A Writing Guide for Social Work

Instructor Edition

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Introduction

Social work is a writing-intensive discipline. Whether they work with individual clients in direct practice, work with administrators in community organizing, or conduct social-work research, our students will write, revise, and proofread for the rest of their professional lives.

This guide assumes that a high-quality product—an essay, a report, a research paper—results from a streamlined, efficient, rigorous process. This guide can usher you through best practices for the complete assignment and grading work-flow, or you can read it in any order, as your needs or preferences require. Each of the following sections represents a stage in the writing process. You can follow these links directly from here, or you can start reading the whole guide in order by following the link at the bottom of the page.

- **Why Make Students Write?** Prepare and organize assignments.
- **What Should Students Expect?** Clarify expectations to maximize student performance.
- **What is Social Work Student Research?** Encourage inquiry, not retrieval.
- **How Can We Help Students Start?** Use process assignments to help students get going.
- **How Can We Help Students Cite?** Teach attribution and documentation efficiently.
- **Why Make Students Revise?** Use revision assignments and peer review to encourage critical thinking.
- **How Can We Help Students Proofread?** Grade and comment efficiently.
- **Conclusion** – More resources for writing instruction.

This guide is also available in two different editions: one "For Instructors" and one "For Students." It may be useful for you to read both editions, regardless of which group you find yourself fitting, because college writing aims to improve critical thinking (ideas) and presentation (language), and not just to affix a label or grade. From either a student's or an instructor's perspective, a "good" assignment (and that means a document turned in as an "assignment" as well as a document that assigns an "assignment") should strive to produce a new and useful insight, not just rehash already established truths. Even a literature review, after all, must make an argument.

<u>Why Make Students Write?</u>

Social Work Writing Beyond College

Preparing BSW, MSSW, or PhD students for a career in Social Work means not only helping them gain competence in new areas of content, but also continuing their education in how to communicate effectively. Writing assignments can accomplish much more than simply allowing us to gauge student progress toward course objectives:

- **Learning to Write:** Learning to write is an iterative process, one that improves with practice. Writing assignments that help students see the steps from brainstorming to proofreading also help cement writing habits that will serve their needs better than a last-minute rush toward a term paper.
- **Writing to Learn:** Informal (or even ungraded) assignments still require students to process information using cognitive methods very different from what they do when they read, listen to us lecture, or speak in class. This cognitive "gear-shift" can help cement course concepts, and also help students explore additional complexities.
- **Writing as Social Practice:** Integrating class dialogue into writing assignments—by requiring students to cite one another's contributions, for instance, or by assigning peer-critiques at any number of stages in the process—helps emphasize that writing itself is a social activity, an ongoing conversation about a complex topic. When students understand that they write for one another, and for posterity, rather than just for us, their perception of our assignments can change.
- **Writing to Communicate:** It's easy for us to forget some of the most pragmatic purposes that writing serves. In addition to traditional academic analysis papers, we can help students understand the variety of writing situations they will face by assigning "practical" tasks, from conference proposals or grant applications to advocacy letters or professional emails.

Effective writing assignments do not just test students' comprehension or critical-thinking skills. They also offer students the opportunity to apply what they already know about effective communication to new contexts, and to adapt these writing skills to the specific writing situations they will face in their careers beyond the academic classroom.

The **_Why Write?_** section in the Student Edition offers students a brief summary of these "real world" writing situations, but we may also find this list useful in thinking through the assignment-design process. This guide aims to convince writers that writing itself constitutes a sustained, ongoing process, and not a sudden burst of work that miraculously produces a

product. Likewise, the guide also suggests that effective assignments should always situate both the student and the assignment in an ongoing process: acquiring and practicing discipline-specific writing skills. To do that, scholars in writing pedagogy recommend three key strategies—which many of us have doubtless already begun to use:

- **Link Backward:** Effective assignments make clear the skills that students should already have at their disposal, whether from prior assignments in the present class, or from prior courses. In particular, many students forget that they *already have* many academic-writing skills, because they developed those skills in an introductory English course (as in UTA's ENGL 0300, 1301, or 1302), sometimes several years before they face rigorous writing assignments in their major discipline. The Student Edition reviews some of these skills, and they may be useful touchstones for "backward links."
    - *Practical Implications:* These kinds of backward links can come in the form of simple reminders that even reading-responses or summaries have to "make and support an argument," or that supporting an argument means we'll have to "summarize or cite specific sources."
- **Link Forward:** Again, effective assignments make clear how the skills used in the present writing situation will be useful, not just for the completion of this class, or even this degree program, but also for the social work career-path as such. This is not just a matter of stating "outcomes" or "assignment goals." Effective assignments integrate upcoming tasks into their components and evaluations, which is partly a matter of the next strategy…
    - *Practical Implications:* Again, rather than listing "skill sets" or "outcomes," these kinds of forward links should organically remind students of the twofold process of writing and course-completion. If our assignments remind students that, "in a clinical situation, you'll need to…" or, "when you have to file a progress report, you'll need to…" then we already use forward-links.
- **Create Exigency:** Any assignment that is "just an assignment," or "just builds skills," cannot engage students as effectively as an assignment that creates a specific writing situation akin to those mentioned in the student section, ***Why Write?*** Faced with odd responses to writing assignments, we sometimes ask, "Would you write that way to your boss?" Well, we can build that frustrated question into our assignments by creating a writing situation *that addresses a "real life" job-situation*.
    - *Practical Implications:* Especially for more involved assignments, try creating a brief summary of a "real-world" situation, and construing the student's paper as a response to that situation. For example, a research-paper assignment might appear as a "call for papers" for a special issue of a journal, or a response/summary-paper assignment might appear as a request for a report.

> The more creative and interesting the writing situation, the more students will feel called upon to write effective, specific *arguments* to address the situation.

The next section will discuss assignment design in more detail; the purpose here is to remind us that there are reasons for *making students write* that go beyond evaluating their performance in the context of a given course—and beyond the customary "term paper" design.

<u>What Should Students Expect?</u>

Writing assignments give students the opportunity to practice applying the course concepts they have been learning in a specific context. As instructors, it's easy for us to forget how unfamiliar most of these assignments will actually appear to our students—who may be re-entering college education after a prolonged time in a professional context, or who may not be as prepared to face academic writing situations as we expect.

The companion Student Edition section of this guide points out that students should approach assignments with an understanding that all academic writing is to some extent formal, and that all academic writing should in some way make an argument, by supporting claims with reasons, and suiting both claims and reasons to the audience and context. Although many students have learned to do this before they arrive in our Social Work courses, many also have trouble transferring these skills, particularly if they don't understand the writing situation they face, or the task they should accomplish.

<p align="center">Tips to Make Your Grading Easier:
Clarify the Assignment</p>

Off-topic responses, last-minute sloppy work, and most of all, *plagiarism*, often occur because students face an assignment they don't understand, and effectively "freeze up," avoiding the assignment for weeks because they don't feel capable of completing it. In some cases, these responses form a pattern of intentional avoidance or shortcuts, but more often than not, *we can help*. Here are four "tricks" for assignment design that help increase student investment and avoid confusion. The next section, **What Is Social Work Student Research?** offers more and different tips…

TIP # 1: Describe the Writing Situation

Start an assignment description by explaining what real-world writing situation it emulates. Many of us already do this for major assignments, but even daily journal assignments need justification. For further information, see the section **Why Make Students Write?**

TIP # 2: State the Writing Genre and Expectations Clearly

The Student Edition of this guide provides a list of common assignment genres, entitled **Common Assignments in Social Work Education**. This list, while not completely comprehensive, is meant not only to prepare students for what they'll be expected to do, but also to remind us that students face many different kinds of writing assignments every

semester. Our assignment sheets can help them respond more effectively by clarifying the kind of writing, argument, and logic we expect. It's easy for us to forget to distinguish between a conceptual argument and a practical argument, since we're used to writing these ourselves, and assume that the distinction is obvious—but for students who may not have taken a basic writing course (or even *any* course that demands significant writing) for many years, the distinction may not register unless we point it out explicitly.

TIP # 3: State the Task Clearly

As mentioned in the Student Edition of this page, a writing assignment serves two purposes: it completes a task, and it demonstrates a student's abilities. In writing up the assignment, we need to keep these two purposes separate. Consider the following set of instructions:

- Your paper should conduct a case-study.
- Your paper should demonstrate and improve your command of social work ethics.
- Your paper should apply three theories from our textbook to your client's situation.

The instructor who mixes *task-oriented* instructions with *course-goal-oriented* expectations should not be surprised when a student's thesis statement says something like: "In this paper I will improve my command of social work ethics."

A clearer set of instructions would distinguish between what the student's writing needs to *do*, and what benefits the successful accomplishment of that task will *provide*:

- **Assignment Instructions:** Conduct a case-study in which you…
    - …identify your client's strengths, needs, and goals, and *ask how you can best serve the client*.
    - …apply three theories from our textbook to your client's situation.
    - …recommend a strategy to use the client's strengths to accomplish one goal, via two measurable objectives.
    - …support your recommendations with specific examples from the text.
    - …etc.
- **Course Objectives:** By creating a clear, convincing case-study, you will…
    - …demonstrate your command of the theory-bases we've covered so far.
    - …improve your grasp of social work ethics.
    - …prepare to conduct case-studies in clinical practice situations.
    - …etc.

These instructions leave less ambiguity about what the resultant piece of writing should look like.

TIP # 4: Provide Resources

Students now entering college have grown up in the Web generation. Many have used Web-based resources all their lives, and this familiarity has both positive and negative consequences. Among the potential negatives is the "shallow click-depth."

> **Click-Depth:** Web-designers and Internet marketers know that most information-seekers on the Web lose interest after very few clicks—3 is a common number—so the talented programmers design their pages to place all information within three clicks of any given page.

Students who grew up in this environment sometimes have surprising difficulty finding online resources—particularly research-oriented library resources and style guides—because university websites often do not follow the 3-click rule. We can help them by putting useful links at the end of the assignment sheet itself.

- For any paper demanding APA style, the Purdue OWL's APA guide would be a good place to start. We can simply copy-and-paste the following into our assignment sheets:

For assistance with APA style, please see the Purdue OWL APA style guide: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/10/

- For any paper demanding more involved research, UTA's own Subject Guide or Social Work Electronic Library would be good additions, as would this guide:

For assistance with Social Work research, please consult the UTA Library's Social Work Subject Guide: http://libguides.uta.edu/socialwork

Putting these resources directly on our assignment sheets gives them a click-depth of exactly one, and makes our students much more likely to find them.

What Is Social Work Student Research?

Student research exists in an odd liminal space: it has to achieve much more than the simpler exercises of the students' prior education, but it also cannot reach the level of precision and comprehensive knowledge that we would expect of ourselves or our colleagues. Increasingly, scholars in education and composition have come to acknowledge a key difference between "basic" and "advanced" student research: basic research focuses on reporting information, and hoping that the answer is correct. Advanced research begins by deriving a question *before* embarking on a quest for answers, let alone writing up a complete paper, and then develops into the students' comprehensive attempt to respond to the questions they propose.

Current research in writing instruction demonstrates that college (and graduate) students respond best to what's known as an "inquiry-based" approach to writing assignments—but that these assignments are relatively uncommon in secondary education and entry-level college classes (let alone in the working world). Inquiry-based assignments combat plagiarism and encourage critical thinking by emphasizing the student's questions, rather than ours. For a very rough working definition, this guide distinguishes between:

Retrieval-Based Writing Assignments: These assignments require a student to conduct basic research—whether in the course texts or via library search engines—with the goal of finding and reporting specific information back to the instructor.

Inquiry-Based Writing Assignments: These assignments require a student to come up with a research question and refine it *before* even venturing into the textbook, library, or Internet to find answers. The specific information that a student may need to retrieve therefore varies depending on the question, forcing the student to decide not only how to answer a question, but *what questions to answer*.

The *retrieval model* encourages rapid, uncritical searches for any material that may appear "relevant," and ultimately results in many of the ***unintentional plagiarism*** cases that instructors face. When students seek out and report information before understanding its relevance, they will have a hard time paraphrasing it effectively. Furthermore, when students believe that their writing simply reports "knowledge" that is "already out there," they become far more likely to copy-and-paste. The present section suggests a few simple ways to revise writing assignments to encourage students to adopt an "inquiry" approach. The next section, **How Can We Help Students Start?**, will include more practical tips on how to get students put their best foot forward.

Tips to Make Your Grading Easier:
Use Inquiry-Based Writing Assignments

Off-topic responses, last-minute sloppy work, and most of all, ***plagiarism***, often occur because students believe that their writing simply repeats or reports what someone else has already said—*and adds nothing more*. Sometimes this is a matter of student laziness or avoidance, but more often than not, *we can help*. The difference between the two very general types of writing assignment can be quite subtle—so by revising our assignments just slightly, we can often turn a "retrieval" assignment into an "inquiry-based" assignment that encourages critical thinking and combats unintentional plagiarism.

TIP # 5: Start with a Present Situation

When a writing-assignment task begins with a phrase such as "choose ten of our course concepts," or, "choose and explain a theory base from our textbook," the emphasis on already-established knowledge encourages students to assume that (as in *The X-Files*) "The Truth Is Out There." More often than not, students will respond to such assignments by assuming they need to repeat back to us the material from the textbook—which puts them at risk for plagiarism.

We can help our students start off on the right foot by emphasizing the need to discuss, debate, or respond to a specific, *present* problem, a problem that they are in a unique position to try to solve (often a client's problem, but current events or news items can make great starting points as well). We can start an assignment by instructing students to start working well *before* they start looking for answers or writing. Here is an example from the previous section:

- **Assignment Instructions:** Conduct a case-study in which you…
    - …identify your client's strengths, needs, and goals, and *ask yourself how you can best serve the client*.
    - …apply three theories from our textbook to your client's situation.
    - …recommend a strategy to use the client's strengths to accomplish one goal, via two measurable objectives.
    - …support your recommendations with specific examples from the text (etc…).

By starting with an instruction to "identify" aspects of the client's experience, this assignment invites students to ask questions that will drive their own inquiry process. This way, when they reach the point where they need to "apply three theories," they will know that they need to do this *to best serve their own client*—to answer questions that stem from the client's situation, and not simply the categories already established in the textbook.

TIP # 6: It's Not (Just) About Assessment

It's easy to let writing assignments simply restate our assessment goals, but this kind of restatement usually encourages a "retrieval" model. If we invite our students to show their command of a theory-base, for example, or demonstrate that they understand the connections between research studies and practical situations, we invite them to go and find "information" that already exists. Ultimately, after all is said and done, we invite them to repeat that information to us—which means, for a small but consistent minority—we invite them to plagiarize. Here is one example:

Assessment Goal: Students should demonstrate that they understand how the latest empirical research in group therapy helps guide practice (preparing students to use evidence-based practice).

Retrieval Model: Write an essay in which you explain how the following articles (in a list, for instance, or perhaps asking students to find current articles in the library) help guide practice in group therapy.

Inquiry-Based Model: Before you write, consider the challenges you will face in facilitating group therapy sessions with clients undergoing rehabilitation from substance addiction. Make a list of urgent questions you would want to know how to cope with before entering this practice situation. Then consult the following articles (in a list, or for student research in the library), and write an essay in which you explain a.) how they could help you address your urgent questions, and b.) what further information you would want to find before entering the practice situation.

The "inquiry-based" model bases the assessment goal on questions that the students will have to derive, rather than on questions that we simply impose upon them. By so doing, it turns the research articles into *tools for student work*, rather than passive "objects" to be read and repeated. In a direct-practice setting, portraying extant research findings as useful tools helps encourage students to adopt evidence-based practices—and to stay current with the latest tools. In a research-oriented setting, this approach encourages students to see other studies as shoulders upon which to stand, and also to identify opportunities to say something truly *new*.

The "inquiry-based" version also introduces two key components: It assumes that ***the writing process starts before*** the research or the literal act of sitting down to write. And it assumes that ***the inquiry process continues long after*** the present assignment ends.

How Can We Help Students Start?

Research on college writing indicates that, perhaps now more than ever, students tend to be intimidated by writing assignments, particularly complex assignments with many important elements. Many students experience anxiety, sometimes quite acute, and many also endure particularly low self-efficacy with regard to writing tasks. Facing an assignment sheet, many students feel incapable of taking the initial steps toward a topic, and as a result, they put off the writing process until it is far too late for them to develop an effective paper. As this guide has emphasized before, late starts sometimes result from laziness or extreme under-preparation, but more often than not, *we can help*.

Tips to Make Your Grading Easier:
Use Process Assignments

After many experiences with students starting their writing projects too late and creating disastrous papers at the last minute, many of us have already adopted a "best practice" recommended by researchers in composition: using process assignments. Process assignments are informal, formative assignments graded primarily for completion and development. They do require more "up front" time from instructors, who have to respond to the students' incomplete ideas, rather than their polished products—but we will make up that time at the end of the term, when students turn in clearer, more professional papers that require less-extensive markup. Students also benefit by learning that writing tasks do not happen all at once, but rather require a **process** involving multiple kinds of activity.

TIP # 7: Develop Process Assignments that Target Writing Goals

One common process assignment is simply the "draft" paper. Reviewing drafts is a wise practice, since it helps instructors re-route students who have started off on an unrewarding track, but it works best as the *last* "process" assignment in a carefully guided sequence, and will be discussed in more detail in this guide's section on revision, <u>Why Make Students Revise?</u> For now, the following list includes potential process assignments for every stage in the writing process *before* the "draft review" stage. There are far more here than we would probably choose to include for *every* class; the purpose of this list is to propose many possibilities, which we can choose and tailor to our specific assignments' needs, and our students' capabilities.

Group Discussion: State Assignment Tasks and Process

- *Time:* 10-20 minutes in Class
- *Purpose:* This process assignment starts students responding to an assignment and embarking on the writing process as soon as the assignment is given.
- *Assignment:* In groups, students read and discuss the assignment, and develop a list of *Things We'll Have to Do*, and *Things We'll Need to Know First*. Students write down the lists and turn them in to the instructor, who reads and responds to the lists, indicating which "Things We'll Have to Do" look like effective responses to the assignment requirements, and clarifying the assignment whenever student responses indicate misunderstandings. Responses can occur in class, or via written feedback.
- *Response:* Instructor responses will clarify the assignment, resolving potential misunderstandings.

Topic Proposal Assignment

- *Time:* One Graded Assignment, Outside of Class
- *Purpose:* This assignment requires students to clarify their goals and interests very early, so that they can use their day-to-day coursework to help them move forward with their writing.
- *Assignment:* This common assignment can run into trouble when it demands too much specificity up front. Students should develop an area of interest, and then quickly narrow it down to a specific area of inquiry. At this stage, however, students often respond best when not yet required to state a "thesis statement." Instead, we can encourage them to clearly state how their own interest areas would intersect with the assignment's requirements (e.g., I have a client whose case would fit this task; I have an interest in gerontology, which might be difficult to fit, but sounds useful; etc.), or ask students to formulate a question to help guide their inquiry. These assignments are typically one page or less in length.
- *Response:* At this stage, students often find questions about their interests or preferences useful in generating further avenues for writing and research. Since this is a formative assignment, it's often less useful to discuss grammar, APA style, or "finished product" qualities.

Topic Proposal Peer Review

- *Time:* One Group-Based Project, 20-40 minutes in class.
- *Purpose:* Reading one another's topic proposals can help students attain a sense of the range of possible responses to an assignment. Evaluating these proposals can also give them the practice they will need, in order to evaluate their own work.

- *Assignment:* Working in small groups, students read one another's topic-proposal assignments. This assignment works best when we can provide students with a set of instructions that suggest how to evaluate a topic assignment. Following guidelines or specific questions, students offer written feedback to their peers, either by hand, or via email. Depending on the writing project, students might evaluate a topic's breadth, specificity, or appropriateness to the assignment, and might also offer suggestions about avenues for research (for larger projects).
- *Response:* It is often best for us to take a quick look at how effectively students have responded to this assignment, but often no significant grading time is needed.

Research Question Assignment

- *Time:* One Graded Assignment, Outside of Class
- *Purpose:* This assignment helps students further clarify their goals in completing a research-intensive assignment. Students often have the most trouble when they conduct broad, unfocused literature reviews, so this kind of assignment can help them narrow their topic enough to read and write efficiently.
- *Assignment:* Students write a single page in which they clearly state what they want their research to find out. Student responses might take the form of a question, a series of interrelated questions, or a question and then a hypothesis. Students enter research assignments at many levels of preparation, so it's often useful to allow them some flexibility in their responses.
- *Response:* As in the Topic Assignment, it's often useful to respond to the Research Question with further questions that help students narrow down their topics. Responses often work best when they follow the general form of the **Apply the Why** exercise suggested in the "For Students" version of this section.

Literature Review or Annotated References

- *Time:* One Graded Assignment, Outside of Class
- *Purpose:* This assignment helps us check to make sure that students are making progress in their work on larger researched projects.
- *Assignment:* There are many potential variations on this kind of assignment. For larger projects, it may be useful to ask students to write a full literature-review section, rendering their discoveries in paragraph form. For smaller projects, or for less-experienced students, an "annotated references" page may be sufficient. Here, students accompany each APA citation with a brief paragraph summarizing the source's findings and relevance to the project.
- *Response:* Many student research projects founder because the student becomes

overwhelmed, unfocused, side-tracked, or all of these at once. By providing feedback that helps the student narrow down a broad topic of inquiry, or by suggesting new avenues of research overly narrow topics, we can help them make their research time more productive. Students may also find the Purdue O.W.L.'s Social Work Literature Review Guidelines page useful. Again, because this is a formative process assignment, it may be useful to provide APA feedback, but scoring on APA style, in whole or in part, may be counterproductive at this stage.

TIP # 8: Use Responses to Process Assignments to Build Student Confidence

Each of the above assignments has the chance to do double-duty, keeping students on-track toward effective writing projects, but also helping them feel in-control of the writing process (and therefore reducing writing anxiety, and boosting writing-related self-efficacy). Many students already know that their writing does not meet expectations, but have trouble understanding what to do about that, particularly when our feedback overwhelms them with critiques that are too numerous, too nitpicky, or too negative. Three simple grading "tricks" have a good track record with building confidence while encouraging further work:

The Criticism Sandwich

Perhaps the most basic rhetorical device we can use in responding to student work is a demand for more work, sandwiched between observations about what the student has done well. Positive observations need not lavish praise on a clearly incomplete draft. Indeed, the first part of the sandwich can often simply summarize what we think the student's project is attempting. Such a "read it back to me" approach helps dignify student thought and effort, by showing that we took the time to understand what they have done. The summary-critique-praise sequence may seem patently artificial—and it is—but its purpose is to help students feel comfortable with what they have done, *and* accept the further work they will need to do in order to produce an effective paper.

Two Is Enough

Contemporary research in composition indicates that students respond best to a limited number of critiques. After about four "action items," students' ability to assimilate and use our advice in future work (or in revisions) becomes limited. Faced with a welter of comments, students often pick one or two, *seemingly at random*, and work on those. As a rule of thumb, particularly for process assignments, our feedback will be most effective if we pick out only one or two major areas for improvement, and if we stick to the most systemic problems— particularly those of **content** and **structure**. If we have to comment on **grammar** or **style**, we should be choosing problems that appear in every paragraph, if not every sentence, or

problems that render the content literally undecipherable.

Socratic Writing Responses

Rather than detailing, in discursive form, exactly what went wrong with an outline, draft, or paper, we can usually elicit much more enthusiasm (not to mention hard work) by asking questions. For example, instead of saying, "The research question is still too vague," it's often preferable to ask probing questions that invite the student to revise further. Such questions can often use the pattern of the **Apply the Why** exercise included in the Student Edition of this guide, helping students develop more focused projects by asking questions that encourage them to develop more specific research questions and hypotheses.

Process assignments and formative responses help encourage productive writing habits among students, by breaking down larger projects into manageable steps, and modeling ***process-based writing*** through course structure. By encouraging students to take ownership of their research and writing process, and to manage their time, we also reduce the likelihood of ***plagiarism***, which forms the central focus of the "Tips" in the next section, **How Can We Help Students Cite**?

How Can We Help Students Cite?

Teaching students to use APA style effectively can be a frustrating experience, particularly since most of us feel that everyone should already know how to cite sources correctly. In fact, continuing reductions in support for high-school and undergraduate education, coupled with an ongoing over-emphasis on standardized testing, mean that most students probably have a shaky command of *one* citation system—usually the Modern Language Association format—and that they probably have not used it frequently or consistently. That means that students in introductory Social Work courses may be less prepared than we would expect. Fortunately, however, *we can help*.

Tips to Make Your Grading Easier:
Teaching Attribution and Documentation

We've all offered to talk about APA style with our students at one time or another—or even bring in an outside expert to help out—but these conversations can actually make things worse if we don't prepare the field effectively. We or our experts may find ourselves pelted with hyper-specific nitpicky questions, and we may answer these questions with laser-like precision—and then we may receive papers that *still* seem incapable of following the most basic precepts.

This guide offers three tips to help ground the nitpicky details in a basic, straightforward explanation, and all three tips are based on a core confusion about what citation is meant to accomplish: students may think they have problems with ***documentation*** (following formatting guidelines exactly, providing enough information to locate a source), when what they really have are problems with ***attribution*** (correctly attributing information to their sources). In other words, getting all of the commas, periods, and references entries formatted correctly isn't going to help students if they're unintentionally plagiarizing by failing to attribute information correctly—or if they've composed a paper that has nothing to say in the first place! We can help students do better with APA style by adopting a few key best practices.

TIP # 9: Minimize Hysteria

As suggested in several of these **Tips**, we need to pick our battles when it comes to evaluating student papers—for more than one reason. Writing is an extraordinarily complex skill. Faced with a paper soaked in "red ink," students won't always be able to prioritize their efforts effectively, and may actually make their writing worse by focusing on the wrong issues.

We can help students address serious problems by focusing their attention (and ours) on those, and not wasting our red ink on minor errors. By reducing grades significantly for content, argumentation, and *attribution* errors, we tacitly tell students that these are the important issues. By reducing grades *equally* for errors in *documentation*, we tacitly tell students that these errors are just as important. Because missed commas, periods, or formatting errors look easy to fix, students often *fixate* on them, giving up on the more complex and difficult matter of making an effective argument.

Especially for undergraduates, nitpicky scoring on APA *documentation* errors does not improve writing. It simply increases stress, possibly reducing writing self-efficacy, increasing writing anxiety, and probably increasing the likelihood of ineffective papers and/or plagiarism. That's not to say such minor errors shouldn't play *any* role in the grading process—the role should just be proportional to their importance.

Of course, problems with *attribution* need to be addressed immediately and clearly, particularly for students who are unclear on the purpose of their work as a task and as an assessment. For more on clarifying these aspects of the writing situation, see the preceding sections of this guide, **What Should Students Expect?** and **What Is Social-Work Student Research?**

TIP # 10: Lead by Example

Part One: Model what we teach

Many of us probably already present ourselves as good models for student behavior in many ways, but we can help students understand and use APA effectively by using it correctly ourselves—*at every opportunity*. We can show them what correct APA style looks like in powerpoint presentations, in handouts, and even in our syllabi, if we quote, cite, and reference sources in each of these places.

But every time we quote something without providing an APA citation, or provide a non-APA-formatted citation, we tacitly suggest that APA style is "just for papers," or even "just for student work." Students can too easily get the impression that APA style is just one more hoop for them to jump through, or one more way for us to catch them or trip them up.

Part Two: Clarify samples

In addition to modeling effective documentation ourselves, we can also offer sample papers, to give students a sense for what a good assignment looks like. It's important, though, that we

clarify how these samples are meant to be taken. Because students often have trouble memorizing the rules for a citation system, they may take sample papers as "templates," and try to reproduce them exactly. By making clear that the sample paper is meant to help with concepts, content, and tone, rather than the nitty-gritty details of documentation and grammar, we can help students avoid using such examples in ways we don't intend. And of course, it's best to avoid the whole issue by providing samples that model impeccable APA style.

TIP # 11: Provide (Many!) Resources

Most of us probably already list a resource or two on our syllabi, or on our Blackboard site for our courses. Some even reinforce these points verbally in class, or in emailed announcements. But in this realm, more is always better: most of us probably could provide one more source or example. As this guide suggests, the Purdue Online Writing Lab is a useful resource, but even it can be a little counterintuitive to navigate. If our students are having difficulty with APA (or if they're undergraduates), it may be important to demonstrate how to use the OWL in class—and how to get to this guide, for that matter. Syllabi, too, might list resources that go beyond any one website—up to and including where to turn for in-person assistance.

Here is a brief sample of what a course blackboard site (or syllabus) might include:

Writing Resources

Writing: For help with all aspects of the writing process, the UTA School of Social Work has provided *A Writing Guide for Social Work*, an online resource available on the Writing Resources page, located here:

[LINK]

APA Style Guides: Everyone should have an APA Style Manual, but you may find the Purdue Online Writing Lab's style guide useful as a supplement. The OWL APA guide includes information on formatting, in-text citations, and references, and can be found here:

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/10/

For specific questions about precise elements of APA Style, you can consult a public resource maintained by the APA editors themselves, the APA Style Blog, located here:

http://blog.apastyle.org/

Further Assistance: For additional questions about APA style, feel free to consult the Social Work Librarian, and the Social Work Writing Resource Coordinator. The UTA library also provides workshops on APA style for social-science students every semester, and offers a variety of writing-related resources.

A list of writing resources available at the UTA Library:
http://www.uta.edu/library/help/tutorials.php

The library's workshop schedule:
http://www.uta.edu/library/instruction/technoscholar.php

The library's social-work subject guide:

http://libguides.uta.edu/SocialWork

Why Make Students Revise?

As this guide continues to argue, our students need our help in adopting effective writing practices, particularly by dividing up large projects into tasks of manageable size. Under tight deadlines we all cut corners, and students who save too much work for the last weekend before the paper is due will inevitably turn in papers that have a variety of errors, and may even plagiarize unintentionally. It is certainly true that some students simply don't want to put in enough time on any given project, but in most cases, *we can help*.

Tips to Make Your Grading Easier:
Conduct Draft Reviews

In the previous section, this guide suggested using a variety of "process assignments" to help students get started early enough to produce high-quality work. We'll now turn our attention to the final process assignment, the draft review. This assignment takes two basic forms—we can review drafts ourselves, or have students review each other's—but its core purpose is the same: We need to encourage students to **revise** their papers, and not simply **proofread** them. Revision addresses problems with argumentation. It's a matter of how students make claims and support them, and how their work addresses the rhetorical situation we have set them. To that end, *all* of our work on draft review should emphasize these large-scale issues, and deal with grammar and style only if there are catastrophic problems. Draft-reviews take time, but we'll earn that time back in the final grading process, when students turn in clearer, more effective assignments.

TIP # 12: Assign Peer Review of Drafts

There is a clear trade-off between the two different methods for organizing a draft-review. Peer reviews take less grading time outside of class, but they work best if run in an in-class setting, so they may occupy up to a full class-period (1-2 hours). In addition, it will be necessary to "train" students to conduct the review effectively, so that they give feedback that their colleagues will be able to use. A "worksheet" or guide can provide useful recommendations or instructions. On the other hand, seeing their peers attempting to fulfill the same writing requirements can help our students understand the assignment itself, and the writing situation in general.

It is possible to conduct this assignment electronically, outside of class, but this can only really be effective if the students are already experienced in reading one another's work and responding in writing. "Discussion Board" formats are often handy here, too, since they help everyone (particularly instructors) keep track of documents and responses.

Peer Review of Drafts

- *Time:* One Group-Based Project, 1-2 hours in class (depends on paper length, student abilities, and depth of review).
- *Purpose:* Reading one another's papers can help students attain a sense of the class's culture, climate, and values. Evaluating these papers can also give them the practice they will need, in order to evaluate their own work.
- *Assignment:* Working in small groups, students read one another's papers. When reading full papers, students often need further guidance to help them provide effective feedback. Most default to a cursory review of grammar and APA, and miss glaring structural or content problems, so we should provide a set of guidelines or specific questions. Students can offer feedback verbally, in a "workshop" setting, but this is often more time consuming than handwritten or emailed feedback.
- *Response:* It is often best for us to take a quick look at how effectively students have responded to this assignment, but often no significant grading time is needed.

TIP # 13: Assign Draft Submission

Reviewing student drafts outside of class does take time, and can be frustrating if we don't make our expectations clear. A draft submission should receive a grade or a score of some kind, to help indicate that it is a distinct step from the final submission, and we should make clear that we expect significant revisions when we give advice. Many students have had prior experience with draft review processes that basically involved ***proofreading***, rather than ***revising***, so we will need to make clear that grammatical fixes or edits to APA style will not be sufficient.

Instructor Review of Drafts

- *Time:* One Evaluated Assignment, Outside of Class
- *Purpose:* Although time-consuming, reviewing drafts helps students get through the writing process sooner. When we provide clear and useful feedback, we can also encourage students to see their work as an ongoing process, in which they can reassess, reorganize, and retrench their projects before turning them in for a grade.
- *Assignment:* Again, there are many potential variations on this kind of assignment. For large projects, partial drafts might be useful, but for the most part it's best to let students get all the way through the writing process before reviewing their work. Also, many students enter this assignment in the hopes that we will simply "rubber stamp" their draft, and let them turn it in as a final product, so it's best to make clear that substantive revisions will be expected.
- *Response:* Responding to "process" drafts is perhaps even more difficult than

responding to the finished paper. For less-experienced students, substantial revisions may be required, so it may be best to focus on content and structure, and leave grammar, style, and references for later. Nit-picky draft reviews have a way of convincing students that all they need to do is fix the grammatical errors and send the project straight back to us.   Again, because this is a formative process assignment, it may be useful to provide APA feedback, but scoring on APA style, in whole or in part, may be counterproductive at this stage. It may be useful, however, to provide a "hypothetical" grade: what the paper would earn, if evaluated in its current state. A and B grades should be used sparingly here, since students receiving such high hypothetical grades will probably not revise extensively.

How Can We Help Students Proofread?

As this guide continues to argue, our students need our help in adopting effective writing practices, particularly by dividing up large projects into tasks of manageable size. Under tight deadlines we all cut corners, and students who save too much work for the last weekend before the paper is due will inevitably turn in papers that have a variety of errors, and may even plagiarize unintentionally. It is certainly true that some students simply don't want to put in enough time on any given project, but in most cases, *we can help*.

Tips to Make Your Grading Easier:
Encourage Proofreading

Most of us already verbally encourage students to proofread their papers, but a little extra encouragement—in modes other than the verbal—always helps. As has been suggested already, allowing students to read one another's drafts often helps them recognize errors that they might be making in their own writing, so proofreading might be one skill to invite them to develop in the draft-review process suggested in **Tip #12**. It also can't hurt to re-emphasize good proofreading strategies, including leaving time for the paper to "rest" before returning to proofread, trading papers for proofreading, or, in cases of extensive grammatical problems, having someone else read the paper back to the writer aloud. But *we* can help the most by **grading efficiently**.

TIP # 14: Prioritize Grading

Students who have extensive grammatical and stylistic problems usually also have significant problems with argument and integrating sources. Studies in composition education have shown that focusing on nitty-gritty details alone **does not work**. Students learn writing holistically, and develop better proofreading skills as they develop more coherent arguments, and deal with concepts and sources more effectively. At the college level at least, drilling grammar rules **does not improve student writing**.

When we grade student papers, then, it helps if we can focus our comments and our allocation of points on issues of argument, including main claims, support, and integration of sources. A paper that loses a full grade for a tendency toward run-on sentences will tell that student that he should go and fix his grammar, *to the exclusion of* the likely co-occurring problems with argumentation. Chances are, too, that papers with systemic grammar and style problems also have systemic logic and source-integration problems.

Finally, argument and source-integration should also remain our focus for a different but

related reason: Many students embark on a paper without clearly understanding the course material itself, or without being able to apply that course material to the sources they locate in their research. When they sit down to write an idea they have not developed clearly, students may produce *grammatically* unintelligible sentences. Likewise, when they sit down to summarize or paraphrase a source's argument that they do not understand, students may also produce contorted sentences, or more likely plagiarize unintentionally. We can help students with this kind of problem, not only by grading effectively, but also by using process assignments to identify struggling students before the paper is due. If we review initial plans and outlines for large papers, we can identify students who seem not to understand course concepts early on, and give them special attention (see **Tip # 7**; **Tip # 8**). In addition, if we review informal "write-to-learn" assignments (see **Why Make Students Write?**), we can often identify these problems even earlier.

TIP # 15: Comment Efficiently

Many students will make a variety of errors in their writing, and may have difficulty deciding how to fix unfortunate habits. When we single out every single error for full commentary, we compound the problem by conveying the expectation that *everything* should be *perfect*.

It's helpful to mark errors in the text when they occur, but we can help students prioritize by:

a.) …only flagging recurring errors *once*, and appending a comment such as "see throughout." Marking every single error takes too much of our time, drowns the paper in "red ink," *and* suggests that editing (proofreading) is something that someone else does to their papers.

b.) …noting the most important problems in comments at the paper's end. In particular, if we can identify *patterns* in the student's errors, we can help students eliminate more problems by pointing out the pattern and offering useful advice *for use in proofreading*, not composing a paper.

It's worth remembering that writing takes a tremendous amount of cognitive activity. If students attempt to correct their grammar *as they compose* their first draft, they will have less cognitive resources to devote to their ideas and argument. If we convince them that everything has to be perfect after one draft, we will, ironically, make their writing worse.

Conclusion

This guide has attempted to help us hone our teaching by offering best practices, examples, and "tips" for each step in the writing process, but we should remember that the project of "teaching writing" ***never ends***. In fact, as long as the trends toward standardized testing, larger class-sizes, and "basic skills" instruction continue to hamper teachers in secondary education, we can expect to take up more and more of the slack. Unless these trends reverse, students will arrive in bachelor's-level courses, in particular, with less and less writing experience, so it will be up to us to give effective feedback, and allot class time to teaching the writing process.

On the brighter side, though, integrating writing instruction into our class material actually helps students learn more and retain what they learn. Writing engages the mind in cognitive processes unlike any used in listening to lectures or reading, so "write to learn" exercises can do double-duty, preparing students to put their thoughts into words, and also solidifying their grasp on course concepts and vocabulary.

This guide's final "tips" focus on broader techniques for encouraging students to take writing seriously, and not simply use it to "earn a grade."

TIP # 16: Encourage Dialogue

Many unfortunate writing habits appear when students feel that they are being asked to "regurgitate" information from the course, or to "report" verbatim information already available elsewhere. We can help students engage by encouraging them to think of writing assignments as opportunities to engage in an ongoing conversation about their topics, in two distinct but related ways:

a.) ***Encourage Student Interaction:*** Many of us already assign group projects and encourage students to help one another in the writing process, but we can go farther. It's particularly handy, even for individualized assignments, to identify clusters of students addressing similar topics, and to encourage them to engage in peer review, even if we don't have a "peer review" assignment. It can also help to have students conduct a "mock conference" with oral presentations, or to ask them to cite one another's contributions to the class dialogue in their papers. Exposure to others' arguments—and *responding* to those arguments—can help students recognized that they are engaged in a process of *knowledge production*, rather than simply getting a grade.

b.) ***Teach the Research Process:*** Standardized testing and curricula have the unfortunate side-effect of teaching students that "learning" is a matter of memorizing and repeating

information, or memorizing and repeating specific formulaic tasks. As college-level educators, we have to teach our students to unlearn this attitude. No "facts" exist in a vacuum, and all "conclusions" are open to reinterpretation, improvement, or dispute. In our own studies, we derive empirical conclusions through clear and effective argument, and *creative* experimental design, so these are the skills we should teach our students—and not the rote repetition of uniform tasks. When students understand that they have the power to remake the knowledge-base through careful and creative inquiry, they will be more engaged in the writing process—and its products.

TIP # 17: Avail Ourselves of Resources

As suggested above, in today's university setting *everyone teaches writing*. That means we have more colleagues than we realize, and more innovative research to draw upon. Indeed, the new liberal-arts disciplinary division of "Reading, Writing, and Linguistics" has begun to generate complex empirical discussions of writing-education, many of whose conclusions may seem counterintuitive to those of us who earned our degrees before the 1990s. No longer is "teaching writing" a matter of grammar and spelling drills, for example, and the notion that *there is* any one definition of "good writing" no longer applies.

Increasingly, researchers recognize that "good writing" is a **task-specific**, **context-specific**, and most importantly ***discipline-specific*** concept. But we tend *not* to tell our students about many discipline-specific expectations that have become second-nature to our own writing. That does students a disservice, since their writing education to-date often inculcates a general competence that needs specific refinements and "focusing." We should assume that our students are competent writers who still need to be introduced (often in more than one course) to our discipline-specific concerns—our ***tacit expectations***.

With these concerns in mind, this guide offers a brief bibliography of vital articles on the role of writing in the college context in general, and in social-work education, most originating in the USA and the UK, but with several key examples from Australia:

On Writing in Social Work – Foundational Articles:

- **Jarman-Rohde**, L., **McFall**, J., **Kolar**, P., & **Strom**, G. (1997). The changing context of social work practice: Implications and recommendations for social work educators. *Journal of Social Work Education 33*(1), 29-46.
- **Waller**, M. A., **Carroll**, M. M., & **Roemer**, M. (1996). Teaching writing in social work education: Critical training for agents of social change. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *13*(1/2), 43-56.
- **Rompf**, E.L. (1995). Student writing in social work: An aggravation or an opportunity for

social work educators? *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 12(1/2), 125-138.

- **Simon**, B.L., **Soven**, M. (1989). The teaching of writing in social work education: A pressing priority for the 1990s. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 3*(2), 47-63.

On Writing in Social Work – Current Empirical Studies and White Papers:

- **Vourlekis**, B. & **Hall**, D.M.H. (2007). Outcomes from a baccalaureate program's writing improvement initiative. *The Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work 13(1)*, 67-80.
- **Alter**, C., & **Adkins**, C. (2006). Assessing student writing proficiency in graduate schools of social work. *Journal of Social Work Education 42(2)*, 337-354.
- **Rai**, L. (2004). Exploring literacy in social work education: A social practices approach to student writing. *Social Work Education 23(2)*, 149-62.
- **Alter**, C., & **Adkins**, C. (2001). Improving the writing skills of social work students. *Journal of Social Work Education 37(3)*, 493-505
- **Dolejs**, A. & **Grant**, D. (2000). Deep breaths on paper. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work 20(3-4)*, 19-40. Doi: 10.1300/J067v20n03_04.

On Writing in Tertiary Education:

- **Elton**, L. (2010). Academic writing and tacit knowledge. *Teaching in Higher Education 15(2),* 151-160.
- **Martinez**, C.T., **Kock**, N., & **Cass**, J. (2011). Pain and pleasure in short essay writing: Factors predicting university students' writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy 54*(6), 351-360.
- **Flateby**, T.L. (2005). Assessment matters: Maximizing campus responsibility for the writing assessment process. *About Campus, 9*(6), 22-25, doi:10.1002/abc.114
- **Lea**, M.R. (2004). Academic literacies: A pedagogy for course design. *Studies in Higher Education 29*(6), 739-756.
- **Lea**, M. & **Stierer**, B. (eds) (2000). *Student writing in higher education: New contexts.* Buckingham: Open University Press.
- **Walvoord**, B.E. (1996). "The future of WAC." *College English 58*(1), 58-79.

National Commission Reports:

- The National Commission on Writing. (2006). *Writing and school reform*. https://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2432
- The National Commission on Writing. (2005). *Writing: A powerful message from state government*. https://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2432
- The National Commission on Writing. (2004). *Writing: A ticket to work… or a ticket out: A survey of business leaders*. https://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2432

- The National Commission on Writing. (2003). *The neglected "R": The need for a writing revolution.* https://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2432

As always, further information about writing instruction is available from the School of Social Work Writing Resource Coordinator, and from the University Writing Center's faculty administrators.

The Writing Resource Coordinator is also available to meet and discuss best practices in writing instruction, including syllabus and assignment design, writing project design, and providing student feedback.

This *Writing Guide for Social Work* was prepared by Christopher D. Kilgore for the School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Arlington, 2010-2012.

Return to the Previous Section,
How Can We Help Students Proofread?