

Writing in Social Work

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*—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 texts in the field, its implications, its applicability to other scenarios, and its strengths and weaknesses.

In the case of a review of literature—an assignment that requires you to look at the relationships across several articles or reports—you must not only identify, summarize, and compare literature relevant to the topic under consideration, but also synthesize this literature to argue a point about the current state of knowledge.

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 in-class 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 reasons, answer *how and why questions*. For example:

Topic: Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County

- ✓ *Describe* Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County’s history, mission, goals and objectives, structure, and programs.
- ✓ *Analyze* why Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County is structured in this way, the ways in which certain practice models or theoretical frameworks influence the agency’s mission.

Topic: Cultural Differences

- ✓ *Describe* a group whose experience differs from yours.
- ✓ *Analyze* why these differences exist and how they might pose barriers to understanding.

Application of a Theory

Some assignments ask you to apply an orienting theory to a particular case. Orienting theories help to explain why things such as child abuse and addiction occur. For example, you might be asked to apply the social systems theory to explain the growing incidence of poverty in 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, cogent explanation of the theory— as if you were explaining the theory to someone completely unfamiliar with the concept— so your instructor can evaluate **your** understanding of the theory. When applying a theory to a particular example or case study that focuses on a particular unit of analysis (i.e., 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. Therefore, key steps in writing a social work research paper include identifying an important question or problem, identifying the current knowledge of that problem, and identifying gaps in the knowledge around the problem. Invest time in formulating a strong research question that you can then work to answer or solve by collecting data or by reading relevant literature. For example:

- ✓ Identify a focused topic—depression among the elderly
- ✓ 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 the elderly 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.

These 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 it 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 Assignments

Writing is an important part of a social worker's professional life. Often, a client's welfare is dependent on the social worker's ability to write in a professional manner. Three common types of professional writing in social work are case notes, assessments, and treatment plans. Each type grows out of good listening skills and relies on accurate and 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.

- ✓ *Case Notes*—Objective descriptions or observations of a situation. Case notes are accurate, clear, and concise, and should represent what you've observed, not your personal opinions.
- ✓ *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 measurable actions to be taken.

Keep in mind that these documents become part of a client's record and that others will read and make decisions based what you've written.

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 focus, and refine your ideas. 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>)

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* (6th ed.)

Using proper citation allows you to:

- Join a community of writers and readers who share certain values and a common citation system.
- Build 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, summarizing, or paraphrasing in your own words, you *must* cite your sources. Even if you do not intend to plagiarize, if you do not properly cite your sources, you have plagiarized.

Tips for Writing Success in the MSW Program

As you write and receive feedback on your papers, consider asking the following questions (not all questions are applicable to all types of assignments):

- Does my paper **reflect a social work approach**? Is it informed by the field's concepts and values?
- Does my paper **accomplish the task** described in the assignment? For example do I move beyond reporting and describing in response to an assignment that asks me to analyze or evaluate?
- Is my paper **clear and to the point**, avoiding unnecessary information and showy phrasing?
- Do I use **evidence** that is grounded in the reading or in observable, collected data? Do I include only those details that are relevant to the purpose of the piece of writing?
- Do I **distinguish my ideas** from those of the authors/theories/articles I discuss? Do I make clear where others' ideas end and where my ideas begin?
- Do I waste space on **excessive summary** of sources? Do I make purposeful choices about when to summarize, paraphrase, and quote primary and secondary sources?
- Do I use **proper formatting** for my paper and in documenting sources?

Common Pitfalls

- **Lack of an adequately complex thesis:** A good thesis moves your writing beyond simple reporting and observation by asserting an arguable perspective that requires some work on your part to demonstrate its validity.
- **Lack of adequate support:** A well-crafted thesis requires substantiation in the form of acceptable evidence. This may come from observations, collected data, or published research.
- **Use of personal opinion or anecdotes:** Personal opinions or anecdotes generally do not qualify as rigorous and appropriate evidence. Your personal opinion does not qualify as data.
- **Improper use of a theory or model:** If you are applying a particular theory or model, be sure you have a good understanding of this theory or model.
- **Excessive summarizing/lack of analysis:** Graduate level writing requires that you move beyond summary and descriptive writing (i.e., "book report" writing) to a level of writing skill that presents a clear and logical synthesis of information to help your reader understand your evaluation and analysis of the text, data, client, agency, or issue.
- **Plagiarism:** Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work or ideas—*intentionally or unintentionally*—without proper acknowledgement. Whether you are quoting, summarizing, or paraphrasing, you **must** cite your sources.
- **Use of unreliable electronic sources:** Rigorously evaluate your sources, particularly Internet sources. Ask who authored the information, who published or sponsored the website information, is the information accurate and timely, does the author have expertise in the subject.
- **Excessive quoting:** When quoting a source to provide evidence, use only the relevant part of the quotation. Make sure to explain the relationship of the quotation and your claim or argument. Don't make the reader do the work of fitting together puzzle pieces of information.
- **Shifting verb tense:** Shift verb tense only when necessary. Your writing should accurately reflect that research was performed and events took place in the past and that certain knowledge is current.
- **Passive voice:** Use active voice as often as possible. Active voice generally is more concise and lively than passive voice.

Handout adapted for location, APA Style, and emphasis added Source: University of Montana Writing Center, College of Health Professions & Biomedical Sciences at www.health.umt.edu/schools/sw/BSW/bsw_overview.php