As a student in the School of Social Work, you will produce academic papers that will help you learn, critically consider, communicate, and apply key social work concepts. You also will produce professional writing that mirrors the types of writing common in the profession.

**Critical Review of a Book, an Article, or the Literature**

Whether you are reviewing a book, a selected article, or literature on a particular topic, your task is not only to summarize but also to analyze and evaluate to identify the key patterns, implications, strengths, and limitations of what you have read. In the case of a book review or article critique, you will summarize, analyze, and evaluate:

- **Summarize**—identify the text’s thesis, the methods used, the evidence/data presented, and any contributions to the field.
- **Analyze and Evaluate**—move beyond summary to analyze the text’s relationship to key concepts and other literature in the field, its implications, its applicability to other scenarios, and its strengths and weaknesses.

Conducting a review of the literature on a given topic is essential because scholarship is cumulative. This type of assignment requires that you examine relationships across several articles or reports with the aim of not only identifying, summarizing, and comparing the relevant literature but also synthesizing this literature to argue a point about the current state of knowledge. Hubbach (1992) has suggested several strategies for identifying important trends and patterns in the literature:

- Determine which theory or theories are referred to most often.
- Determine if there is or has been a debate over theories.
- Compare the acceptance or popularity of certain theories, and whether acceptance has shifted over time.
- Categorize the literature by the basic assumptions or methods used in the research.
- Look for patterns in the results reported or conclusions drawn by the authors.
- Identify which authors are cited most frequently, and if they are associated with certain theories or methods.

**Description and Critical Reflection**

These types of papers ask you to describe and reflect on a particular experience, agency, individual or group, a role-play exercise, or an interview. In this type of assignment, you must not only accurately describe your subject, but move beyond reporting to critically analyze what you have described. To analyze and uncover underlying relationships or connections, answer how and why questions. For example, asking yourself probing questions about a topic will help you move from reporting to analyzing.

**Topic: Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County**

- **Describe** the history, mission, goals, objectives, structure, and programs of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County.
- **Analyze** Why is Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County structured in this way? How has the agency’s mission been influenced by practice models or theoretical frameworks? Which theories? Which models? Does the organizational structure reflect or determine function?

**Topic: Cultural Differences**

- **Describe** a group whose experience differs from yours.
- **Analyze** Why do these differences exist? How are these differences maintained? How might cultural differences pose barriers to understanding? What helps to bridge differences?

**Application of a Theory**

In some assignments, you’ll apply an orienting theory to a case study. Orienting theories describe and explain behavior and help to explain why problems such as child abuse and addiction occur. For example, you might be asked to apply the social systems theory (Note APA does not capitalize the names of theories) to explain the growing incidence of poverty in America’s suburbs. Before you can successfully apply a theory to a case study, you must develop a thorough understanding of the theory. It’s imperative that your paper includes a clear explanation of the theory. A helpful approach is to formulate your explanation as if you were explaining the basics to a colleague completely unfamiliar with
the theory and its concepts. This approach helps to ensure that you cover “all the bases,” which in turn, enables your instructor to evaluate your understanding of the theory and your ability to apply the theoretical concepts in social work practice. When applying a theory to a case study that focuses on a particular unit of analysis (e.g., a social group, agency, or individual), you must analyze the example as it compares with the theory. That is, in what ways does the theory help you understand the example? What aspect of the example does the theory fail to help you understand (i.e., at what point is the theory not a good fit)?

**Social Work Research Paper**

Research papers in social work require you to identify a problem or question worth investigating and perform research to help address the problem or answer the question. Key steps in writing a social work research paper include identifying an important question or problem, identifying the current knowledge of that problem (or the “state of the science” on the topic), and identifying gaps in the knowledge around the problem. Investing time in formulating a strong research question will help you focus your research efforts. A well-developed research question will help you narrow your literature search to identify articles with the greatest relevance to your topic. For example:

- Identify a focused topic—depression among older adults
- Formulate a question—
  - What are the unique barriers to addressing depression?
  - What are the unique barriers to addressing depression in older adults?
  - What are the unique barriers to addressing depression among older adults living in rural areas of Randolph County?

**Social Policy Analysis**

Policy analysis papers critically evaluate the effectiveness of social policy. By understanding the outcomes of these policies and making recommendations, social workers inform future decision making. Policy papers generally include the following sections:

1. **Issue:** Clearly define the social problem the policy addresses.
2. **Background:** Describe and summarize key points of the historical development and original intent of the policy, and how the policy attempts to address the social problem in question.
3. **Analysis:** Analyze the social policy, focusing on its strengths and limitations to address the social problem.
4. **Recommendation:** Propose social policy alternatives that might better address the problem.
5. **Conclusion**

**Professional Writing**

Writing is an important professional skill for social workers. A client’s welfare can be affected in significant ways by the social worker’s ability to write in a clear, cogent manner. Three common types of professional writing are case notes, assessments, and treatment plans. Each type grows out of good listening skills and relies on accurate, objective details recorded during client interviews. Having “good notes” means you must record facts as opposed to opinions. When you do offer a professional opinion, support it with relevant facts. Keep in mind that these documents become part of a client’s record and that others will read and make decisions based on what you’ve written.

- **Case Notes**—Objective descriptions or observations of a situation. Case notes are accurate, clear, and concise. Case notes should represent what you’ve observed, not your personal opinions. A social worker’s case notes can be subpoenaed by the courts, so it is critical that your notes clearly communicate what you observed and the reasons for the decisions and actions taken. Once subpoenaed, you cannot rewrite notes (although it’s acceptable to correct misspellings by crossing out the error so it can still be read, adding the correct word, and then initialing the correction). Therefore, take great care to write professionally, remembering that at some point, your words might be read by others.

- **Assessments**—Descriptive compilations of data gathered to present a cohesive view of an individual or family. Assessments represent what you think professionally, not personally, and are descriptive, not diagnostic.

- **Treatment Plans**—Outline an intervention that includes specific goals and objectives. Goals are usually broad statements, whereas objectives are measureable actions to be taken.
Common Moves for Writers in Social Work

**Understand the Task and Revise**
Before you begin thinking, researching, and writing in response to an assignment, know what is being asked of you. Are you being asked to analyze, describe, discuss, evaluate, explain, reflect, or summarize? Each of these verbs directs you to do something different, and sometimes you may be asked to do more than one thing in a single assignment. Moreover, do not confuse your writing process with your final product. The magic in good writing is careful revision. Form a writing group to read one another’s papers and offer constructive feedback.

**Provide Relevant Details**
When describing a client, group, or agency, provide only those details that are relevant to the purpose of the piece of writing. Avoid extraneous details that will not help the reader understand your subject, and avoid inserting opinions and judgments. Provide details that show rather than tell. For example, instead of claiming that a client’s house is “dirty,” provide the concrete details that led you to this conclusion.

**Move Beyond Description**
Most assignments will ask you not only to describe an agency, policy, situation, or text but also to analyze your subject. This means you must pay attention to underlying explanations (perhaps using orienting theories), potential implications, and practice theories and models that may have influenced decisions. Critical analysis seeks to understand the why and how behind an agency, policy, situation, or text.

**Use Appropriate Evidence**
Whether you are making a critical argument about a text or set of texts or a data-oriented argument, you must substantiate your argument with appropriate evidence. In social work, always take care to distinguish between your opinion and evidence that is grounded in what a text actually says or in what the data actually tell you. Be rigorous in making this distinction.

**Use Subject Librarians Throughout the Research Process**
Librarians at the UNC Health Sciences Library can help you identify and evaluate source materials, narrow your search terms, and refine your research process. Effective research strategies are a key part of a successful writing process. (See online tutorial on Evaluating Sources, at [http://www2.lib.unc.edu/instruct/evaluate/index.html?section=about](http://www2.lib.unc.edu/instruct/evaluate/index.html?section=about))

**Document Sources Accurately and Ethically**
Writers in social work use the American Psychological Association (APA) format for citation. This documentation style enables consistent documentation within the discipline and several allied fields. For example, APA style places importance on authorship and on time and its passage. Because APA format for citation is a complex and strict citation system, refer to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Sixth Edition.

**Using proper citation allows you to:**
- Join a community of scholars, writers, and readers who share certain values and a citation system.
- Build your credibility as a writer and researcher in the field of social work.
- Provide readers access to your sources.

Make clear where your ideas end and another’s begin. Whether you are quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing using your own words, you must cite your sources. Even if you do not intend to plagiarize, failing to properly cite your sources constitutes plagiarism.

Adapted from a handout developed by the University of Montana Writing Center (n.d.). Retrieved from [www.health.umt.edu/schools/sw/BSW/bsw_overview.php](http://www.health.umt.edu/schools/sw/BSW/bsw_overview.php)

**Need One-on-One Writing Support?**
Please email to schedule an appointment:
soswwritingsupport@gmail.com