It’s a new year and a new semester, both of which can equate to a fresh start, especially for social work writers. Perhaps the best approach to improving your writing is also the simplest: Commit to do better and then put in the extra effort needed to achieve your goal. With those ideals mind, we present this latest edition of The Portable Editor, which was inspired by the style guide of *The Economist* and John Cochrane’s advice to PhD students at the University of Chicago’s Graduate School of Business.

- **Do your best to be lucid.** Clear writing is usually the product of clear thinking.

- **Clothe the naked.** In the case of writing, *the naked* refers to all too-frequent uses of “this.” “This means the safety network of social support agencies will be reduced…” “This” should always be followed by the person or thing to which “this” refers: “This *budget reduction* means…” “This *agency realignment* means …” or “This *economic recovery* means…” “This” could apply to any of these topics, and each has a substantially different meaning for the final interpretation of the paper.

- **Get to the point and grab the reader’s attention.** You’re not writing a mystery novel or building up to the dramatic “ta-da” revelation of a magic trick. Adopt the inverted triangular or funnel style of newspaper writing and provide your reader with the most important information—*who, what, when, where, how*—in the first few paragraphs. Discussion details and explanations should be included in the “meat” or middle of the paper.

- **Provide context in brief, but adequate, one or two sentences of background.** Avoid introductions that amount to the written equivalent of clearing your throat or announcing “Testing, testing 1, 2, 3.” Overly broad context statements often start with a global or historical focus, such as, “For centuries, those interested in improving the plight of the world’s poor have been thwarted by the political domination of the rich.” See the tip above—narrow your focus and get to the point. Provide only the specific background or context the reader needs to understand your case, your claim, or your argument.

- **Read through your written work several times—and edit it ruthlessly in each round.** Yes, you’re a busy person with many demands on your time. But, do you make time to eat, sleep, and brush your teeth? Do you make time to prepare for class? Do you make time for Facebook? Then give adequate attention to editing your writing, including time to “step away” and take a break from the writing and review process. Each round of review will help cut, sharpen, and polish your writing if you concentrate on providing the essential information in a well-ordered argument.

- **Don’t be stuffy.** Use the simple, straightforward language of everyday speech, and boycott the bloated rhetoric of lawyers, bureaucrats, or anyone who favors “operationalize” or “utilize.” Don’t fall victim to the false assumption that grandiloquence and pomposity are required elements of academic writing. Instead, recognize inflated language as the enemy—the barrier muffling communication between the worlds of research and practice.

- **Assume the reader has GPS.** This piece of advice is likely to get me in hot water. However, I think a writer can provide adequate guidance to the layout of a paper without resorting to the space-consuming “roadmap” paragraph. This tiresome tactic typically reads along the lines of the following example:

  This paper first presents the Crouse family’s current budget and available resources. The second section discusses eligibility criteria of various public and private assistance programs
available in the Crouse’s community. The third section presents a strategy for engaging Mr. Crouse in receipt of assistance. Finally, the fourth section presents a proposed budget for the Crouse family.

Unless an instructor requires a roadmap, this paragraph should remain in the author’s notes. But, I can hear protests, “A long paper, such as a dissertation, needs to inform the reader about the organization of the paper and the location of particular sections or topics.” I agree; therefore, dissertations should include a table of contents.

- **Avoid unhelpful repetition.** Not all repetition is unnecessary or unhelpful, but over use of “As stated earlier” is a sign that you may be repeating things because you failed to make your original point clearly. Assume the reader can recall the point you made on the previous page. If you failed to make the point stick, then go back and do a better job. Don’t equate shear repetition with quality of support.

- **Use helpful repetition.** Accept that readers are likely to skim rather than to read every word. Therefore, protect your information from readers’ bad habits and make your writing reader-friendly by using headings and repeating a variation of the wording in the first line of the paragraph. This helpful repetition enables readers to use headers as visual cues (i.e., without reading and processing every word) while avoiding the loss of important information. Keep headers brief and repeat and expand on the information in the first sentence of the paragraph.

  a. **This:** Limitation of assessment tools. To adequately interpret our findings, readers must first understand the four limitations of the mental health assessment tools we used in this study. First, the TTD scale...

  b. **Not this:** Four limitations of mental health assessment tools used in this study. The TTD scale inflexibility around participant age, especially for adolescents, limited our ability to ....”

- **Stop thinking of yourself primarily as a social work researcher or practitioner, and think of yourself primarily as a social work writer.** Well-written articles that provide either research evidence or practice information are the avenues by which social work knowledge is made accessible, shared, and advanced within the profession. Social work writing is not like the *Field of Dreams* (“If you build it, they will come”)—just because you write it, there is no guarantee that anyone will read it, especially if your writing is dense, complicated, stuffy, and boring. To be an effective social worker, whatever your area of interest, your writing must be clear, informative, and accessible to the reader. Make those attributes your goals for 2012, and it will be a good year!

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**Need Writing Assistance?**

Contact the Writing Support Team via email: soswwritingsupport@gmail.com
Drop-In Writing Help: Tuesdays, Noon-2 p.m. 548e (Diane Wyant’s office)