preferences about custody?
- How old are the children and what is their maturity level?
- Document what they've said in their own words, without leading them

What children have shared:

[Write here]

PART 7: WHAT YOU'RE SEEKING

Be clear about what you want the outcome to be.

A. CUSTODY ARRANGEMENT

What custody schedule are you proposing and why?

[Write here]

B. FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS

What financial arrangements are you seeking (spousal support, child support, asset division)?

[Write here]

C. SPECIAL PROTECTIONS

Given the high-conflict nature, what specific protections do you need?

Examples might include:

- Communication only through parenting app
- Parallel parenting plan

- Right of first refusal
- Supervised exchanges
- Specific language in default clauses about financial obligations
- Provisions about decision-making for children
- Restrictions on introducing children to new partners
- Geographic restrictions

Your requests:

[Write here]

FINAL NOTES

WHAT TO DO WITH THIS DOCUMENT

Before sharing with attorney:

1. Read through it and edit it for clarity
2. Remove redundancies
3. Check that examples support your thesis
4. Ensure that your language is factual, not inflammatory
5. Consider having a trusted friend or your coach review it

When sharing with attorney:

- This is a *working document* to help your attorney understand your situation
- Your attorney will pull relevant information for legal filings
- Not everything will end up in court documents
- Your attorney may ask for additional details or clarification

Keep this separate from:

- Ongoing documentation of incidents (which should be in parenting app or incident log)
- Communications with your ex (BIFF or Yellow Rock method)

- Journal entries for personal processing (although some of this will probably go into your journal and vice versa)
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REMEMBER

- Writing this may bring up difficult emotions - that's normal
 - You don't have to finish it all in one sitting
 - The act of writing helps you gain clarity and trust your own experience
 - This document is about YOUR truth and YOUR voice
 - You are not crazy. This is what happened.
 - Writing your story is an act of self-advocacy and empowerment
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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you need support while writing your divorce story:

- Your divorce coach can help you work through this document and keep it factual where necessary
- A therapist can help you process emotions that come up
- Trusted friends can provide reality checks and validation
- Support groups remind you that you're not alone

Remember: The goal is not a perfect document. The goal is YOUR story, told in YOUR voice, so that you are heard in the legal process, and you can move forward with clarity.

Created by Rina Groeneveld, © 2024.

This template was adapted from Dr. Stephanie Han's divorce story framework to high-conflict divorce and post-separation abuse situations.

Disclaimer: This is a free self-help tool for personal clarity and attorney prep—not legal advice. Consult a qualified family lawyer for your situation. Use at your own risk.

