

1

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION: GETTING YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS

INTRODUCTION

Social workers engage in a wide range of writing practices across a variety of practice methods and contexts. Historically, the social work profession has emphasized the importance of skills in spoken communication but has accorded less attention to effective written communication (Prince, 1996). Fortunately, social workers are becoming more aware of the importance of writing skills for direct practice with service users and for achieving such goals as improved team communication, influencing policy, and contributing to the knowledge base of social work. Indeed, the national educational standards for professional social workers in many countries, including the United Kingdom and Australia, now require that social work graduates build and demonstrate a skills base in professional writing, particularly in writing case notes and professional reports (see AASW, 2010; QAA, 2008). This emerging awareness of the importance of professional writing skills is perhaps due to the increasing volume of written work required in social work practice and the growing number of social work responsibilities that involve written communication. For example, social workers face increased accountability requirements to maintain accurate written accounts of their work, and to report on the efficacy of social service programmes.

This book aims to enhance your effectiveness in written communication by providing a comprehensive guide to writing for social work practice contexts and professional purposes. The good news is that many of the principles for effective spoken communication also apply to written communication. However, many areas of

communication also require specialist writing skills, and by mastering these skills you can improve your usefulness as a social worker. This book is dedicated to that goal.

Social workers spend a great deal of their working day involved in written communication. Most social workers write emails, letters and case notes every day. Social workers are also regularly required to undertake other types of writing tasks, such as writing professional reports, legal statements and funding applications. Writing skills are just as important as spoken skills in the knowledge and skills base we need for professional social work practice. Internationally, social work educational programmes are now being held to account for developing students' capacities for professional writing. For example, in the United Kingdom, the QAA (2008) national benchmark statement for social work standards requires that social work students learn to 'Assimilate and disseminate relevant information in reports and case-records' (Section 5.5.2) and that social work students learn to 'Write accurately and clearly in styles adapted to the audience, purpose and context of the communication' (Section 5.6). Similarly, in Australia the national educational standards documents require that, at a minimum, social work students learn 'written skills for case-noting and report writing' (AASW, 2010, Section 4.1.4).

THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN SPOKEN AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Let us begin by considering the similarities between spoken and written communication. Our purpose in making this comparison is to show that you already possess some of the skills required for effective written communication, and to identify those aspects of spoken communication that can or cannot be transferred to written communication.

Qualified social workers are well used to managing spoken communication with clients, managers, colleagues and others. Your training in supportive talking and sensitive listening enables you skilfully and successfully to conduct client conversations and interviews. And you have learnt to hear the nuances of spoken language as your colleagues talk in team meetings and case conferences, and to respond with care and attention to what their language tells you. These skills are at the core of your daily work as a social worker. But the social services profession also requires you to be skilled in communication through writing. You have to translate the spoken interactions you have with clients, and make them available for others through your written case notes and records; and many other parts of your practice require you to write for an audience, some of whom you may never see. You will have to inform different people what happened in your spoken interactions, to explain what you think the interactions meant, and to design reports on them to fit the requirements of the audience. Your written assessments of clients' circumstances may form the basis of your own and others' decisions for action. Indeed, your written assessments may play a crucial part in a chain of events and decisions well beyond your direct involvement with a particular situation. It is important to remember that written communications

are social interactions, and that they serve to inform, explain to or persuade others for many social service purposes, and are as much part of your daily communications as speaking and listening. You need to work as hard on your written communications as you do on your spoken ones.

As your experience of client interactions grows, new occasions for writing occur: you may want to communicate your ideas on social work practice to others in your profession, or to inform the community of a community services initiative. As a practitioner you may also want to influence the formal knowledge base of social work. Your practice experience can provide an ideal vantage point from which to critique and develop social work knowledge for practice. The most effective way of influencing the knowledge base is through written communication in public forums, especially professional journals and conference proceedings. Through these formal communication channels you can have national and international influence on the profession.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SPEECH AND WRITING

Using written communication is not easy. After all, most of us have a good deal more experience with speaking and listening and with non-verbal communication than with writing. We develop writing skills long after we learn many other forms of communication skills.

When the two skills of speaking and writing are compared, a number of differences can be seen.

- Speaking occurs quickly in many cases, and because of this any errors which occur in words and sentences are rarely noticed. Also, since the speaker is present, he or she can add non-verbal information such as gestures or facial expressions to supplement the message to the listeners. But in writing, the words and sentences have to work alone, and what appears in the document is all that the meaning has to depend on.
- Speaking occurs in the presence of others. You may know your audience beforehand or you may get to know them during the course of talking together. Writing, on the other hand, has no audience present, and in some cases writers may not know who exactly their audience is, or even when and where their communication will be read. In the speaking situation the others who are present usually join in the talk, and so the talk will change direction and develop new tones and topics. Topics normally drift during interviews, conversations and meetings; it is often commented on at the end of a talk session that the last topics are very different from the first, and people remark that it is hard to know how the changes of topic came about. In writing, on the other hand, the topic is under the control of the writer from start to finish, and good writing makes readers feel that the writer knows where the communication is going, that there is an underlying plan, and that thought has gone into the topic choice and development. Readers feel comfortable in the hands of a writer who acts as a good guide through the communication so that the arduous task of reading is made easier. For example, students often state that they prefer those lecturers who deliver tidy lectures, with good identification of each section and a clear introduction and conclusion. Such lectures are easy to follow and understand, and they enable students to take good notes on them: you could reflect on your own experiences in this regard.

- Because speaking happens in the presence of others, listeners are able to ask questions if the speaker is unclear or to make corrections if the speaker gets something wrong. Writing does not make this allowance, so writers have to put themselves in the position of the audience and anticipate what questions may be raised, and present the material so that any potential questions, or disagreements, are handled within the writing.
- In spoken communication the audience's attention is less focused than in written communication, because in spoken communication the audience are often at the same time giving attention to what they will say as soon as the speaker finishes. Because their attention is divided, they may miss something that is said, even losing entire ideas and important aspects of what the speaker is saying. However, readers of a written communication pay closer attention. Readers can pause and think about what has been written, and can go back over a difficult idea at any point. This means that written documents can and perhaps should be more complex and densely packed with ideas and meanings than is the case with speech. The density means that extreme care has to be taken with every element of the complex document. In addition, the structure and planning of the document must be carefully designed so that the complexity is made as easy to follow as possible, and the language must be precise enough to withstand being reread several times. The care that readers will take in reading the document needs to be matched by the care with which it is written or they will be disinclined to take it seriously.
- Once speaking is over, it is lost except in memory (unless it is recorded). But memories of spoken interactions can be inaccurate: there is a game in which a spoken message is whispered to a person who then whispers what they remember of the message to the next person, and so on. By the time the message has passed through, say, ten people, it is often quite different from the original one. You could think of your disagreements with a friend about what exactly someone said in the presence of you both. Written communication survives a lot longer, and with accuracy, whether in print, email or fax (though writing on websites can be transient, depending on how often the site is changed). Many written documents are almost permanent, and are certainly far more important in law and other areas of society than what is remembered of what is said. So writing needs to be produced very carefully, since once it leaves your hands it will stand on its own as your message and your meaning, and may remain for readers to consult for years.

As these differences indicate, the content of writing needs to be carefully chosen to suit the aim of the communication and its intended audience. Writing needs to work in unknown contexts, so the content should be arranged so that it is suitable for whatever context its readers may be in. And, of course, it needs to use the language possibilities of words and grammar to the best advantage.

A CONTEXTUAL APPROACH TO WRITING IN SOCIAL WORK

In this book we advocate a contextual approach to writing in social work practice. As a preliminary comment, we are aware that any writing task will have to be completed within the context of the time limits of your busy workload, and that the time you can spend on it will be broken by the need to complete other tasks. So it is vital that you develop efficiency and good time management in your writing habits as well as in the other parts of your work. The ideas we present here for achieving good outcomes from your writing should help you see what writing processes to adopt in order to become an efficient as well as an effective writer.

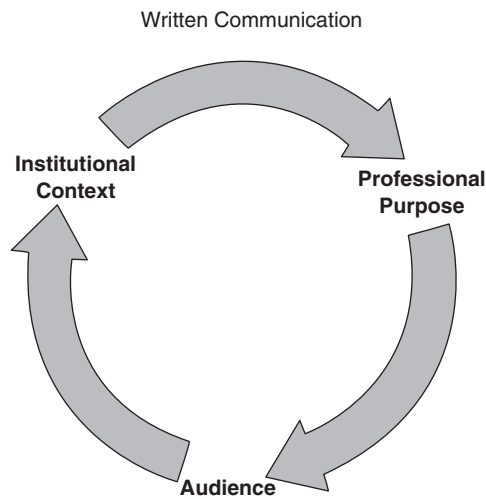


Figure 1.2 Elements of a contextual approach to writing

The three elements of this contextual approach, which are outlined in Figure 1.2, are awareness of institutional context, professional purpose and audience. As the figure shows, each element influences the others in achieving effective written communication.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The first element of a contextual approach to writing is to recognize the influence of institutional context in the shaping of every dimension of social work practice, including writing practices. Healy (2005: 4) refers to the institutional context of practice as 'the laws, public and organizational policies, and accepted practices shaping the institutions where social workers are located'. Your institutional context shapes your writing practices in so far as it shapes both your professional purpose, and the expectations of the audiences for your writing. An understanding of the influence of institutional context can enhance your credibility and effectiveness as a communicator.

Institutional norms about writing vary considerably and so in order to maximize your effectiveness in your written communication, you should take note of formal requirements and expectations in relation to writing style, language and structure within your practice contexts. In some institutional contexts, written communication is formalized through, for example, the use of standardized formats such as structured case records and action plans and through set roles and specialized language. Formalization of written communication is more likely to be the case where a social worker's written communication is shared with colleagues or team members, or where it can be expected to be subjected to external professional scrutiny. For example, your written documents may be requested by a court or a public committee of inquiry. In some practice contexts, however, written communication may be

less formal and more variable, as in the relative flexibility of memos and letters, but even in these contexts your written communications may have significant influence on both internal and external decision-making.

It is important to consider how you represent yourself and your practice in your writing. The impression we create of ourselves through our writing is usually more enduring than the impression we create in spoken interactions and, indeed, we may be called to account for our written words long after we have written them. For example, we can be asked to appear before courts for cross-examination of reports and case notes we have written years ago.

Many readers like to sense that a particular voice is behind the written words, so you have to put something of yourself into the way you write about your ideas. In many professional forums, such as case notes, it is acceptable to use 'I' in your sentences, as in 'this situation arose from the client's circumstances which I took note of during our interactions'. You should always try to represent yourself in your writing as thoughtful, and your approach to the information incorporated in your written work should be fair, truthful and comprehensive. One way of doing this is to indicate something of your thought processes as you write. This way you not only reveal the care with which you are writing, but as a bonus you make your communication easy to follow. It is important that you share with the reader the information and reasoning that inform the views you express in writing. Some phrases that can help readers to understand the thought processes that inform your writing include:

- 'this matter needs to be explored further' shows that you know what is needed, and that you are going to explore it;
- 'as we consider this matter a question arises about ...', shows that you are someone who considers, and thinks about questions that arise, and that you will do both;
- 'while this idea seems to solve the problem of ...', it presents another difficulty which will have to be dealt with', shows that you recognize that apparent solutions are not always the complete answer, and that you deal with difficulties rather than ignoring them and will do both.

Exercises: The presentation of self in written communication

The purpose of the following exercises is to help you to consider how you can shape the presentation of your professional self in written communication.

- 1 Attempt to write the same case note for two different professional contexts. The case note includes your observations about a family you believe may be at risk of neglecting their young children. You are seeking further assessment of the situation. In the first instance, imagine that you are writing for a medical team composed entirely of health professionals. In the second instance, imagine you are writing for a community support service which includes both professional workers and family representatives.
- 2 Read a work-practice document of the kind you have to produce yourself. Use one which was written by someone whose writing you respect and which you think does its task well. What indications can you see of the author's thought processes?

PROFESSIONAL PURPOSE

Professional purpose, clearly expressed, is the second element of effective writing. As a social worker, your purpose as a writer will be shaped by your professional roles and values. Social workers occupy a wide variety of formal roles, such as those of caseworker, family worker and community worker. In each of these roles you will conduct a variety of writing tasks. For example, a family worker typically keeps case records, and writes letters and reports with, or on behalf of, the family with whom they are working. By contrast, a community worker may write public submissions aimed at achieving policy change and funding submissions to improve the resources available to the communities with whom they work. Your professional values also shape your purposes as a social worker, and therefore your purposes in writing. Despite considerable debate about values in social work practice, some values are common to the profession across many countries. For example, in her review of social work ethical codes across several countries, including the UK, Australia and the USA, Banks (2006: 47) identified that these codes shared variations of the values of: 'human dignity and worth; service to humanity; and social justice'. In writing, no less than in speaking, you should consider how your practice reflects these values. For example, your commitment to human dignity and worth should be demonstrated in how your writing practice reflects the voices of the individuals you write with or on behalf of. And the principle of social justice may lead you to scrutinize how your writing practices can be more inclusive of and equitable to the service users with whom you work. Drawing on this same principle, you might decide that rather than writing a policy submission on behalf of your disadvantaged community, you will use your knowledge of policy writing to facilitate the involvement of community members in writing the policy submission on their own behalf.

AUDIENCE

Understanding and responding to your audience is the third element of the contextual approach to writing. Rabbitts and Fook (1996: 171) remind us that effective written communication is about 'writing in the appropriate way for the appropriate audience'. You cannot know in advance all the audiences who will review your work, nor can you be responsible for their interpretations of it. However, you can usually identify the primary audience for a specific piece of writing, that is, the audience to whom your work is addressed. For example, if you work in a multi-disciplinary health team, the primary audience for your case notes is other team members; while if you are writing an application for funding, your primary audience is the funding committee. You can also often identify potential secondary audiences for your work; that is, those for whom the work is not primarily intended but who you might reasonably expect to access it. For example, as a child protection social worker you can reasonably anticipate that service users may

access any files kept about them and also that your files may be reviewed by the courts. Indeed, the establishment of freedom of information legislation in many post-industrial countries means that a broad range of stakeholders may gain access to your documents. While you cannot always identify secondary audiences you can, nonetheless, enhance your capacity to reach these audiences by taking a thoughtful and planned approach to your writing.

Understanding and reaching your audience is important to effective written communication. This simple fact is often forgotten when you focus on the importance of the story you want to tell, rather than on how you can ensure that your written story is made accessible and interesting to your audience. Some initial investigations into the expectations of the primary audience and an understanding of the conditions under which they will read your work can help to improve your effectiveness, so you should identify them, and, on this basis, develop an understanding of their knowledge base and expectations. One way of understanding these expectations is to critically examine examples of written communication in your workplace. Some matters you should note are the typical length of the written communication, the type of terminology, including abbreviations, and also the formatting required. Understanding the language used by your audience is important to reaching your audience. For example, in medical record keeping, your primary audience may be the interdisciplinary health care team. However, in such situations you need to remember your own position, so you need to write as a social worker, not as someone from nursing or counselling. Ensuring that you deploy concepts understood by the whole team enhances your capacity to get your message across and also improves your credibility as a team member (Opie, 1995).

You also need to consider the context in which your audience will read your writings. In particular, you should consider the period of time they can allocate to reading and comprehending your written communication. For example, your case notes are most likely to be reviewed by your colleagues while they prepare for a meeting with a particular service user, sometimes in a crisis situation, and in preparing for team discussions in relation to the service user. In this context, your notes are likely to be read quickly, and so your key points should be readily accessible to the reader. By contrast, in reading a journal article, readers are likely to seek to gain a depth of understanding of a specific issue, and you can anticipate that they will allocate more time to their reading.

Another way of assessing your audience's needs is to consider their purpose for reading. These purposes can include: preparation for discussion with an individual, group or team; support of decision-making; or development of their knowledge base. Considering your audience's needs can help to structure your writing in ways that prioritize those needs. For example, in writing a funding application, you may appeal to the funding body's commitment to address particular community concerns by ensuring that you make clear how your proposal recognizes those concerns.

PREPARING THE CONTENT OF YOUR WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

So far we have considered the *context* of writing in social work practice; we now turn to your written *content*. In every situation in which writing is required, you will have to think carefully about your content, that is, the ideas you use, with respect to your aims and position. In this section, we focus on how to develop your ideas and make them into good topics in your written communication.

IDENTIFYING IDEAS AND TOPICS

Effective writing is focused on a topic, which could be defined as a set of linked ideas, all making a contribution to a communication document. Your ideas come from your education, reading, and life experience, and are many and varied. As you begin a communication your task is to select from the mass of ideas in your mind the ones that are needed for the document you are writing, and these will need to be adjusted to become your topics.

In preparing your communication, you may be faced with two different situations – you may be requested to produce a written document, or, on the other hand, you may make your own decision to write on some matter.

- 1 If you are requested to write, your document topics may be supplied. For example, in case recording you have to structure your content according to the formal document headings required by your organization. Alternatively, if you are asked to write ‘an account of the problems of implementation in the new policy, section 2.1’, this request requires you to deal with the topics of ‘problems’, ‘implementation’ and whatever topics are in ‘section 2.1’ of the new policy. However, even when the overall topics are supplied, it will still be your task to find the relevant sub-topics for each of these headings.
- 2 By contrast, it may be your own choice to find and use the appropriate ideas for the communication, for example, in advocacy or referral letters; media releases; some policy documents and research reports; and conference papers and journal articles.

Whether the ideas are decided for you, or self-initiated, when they become the topics of your communication they need to be thoroughly developed, the most important points covered, and to be designed so that your meaning is comprehensible and leads to your conclusion. Hopefully the advice we offer in this book will reduce the difficulty of these tasks.

It may be that you already have a rough sense of the relevant ideas, that is, you know what will be your topics, and just need to ensure that you fully cover the matter. Or it may be that you need to check what ideas have been used by others writing similar communications, so you can draw on common understandings. In both cases you should allocate time to identifying and developing your ideas before you settle on which ideas will be your topics, and you should do all this

before you write your first page. This is because it enables you to see the wood of your general idea before you get lost among the trees of detail. We will now outline some well-established methods for searching for ideas, and then show how best you can organize them into the topics of the various sections of your communication.

THE SEARCH FOR IDEAS

The process of searching for the appropriate ideas to use in any written communication is a complex one. Firstly, you need to think about the nature of your writing project, to ask yourself what you know about it, and to jot down notes on what ideas come into your head (sometimes called ‘brainstorming’). This may look like a jumble, but putting it on paper enables you to see similarities which can be put together, any overlaps which can be omitted, and so on, so you can tidy the ideas into some sort of a list. Secondly, you need to think what ideas on the project might interest your audience, and make notes on these too; then see what ideas are common to both lists, and make a joint list. Thirdly, ask yourself which idea or couple of ideas on the joint list seem to you to be central to what you want to communicate – these are a basis for the rest of your ideas search.

The next stage is to supplement your own ideas with those of others who are knowledgeable on the subject. For example, if you are new to practice in a specific field you could talk with experienced colleagues, review previous case notes, attend work-based training opportunities, and, of course, check the formal research literature in your field. Specialist writing tasks, normally undertaken by advanced professionals, such as writing research reports and conference papers, require that you demonstrate in-depth knowledge of your field. For these tasks, you need to undertake a formal review of the literature to ensure that your writing is engaged with established knowledge in your field (see Chapter 7). Your investigations in this phase may provide ideas which you had not previously considered, or better versions of your ideas.

Once you have considered the range of possible ideas, you will need to incorporate the relevant ones into your own list of ideas. Very importantly, you need to decide which ideas to keep, and then to see how they connect with one another. Once you have drawn up a list of your ideas, you should prioritize the list, deciding which are the main ideas, which are subordinate, which are comparable, and which are strong contrasts, and so on. Drawing them as a tree diagram can help (Flower, 1998). Select the best ones for the purpose, and delete any which do not seem to link easily with the others or which are on very minor points. Too many ideas can clutter up a document and make it hard to follow, while too few can make a document seem too uninteresting to be worth the effort of reading. Depending on the depth of investigation undertaken at this point, and on how frequently you have to write communications of this type, you may find it useful to establish an ideas database (see Chapter 2).

The next stage is to make sure that your coverage of the ideas deals with all the relevant aspects of your argument. One of the best methods of exploring an idea fully is to use the classic method which Aristotle devised, and which has been used by generations of writers since that time. Aristotle recommended a two-stage method: firstly, that you work out what *category* of main idea you have selected; and secondly, that you think about the *qualities* of that kind of idea.

TOPICS: IDEAS – CATEGORIES AND QUALITIES

First, ask what *category* of idea is the main one you need to write about. Is it:

- an event – a happening, for example a client interview, a team meeting, a focus group, or a new policy directive?
- a question – for example, ‘how can statutory authorities improve child welfare practices with clients from differing cultural and linguistic communities?’
- a concept – concepts are ideas themselves – for example, ‘social work ethics’ or ‘client needs’ or ‘policy issues’,
- a proposition – a suggestion or recommendation? For example, as a member of a community mental health team you may suggest certain courses of action for individual service users, such as hospitalization or release to community care. Similarly, in a policy development role, you may make recommendations about the deployment of staff.

Next, you need to decide on the sub-ideas that are involved, how much of the document you will spend on them, and what treatment they will need. Think what special *qualities* your idea category has, and what special approach it needs. Select which you need from the following.

- If your idea is an event, you should identify what you can say about it that will accurately describe it so that your readers can know what it was like. Perhaps it would be useful to mention its causes, or its effects, or both. Or you could mention its positive and negative features. You might show how you came to know the event – there could be something useful in this for your audience to know.
- If your idea is a question, you need to think what makes it different from a statement. For example, the question ‘Does the family understand the safety issues for the child?’ is different from the statement ‘The family has an adequate understanding of the child’s safety’. What do the terms of the question take for granted? For example, that there is a concept of ‘safety’ that the family should understand, and what is meant by ‘understanding’. Are these worth exploring? You might also consider the range of possible answers to the question you intend to discuss, think about which are your preferred answers, and what are your reasons for these preferences? As you develop your question and possible answers, you might also like to consider whether your viewpoint is different from that of your audience and how you might deal with expressing your difference of view. For example, a strengths-based caseworker may want to challenge other team members to recognize the service users’ strengths rather than focusing on their deficits (Saleebey, 2005). In offering a credible challenge

to others, however, you are more likely to succeed if you show you understand their viewpoint and can respectfully offer evidence to support your alternative perspective.

- If your main idea is a concept – say, ‘policy issues’ – it is useful to describe the features you think the concept has and list them, for example, policy documents, laws, implementation, and so on. Ask yourself how you would distinguish this concept from those which are closely related to it, for example ‘management issues about policy’. Ask yourself if you are using the concept differently from the way others do. For example, when discussing a ‘family system’, are you referring to a nuclear family unit or a broader kinship network? Perhaps you are narrowing the concept by focusing on only one part of it, and this is exactly what you want to do. If so, you should produce a ‘stipulative’ definition; that is, tell your readers that in this communication you stipulate that the concept has only one specific meaning – which you spell out. And, if necessary, you should state how it might differ from the reader’s assumed usage of the term. You might state that in working with this ‘family system’ you refer not only to parents and siblings but also to their kinship network, including aunts, cousins and grandparents who have played an important role in the family.
- Ask yourself if there is a problem with the concept. Is there something about the idea that does not quite fit the purpose you need it for? Does the concept have good or bad associations and, if so, do you want these associations? If you do not want them, then you will need to deal with this in your account, explaining that you want the good associations to be understood.
- If your idea is a proposition, you could consider what prior propositions, if any, it assumes. One way of doing this is to analyse the meaning and implications of the keywords in the proposition. For example, in a mental health case, where you are recommending hospitalization, what does the key word ‘hospitalization’ actually mean? Do you mean compulsion or not? If you are responding to someone else’s proposition, you may need to supply information about the context of their proposition. Importantly, you should think about whether the truth status of the proposition needs to be confirmed or challenged in your argument and, if so, the kinds of evidence required to support your approach to the proposition. For example, in arguing for careful consideration of the use of structured decision-making tools in practice, you might state why the tools are useful by pointing both to the advantages in using them and to the disadvantages in not using them. You may need to supply data to support your proposition, and if that is the case, then you need to make sure the data is relevant to the proposition, up to date, and persuasive for your readers.

In all of this writing you need to show that you have experience and knowledge of your field, and that you are capable of critical reflection.

Exercise: Analysing writing practices

The following exercises are intended to help you to reflect on your own and others’ writing practices.

- 1 Look through the files of written communications you have received. Using them as examples, analyse a few of them to see which of the idea categories as listed above (event, question, concept and proposition) are evident. What are the features of the most effective pieces of communication?
- 2 Look through some old lecture notes or case records you have written, and analyse the extent to which the ideas they contain make sense now. Think about the ideas that are missing or are not explained properly. Most people have a particular habit of fixing on certain ideas and not mentioning others when they communicate. Which do you omit? Make a special note to try to remember this kind of idea when you write.

DESIGNING YOUR DOCUMENT

We turn now to the subject of document design. So far in the writing process you have thought about your context, purpose and audience, and you have collected your ideas, narrowed them and focused them so that they become your topics. The next stage is to consider how you will use your topics to the best advantage. It is not enough to present a heap of good topics and hope that this will produce a good outcome. Do not forget that your communication has to take its place among all the other communications that land on people's desks, and unless you do a good job of presenting your material, it will not receive much attention. In order to have a good chance of achieving your aims, you need to think about the design of your document. At this point you are starting to write, producing notes and jotting down thoughts that will, eventually, become your document.

How do you arrange your topics and create a readable communication? Most documents should have an introduction, a middle, and a conclusion, but this is not always easy to achieve. You need to decide which topics will form the introduction of your document; which belong in the middle part of it; and which should go into the conclusion. The golden rule is to put your main topic in the introduction, then in the middle part to expand and develop it, bringing in related minor ideas, and to finish with some new aspect of your main topic. The reason for putting your main material at the beginning and at the end is that these are the most powerfully important places, because most readers can remember the first and the last points of documents, but may lose track during the middle.

THE INTRODUCTION

In this part of the document you need to get the audience into a mindset which will follow your thoughts with comparative ease. Try one of the following tactics:

- Begin with what is familiar to your audience, but add a twist that will engage the audience and encourage them to read further. For example: '[*familiar*] Social workers share a commitment to the value of social justice, [*twist*] but this value is easier to achieve in some practice contexts than others.'
- Explain your purpose. For instance: 'In the paper I will explore the opportunities and challenges in applying the value of social justice in the field of mental health practice with the aim of improving practice.' Think of your readers as wanting to highlight parts of the document to find the gist of the communication – so make it easy for them: 'opportunities and challenges', 'social justice' and 'mental health' seem to be asking to be highlighted.
- Show that the ideas you are writing about are valuable and worth attention. You can achieve this by appealing to the concerns that you know your readers share with you. For instance, in an audience of social workers this might be a commitment to a particular improvement in practice.
- Use an example which will rouse attention, such as a case study or a high-profile concern in the field you are considering.

- If you anticipate that some of your ideas may meet with rejection, begin by anticipating this and trying to prevent it. You might include a sentence such as 'Some say [*oppositional idea*] ... and it has value [*respecting your opponents*], but in these particular circumstances, its value is lessened [*show why oppositional view is not appropriate*]...'.

THE MIDDLE

Begin this section with an expansion of the main topic, discussing any content that needs explanation. Tell your readers what aspects you are going to deal with and, if you think it useful, define or explain anything that your audience might not be sure about. Definitions should be used here rather than in the beginning section – unless absolutely necessary – because they are boring to many readers and because a definition just restates an idea: it does not advance the idea in any way. If you are writing about an event or a process it is good to use chronology as your plan through the section; though this strategy does not always work for concepts and propositions.

HOT TIP

Keep to your planned order

In developing the structure of the middle section it is important that, if in the introduction you set up an order of ideas, like 'this account will deal with A, and then B, and will end with C', you keep to that order in the middle part: your audience expect it, and will be confused, irritated and lose concentration if it does not happen.

As you write the middle part it is good to start with what you and your audience agree on, and lead them from there to any new ideas you want to share with them. It is also good to distinguish clearly your major points from your minor ones so that readers can know what importance to give to each one; and you should also ensure that there is some linkage of the points (see the section below on paragraphs) so that the reading process is as smooth as possible.

THE CONCLUSION

The conclusion serves a number of purposes depending, in part, on the aims of your written communication. In most instances, a summary of your main points (without the minor points) is useful, especially if your document appears to cover a good deal of material. In some circumstances, such as where you expect a broad audience, it can be worth showing how your audience could use or adapt the ideas you have presented. One effective strategy for persuading your audience of your ideas is to conclude with the positive consequences which would arise if your ideas were

accepted. Another is to mention that further research is needed. And in writing that is intended to inform or change practice, a consideration of future practical directions for the development of the ideas and practices you have discussed is likely to be valued by your audience.

YOUR WRITING STYLE: PARAGRAPHS, SENTENCES AND WORDS

The writing of the whole document must use a professional style, that is, it should demonstrate clarity of paragraph structuring, good word choices, and good use of grammar. If these are present they will show you to be logical, and that can be persuasive as you lead your audience step by step through your ideas so that they may think about your material in the way you want them to. They will consider your ideas seriously and may come to agree with you.

PARAGRAPHS

There are several useful tactics for achieving good paragraph structure, which we now outline.

Begin each paragraph with a sentence which encapsulates the main idea of the paragraph you intend to write; this is called the ‘topic’ sentence. It tells readers in advance what to expect in the paragraph, and so enables them to track your ideas easily. For example, you might write: ‘This aged person has a major need for safety in her housing.’ Then follow this sentence by choosing a pattern for the rest of your paragraph. Here are some useful patterns.

- Create a chronology out of what you have to say – and make this your way of connecting the elements of the material. For example, you might write: ‘*First* the idea seems unfeasible because it is ... *but then* as we consider its possibilities ... till *finally* it seems the best idea to use because ...’.
- Lead one sentence into the next, as in: ‘Ethical behaviour in social work is *essential*. It is at *the heart of* the relationship of worker and *client*. *Clients* will not disclose matters to someone they do not *trust*. So *trust* has to be built ...’.
- Use a series of similar sentence types for a part of a paragraph, as in ‘*Trust* is crucial to client work. *It is important* for disclosure of private details. *It is vital* for the honest revelation of difficulties. And *it is essential* for the future actions that may be set up.’ This pattern works well if you have a short series of points to make, as here, and it works best if you end with the most important as a climax to the pattern.
- Balance your paragraph with sentences in favour of something, followed by sentences against it, as in ‘You *can do X* in the circumstances. But on the other hand it is *not possible to do Y*.’
- In your paragraph, create a list of similar points and introduce each one with a phrase such as *equally, also, as well, but mostly, in the same way*. Listing your points makes them tidy, and it enables the audience to see similarities which they might not otherwise see, and, of course, to focus on the listed items.

- In a set of adjacent sentences in a paragraph, state a point and then supply an example (but only if the point would be hard to understand without it). This tidies the material into an *idea–example* routine, and readers can follow it easily.
- In a paragraph that contains an idea which you think will be difficult for readers to grasp, put it into one set of words, then re-express it in other words, using a phrase such as *in other words*, *to put it another way*, *alternatively*. These phrases can help readers understand the point: if they find the first formulation unclear, perhaps the second might be clearer.

In any paragraph it is wise to include connecting words, sometimes called ‘signposts’. They tell the reader (perhaps quite subconsciously) to make a mental switch. For example, ‘but’ acts to tell the reader that the next idea is a contradiction of the previous one, as in ‘This is good, *but* not always’. Other signposts are:

- ‘particularly’, which heralds a specific point after you have made a general one, as in: ‘The trust factor is essential, *particularly* on first meeting your client.’
- ‘therefore’, which indicates that the next idea is the conclusion of those preceding it, as in: ‘X is completed, the Y issues have been addressed, *therefore* the scheme should go ahead.’
- ‘because’ tells readers that the reason for the preceding matter is about to be revealed, as in: ‘The situation caused a number of problems, *because* it was poorly organized and insufficiently funded.’

Other signals that are useful in a paragraph are the phrases which show that a particular point you are making is very important, for example ‘my main point’ or ‘the significant issue here’. And you can signal how many points you will make, as in ‘There are three main issues in this context,’ provided that you do then go on to deal with three main issues.

SENTENCES

Most advice about sentences in written communication recommends that writers produce direct and simple sentences if they want their readers to understand what they are communicating. There are several ways in which this can be done.

- Use the active form of the verb, as in ‘the team *organized* a meeting’, rather than the passive form of the verb, as in ‘a meeting *was organized by* the team’. This is simple and direct language because it is the most used sentence type in communication generally. It is a form that we have used since we were children first learning to talk (as in ‘*I did* this, then *Mummy got* cross, and I *cried* ... and then I *played* ...’), it is therefore an easily followed pattern for adult readers. Use this active form especially if you have to express any ideas which might be difficult for your readers, as its simplicity will help them process the material. However, there are times when using the active form is not the best way to write your sentence. The active form places the agent or actor in first position in the sentence, and this tells your readers that the agent is a focus they should note. In the example given above, ‘the team organized a meeting’, the active form focuses on ‘the team’. But if you wish to emphasize ‘the meeting’ rather than the team that organized it, then the passive form, ‘the meeting was organized’ is more appropriate.

- Related to the previous point, you should put any matter which you want to highlight into first position in the sentence. Note the difference between the following versions of the same ideas: 'Provided that we get the details, and that they are satisfactory, then the procedure is acceptable to the organization' and 'The procedure is acceptable to the organization, provided that we get the details and that they are satisfactory'. In the first version there is more emphasis on the 'details' and in the second version the emphasis is on the acceptable 'procedure'.
- If you want to omit the agent of an action, then you can use the passive form: so you could write either 'a meeting was organized by the team' or just 'a meeting was organized'. The second version may be sufficient if it is not relevant to your purpose to show who organized the meeting, and you want to focus instead on what happened at the meeting, its results, and so on.
- You can sometimes put a whole section of a sentence into a noun form (that is, a naming word) in order to make the matter simpler to understand. So, for example, you could write the whole sentence 'we noted that Mary *did not often come to interviews and other meetings*' or you could express it by the single word 'we noted Mary's *absences*'.

It will be useful for you as a writer if, as you read a newspaper, novel, or a work document, you can spend a little time looking especially at the sentence forms and seeing which ones you find easy to follow and which are hard. Using the possibilities of sentence construction carefully means that you can make your grammar help your reader understand your material.

WORDS

Every time you write a word you are choosing from a set of similar words from your vocabulary. So, for instance, in writing about the person Mary Smith, you might choose the word 'client', but you have other possible words that you could use for Mary Smith – 'service user', 'carer', 'complainant'. Each word has a different cluster of meanings around it that come with it as you bring it into the communication. So the choice of 'client' implies that the writer sees Mary as someone who is in a troubled situation similar to that of the clients who come to visit a professional. The choice of 'service user' implies that someone supplies a service, and that Mary is a user of it. Though these words share a lot of meaning, you will choose one almost automatically because that is the term used in your training and your practice, but other social workers, and perhaps you yourself at other times, might prefer another. The choice of the word 'carer' rather than 'client' might be appropriate in a specific communication context, because it highlights a salient feature of the person that you want your readers to concentrate on. In some social and communicative contexts, such as a legal office or a courtroom, you might need to choose the word 'complainant', which focuses on Mary's position as in opposition to the 'defendant'. Whichever word choice you make, one consequence will be to encourage your readers to accept the meaning behind your choice as the way they should see Mary Smith. And this will have implications for their understanding of your whole document. Because of the power of word choice and its implications, there have been

many discussions about words to be used within the profession, and some words are now seen as quite inappropriate, such as ‘victim’ as a way of seeing a client. This is more than just a word rejection, and implies a different sense of the roles and responsibilities of service providers and those who use, or are subject to, social services. (As time passes, keep yourself alert to any changes in word meanings used by colleagues or the mass media, and so on, which offer different implications.)

As a useful extra task, think of the appropriate name for what you are doing as you produce the words. There is a difference between ‘explaining something to’ or ‘informing’ your audience – which are you doing? *Roget’s Thesaurus* in either print or on-line form can help you see these differences in either print or on-line form (at the time of writing you can download *Roget* for free at www.yourdictionary.com/Library/Reference/Resources). You need also, of course, to use anti-oppressive language, watching out for those words which reduce the value of people, such as using inappropriate names for people, as in ‘natives’ (this is an awkward problem because everyone who is born in a country is a native, but nowadays the word has come to have oppressive meanings).

To return to the issue of using simple language, aim to use the simpler word where appropriate: not ‘accomplish’ but ‘do’; not ‘commence’ but ‘begin’ or ‘start’; not ‘in conjunction with’ but just ‘with’; not ‘terminate’ but ‘end’; not ‘transpire’ but ‘happen’.

HOT TIP

Golden rules of written communication

Here we select some of the main points of this chapter as a list of golden rules for effective written communication in social work practice.

- 1 Provide a clear and focused structure in the introduction to your work. State the key ideas in the order that they will be presented in the document. This will allow you to maintain, and demonstrate, the logical progression of your ideas throughout your material.
- 2 Ensure that a clear and, if possible, unique argument underpins your work. Make your work stand out from the crowd by highlighting what is new, different and relevant about your work.
- 3 Provide evidence for your statements, especially for key or contentious points. Lead the audience through the logic of, and evidence for, your case rather than insisting that they simply accept your position.
- 4 Understand and use the ideas and language of your audience as this can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of your communication with them.
- 5 Use the active voice, which involves putting the main actor or concept at the beginning of the sentence. Using the active voice results in a stronger statement than the passive voice.
- 6 Avoid repetition. Make sure that relevant points are presented together and in logical order to prevent repetition.
- 7 Check your punctuation and spelling. Poorly presented work will detract from your credibility and may also interfere with the comprehensibility of your work. Make use of the thesaurus, grammar and spell-check facility on your word processor.
- 8 Edit your work. Good writing takes time and effort. Expect to spend time redrafting written communication and seek feedback from your colleagues on the effectiveness of your written communication.

AUDITING YOUR WRITING STRENGTHS AND SKILLS

We now turn to the issue of you as a writer. We encourage you to reflect on your skills as a writer in the same way as interpersonal skills courses encourage students and practitioners to reflect on their spoken and non-verbal communication. Effective writing is a skill that takes time and effort to develop and, like all skills, requires continual maintenance and extension. Because of the effort involved, it is worth reviewing your motivations for developing your written communication skills as well as your strengths and areas for development as a writer. The following exercise should help.

Exercise: A writing audit

The first two questions help you to conduct an audit of your strengths as a writer, while questions 3–7 are intended to identify the skills you require to meet your writing needs and goals. It might help you to return to this audit at various stages of your writing skills development.

Allocate about 30 minutes to answer the following questions:

- 1 What do you see as your strengths as a writer?
- 2 What do others who have read your written work identify as your strengths as a writer?
- 3 What are the main writing tasks you already undertake in the course of your practice?
- 4 What skills are required to communicate effectively in these writing tasks?
- 5 What writing tasks would you like to develop further capacity for?
- 6 What skills do you need to develop to complete these writing tasks successfully?
- 7 And, as a spur to make the effort to develop and sustain your writing skills: What benefits will arise for you and for others, such as service users, through further development of your writing skills?

Applications on writing may be useful

If you have either a iPad or an iPod Touch, some of the applications that you can purchase may be helpful for your writing. Currently, among the many apps you can find under the category 'Education' are 'Art of Writing', 'Quick Writing Notes', 'Writing Toolkit' and 'Writing Tips'; under the category 'Productivity' you can find 'Writing Assistant'. By the time you read this there may well be others.

HOT TIP

SOMETHING ELSE THAT MIGHT HELP! A CRITICAL FRIEND

We have emphasized that becoming an effective writer is a skill that, like all skills, requires time and persistence to develop. As with developing any skill, it

can help to have support in this process and preferably the support of someone who has similar goals and challenges. We have found that many budding social work writers benefit from developing critical friendships with others who are also seeking to develop their effectiveness as communicators. We first became aware of the term ‘critical friendship’ in the work of community activist Katrina Shields (1994). The role of the critical friend is to provide support and respectful critique. While it may be obvious that support can help to gain new skills, Shields also highlights the importance of respectful critique for encouraging skills development by enabling us to receive honest insights and suggestions about improvement.

In the context of enhancing your written communication, a critical friend is a person who is willing to help you to develop your writing skills by providing support and critique. Ideally, a critical friend should have the following qualities:

- They should be conversant with your field or discipline. Writing practices vary by discipline area and so your critical friend will be of most assistance if they share the norms and language of written communication in your field.
- They should themselves be engaged in the writing process and committed to improving their own writing skills. Common engagement in writing processes and awareness of its difficulties can promote empathy between critical friends.
- They should be sensitive to the way they give feedback and they should be respectfully critical. Writing, like all forms of communication, is a personal activity. Many of us are sensitive to critical comments about our writing as this can seem to reflect badly on our personal communication styles. For this reason, your critical friend should have the capacity to provide constructive feedback that you can learn from, and do so with sufficient humility to allow you to accept or reject their insights.

We acknowledge that it can be difficult to get the balance right: in our experience, colleagues find it relatively easy to be supportive of writing efforts but more difficult to offer critique, and the challenge of respectful critique is more difficult still! For this reason, we include some suggestions on being part of a critical writing friendship.

HOT TIP

Being a critical friend!

Being asked to be part of a critical friendship is an honour and responsibility. The friendship says that your colleague trusts your capacity to help them in developing their writing skills. With this role comes the responsibility of providing support and constructive critical feedback. We have found the following pointers to be helpful for balancing the elements of this role; you may already use these ideas in your spoken communication but it is imperative also that you consider how to provide constructive feedback on written work.

- 1 Always aim to provide a balance of positive and negative feedback. Exclusively positive feedback can limit opportunities for your colleague to learn from your insights. However, too much negative feedback can be

demoralizing and alienating. The principle of 'praise, critique, polish' can be helpful in structuring your feedback. This means that you begin your commentary by identifying a genuine area of strength in the written piece. This is followed by identification of an area for improvement, and finally you should polish your comment by reviewing the areas of strength in the written piece and offering any practical suggestions for improvement.

- 2 Suggestions for improvement should be specific and practical, such as 'shorten the length of sentences', which is more helpful and less judgemental than abstract comments such as 'clarify your argument'.
 - 3 Limit your critical comments on style. One's style of written communication is a personal matter and we believe that the personal flair of the writer can help to make connections with the audience. Comments on style should be limited to improving the clarity of communication, rather than encouraging the writer to conform to a specific style guide about written communication. Above all, avoid making sweeping critical remarks about another person's writing style, as this will be very unlikely to help improve their written communication and it is probably the quickest way to dissolve a critical friendship!
 - 4 Don't expect all your advice to be accepted. In any effective critical partnership we can expect that both parties will actively consider, rather than entirely accept or reject, the viewpoints of the other.
-

CONCLUSION

Most social workers are well educated in the strategies and skills of effective spoken communication. Many of the skills involved in spoken communication are also relevant to written communication. However, in writing you must anticipate problems your audience may have in understanding what you write, and deal with them within the communication itself. This means a lot of thinking and editing work before you can feel you have completed the writing in a satisfactory manner. This is why writing can be hard to do. Through this book, we offer some strategies to help in developing your effectiveness in written communication across a range of practice contexts and roles.

Review exercise: Reviewing your communication style

It is useful to know something about your own style of speaking in order to see what your style of writing might be. Next time you speak to a colleague on work matters, note how many times you are questioned about what you have said, how often you have to repeat something in different words because it is not understood, how often you catch a questioning look in your listener. This self-reflection will give you some idea of what problems there are in your particular style of spoken communication, and these may also occur in your written communication and may need to be addressed. It is a valuable exercise in strengthening your interactional competence.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Special exercise

In our writing of this book we have tried to follow the rules and best methods we are urging on you. However, we know from experience that, no matter how careful writers and editors are, some mistakes will slip through. If you have noted any as you have read the book, perhaps you might spare the time to let us know, as a critical friend of ours!

FURTHER READING

Barrass, R. (2002) *Writing at Work: A Guide to Better Writing in Administration, Business and Management*. New York: Oxford University Press.

A helpful guide to writing in professional contexts, though it is not specifically designed for social work and human services practice.

Flower, L. (1998) *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing*. Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

A classic text on real-world writing, with many examples to show how to write successfully.

Hopkins, G. (1998) *Plain English for Social Services: A Guide to Better Communication*. Lyme Regis: Russell House.

An exploration of how to write in plain English for social work professionals.

Pugh, R. (1996) *Effective Language in Health and Social Work*. London: Chapman & Hall.

An exploration, as the title suggests, of key issues of using language effectively in the entwined contexts of health and social work.

Strunk, W. and White, E.B. (2008) *The Elements of Style* (50th anniversary edn). New York: Pearson Longman.

This pocket-sized handbook has been a classic source of information since 1917 and provides an overview of the general rules and principles of effective and elegant written communication.

Taylor, G. (1989) *The Student's Writing Guide for the Arts and Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Although designed for university students, this book could be very useful to practising social workers, especially Chapter 3 on interpretation and taking notes.

Thompson, N. (2003) *Communication and Language: A Handbook of Theory and Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

This is an easy to read broad coverage of speaking, writing and general communication.

If, and only if, you can spare the time and want to know more about categorizing *ideas* and how to sort them, and on improving the *structure* of your writing, we recommend the following text:

Corbett, E.P.J. and Connors, R.J. (1998) *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (4th edn).
New York: Oxford University Press.

Chapter 2 has a section on topics, which contains material on idea collection; and Chapter 3 contains material on arrangement or structuring of your ideas. (The book has appeared in a number of editions since 1965; you may be able to find a second-hand copy of an early edition.)