

A Guide to Writing in Graduate Social Work



Prepared by Dr. Casey Bohrman

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Introduction to Social Work

Social workers serve individuals, families, and communities, focusing their energies on improving the quality of life and social positions of those who have been most marginalized by society. The profession dates back to the Charitable Organization Societies and Settlement House movement at the turn of the 20th century. While the Charitable Organization Societies focused on working with individuals, the Settlement Houses aimed to improve communities while also working with individuals within those communities. The robust discipline and profession of social work today remains rooted in understanding the needs of both individuals and communities. Today, the social work profession continues to shape, study, and serve what social workers have come to think of as the micro, mezzo, and macro focuses of the profession.

A 1910 report authored by Abraham Flexner, which later came to be known as the Flexner Report, argued that American medicine should adopt a rigid scientific approach rather than continue to consider social dimensions of health. For Flexner, then, social work was not an actual profession, and as a result the social work community has struggled with how to define the profession. One of the main tensions within the profession is this: do we focus on changing individuals to fit into societal norms and acquire resources on their own or do we focus on changing society to more equitably distribute resources in a way that allows all individuals to live meaningful lives? The answer of course is both. However, sometimes social workers can sometimes struggle with where to exert their energy.

One of the reasons that Flexner criticized the social work profession is that we are inter-disciplinary, meaning that we draw on knowledge bases from a range of fields. He felt that a true profession drew from only one knowledge base. Social workers prefer to draw from multiple knowledge bases in order to develop a broad understanding of the challenges that individuals and societies face. A benefit of our inter-disciplinarity is that our research is not limited to social work journals or social work discourse alone, but rather, can be informed by scholars in other areas as diverse as psychology, medicine, geography, and even business management. Being a social work student therefore requires inter-disciplinary reading and writing abilities.

In addition to drawing upon multiple scholarly discourses, social workers also draw upon multiple forms of knowledge. For example:

Social workers see clients as the experts in their own situations. Clients have knowledge about their unique lived experience that is essential for social workers to understand in best serve them.

Social workers also recognize the importance of practice wisdom from experienced social workers. Practice wisdom provided by field supervisors often guides social work students' learning during their field experience.

Social workers also draw upon books and peer-reviewed journals as a way to use research evidence to inform their practice.

In social work, different modes of writing privilege different types of knowledge. For example, practice wisdom and institutional knowledge from a field instructor, guides social work students on how to fill out documentation within a specific agency context. However, practice wisdom may not be appropriate source of information for a research paper. Likewise, student's lived experience may be an important component of a reflection paper, but may not be a useful source of information for a policy brief. That is, depending on the types of writing you are doing, certain types of knowledge may be privileged.

What's unique about social work writing?

While social work draws on multiple knowledge bases and forms of knowledge, there are certain approaches that are unique to our profession.

One of the things that makes social work different from other helping professions such as psychology is that **we always look at the larger mezzo and macro contexts when working with individuals.** For example, if social workers are working with someone living in poverty, we would not simply focus on individual factors that may hinder or help someone to get out of poverty. We would also want to know about what kinds of resources their friends, families and communities have in addition to knowing about eligibility for government anti-poverty programs.

Bias is also a constant concern for social workers. Because American society values individualism and there is a widespread belief that people can have better lives if they just try hard enough, **social workers have to pay particular attention to our own biases and those in the research literature** that focus solely on individual or micro causes of behaviors and situations.

Another distinguishing characteristic of our profession is that **we approach our work from the strengths perspective**. Because we work with individuals and populations that face many challenges such as trauma, mental illnesses, substance abuse and poverty, it is easy to fall into the trap of solely focusing on problems. Instead, we are called to look for individual, family and community-level assets that can help people succeed despite the challenges they face. We do not just attempt to help people fix their problems, but instead we focus on how they can build from existing values, resources and previous successes. **As social workers do research and writing, we must acknowledge the problems and challenges people face, while at the same time balancing our assessments with individual, family and community strengths.**

Social work also differs from academic disciplines, like sociology, because **our research needs to have practical applications** at the individual, family, group, community or policy level. Other disciplines generate emphasize epistemic and neutralist critical thinking, or making knowledge for knowledge's sake and often attempt to approach their writing and research through an objective lens. In social work, our thoughts, research and writing are influenced by the values of our profession and deontic and activist critical thinking is emphasized. The National Association of Social Work code of ethics lays out the following professional values:

- service
- social justice
- dignity and worth of the person
- importance of human relationships
- integrity and competence

It is helpful for social work students to keep these values in mind as they complete writing assignments and learn to think, research, and write as social workers.

Common Genres of Writing in Social Work

Social workers work in so many different professional contexts that it is nearly impossible to address all of the types of writing they may do in the field. Social work students will also experience a wide range of writing assignments in WCU's social work program. This guide will provide suggestions for just three common genres, or types of assignments, students will encounter in the program: **concept application papers, literature reviews and policy briefs.**

Concept Application Papers

Your professors may have other names for these papers, but they essentially involve **taking concepts or theories and applying them to hypothetical or real situations.** For example, an assignment description might ask you to apply concepts from Family Systems Theory to analyze a family in a movie or to use the Strengths Perspective to describe a client. We ask you to write these papers to help you prepare to apply concepts you learn in your classes to your social work practice because the ability to think critically about social work content learned in school and apply that content to real world scenarios is an essential skill for all social workers.

As with all papers, you should find out if your professor would like a **title page** and an abstract for this assignment.

Some professors will ask for an **overview of the paper in the abstract**, while others may ask you to provide an **overview of the paper in the introductory paragraph**. This is sometimes referred to as the “roadmap” or “scope” of the paper and helps show readers and teachers what will be covered in the paper that follows.

In the paragraph following your introduction and before applying your concept or theory, you should begin by explaining what the concept involves. For example:

According to Rhodes (2002) the risk environment describes the ways in which factors such as the physical, policy and social environment influence people's health behaviors.

The above example makes clear what the “risk environment” will refer to in the paper that follows and makes clear which definition of the concept the writer will utilize. You can use direct quotes or you can paraphrase the definition as in the example above.

In general, social work professors prefer you to paraphrase to show that you understand a concept and can put it into your own language. However, sometimes you might want to use a direct quote if there is no way to paraphrase without being close to plagiarizing or if it is important to capture an author's exact phrasing. If you do chose to use an exact quote, be sure to use quotation marks or if the quote is longer than 40 characters you do not need to use quotation marks, but you do need to indent the quotation. For example:

The principles of the new public health are one and the same as the principles of effective harm reduction. The new public health and harm reduction are parallel social movements. Not only do they coincide historically, they coincide conceptually. More than this, harm reduction has been held up as a model of the new public health movement (Rhodes, 2002, p. 85).

Use direct quotes sparingly and quotations more than 40 characters even less frequently. Regardless of the length of the quotation, you always need to include the page number of the quotation. If the quote comes from a document that does not have page numbers, consult your APA handbook on how to cite where the quote comes from within the larger text.

Once you have defined the theory or concept, you need to **explain how it applies to a specific individual, family, organization, community or scenario**. For example:

My organization changed their policies to be more trauma-informed. They took down signs that distinguished staff bathrooms from client bathrooms, demonstrating that all people were worthy of using the same bathrooms regardless of their status within the agency.

Every theory has its limitations and may not be able to account for the complexities of real situations. In some cases **it may be appropriate to address those limitations** in your paper. For example:

The Smith family generally displays enmeshed boundaries. They each know everything that is going on with the other family members. However, when the mother began developing signs of dementia, no one discussed her bizarre behavior. The family's inability to discuss the mother's behavior provides one example of why it can be difficult to categorize a family's boundaries as either completely enmeshed or completely disengaged.

As with most other papers, you should end a concept application paper with a concluding paragraph or at least a concluding statement. A good social work conclusion to a content-application paper ends with a nuanced or qualified explanation of what we can learn or conclude from this application of a theory or concept to the case situation. **Nuance and qualification** is important because you want to avoid definitive claims that have yet to be demonstrated. For example:

My assessment of the Parkside community suggests that gentrification had an overall negative effect on those who had been living in the area for more than ten years. However, long-term residents remain hopeful about their ability to adapt to their changing environment.

Note in the above conclusion how the statement makes clear how the concept (“gentrification”) informed the case population (“those who had been living in the area [Parkside] for more than ten years”), which in this case is “an overall negative effect.” But notice also the qualifying language that this assessments “suggests” this to be the case.

If assigned a content application paper consider how your paper will make the moves discussed above:

- Provide an overview of the paper or “roadmap” in the introductory paragraph or abstract
- Use the body of the paper to explain how the concept or theory applies to a specific individual, family, organization, community or scenario.
- Use section headings to help organize the essay.
- Address any limitations of the application
- Conclude with connection and nuance/qualification

Literature Reviews

The purpose of literature reviews are to **become familiar with the existing scholarly literature on a given topic**. The term “literature review” may refer to two different but related meanings that you may encounter in social work. The first meaning of a literature review that is a type of assignment or paper that faculty may ask you to produce, often as a learning activity to get you to better understand what’s been written about a topic. A second meaning for literature review is a style of writing in academic articles that is often formatted as part of an article introduction or as a section of the article shortly after the introduction. For example, a background and significance section of a journal article is one form of a literature review. It can be helpful to look at a range of articles to learn from how different authors write this type of literature review.

In social work some of the reasons we may do a literature review are:

To explore existing research on a topic of concern or interest.

To better understand the scope of a problem.

To assess the effectiveness of a specific intervention or policy.

When writing a literature review, it is crucial to capture the most recent research and theoretical pieces on the topic. Depending on the assignment, you might also want reference older landmark books and articles on which the current thinking was built. Literature reviews may also include an analysis of the limitations of previous research and current tensions about the topic.

When conducting a review of the literature, it is helpful to **use a range of keywords to explore a topic**. For example, if you wanted to do research on Alcohol Use Disorder, there are many different words that might connect you to the articles you want. Alcohol Use Disorder is a diagnostic term from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) V. In previous editions of the DSM, there were two separate diagnoses for someone with Alcohol Use Disorder: Alcohol Abuse and Alcohol Dependence. Because researchers might have been using an older DSM, might want to include the older terms for the diagnoses in your keyword search. You might also consider using terms like “problem drinking”, “binge drinking” or “alcoholism”. You might even consider using the term “substance use disorder”, though this might yield too many articles related to abuse of other substances like heroin or cocaine.

Everyone has different approaches to organizing and taking notes on the articles they find. It can be helpful to talk to people from the writing center, your professors and other students about how they approach organizing their research.

Regardless of how you organize your research, **the key to writing a strong literature review is to give yourself plenty of time.** If you try to write a literature review the night before it is due, you will probably end up struggling to organize your paper so that it flows logically and struggling to incorporate scholarly literature in a meaningful way. You also increase your likelihood of plagiarizing because it takes time to thoughtfully paraphrase and integrate concepts from the literature.

Before you begin writing, it can be helpful to create an outline of all of the sections you want to include in the paper. The exact components of your literature review may vary by assignment. In order to illustrate some of the sections that may be included in a literature review, let us examine an excerpt from a background and significance section of the following article:

Bohrman, C., Tennille, J., Levin, K., Rodgers, M., & Rhodes, K. (2017). Being superwoman: Low income mothers surviving problem drinking and intimate partner violence. *Journal of Family Violence*, 32(7), 699-709.

The introductory paragraph or paragraphs should explain and often define the topic that you will address in the paper. For example:

The first two sentences clue the reader into the fact that the paper will be about motherhood, violent relationships, and problem drinking

For some women, motherhood can provide purpose, an opportunity to better themselves, or at least the chance to provide an environment for their children that is preferable to what they experienced in their youth. For women struggling with substance use or violent relationships, motherhood can be an impetus to make positive changes

(Edin & Kefalis, 2005; Vatnar & Bjørkly, 2008). However, motherhood can also compel women to remain in violent relationships or can create stressors that increase the risk of heavy drinking, which is defined by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's sex-specific criteria, as four or more drinks per day (Baker & Carson, 1999; Rhodes et al, 2010; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2005)...

Here the authors define problem drinking. They also could have defined violent relationships. If this was a full introductory paragraph, it might end with a statement about how the authors were going to explore the research on how motherhood influences problem drinking and decisions about violent relationships

It is helpful to use headings to break down various components of the paper. For example, in a paper on motherhood, problem drinking and violent relationships, you might do a heading about the research motherhood and problem drinking. In this section it would be helpful to begin by addressing the scope of the issue. For example:

“Motherhood and Problem Drinking”

This section shows how you can discuss the prevalence of a problem when there are not exact statistics

Surprisingly, little information is available regarding the prevalence of problem drinking among mothers. Approximately 3.5% of women in the United States meet criteria for alcohol use disorder while they are pregnant, with slightly more than 7% of non-pregnant women meeting the same criteria (Vesga-Lopez, Blanco, Keyes, Olfson, Grant, & Hasin, 2008). Research also indicates that approximately 10% of children live in a household where at least one parent is abusing substances, and researchers therefore have estimated that millions of mothers have substance use disorders (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration, 2011).

You might also want to include a discussion of the limitations or contradictions in previous research. Rarely is there total consensus among all scholars studying a topic. It can strengthen your paper to address these differences. For example:

These researchers found that motherhood could reduce drinking in the population they studied.

Edin and Kefalis’ (2005) ethnography of low-income women in the Philadelphia area found that motherhood motivated many young women to return to school, seek a job, and become sober from drugs and alcohol. While these women were not always able to achieve their aspirations, their children kept them motivated.

Balan and colleagues’ (2014) found that motherhood generally reduces the rate of alcohol use disorder in women. They hypothesized that the reduction resulted from social controls being placed on

Unlike the first article, this article examined the sample by race. By including this second article, you are showing that a second study found that motherhood can decrease drinking, but that the finding may not be true for mothers of all races. You are showing the possible limitations of the first article as well as a need for further exploration of the role that race can play in the drinking habits of mothers

mothers and mothers having less time to drink. However, when they broke their sample down by race, controlling for income, they found that for black women, motherhood did not reduce rates of alcohol use disorder. This was surprising because black women generally have lower rates of alcohol use disorder than white women (Grant et al 2004; Wilsnack, Klassen, Schur, & Wilsnack, 1991).

The conclusion of a literature review will depend on the type of literature review you are doing. For example, if the literature review is for a grant, you might conclude the paper with why you need more funding to address a specific issue. If the literature review is paper of a research paper, you might conclude with how your research will address the limitations of previous research studies. If the literature review is part of a review of research on a specific intervention for a population of interest, you might conclude with your assessment of whether not the evidence overall supports the use of the intervention with your population.

General Writing Tips*

The following are some general writing guidelines for social work papers. Every professor might have slightly different guidelines and expectations, so if their writing guidelines differ from what is written here, you should defer to their instructions for assignments in that class.

- Do not wait until the night before to write your paper. We know you have a lot going on besides school, but waiting until the night before will not give

you the opportunity to properly research, organize, write and proofread your paper.

- Outlining a paper can be a helpful way to begin writing.
- Use headings and sub-headings to organize your paper. They can help to organize your thoughts and show that you are addressing all of the assignment prompts
- Introductions and conclusions help to orient the reader to what you will be addressing in your paper. Using transition statements between paragraphs will help the paper to flow more smoothly.
- Paragraphs should have a topic and are typically at least three sentences long. If your paragraph is taking up an entire page, you may be covering multiple topics and should consider breaking up that paragraph into smaller paragraphs.
- When researching a topic, do not trust authors to accurately capture the work of others. If you want to use information cited in a source, make sure to track down the original document and read it for yourself before citing it.
- Minimize your use of quotes
- You should use citations to support your assertions. The sources that are appropriate for a paper depend on the assignment. Books, peer-reviewed journals, and government websites are generally acceptable sources. For some assignments, you may also include news articles, agency websites and materials, policy institutes, and personal communications. Check with the professor about using other websites. Wikipedia can be a great starting point to give you an overall orientation to a topic, but is not an acceptable

source for a formal writing assignment. You need to go beyond your reading of Wikipedia to find reputable sources to cite.

- If you want to cite a professor's slides, it is better to find out the original source of information from the slides, read that source and cite the source.
- Do not reuse papers or even parts of papers for different classes. We expect that you will do original work for each assignment.
- Write in the most simple and direct fashion as possible. Avoid overly complex sentences and big words when smaller ones will do.
- Avoid using passive voice
- Be thoughtful in how you use first-person. Find out from your professor whether the use of first-person is appropriate for the specific assignment. First-person is useful in reflective papers, in an introduction to a paper, and when discussing the methods you used in research. Use of first-person does not always mean that you should include your opinions in a paper.
- Use a consistent tense throughout each paragraph
- When proofreading it helps to read your paper aloud. If possible, have a friend, family member, or colleague read over your paper before submitting.
- If your professor has enabled you to see submissions in turn-it in prior to submitting, it is helpful to review your paper in Turn-it in to reduce the likelihood that you have unknowingly plagiarized a source.

APA and Citation Tips*

For a full overview of the guidelines from the American Psychological Association, you can consult their sixth edition manual. The following is a list of tips based on common challenges that social work students encounter when using APA style.

For formal writing assignments social workers use APA style, formatting, and citation:

- The title page includes the running head, page number, title of the paper, your name and your university. If you are unsure about the format, look for examples provided by the APA style guide or websites like Purdue Owl.
- Find out if your professor requires an abstract and then look at the APA guidelines on what goes in an abstract
- If you use a citation generator, be sure to double check the formatting.
- APA has a citation format for most sources, so look for guidelines in the APA style guide or a website like Purdue Owl.
- APA does not have citation styles for some documents you may need to use in a policy analysis, such as a court ruling. For these government documents, APA defers to the Blue Book (legal citation style). You can find examples of Blue Book citation formatting here:
<http://guides.ll.georgetown.edu/bluebook/citing-cases>
- The in-text citation goes before the period at the end of a sentence. It should include the author and date. Make sure to look up how to cite when the source has no author or no date. If you are citing a direct quote, make sure to also include the page number.
- If you begin a sentence with “According to Author’s name (date)”, you only need to include the author’s last name. This is an acceptable way to cite a source, however you do not want to begin a series of sentences with “According to” or your paragraph will sound disjointed.

- Be sure to look up the format of the in-text citation when a source has multiple authors. Look at how to do the initial citation as well as subsequent citations of that source.
- Personal communications should be cited in-text, but not in the reference section. Besides personal communications, all other sources cited in the paper should appear in the reference section. If you do not cite a source in your paper, it should not appear in the reference section.
- Use a hanging indent with all sources in the reference section, meaning that you should indent all lines after the first line.
- When citing a journal in the reference section, the journal title and volume number should be italicized, but not the issue number. For example *Nature*, 68 (2).

*Tips contributions by Kerry Occasio, Aury Garcia, Cynthia Scott, Mia Ocean and Chrstina Chiarelli-Helmeniak

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