Confession time. Along with 75% of the U.S. adult population (my estimate), I’ve become a fan of the PBS series “Downton Abbey.” Such a truth amazes me because other than being a pale, pasty White person, I share no common ground with any of the characters from the British period TV drama. Even more bewildering, a recent episode made me think of social work writing. Indulge me for a moment. The revelation struck me as I “dined” on a leftover casserole that had dissolved into a gray-brown glop. As I unenthusiastically accepted each bite, I watched as Downton’s Lord and Lady Grantham presided over their nightly multicourse feast. As each course was devoured, footmen whisked away the plates while the butler served up the next on a gleaming silver platter. The seamless dinner choreography made me long for a real meal and realize, “That’s how a writer should present information to a reader—one distinct course at a time, each in the proper order, and each building on a theme for a well-rounded meal. No writer should ever serve a casserole.”

Technically, my casserole was a nutritious meal because all of the food groups were represented, but the dish was barely edible. The problem (beyond my culinary skills) is that by definition, a casserole is generally a mixed concoction of ingredients that are presented with minimal order. By comparison, many writers often produce “casserole papers” that are equally nondistinct, gray-brown mental glop that include all the needed information but are hardly enjoyable for the reader. For a piece of writing to be informative and a joy to read, the writer should order the information in the sequence that is necessary for the reader to process properly each bit of information. In other words, one course at a time with the right fork, knife, or spoon for the food presented. Stretching the meal metaphor, imagine that you are served a steaming bowl of chicken soup but have only a fork. Or you’re served a big, juicy steak (vegans/vegetarians should sub “Portobello mushroom”) only to find that you have no fork and knife. Your reader faces similar confusion when your paper skips over details, omits definitions of concepts, or assumes the reader has specific knowledge or familiarity with the topic.

Consider the following examples, which were taken from an archived handout prepared by the University of Houston-Victoria Writing Center (on file with Writing Support Team). The two paragraphs present the same information in a casserole (unorganized) and fine dining (organized) format.
Example of Unorganized Paragraph:
The days of placing traditional ads in college-town newspapers have all but disappeared with new computer whizzes surfing the net for job prospects. Because of the "computer geniuses" being mass produced in today's universities, Human Resource Managers are having to come up with innovative ways to recruit personnel. Human Resource managers are shelling out hefty portions of their budgets to the dot com employment sites trying to get the "best and the brightest." These students have "come of age" pointing and clicking their way through headline news, entertainment, college courses, and electronic commerce. Scanning the printed classifieds is out. Other recruitment administrators have their own web designers "spiffing up" company websites with "career" or "job" links being the most valued asset to the company's ability to retain "cutting edge" employees.

Example of Organized Paragraph:
Because of the "computer geniuses" being mass produced in today's universities, Human Resource Managers are having to come up with innovative ways to recruit personnel. These students have "come of age" pointing and clicking their way through headline news, entertainment, college courses, and electronic commerce. As a result, the days of placing traditional ads in college-town newspapers have all but disappeared with these new computer whizzes surfing the net for job prospects. Scanning the printed classifieds is out. Human Resource managers are shelling out hefty portions of their budgets to the dot com employment sites trying to get the "best and the brightest." Other recruitment administrators have their own web designers "spiffing up" company websites with "career" or "job" links being the most valued asset to the company's ability to retain "cutting edge" employees.

Introduction – Setting the table
Often, instructions for class papers state something to the effect of, “Don’t rehash the case study – just present your analysis.” Unfortunately, students tend to interpret these directions to mean that their papers don’t need an introduction of any sort. APA doesn’t use a header for the Introduction section, but APA style papers do require an introductory section. If “introduction” throws you off, it might be more helpful to think of this first section as a problem statement that clearly states the social issue of interest, the current status of that issue or problem, and the aspect of the problem that is addressed in your paper. Providing a description of the problem or creating a context for the reader is like setting the table. Whether you are preparing a banquet or picnic, you need to provide the proper utensils, or in the case of writing, an overview for the reader to use as background to understand your argument.

First course – Literature Review
The Literature Review should be the soup course—it anchors the meal, conditions the palate, and whets the appetite for the next course.

Somewhere, someone must be teaching social work writers that the person with the most citations produces the best paper. Not true. Cited works should be the most relevant, the most salient supports for your argument; not a list of everything remotely related to the topic. Like the soup course that conditions the palate before the main course is served, the literature review establishes the foundation on which to build your argument—and like the soup, if the lit review is too overbearing and too heavy, the diner/reader will be asleep before the next course.

Main Course
Whether your paper is a one main entrée meal (e.g., brief report) or a multicourse feast with salad, meat, and vegetable courses (e.g., research article), make sure that each course is distinct. In other words, each paragraph should address a single topic, but all paragraphs within a section should build on each other to create a logical sequence within the section. Keeping sections distinct means mindfully and purposefully organizing the information into a logical argument that persuades the reader to accept your position as valid. Unfortunately, some writers get a bit sloppy. For example, when reporting the results of a survey, they include interpretations of the findings or the discussion of study limitations that might have affected the responses. Remember, report only
results in the Results section, only methods in the Method section, and save discussion of both for the Discussion section. Returning to the meal metaphor: Sloppy section writing is like the butler serving the next course on dirty plates with used silverware. It might get the job done, but it’s not clean and certainly lacks style!

**Dessert – Conclusion**

A grand feast needs a well-conceived and executed ending note, whether it’s a sweet treat or a savory plate of fruit and cheese. Similarly, a paper needs a strong ending that equally satisfies the reader. If the problem statement is equivalent to setting the table, then a conclusion is the equivalent to the dessert course AND the magic trick of whipping the tablecloth out from beneath the dishes and crystal. You not only want to restate the problem but also clearly state how your paper has advanced your claim/argument/perspective of the issue so that the reader accepts your position as a logical conclusion of the evidence presented.

Papers that fail to make a persuasive argument are the equivalent of a guest choosing to ditch dessert for some alone time in the library with a brandy and cigar. Remember to use the conclusion to summarize key points, highlight implications, and recommend next steps (as appropriate).

Ever been in the middle of a meal in a restaurant when the server slapped the check on the table and announced, “Here’s your ticket, I’m off shift now.” So much for dessert and coffee—and so much for the tip! Now you know what your reader feels like when he or she turns the page, looking for a satisfying conclusion, only to get smacked in the face with the Reference section.

**Start strong, end strong.** Remember every paper should start strong by providing context and a concise statement of the problem that brings the reader “up to speed” on the issue your paper will address. Next, build an organized, logical argument that leads the reader to accept your claim as a valid position supported by the evidence. Finally, end strong by restating key points as evidence that your thesis is a well-supported and logical conclusion. (And by all means, practice with many drafts and cheap dishes!)

**Need Writing Help? Contact The Writing Support Team: soswwritingsupport@gmail.com**