A Writing Guide for Social Work

Student Edition

Prepared by Christopher D. Kilgore

School of Social Work

University of Texas – Arlington

Table of Contents

Introduction

Social work is a writing-intensive discipline. Whether we work with individual clients in direct practice, work with administrators in community organizing, or conduct social-work research, we will write, revise, and proofread for the rest of our 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 the complete work-flow, from idea to final draft, 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 Write?** Prepare for common writing situations in Social Work.
- **What Can I Expect?** Analyze the writing situation to develop an argument.
- **What is Social Work Research?** Conduct research to support and critique an argument.
- **How Do I Start? – Part 1: Prewriting** Plan an argument.
- **How Do I Start? – Part 2: Writing** Express and support an argument.
- **Why Cite?** Organize and attribute the ideas that support an argument to their sources.
- **How Does APA Style Work?** Document sources that support an argument.
- **Why Revise?** Assess the argument's effectiveness.
- **Why Proofread?** Assess the argument's expression and documentation.

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.

Why Write?

Social Work Writing Beyond College

In studying for a BSW, an MSSW, or a PhD in Social Work, we will have to write a variety of papers, responses, and other assignments, not just to demonstrate our mastery of key concepts (or to earn a grade), but to hone our skills for the writing situations we will face in our careers. Each assignment should prepare us to address one or more of the following "real world" writing situations, by giving us the "real world" skills we will need.

The present section summarizes such situations and identifies the *key skills* that each situation will require. The next section will start us off analyzing specific assignment types common to social work education.

Common Writing Situations in Social Work

- **Case Notes:** In direct-practice situations, we will need to take notes on each case quickly and efficiently. That means knowing how to identify and describe key elements such as client goals, strengths, weaknesses, and large-scale contextual factors.
  - *Key Skills:* Effective descriptions use active verbs, specific details, and succinct phrases.
- **Reports:** Whether we work in direct-practice or community organizing, we will need to submit occasional reports to our supervisors, or to various government or non-government agencies, describing what we have done, *why* we have done it, and how we went about doing it. That means being able to make an *argument* that not only identifies, but also *explains* our actions.
  - *Key Skills:* Effective explanatory arguments use specific details, make specific points, and support their assertions with references to specific situations, and to established authorities (this is what *evidence-based practice* means).
- **Research Reading:** Again, whether we work in direct-practice, community organizing, or an academic context, we will need to be able to read, understand, and evaluate research papers and reports from government agencies. We will need to understand how the researchers designed, conducted, and analyzed their studies, in order to evaluate our own activities.
  - *Key Skills:* Reading effectively means being able to use and interpret APA citation style, understand how the parts of a research paper work (e.g. the abstract, literature review, methods, conclusions, and discussion sections). It also means

being prepared to think critically, evaluating the authors' claims and deciding whether they match up to the available data.

- **Grant Writing:** Many of us will be required to at least participate in the grant-writing process, finding sources of funding, evaluating the application process, and developing an application that best suits the funder's requirements. We will need to understand what funders want to see, what resources we have available, and how best to portray those resources in our application.
    - o *Key Skills:* Effective grant-writing requires close attention to application instructions, funder needs, and a solid command of our institutional bureaucracy. Written grant-applications need to make specific arguments for the value of their proposal, and for its value *here*, *now*, and run by *us*. They also need to demonstrate a command of research already completed (see **Research Reading**, above).
- **Research Writing:** Many of us, in practice situations as well as in academic positions, will need to conduct, document, and write up our own original research. We will need to understand the research that has already been completed, and make a clear *argument* that our research contributes significantly to the existing body of knowledge.
    - o *Key Skills:* In addition to mastery over a given field, research writing requires clear, succinct sentences that make and support a clear *argument*, with clear references to our own data, and to existing research conclusions. We will need to master APA documentation, and to integrate others' arguments and conclusions into our own prose (see **Research Reading**, above). We will also need to do a lot of *self-evaluation*, making sure our arguments and methods are free of faulty logic or unwarranted assumptions.

As this list should demonstrate, regardless of our specific role in social work, we will need to be able to make effective arguments, use clear and specific language, use and interpret APA documentation, and integrate others' conclusions into our own work. *How?* The next sections will show how writing assignments in social work education help us cultivate these skills, and how to make the best use of those assignments.

What Can I Expect?

In social work education, instructors tend to assign several distinct types of writing assignments. Although individual instructors have their own unique expectations—especially with regard to the kind of course concepts we should use—assignments within each category nearly always share certain kinds of expectations.

Common Expectations for All Writing Situations

Regardless of the specific assignment, we're guaranteed to need to meet a small set of "core" expectations for academic writing.

Language:

Although some assignments are couched as "informal," we should always use correct grammar, style, and spelling. It's just as important to proofread a journal entry as it is to proofread a research paper. Remember: *How you say what you say **is** what you say.* Errors in grammar and mechanics can distract our readers.

Purpose (**What** We're Doing):

The purpose of academic writing is not to earn a grade. Sometimes even instructors forget this, so it deserves repetition and elaboration: The purpose of academic writing is not to earn a grade, or impress the instructor; rather, any assignment should accomplish an intellectual (and often also practical) ***task***.

In order to prepare to respond to an assignment, it's important for us to distinguish between ***tasks*** and ***course goals*** or ***learning objectives***. We should pay attention to which parts of the assignment tell us what to *do*, and parts that seem to be telling us how we'll benefit *by doing* what we'll do. Our writing should always *perform the task*, and *not talk about the learning-objectives*.

- **Task-Oriented Language:** Specifies what we'll need to <u>do</u>: *Choose 5 course concepts…; describe…; explain…; identify…; summarize…; prepare a literature review…; create a "methods" section…; include an introduction/conclusion…; use APA style…; use section-headings…*
- **Learning-Objective-Oriented Language:** Specifies the benefits or skills we'll acquire by doing the task, or the skills we'll show that we have (by doing the task): *demonstrate your understanding of…; show that you are aware of…; attain greater command of…; learn the benefits of…; learn how to…; improve your skills in…;*

Assignments often include course objectives such as "demonstrate your awareness of social work ethics and values." In any assignment, we "demonstrate" by doing the task well—for instance, by describing in detail and explaining how our specific examples raise (or answer) ethical concerns.

- Statements such as "I am aware of social work ethics and values" just *assert* awareness. They don't *demonstrate* awareness. They also don't accomplish the actual task.
- Statements such as "this paper will demonstrate my awareness…" describe how we'll meet a course goal, not how we'll carry out a task.
- A more *task-oriented* statement might say, "This paper shows how (Organization X) meets the ethical standards set by the NASW." By *doing* that task well, we'll also be demonstrating our knowledge—so we don't need to *say* that.

Argument (**How** We're Accomplishing Tasks):

Not every piece of writing makes an *argument*, but most *academic* writing does, and even academic writing that doesn't *have to* make an argument (e.g. when not required by an assignment) will probably work better if it makes one anyway. An argument, in its simplest form, is just a **claim**, supported by one or more **reasons**. We'll often find that reasons also turn out to be claims too, which in turn require support. As we'll see in the section **What is Social Work Research?**, sequences of claims often help structure a piece of writing.

Often, assignments will pre-specify a primary **claim**. For example, the task, "Show how 3 theories we've studied in this course apply to your client's situation," gives us some big clues about what our primary claim will need to be. It had better mention a specific client, and it had better mention 3 specific theories. But it had also better assert, *specifically*, how and why those theories matter to this case. A good starting place for a claim might be something like, "Cognitive behavioral therapy should be useful in Robert's case *because*…" So, there are two basic strategies to developing a good argument in response to *any* writing situation:

> **Apply the WHY:** Our main claim should answer a "why" question, even if it's never explicitly stated. We can turn a claim into a thesis statement for an argument by asking, like a small curious child: "Why?"

> **Produce a BECAUSE:** Although the "because" may never appear in our actual essay or paper, we'll *imply* that it exists. The "because" is the sign of a transition from a claim to a reason.

Further Resources:

- **Common Assignments in Social Work Education**
- Establishing Arguments (click here): A resource on the Purdue O.W.L. website.
- Using Logic in Arguments (click here): A resource on the Purdue O.W.L. website.

Common Assignments in Social Work Education

This section introduces common assignment types, and the (sometimes completely unstated!) expectations they include. The list organizes assignments in order of ascending complexity, and we should assume that with this complexity comes a greater *time* investment.

As we approach one of these assignments, it's important to start off by assessing how many distinct components the assignment has, what we'll have to do in order to create those components, and how long each component will take.

More information on getting started can be found in the **How Do I Start? Part 1: Prewriting** section. For now, it may be useful to take a look at the following types of assignment:

- Journal/Log Assignments
- Reading / Viewing / Participation Response Assignments
- Report Assignments
- Critical Explication / Analysis Assignments (Research without Collecting Primary Data)
- Critical Practical-Argument Assignments (Research without Collecting Primary Data)
- Research Assignments (Collecting Primary Data)

More information about research activities can be found in the next section, **What Is Social Work Research?**

Journal / Log Assignments

Common Assignment Titles in Social Work: *Case notes, service participation journals, reading journals, reading logs, field-placement journal/log assignments*

These assignments ask us to write periodically about a specific kind of event or activity. We might have to jot down our actions and reactions each day, each week, or simply each time we participate in a specific activity. These assignments can have a lot in common with what's often called a *narrative essay*. For further discussion, see the Purdue O.W.L.'s section on Narrative Essays.

- **Usually Stated Expectations:** Most assignments include a length requirement, and a number of entries. It will be important to keep up your journal or log as you go. The best journal-keepers make notes in the moment, but quickly return (within the day) to

outline, and then write out the full journal entry.

- **Usually Unstated Expectations:**
  - ○ <u>Language:</u> Although these assignments are sometimes called "informal," it's generally understood that you should proofread them just as carefully as you would a "formal" paper. As in an employment environment, unprofessional grammatical errors do not put your work in its best light.
  - ○ <u>Specificity:</u> The best journal entries really try to describe exactly what we witnessed or felt. The more specific the better: "I assisted with filing" is vague, but "I helped Dr. X and Ms. Y organize their case-notes" is more specific.

<u>Back to Top</u>

Reading / Viewing / Participation Response Assignments

<u>Common Assignment Titles in Social Work:</u> *Reaction essays, response essays, reading-response assignments, viewing-response assignments, service-learning reflection assignments, field placement reflection assignments*

These assignments ask us to respond to someone else's work, often by placing it in a specific context related to a course's content.

- **Usually Stated Expectations:** The assignment will commonly specify the course concepts that should provide the context for our reactions. It will be important to use these concepts correctly, and consider their details and ramifications carefully.
- **Usually Unstated Expectations:**
  - ○ <u>Description:</u> In order to explain **why** and **how** a course concept is relevant, we will need to describe *specific details* from the reading, viewing, or participation experience. We can't always assume that anyone else has picked out the same salient examples—so it's a good idea to describe the details before explaining how they suit a given course concept.

<u>Back to Top</u>

Report Assignments

<u>Common Assignment Titles in Social Work:</u> *Reading summaries; reading reports; analysis of assigned readings*

Sometimes assignments will require us to conduct more sustained reading (e.g. selected articles beyond our textbook) or practical activities (e.g. service with an organization, or conducting a session or mock-session with a client). Even these assignments should make an *argument*, usually that a specific theme, debate, or conclusion unifies the experiences or readings. We won't be collecting data, but we will be drawing our own conclusions based on all of the available material, *not* simply repeating what was already said. These assignments have a lot in common with what's often called a *descriptive essay*. For further discussion, see the Purdue O.W.L.'s section on Descriptive Essays.

- **Usually Stated Expectations:** These assignments usually specify a series of activities or readings, and also the general kind of unification we'll be expected to give them (the theme, debate, or topic of inquiry they all address, for example).
- **Usually Unstated Expectations:**
  - Argument: As we'll see in the section **What Is Social Work Research?,** even a report based on reading a set of articles has to make an *argument*. If all we had to do was say again "what they said," then why would we need to do any writing? A simple citation would suffice! We should look for implicit disagreements among authors, common claims, or common methods. How can we go beyond what each individual article asserts?
  - Specificity: In order to explain *how* the series of experiences or readings hang together, we will need to describe *specific details* from each reading or participation experience. We can't always assume that anyone else has picked out the same salient examples—so it's a good idea to describe the details (or quote *brief* excerpts) to help us explain how they agree, disagree, or work toward the same (or different) goals.

Back to Top

Critical Explication / Analysis Assignments (Research Assignments without Primary Data Collection)

Common Assignment Titles in Social Work: *Term paper, research paper, the integrative seminar paper, clinical assessment paper,*

When an assignment asks us to venture beyond readings selected by the instructor, we're entering the realm of "Research Writing." For these assignments, we'll need to begin thinking about how to locate further information on a specific topic, so we'll need to budget a good deal more time than in the preceding assignments. The next section, **What Is Social Work**

Research?, discusses this research strategies in much more detail; for now, we should just keep in mind that all of the skills in the preceding assignments come into play here.

An "Explication" assignment asks that we conduct some basic research to find out the size and shape of a specific topic, problem, or issue, **but** does not require that we develop a practical prescription for action. Keep in mind, though, that "this is how it works" is a *claim*, and needs to be supported by *reasons*—which is to say, "explication" = "argument." To complete such an assignment, we'll need to collect articles and other sources to support our assertion that, for example, "homelessness is a pressing problem in contemporary urban areas," or "cognitive behavioral therapy is an effective treatment for depression." As we go, these kinds of claims should get *more specific* (see below).

These assignments have a lot in common with what's often called an *expository essay*. For further discussion, see the Purdue O.W.L.'s section on Expository Essays. There is also more information on research in the Purdue O.W.L.'s section on Conducting Research.

- **Usually Stated Expectations:** Most assignments in this category provide a great deal of information about the exact tasks we'll need to undertake. More than ever, we will need to read the assignment sheet carefully, distinguishing learning objectives from tasks, and sorting out the kind of research exploration we'll need to launch. Most assignments will also specify the kinds of sources we'll need to dig up to support our argument, and most will also ask that we document those sources in APA style. For more information about this, see the section **Why Cite?**   Finally, we shouldn't forget that our instructors will welcome the opportunity to help us decide on the best topic, and maybe even the best place to look for resources.
- **Usually Unstated Expectations:**
    - Sources: Almost without fail, instructors assume that our sources will be *peer-reviewed journal articles*, or *books*. Websites can often offer excellent starting points, but we'll need to dig deeper to find reliable, useful information. We can think about it this way: *If I can already find it on Wikipedia, do I really need to restate it in my paper?* **Note:** If my primary claim can be supported *exclusively* with information from Wikipedia or a similar online source, then *the claim is not specific enough*. Revise the claim by asking the interrogative questions, *who, when, where, how, and why?* For further discussion see the next section, **What Is Social Work Research?**
    - Specificity: Even more than in the previous assignments, instructors expect high specificity. The sample claims given above—"homelessness is a pressing problem in contemporary urban areas," or "cognitive behavioral therapy is an effective treatment for depression"—usually aren't specific enough. Again, we'll

need to revise these claims by asking the interrogative questions, *who, when, where, how, and why?* The first claim might add "homelessness *among adolescents*," or perhaps "urban areas *in the U.S. Midwest*." For further discussion see the next section, **What Is Social Work Research?**

- o Section Headings: Some assignments specify the exact section headings that we'll need to use, but nearly all instructors assume that we'll break up a paper into labeled sections. Check with your instructor, if it's left unstated.
- o APA Style: Instructors always assume that we already know what APA style is, and how to use it, so they often won't issue specific instructions beyond "use APA style." If we don't know already, now's the time to find out! See the section, **Why Cite?**

Back to Top

Critical Practical-Argument Assignments

Common Assignment Titles in Social Work: *Term paper, research paper, position paper, clinical strategy or recommendation paper, client service strategy paper*

When an assignment asks us to venture beyond readings selected by the instructor, we're entering the realm of "Research Writing." For these assignments, we'll need to begin thinking about how to locate further information on a specific topic, so we'll need to budget a good deal more time than in the preceding assignments. The next section, **What Is Social Work Research?** discusses this research strategies in much more detail; for now, we should just keep in mind that *all of the skills* in the preceding assignments come into play here.

A practical-argument assignment not only asks us to understand the shape and size of a given problem (e.g. homelessness), but also asks that we develop a recommendation for a specific course of action. That means we'll have to do all the work to, first of all, make an argument that "this is how things work" (an explication argument), and then, second, make an argument that "this is how things *should work*," and finally, that "this is the *best way* to get from how things work to how things *should work*." Short of collecting primary data, this is the most complex type of assignment we'll be given. A primary claim for this kind of project might start off by asserting, "We need to mobilize popular opinion to get legislators to provide the necessary resources to end homelessness"—but that's not specific enough! Again, we'll need to revise these claims by asking the interrogative questions, *who, when, where, how, and why? How* can anybody "mobilize popular opinion"? *Where* is this problem most acute? Or, *how big* of a problem is homelessness in *my* geographic area? *When* is the best time to lobby

legislators, and *who* would be good legislators to target? *How much* do we need in terms of resources? *What kind* of resources might be useful to end homelessness? *What kind* of homelessness are we talking about—chronic or periodic/acute? *Who* are the currently homeless people, and *how* do we know?

These assignments have a lot in common with what's often called an *argumentative essay*. This guide does not use that name, because it implies that other essays don't have to make an argument, but it's commonly used, nonetheless. For further discussion, see the Purdue O.W.L.'s section on Argumentative Essays. There is also more information on research in the Purdue O.W.L.'s section on Conducting Research.

- **Usually Stated Expectations:** Most assignments in this category provide a great deal of information about the exact tasks we'll need to undertake. More than ever, we will need to read the assignment sheet carefully, distinguishing learning objectives from tasks, and sorting out the kind of research exploration we'll need to launch. Most assignments will also specify the kinds of sources we'll need to dig up to support our argument, and most will also ask that we document those sources in APA style. For more information about this, see the section **Why Cite?** Finally, we shouldn't forget that our instructors will welcome the opportunity to help us decide on the best topic, and maybe even the best place to look for resources.
- **Usually Unstated Expectations:**
  - Sources: Almost without fail, instructors assume that our sources will be *peer-reviewed journal articles*, or *books*. Websites can often offer excellent starting points, but we'll need to dig deeper to find reliable, useful information. We can think about it this way: *If I can already find it on Wikipedia, do I really need to restate it in my paper?* **Note:** If my primary claim can be supported *exclusively* with information from Wikipedia or a similar online source, then *the claim is not specific enough*. Revise the claim by asking the interrogative questions, *who, when, where, how, and why?* For further discussion see the next section, **What Is Social Work Research?**
  - Specificity: Even more than in the previous assignments, instructors expect high specificity. As demonstrated with the sample claim above, we'll need to revise our primary claims several times, by asking the interrogative questions, *who, when, where, how, and why?* For further discussion see the next section, **What Is Social Work Research?**
  - Section Headings: Some assignments specify the exact section headings that we'll need to use, but nearly all instructors assume that we'll break up a paper into labeled sections. Check with your instructor, if it's left unstated.
  - APA Style: Instructors always assume that we already know what APA style is,

and how to use it, so they often won't issue specific instructions beyond "use APA style." If we don't know already, now's the time to find out! See the section, **Why Cite?**

Research Assignments (Collecting Primary Data)

<u>Common Assignment Titles in Social Work:</u> *Term paper, research paper, program evaluation paper, master's thesis, dissertation.*

The most complex type of writing work we can undertake in any academic realm, primary data research involves a far more sustained expenditure of time and energy than any of the previous categories. Often we'll need to start on these projects early in the semester, and some (like the master's thesis or dissertation) will stretch well beyond a single semester. They'll require that we: a.) do all the work for an expository essay, using research to establish "how things work" with a specific problem, topic, or area of inquiry; b.) do all the work for a practical-argument essay, using research to establish "how things *should work*," and that "this is the *best way* to change how things work to how things *should work*"; c.) conduct an intervention or a data-collection in the field, to *find out whether* "our way of changing things works"; and finally d.) analyze the data collected and explain what the results mean for the study—and for the whole problem or situation—to *show that* "our way of changing things works." Whew!

This kind of research entails far more writing work than it may seem, and this guide will help us tackle some of that work in the next section, **What Is Social Work Research?**   There is also more information on research in the Purdue O.W.L.'s section on <u>Conducting Research</u>, particularly in the section on <u>Conducting Primary Research</u>.

- **Usually Stated Expectations:** Most assignments in this category provide a great deal of information, but they often allow even more leeway for us to choose a topic and a method for analysis. That leeway is both a boon and a challenge, because most of the topics or issues we'll think of right off the bat will be far too broad, and we'll need to refine them with multiple rounds of interrogative pronouns (*who, what, when, where, how, why*) to produce a workable method for data collection. We shouldn't forget that our instructors are experienced in these processes, and for projects like this, they will welcome the opportunity to help us decide on the best course of action.
- **Usually Unstated Expectations:**
    - <u>Sources:</u> We should not forget that we will need to support *three different arguments* with our research: an argument about how things work; an

argument about how things *should* work; and an argument about the best method for getting there. Almost without fail, instructors assume that our sources will be *peer-reviewed journal articles*, or *books*. For further discussion see the next section, **What Is Social Work Research?**

- o <u>Specificity:</u> Even more than in the previous assignments, instructors expect high specificity. We'll need to revise our primary claims several times, by asking the interrogative questions, *who, when, where, how, and why?* For further discussion see the next section, **What Is Social Work Research?**

- o <u>Section Headings:</u> In almost all data-collection writing assignments, we will use *one* set of section headings: Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, Data Analysis, and Conclusion and Discussion. We should check with our instructor if the assignment leaves the sections unclear.

- o <u>APA Style:</u> Instructors always assume that we already know what APA style is, and how to use it, so they often won't issue specific instructions beyond "use APA style." If we don't know already, now's the time to find out! See the section, **Why Cite?**

<u>Back to Top</u>

What Is Social Work Research?

Simply put, research is the engine that drives our day-to-day actions, whether we work in an academic office or a direct-practice position. In the course of earning a degree in social work, we will need to conduct our own research, and do a lot of writing that recounts, analyzes, applies, and evaluates that research. So what is "research" anyway? Even if you already know, this section is designed as a refresher, a reminder that there's more to the research process than Google and some good keywords. The next section, **How Do I Start? Part 1**, will feature more hands-on exercises that should prove useful in responding to writing assignments.

The Idea of "Research"

For much of our daily lives, we can go about our business relying upon habits, or practical knowledge we've developed through experience. The 17th-century Scottish philosopher David Hume once offered an extreme example: We all "know" that the sun will rise tomorrow, but really all we have to go on is the fact that it's risen on every other morning that we can remember. Until we develop an empirically-provable theory about what a "sunrise" really is, we can't really *know that* the sun will rise tomorrow. All we have is habit and assumption.

The same can be said at a much smaller scale: before we can adequately serve our clients or advocate for social justice, we need to know that our actions stand the best chance of helping these specific clients with the specific challenges they face—and we need to know how to back up our claims and advocate effectively. Research is using methodical analysis to answer questions, and it generally tends to involve one or both of two basic activities:

1. Reviewing the Literature (Secondary Research)

2. Testing a Hypothesis (Intervention, Primary Research)

At each stage of this process, it's important to make clear where our information comes from, not only to give other authors their due credit, but also to show *future* readers where our research fits. For more on how to document our sources, see the upcoming section, **Why Cite?**

1. Reviewing the Literature (Secondary Research)

Often writing assignments are going to ask us to make a case for a specific action—an intervention with a client or organization, or perhaps a policy or practice. In order to do that, we will need to find out what others have already learned about the situation we face. It won't

be enough to decide what we want to do, and then find a source or two to justify ourselves. "Reviewing the literature" means finding *as many sources as possible*, and figuring out what kinds of conclusions these sources allow. This is also a kind of "secondary research," reading others' conclusions to inform our own project. The Purdue O.W.L. site offers some specific tips for writing social work literature reviews, available here: Social Work Literature Review Guidelines. For further general information on secondary research, see the Purdue O.W.L. site's resources: Research Overview, and Evaluating Sources. As we collect and read articles, we need to keep in mind:

- **Few authors can claim to have the last word.** Every study was conducted in particular circumstances, with particular methods, and for particular purposes. As we read our sources, we'll need to keep a "questioning" stance. Is this the only way they could have done this? Is this the only source for this kind of data? How else might we re-think the basic concepts?

- **Experts do not always agree.** Because different scholars start off with different theory-bases, methods, and trial populations, they may reach different results. Disagreements are often the best sign that there's something that *we* can do to contribute to the topic, so it's important to figure out *why* different scholars reach different conclusions.

- **Our own writing has its own purpose.** It's important to keep in mind what we want to find out, so that we can focus our inquiries carefully. If I choose to research "homelessness in the USA," I could spend years reading the available literature, and never finish! But if I choose to do some research about "homelessness in suburbs of major US cities during the recession of 2007-9," I will have a much narrower collection of possible sources (How do I get that specific? See the next section, **How Do I Start? Part 1**). Most importantly, ***the argument I want to make will tell me how I'll need to explain my sources***. It's easy to assume that the information is "just there," and that my own writing is redundant because I'm repeating what others have already said. But when I am making my own argument, I need to carefully pick and choose from among the wealth of available information, developing new connections between different sources to best support (and critique!) my points.

Back to Top

2. Testing a Hypothesis (Intervention, Primary Research)

Once we know how others have already attempted to answer questions like ours, we can develop new strategies to test their conclusions, or to try out conjectures of our own. In a direct-practice setting, this may mean trying out an intervention with a client (this is also called

single-system design). In an academic setting, this may mean trying to fill a gap in the established literature by conducting a new kind of study, or perhaps repeating a study with a new population, or other source of data. For further general information about primary research, see the Purdue O.W.L.'s resources on Primary Research.

Common writing assignments (for examples, see **Common Assignments in Social Work Education**) may ask you to review the literature without moving on to test a hypothesis (carry out an intervention or collect data), but the reverse is *never* true. We will *always* have to review the literature to justify how we carry out an intervention or collect data. This justification happens at three distinct, but related levels:

- ***Theory Base:*** At the broadest level, working with many others, scholars can synthesize large collections of work to create a general picture of how people live and behave. These general frameworks have to be tested constantly, but they're often useful to help us define how we want to tackle questions or problems. They divide up domains of knowledge into manageable sizes, and help us explain what we already know. As we begin to create a hypothesis, we'll have to decide very quickly which general area of knowledge we want to work with—so we'll have to choose a theory-base.

- ***Method:*** At an intermediate level, either individually or working with others, scholars can propose, test, and refine specific *methods* for applying a theory-base to a specific situation. Within this general realm, we can find a range of categories. In beginning to try to answer a specific question—for example, "What causes homelessness in sub-urban communities today?"—we'll need to decide whether to conduct *qualitative* or *quantitative* research, and then we'll need to decide how to collect our data. ***Qualitative*** research tries to answer research questions by collecting information in depth from a few individuals or groups. It usually involves reading and interpreting large amounts of text in great detail. ***Quantitative*** research tries to answer research questions by figuring out how to convert larger-scale questions into *numerical* amounts. Using numbers lets us analyze far larger amounts of data from large populations, but it limits the kinds of questions we can ask, and makes us work harder to turn those questions into numerically measurable quantities. We'll learn more about qualitative and quantitative methods in our Research courses here at UTA. For further information about using statistics in our writing, the Purdue O.W.L. site offers an overview.

- ***Conclusions or Findings:*** When an individual scholar has run a study, she will *interpret* the results of the intervention, or the data gathered in a qualitative or quantitative study. Taken alone, the conclusions of a specific study are the *narrowest*, *most specific* level of knowledge in social work. Many studies cannot be generalized beyond the specific circumstances or populations they measured. Taken in large groups, however, many studies together can suggest very convincing conclusions. This is why the *review*

of the literature (see above!) is so important: it lets us draw broader conclusions that would be unavailable based on just one or two studies. Here the serpent eats its tail: reviews of the literature allow us to decide on appropriate theory bases and methods, which help us create our own conclusions, which in turn feed further work on the theory-bases and methods we've used.

Back to Top

Return to the Previous Section,   Continue to the Next Section,
Common Assignments in Social Work Education   **How Do I Start?**

How Do I Start? Part 1: Prewriting

Writing in any discipline presents us with an imposing experience: Staring at a blank page, just before starting to write. The good news is that, with a little practice, we can face this experience with plenty of confidence—and also some preparatory work that makes it much easier. The present section offers us some simple exercises that can help get past that moment of anxiety, that *"What do I do now?"* moment. But the best piece of advice is also the shortest:

Writing is a Process: *Start early!*

If there's a single most important thing to remember about writing, it's that **writing is a process**. Actually typing complete sentences into a blank document is just one tiny step, and it happens somewhere in the **middle** of the process. If we can follow the other steps effectively, it does not have to be a daunting step. The three basic steps toward a successful paper are **prewriting**, **writing**, and **revising**. We need to keep in mind that each of these steps deserves significant time, so we need to **start early**. This section has two parts: Part 1 (below) discusses **prewriting**. **Part 2 (click here)** discusses **draft writing**.

Before we face that blank page, we should prepare ourselves with three key elements:

- Preparatory Exercises
- Appropriate Research
- An Outline

We have to remember to fine-tune each of these elements as we go, to make sure it suits the writing situation we face. For more information on common writing situations and their explicit and tacit requirements, see **What Can I Expect?** For more information on types of research, see **What Is Social Work Research?** This guide provides two exercises to help the prewriting process and get us started on appropriate research:

Apply the Why – An easy exercise to turn the kernel of an idea into a more specific research question or hypothesis. Specific questions or hypotheses will help us conduct *appropriate research*.

The Real Outline – An easy exercise to break up an argument into sub-arguments that fit each section of a paper, producing an *outline* that we can work from.

A Preparatory Exercise: Apply the Why

There are many potential ways to get our ideas started, and we may find that we prefer to diagram things visually, or to create lists. Either way, **before we can even start researching** (or even crack open the textbook, if it's that kind of writing situation), we need to figure out what we're trying to say. One way to do that is to take our first kernel of an idea—no matter how small or basic—and turn it into a question we'll have to answer, or an argument that we'll have to support. To do that, we need to call upon a handy grammatical category: the *interrogative pronouns*. Once we have a more specific question or hypothesis, we'll have the search terms we'll need to make our library work manageable.

For this exercise, we'll need a writing assignment, a very basic declarative sentence in answer to the assignment, and the interrogative pronouns: **What? Where? When? Who? How? Why?** We'll also need about half an hour of uninterrupted time (to do the exercise), and then some more time to conduct our research.

STEP 1: Create a Simple Sentence

To begin with, write down a very basic declarative sentence (or as complex a sentence as we can manage at the moment).

Sample Assignment: Choose a serious social issue. Conduct a literature review in which you clarify its significance, and then make an argument for a specific course of community action.

Sample Declarative Sentence: Homelessness is a serious social problem.

STEP 2: Recruit Interrogative Pronouns

Start writing in the interrogative pronouns, either beneath (if you're inclined to verbal, textual organization) or around (if you lean toward visual organization) that main sentence.

(The next page provides some examples.)

Sample List-Based Version:

Homelessness is a serious social problem.

<u>What?</u>
<u>When?</u>
<u>Where?</u>
<u>Who?</u>
<u>How?</u>
<u>Why?</u>

Sample Graphical Version:

When?

What?   *Where?*

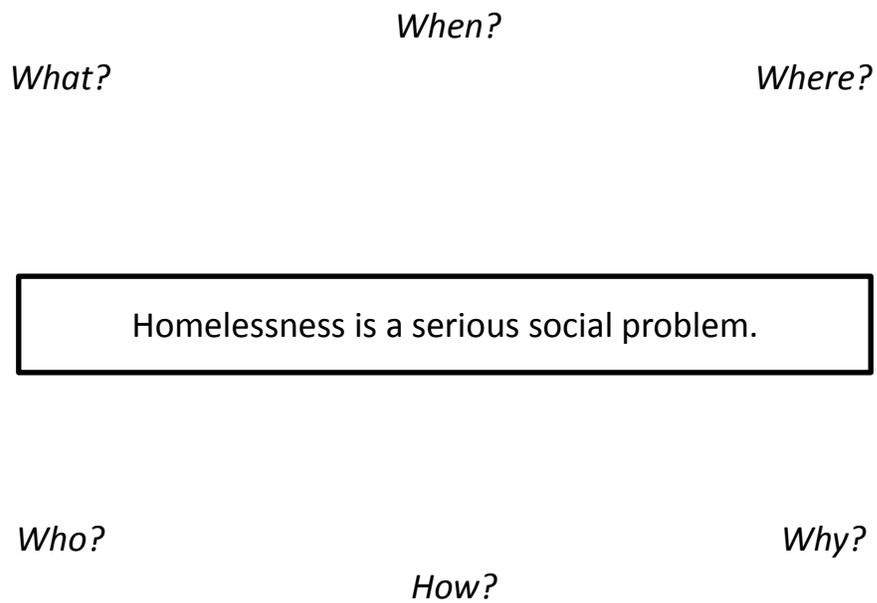| Homelessness is a serious social problem. |
| --- |

Who?   *Why?*

How?

STEP 3: Ask Yourself the Questions

Use the interrogative pronouns as questions about your basic sentence. Either simply write down the questions, or supply information that you already know. This is entirely a conversation with yourself, so **write in casual language**. We can worry about getting more formal later.

Sample List-Based Version:

Homelessness is a serious social problem.

<u>What?</u> – What *is* "homelessness"? Seems like some people are long-term homeless, but others sometimes have trouble, but then find a place to live.
<u>When?</u> – When has homelessness already been studied? How long has it been studied? When has it been a serious problem? Is it getting worse?
<u>Where?</u> – Seems like mostly an urban problem. Do people lose their housing in rural or suburban areas too? How come I never hear about that?
<u>Who?</u> – Who are the people that have nowhere to live? It seems like people with serious untreated emotional or mental disorders are some of the long-term homeless, but what about people who lose their houses to foreclosure?
<u>How?</u> – How should we study homelessness? How's it been studied already? And, how serious a problem is it? Are there more serious problems I should be studying?
<u>Why?</u> – Why should we pay so much attention to *this* problem? Why do people lose their housing? Do they get it back?

(The next page illustrates a sample graphical version)

Sample Graphical Version:

What *is* "homelessness"? Seems like some people are long-term homeless, but others sometimes have trouble, but then find a place to live.

What?

When has homelessness already been studied? How long has it been studied? When has it been a serious problem? Is it getting worse?

When?

Seems like mostly an urban problem. Do people lose their housing in rural or suburban areas too? How come I never hear about that?

Where?

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│        Homelessness is a serious social problem  │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

Who?

Who are the people that have nowhere to live? It seems like people with serious untreated emotional or mental disorders are some of the long-term homeless, but what about people who lose their houses to foreclosure?

How?

How should we study homelessness? How's it been studied already? And, how serious a problem is it? Are there more serious problems I should be studying?

Why?

Why should we pay so much attention to this problem? Why do people lose their housing? Do they get it back?

STEP 4: Refine and Specify

Using what you know, and what these questions suggest, refine our original statement. We should make it much, *much* more specific, and maybe even turn it into a question.

Sample Research Question Version:

Is long-term homelessness a serious problem in the suburban/urban areas in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex?

Sample Statement (Hypothesis) Version:

Ever since the housing crisis of 2008, chronic homelessness has been an increasingly serious problem in the suburban/urban Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex.

NOTE: Even though it might look authoritative, the statement/hypothesis version isn't something we know. It's a guess that we now need to test by looking for available data, and perhaps even collecting new data of our own.

STEP 5: Start Reviewing the Literature

Now it's time to hit the library databases, our textbooks, and any other sources we can find. We can use the more precise sentence to generate keywords to help us find out what the research community already knows about this specific issue. In the case of the "Question Version," we'll need to find some kind of answer that lets us move forward with our project. In the case of the "Statement Version," we'll need to find information that supports all the parts of the assertion.

For example, a search for just "homelessness" in the "Social Sciences" databases turns up about **13,000** results, which is far too many to examine. A similar search using "chronic homelessness" turns up **540 results**—a lot less, but still too many. But when we refine the results further, by adding the word "urban" (**127 results**) and then the word "Dallas" (**2 results**), we quickly get much narrower collections of articles. Even 127 results is a manageable number, because we can quickly skim titles and abstracts, and discard articles that don't help us.

When we've conducted some research and feel like we're beginning to have something to say, it's time to start organizing our thoughts and preparing to create a draft.

A Preparatory Exercise: The Real Outline

Even if we already have an argument in mind, and even if we've already done some useful prewriting exercises, the blank page of a word processing program can still look mighty intimidating. An outline can help, but it can also get in the way. Consider the following outline:

Example:

Introduction

Literature Review

Main Argument

Conclusion

This looks like an outline, but really it's a **list**—a list of section headings! If I need to make a clear argument, the words "Literature Review" might be just as nerve-wracking as staring at a blank page. In this exercise, we'll take this list of section headings and turn it into a real outline, using a sample argument from the previous exercise, **Apply the Why**.

STEP 1: Clarify Purpose

For each section, we should write down some questions that show what this part of the argument is going to need to do. Arguments and purposes vary a great deal, depending on the writing situation (see this guide's summary of Common Writing Situations in **Why Write?** and **What Can I Expect?**), but here are some common examples:

Introduction: Why is this paper about this topic? Why is the topic important?

Literature Review: What have others already said about this and similar topics?

Main Argument: What does your research tell us about this topic? What is your new contribution?

Conclusion: What future courses of action does your argument suggest? What still remains to be done?

STEP 2: Create Sentences

For each section heading, create a short, simple, declarative sentence, ***OR***, if that seems impossible, create a short, simple question, based on your overall argument. Keep in mind the purpose for each section (here written in bold next to the section). The examples below are based on a sample argument from this guide's previous exercise, **Apply the Why**.

Sample Argument:

Ever since the housing crisis of 2008, chronic homelessness has been an increasingly serious problem in the suburban/urban Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex.

Introduction: Why is this paper about this topic? Why is the topic important?

Declarative Sentence: Homelessness is a far-reaching problem.

Question: Is homelessness a serious problem?

Literature Review: What have others already said about this and similar topics?

Declarative Sentence: Other scholars have already begun research on urban homelessness, chronic homelessness, and homelessness in the state of Texas.

Question: I know scholars have been talking about chronic homelessness, but what about specifically in Texas?

Main Argument: What does your research tell us about this topic? What is your new contribution?

Declarative Sentence: The housing crisis of 2008 made housing much more difficult to obtain or keep, and here in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex, a lot of people have lost their homes.

Question: I know the housing crisis made things tough, but does our area have it worse than other areas?

Conclusion: What future courses of action does your argument suggest? What still remains to be done?

Declarative Sentence: Since this is such a serious problem here, it might be equally serious or even more serious elsewhere. Also, we should be finding out more about what's unique about this area.

Question: How can this argument be applied elsewhere, and what further information about it do we need?

STEP 3: Fill Gaps / Create Lists

Fill Gaps

If we find we've written questions underneath any section heading, now is the time to go back and conduct a little further research, to ***fill in the gaps*** that those questions indicate. When we've found the information, we can come back and turn the questions into declarative sentences (statements that we'll have to support).

Create Lists

Underneath each statement, make a list of points that support each assertion. These should be more detailed, but at this stage they don't have to be complete sentences. **Note:** Because this is a sample argument, and not an actual research project, placeholders such as ABC and XYZ indicate where specific sources or information would appear.

Sample Argument:

Ever since the housing crisis of 2008, chronic homelessness has been an increasingly serious problem in the suburban/urban Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex.

Introduction: Homelessness is a far-reaching problem.

- National data XYZ on homelessness
- Anecdote about chronic homeless persons ABC

Literature Review: Other scholars have already begun research on urban homelessness, chronic homelessness, and homelessness in the state of Texas.

- Scholars ABC, with conclusions on chronic homelessness
- Scholars XYZ, with conclusions on urban homelessness
- Scholar D, study on Houston, Dallas
- No studies available on Fort Worth, Arlington!

Main Argument: The housing crisis of 2008 made housing much more difficult to obtain or keep, and here in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex, a lot of people have lost their homes.

- Government data ABC on status of housing crisis nationally
- State government data XYZ on the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex
- Interviews with service providers
- Interviews with people without stable housing
- State government data DEF on housing in Dallas

Conclusion: Since this is such a serious problem here, it might be equally serious or even more serious elsewhere. Also, we should be finding out more about what's unique about this area.

- Government data ABC on status of housing in other specific areas
- Information from scholars listed above, showing where there's more work to be done.

STEP 5: Organize, and Start Writing!

Now it's time to look through the lists we've made, and think about what order would best convey what we want to say. For example, in the *introduction*, it might be useful to start with a clear, striking *anecdote* about one person's experience, before we report national data, so we might reorganize as shown in this sample:

Sample: Initial Version

Introduction: Homelessness is a far-reaching problem.

- National data XYZ on homelessness
- Anecdote about chronic homeless persons ABC

Sample: Revised Version

Introduction: Homelessness is a far-reaching problem.

- Anecdote 1 about chronically homeless person A
- National data XYZ on homelessness
- Anecdote 2 about chronically homeless persons B&C
- Statement on what we need to do

Once we've reorganized each list, we'll have a very strong blueprint for a well-organized paper. It will be much easier to sit down and write if we already have this complex outline in front of us—instead of that initial list of section headings!

How Do I Start? Part 2: Writing

If we start off by doing some **Prewriting**, we can start the actual writing with confidence, knowing we have an outline, a road-map for where our argument begins, and where it's going.

If we start *the whole process* early, we'll be able to do the writing with even more confidence, knowing that we'll have time to come back later and fix problems. That means that we don't have to write everything perfectly the first time around. All the same, we can make things easier on ourselves by paying careful attention to a few things *right now*, as we write:

- Best Practices for Efficient Writing
- How Should I Use My Sources?
- What if I Get Stuck?
- What Is a Claim?

Best Practices for Efficient Writing

There are a few things we can do to help us work as efficiently as possible, and save us more work later on: tracking our sources as we go, and making basic grammatical decisions before we write.

Tracking Citations

It's always important to keep track of where information came from *as we write*. It may seem like a pain to enter an in-text citation in the middle of the writing process, but that's nothing compared to how difficult it is to look back after we're done, and figure out where we got something. Many cases of **plagiarism** happen because we included data, but forgot to provide the source. If, in the moment of writing, I can't remember exactly where I got a specific piece of information, I tend to leave myself a note, such as: (CITATION from JONES GOES HERE). That way, I won't forget to attribute the information to Jones. For more information about citations, see the next section, **Why Cite?**

Basic Grammatical Decisions

It's important to figure out the most basic elements of our writing before we start. Some elements, like pronouns, *can* be fixed later, but others, such as verb tenses, are very difficult to edit effectively.

Tense: It's important to decide *when* everything has happened as you write, so that your verbs all communicate the correct information to the audience.

- The Past Tense: Use the past tense when you want to describe events that happened at a specific time, but are over now.
    - Past research activity, which was completed at a specific point. Example: "In the 1980s, researchers **found** that AIDS cases in the continental US were on the rise."
    - Your own data collection. Example: "Fourteen subjects **participated** in the focus group."
    - Past theoretical models, when you want to contextualize them (e.g., when they're no longer accepted as valid). Example: "Freud **thought** that girls pass through a stage involving 'penis envy.'"
- The Present Tense: Use the present tense to indicate what continues to happen now, and what your work is demonstrating.
    - Events that began in the past, but continue to be true today. Example: "The Centers for Disease Control **manage** reports of outbreaks all over the USA."
    - Conclusions that you reach in this project. Example: "These data **show** that the intervention should be successful in comparable cases."
    - Theoretical models that you are discussing *as abstract models*. Example: "For Seymour Chatman, narrative **comprises** both the story (what is told), and the discourse (how the story is told)."
    - Theoretical models that have not been invalidated. Example: "According to Lacan, human self-consciousness **begins** at the 'mirror stage.'"

Person: It's also important to decide how we will refer to our own work. Some specific contexts require the use of passive voice, while many (particularly in social work) require us to refer to our own experiences, using the pronoun **I**.

- Passive Voice: Generally, passive voice constructions are weaker, and make reading more difficult. That means they should be avoided, except where required, and even then, there are correct and incorrect usages. For further information, see the Purdue OWL page on Passive Voice.
    - *Passive Voice Used Incorrectly:* "That means they should be avoided." Yes, this guide itself is not immune. For some examples that demonstrate how to change passive to active voice, see the Purdue OWL page here.
    - *Passive Voice Used Correctly—to describe data-collection activity:* "Fourteen subjects were interviewed." For more examples of useful passive-voice moments, see the Purdue OWL page on Using Passive Voice.

- The First-Person: For a long time, most people have assumed that we should not use the first-person "I" in academic work, but that's no longer true, especially in social work. When we need to refer to our own practice experience, or our interactions with clients, we make our work much easier to read by simply using "I." **When preparing to write a paper for a class, it's appropriate to ask the instructor what s/he prefers**. Many instructors have their own personal preferences.
  - Rule of Thumb: Use "I" only when you *really* need it—to refer to your own actions, or to specify a conclusion or interpretation as subjective.
- The First-Person Plural: In rare cases, it's appropriate to replace the first person "I" with a "we." We have to do this carefully, because, (as in this writing right here), we risk over-generalizing.
  - *Correct Usage:* Multiple Authors. When a paper by multiple authors needs to refer to their own work in the first-person, then the plural is correct. Example: "We found that the intervention was successful."
  - *Incorrect Usage:* Generalized Statements. Example: "We all experience loss, and we all know what a profound impact it can have." This is a risky statement, because the reader may not have experienced *this kind* of loss, and may feel excluded.

Back to Top

How Should I Use My Sources?

Most of the time, we'll need to support our argument by referring the reader to the sources for our information.

Integrating Sources: Summary, Paraphrase, Quotation

Integrating quotations is a skill that takes a great deal of practice to pull off effectively, but right here, in the moment of writing, we'll need to choose from three important tactics:

Summary: If I need to suggest the conclusions of a variety of studies, or of one important study, *very quickly*, then I will need to **summarize** the whole study.

- If I summarize, I'll only need to provide the author's name and date. For more information, see the next section, **Why Cite?**
- For more advice about summarizing, see the Purdue OWL page on Summary.

Paraphrase: If I need specific information from a study, but it's either difficult to integrate into my text, or *full of jargon*, I should probably **paraphrase** one or more sentences. That means I'll transform difficult words into easier words, and change the language structure so that it better

suits the specific sentences I'm using.

- This is a jargon-filled sentence: "Houseflies not only defecate constantly, but do so in liquid form, which means they are in constant danger of dehydration" (Conniff, as cited in Ballenger, 2009, p. 127). We might have to look up a few words before we're ready to create a quick, easy-to-read paraphrase for this (disgusting) fact.
- If I paraphrase, I'll need to provide the author's name, the date, and a page number. For more information, see the next section, **Why Cite?**
- For more advice about paraphrasing, see the Purdue OWL's Paraphrasing Overview, and also their Paraphrasing Exercises.
- NOTE: Most cases of **plagiarism** happen when we don't **paraphrase** adequately. For advice about how to avoid this, see the Purdue OWL's Plagiarism Overview, and Anti-Plagiarism Strategies. The UTA library also has a comprehensive Plagiarism Tutorial, which includes exercises and examples.

Quote: If I need a *definition*, or a *specific piece of information* that I can only use in the author's original words, then I need to **quote** a sentence—or maybe just part of it.

- If I quote, I'll need to enclose the author's words in quotation marks, and provide the author's name, the date, and a page number. For more information, see the next section, **Why Cite?**
- For some examples of how to integrate quotations, see the Purdue OWL's Quotation Overview.
- For further rules about using quotations, see the Purdue OWL's Additional Resources, and Punctuation Rules.

What's this doing here? – Occam's Quotation Razor: It's also important to ask ourselves exactly *how much* of a source's information we actually need for the task at hand. Whenever I'm about to add a quotation to my paper, I always ask myself: *what's this doing here?* and *how much of this do I need?*

Based on long experience, here are a few tips to help us follow "Occam's Quotation Razor," an axiom that says: "**The simplest and shortest quotation is usually the best**."

- Large block-quotations of three sentences or a paragraph **are almost never a good idea**. Unless I'm using a quotation from a literary text (a story or a poem), and intend to provide several pages of *my own analysis* of it, I probably don't need the whole block, and should pick just one or two vital points.
- Isolated quotations **are almost never a good idea**. I should not quote an entire sentence and let it stand by itself among my other sentences. An isolated quotation is

rough on the reader, and sometimes produces jarring clashes of tone and diction. Instead, I should choose only the most important part of the sentence, and introduce just that part with my own argument.

- o <u>Effective Example:</u> Against the idea that education is meant to get us a job, Hart argues that "the goal of education is to produce the citizen" (citation would go here).
- o <u>Less-Effective Example:</u> "It's not the perfect, not the nuclear family they were born into, or the happy ending they might have asked for. But maybe it is enough" (citation). Since the divorce I have watched my parents grow as people. I recognize that they are human and make mistakes.
    - ▪ <u>Improved:</u> Since the divorce I have watched my parents grow as people, and I can see now that they are human and make mistakes. Like Matthiessen, I see our family as "not the perfect, not the nuclear family," or "the happy ending [we] might have asked for. But maybe it is enough" (citation).

- Quoting someone's summary of someone else's argument is **almost never a good idea**. If I need that specific piece of information, I need to go find the original article, to make sure I understand the context and interpret the information correctly.
- Inserting a quotation I don't fully understand is **never a good idea**. Sure, it may "sound good" to me, but if I don't know what it really says, then I can't be sure it actually supports my claim. It might say the *exact opposite* of what I wanted to say.

<u>Back to Top</u>

What if I Get Stuck?

We should always bear in mind that our writing has to *make an argument*. That means we're making claims, and supporting those claims with reasons. In turn, we'll be choosing reasons that we know will make sense to our audience. As we write, it's worth paying attention to the kinds of claims we're making, by asking the following questions (particularly when we're "stuck"):

Is this claim based on common knowledge that my audience will share?

- If so, do I really need to make this claim in detail, or can I assume the audience will already know something about it?
- If not, do I need to provide some more support for the claim?

Do I have anecdotal information (my personal experience, or the personal experience of someone I've interviewed) to support my claim?

- If so, is it *convincing enough* to support my claim?
- If not, do I need to interview someone, or **find some more data**?

Do I have the data to support my claim?

- If so, what would be the best quotation or summary to use here?
- If not, do I need to **find some more data**?

If it seems I need to find some more data, will my whole argument change if I don't find what I need, or if what I find contradicts my point?

- If the whole argument will change, it's best to *stop writing* until I find some more data.
- If the whole argument will not change, it's best to make a note to myself, right there in the text (for example, (Demographic data GOES HERE)), and keep writing.

<u>Back to Top</u>

What is a claim?

A claim is any statement we make in a paper that isn't derived from another source, and does not directly report information we ourselves have observed.

<u>Example 1:</u> Most people need external motivation to change their daily habits.
(*That's a claim*: I would need to provide data to support it.)

<u>Example 2:</u> The study found that 78% of the subjects who changed their daily habits had external motivation.
(*Not a claim:* This is a report of experimental results.)

<u>Example 3:</u> Because 78% of the subjects who changed their daily habits had external motivation, it's fair to say that most people of similar demographics also need this kind of motivation to change.
(*Both at once:* This sentence integrates the claim from Example 1 with the data report from Example 2, uniting a claim and some support. But by doing that, it creates a *new* claim: that these data *can be generalized*. That claim will need—yes—more support.)

Return to the Previous Section,   Continue to the Next Section,

Why Cite?

Most of us get the necessity for proper citation drilled into us as soon as we get to college, and then over and over again, in each successive class or degree program. In social work, we have to use APA style (created by and for the American Psychological Association), and we have to cite our sources, and we're told over and over again that this citation process helps us avoid accusations of **plagiarism**. But that's not the whole story.

The truth is much more complex and interesting. ***Why cite?*** This guide suggests a number of reasons, but we should first be clear about what we're describing. Citation systems are designed to accomplish multiple goals, but these goals fall into two basic categories: **attribution** and **documentation**. Once we're clear on these, we can proceed to the practical side, available on the next page, **How Does APA Style Work?**

Attribution

When I attribute a quotation or a piece of information to a source, I distinguish between that source's contribution to my argument, and my argument itself, my own conclusions. There are many *documentation styles* (APA, MLA, Chicago, and many others), but they are all designed to make *attribution* easier. We need to get used to using a citation style, not because "they" say so, but because it helps us organize our thoughts. Plus, *attribution*, giving credit where credit is due, helps us avoid plagiarism.

- ***Organize Our Thoughts:*** College writing requires a difficult balancing act, between generating our own conclusions and acknowledging what's already been done by others. When we write, we enter a ***conversation*** with others in our field, and as in any conversation, we're obliged to acknowledge others' statements, but also to contribute new and interesting ideas. By carefully tracking and attributing others' conclusions to them, we can keep a clear eye on what we're really adding to the conversation. If *all* I'm doing in a paper is repeating information I've learned elsewhere, then I need to reconsider my project, and re-work it in order to make an argument of my own. For more information on common types of argument in social work, see this guide's sections, **Why Write?** and **What Is Social Work Research?**
- ***Show Others Who Said What:*** We have to remember, too, that our writing isn't just an exercise to get a grade. It's a piece of communication, aimed at refining our collective understanding of how the world works. When we ***attribute*** information to our research sources, we provide information that others can use—we help *teach* others. A ***citation system*** helps provide our readers with a ***road map*** to the information we've used—not

just so an instructor can check up on us, but so that future readers can follow in our footsteps, much as we follow in our sources'.

- ***And Be Brief:*** Citation systems in general let us refer others to who said what (as mentioned above) *more briefly and succinctly*, saving us and our readers some valuable space and time.

Documentation: APA Style

Specific citation systems such as APA allow for efficient bookkeeping. I might attribute sources in any number of ways—mentioning titles of works, authors' names, chapter headings, dates, page numbers, and so on—but if everyone did this, it would be difficult to find our sources easily. APA documentation style accomplishes several tasks quickly and efficiently:

- Documentation Standardizes Attribution: That's a compressed way of saying that when all social-work researchers use APA Style, we can all read and evaluate one another's claims and support more easily—we can all teach and learn more effectively.
- In-Text Citations Keep the Text Clean: **In-text citations** are designed to be brief, so that we can introduce our source quickly and then get on with our argument. Each citation refers to a "References Page" entry, which in turn provides enough information to find the source easily. It's a road map anyone can follow.
- In-Text Citations Show We're Up to Date: In social-sciences research, we want to refer to the most up-to-date information. **APA style** includes the **year** of publication in the **in-text** parenthetical **citation**, making it easy to glance over a paper and see very quickly how up-to-date its sources are. If I see too many 1980s and 1990s entries, I'll worry that the paper doesn't use the newest information. But if I see the current year or last year all over the place, then my confidence will increase. Likewise, if I see information coming from a variety of sources (many different authors' last names in parentheses), I'll know immediately that the writer has carefully considered a variety of perspectives. But if I see only one or two names, over and over again, I might worry that the paper is biased, or hasn't considered all the potential avenues of research.
- References Pages Are a Resource: The **References Page** has to provide enough information for anyone to track down the source I've used. That's not just to let anyone "check up" on me—it's to help others along with their own research. We can "mine" other writers' references pages to find the sources they've used, and when I do that, I'm always grateful that they've followed APA style, so I'll have enough information.

How Does APA Style Work?

APA style provides readers with a road-map, both to understand how we've used our sources, and to follow our documentation to see our sources for themselves. As mentioned in the previous page, **Why Cite?**, APA style requires us to provide all of this information in a specific order, making things easier to follow. To use APA style, we need to be ready to use a standardized **format** for our papers, provide **in-text citations** to document all sources whose information we use, and provide a **references section** to show the reader a more detailed account of which sources we used. This guide provides a brief section on each of these, as well as some Frequently Asked Questions.

Using APA Style

- APA Format
- In-Text Citations
- References List
- FAQ

APA Format

In order to help us read quickly and efficiently, APA style standardizes our writing format. I can review any paper quickly, jumping straight to the sections I need, if the writer organizes it according to the basic APA format.

- *Title Page:* The title of the paper, plus information about the author. For a sample title page, see the Purdue O.W.L. sample page.
- *Abstract:* An abstract summarizes the whole paper. Abstracts may seem pointless, but as soon as we start conducting wider *literature reviews*, we'll appreciate being able to glance through a 200-word abstract to decide whether or not to read a 20-page article. For a sample abstract, see the Purdue O.W.L. sample page.
- *Main Body:* The bulk of the paper belongs here. The body is often divided up into an introduction, a literature review, a section on methods, a section on data-analysis, and a discussion and conclusion section—but not every paper needs to have all of these.
  - For more information about deciding how to organize APA-Style papers, see the Purdue O.W.L. section on paper types.
  - For more information about how APA Style regards basic grammatical decisions,

see the Purdue O.W.L. section on basic style.

- o For more information about how to create headings and sub-headings in an APA Style paper, see the Purdue O.W.L. page on headings and seriation.

- *References:* The References section contains all the information anyone would need to find any of the sources we use (see below).

Back to Top

In-Text Citations

The Main Body should also contain *in-text citations*. These can seem confusing, so it's worth remembering that APA style cares the most about only a few pieces of information in the text: the **Author's last name(s)** and the publication **date** should *always* appear, in parentheses, after information that we derive from another writer's work. If we *quote* some text, or if we *paraphrase* information from a single paragraph, we'll also need a **page number**. If there's no page number, then yes, it's necessary to count paragraphs! The format looks like this: (Lastname, Date, p.1).

- For more information about in-text citations, see the Purdue O.W.L. page on in-text citations.
- For more information about how to handle authors' last names in in-text citations, see the Purdue O.W.L. page on Author/Authors.
- **Best Practice:** It's best to put in in-text citations *as soon as we add a quotation, paraphrase, or summary* to our paper. They're hard to add later!

Back to Top

References

The References section contains all the information anyone would need, in order to find any of the sources we use. Sometimes the sheer number of possible source-types can seem overwhelming, but it's worth remembering that APA papers need to offer *at least* four basic categories of information: **Author(s)**, **Date**, **Title(s)**, and **Publication Information**. As long as we make a serious effort to include that information, and in that order, we'll be well on our way to correct APA reference style.

- For more information on the References section, see the Purdue O.W.L.'s page on Basic Rules.
- The Purdue O.W.L. also provides a variety of useful sub-categories dealing with most types of sources. Of particular interest:
  - o Articles in Periodicals

- o [Books](#)
  - o [Electronic Sources](#)
- **Best Practice:** It's best to create a "references entry" for a source *as soon as we decide that it'll be useful*. If we create a computer document with all of that information, all we'll need to do when it comes time to compose a References section is copy and paste!
- **Best Practice:** From painful experience, *it's best not to rely on automated or computerized citation systems*. Some of these programs can create a references entry for us, but most will get something wrong, and some of them make a downright mess! If you do use one, be sure to double-check it against the APA manual, or the Purdue O.W.L.

[Back to Top](#)

Frequently Asked Questions

As suggested throughout this guide, the APA style manual is the best resource for detailed questions about the practical details of correct citation. But this guide also highly recommends the following sources:

The Purdue OWL APA Style Guide – cited throughout this guide, this resource has an easy-to-read menu and plenty of examples.

The APA Style Blog – Maintained by APA editors themselves, the blog answers many arcane questions about formatting and the proper method for citing all manner of sources.

The following Frequently Asked Questions are more general questions about how and when to use citations...

Q: *When should I cite?*

A: We should cite a source whenever the ideas we're discussing are not derived from our own conclusions, experience, or data-collection. If we find that *all* we're doing is providing information from other sources, then it's time to reconsider our project. Are we making an *argument*, or just reporting someone else's? For more information about how to improve our argument, see this guide's section, **How Do I Start – Part 1: Prewriting**.

Q: *When should I use quotation marks?*

A: We should enclose in quotation marks any section of text that looks almost exactly like what the original author wrote. The technical limit is **5 words**, not including particles and conjunctions (a, the, if, and, but). If more than five of the words in a sentence are the original author's, it's time to either rewrite the paraphrase more effectively, or use a direct quotation.

For more information on how to quote effectively, see this guide's section, **How Do I Start? – Part 2: Writing**.

Q: *How do I cite a quote within a quote?*

There are actually two answers to this question:

Short Answer: Don't. Generally, **it's best to find the *original source***, and take a good look at that source. Every paper makes an argument and every argument picks and chooses its support from the available sources. A source may be misrepresenting—or just being very selective about—the material being quoted.

Long Answer: In some *rare circumstances*, it may be necessary to cite a quote within a quote. Usually these circumstances involve a source citing something that's very difficult (or actually impossible) for us to find and read ourselves. For example, some sources cite personal conversations or interviews, while others may cite speeches for which no transcription is available. In these cases *only*, we might need to cite a quote within a quote. This is called an ***indirect citation***. For more information about how to format such a citation, see the Purdue O.W.L.'s overview of Author/Authors, and scroll down to the entry for indirect citations.

Back to Top

Why Revise?

This guide distinguishes between "revising" and "proofreading," granting each its own separate section. It's easy to confuse the two, especially when a deadline looms, and we find we want to look over a paper as fast as possible before turning it in. But these are separate steps, and each deserves time. As always, this guide advises us to **start early**, in order to leave enough time near the *end* of the process to carry out revisions and proofreading as two separate steps.

In fact, we may find we need to begin **revising** our argument well before we finish a complete draft. As we "review the literature," we may find that existing research contradicts the point we'd set out to make, or when we collect data, we may find out that some information is very difficult to locate. That means we'll need to change our plans for what to do next.

Revision, as a step in the writing process, is most important once we have a **complete draft**, however. Once a draft is done, we can carry out a complete revision process. Of course, everyone has their own style and technique for revising, so the following instructions are intended just to get us started. This guide suggests four fairly simple steps:

STEP ONE: Wait

Wait a few days. It's a strange thing to ask us to do, but once we get used to seeing a paper, report, or other document as we write it, we become blind to how its argument really works. Put down the draft, and focus on other activities for at least 48 hours. With distance, we'll be able to return to the draft and see it for what it is, rather than what we wanted it to be.

STEP TWO: Re-Outline

Before opening that draft document, it's a good idea to sit down and sketch out a brief outline of how the paper was supposed to go. Give each section not only a title, but a one-sentence summary. This summary should include the word ***"because"*** –or at least a structure that *implies* a "because."

> Example: Homelessness is becoming a serious problem in the greater Miami area ***because*** the 2008 financial crisis wreaked havoc with the housing market.

This kind of statement includes both a **claim** (that this is a problem worth attending to, here and now) and a **reason** (this is *why* this is a problem, here and now).

STEP THREE: Check the New Outline

Now we can take a look over this outline and make sure it makes sense. Find areas where the reason (the part after the "because") doesn't provide enough support, where the claim is too broad, or where the argument has gotten off-track. These kinds of problems can take too many forms to list here, but be sure to look for the following

Make sure each claim is clear and narrow, and has sufficient support: Each of our paragraphs should contribute a unique claim to our overall argument. Each paragraph should also support that claim with information from our own experience, from scholarly sources, or from data that we have collected. That means we'll need to make sure each claim is narrow enough, and has the appropriate support.

> Broad Claim, with Insufficient Support: Substance abuse is a serious problem **because** it impedes performance in school or at work.

> Narrower Claim, with Better Support: Substance abuse is a serious problem in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex **because** it impedes students' performance in XYZ (naming specific schools in this area).

This comparison should sound familiar to those who have tried the prewriting exercise, **Apply the Why**. It's designed to help us produce narrow claims with clear support. If we've done it well, we should have no problem preparing a quick new outline.

Make sure the argument deals with the correct situation, and addresses the correct audience: In the drafting process, it's easy to lose sight of our primary purpose as we work through each part of our argument and try to incorporate all our sources. Now is the time to look at this new, rough outline, and see whether it fulfills all the requirements of our writing situation. There are too many such situations to list potential problems here, but it might be worth reviewing the common writing situations in social work, in this guide's **Why Write?** section, and the purposes and expectations for writing assignments in social work, in this guide's **What Can I Expect?** section. For more information about the academic writing situation in general, see the Purdue O.W.L.'s section on The Rhetorical Situation.

STEP FOUR: Re-read and Revise, with Outline

Now we're ready to re-read the paper. With the outline in hand, we'll be prepared to match the statements we make in the paper with the brief summaries we made in the outline, to see whether the paper actually does what we think it does. We should be setting out to make **big changes** to the **argument**, not fix little sentence-level errors. These changes should include one or more of the following:

Rework the argument according to the new outline: In re-outlining, we may have already discovered that the sequence of sections doesn't quite work, or that our claims are too broad. If this is the case, we'll need to go into the re-reading process already prepared to cut over-large paragraphs, add new paragraphs, beef up supporting information, or add new sections.

Make sure the argument as stated matches the argument in the outline: It may be that we have not discovered serious gaps in the outline, and if that's the case, then we'll need to compare what we said in the outline with what the paper actually does. On this "second look" at our draft, we should be prepared to discover that we didn't finish thoughts, that we forgot to include supporting information, or that our work does not quite express the ideas we meant it to express. Now is the time to make those changes, deleting or re-writing whole paragraphs if they do not serve the argument. Again, there are many potential problems here, so this guide will not attempt to detail them all. However, here are some common problems that a revision can fix:

- *Key paragraphs lack sufficient or appropriate support:* We will need to be able to tell which are the most vital claims our argument makes, so that we make sure they receive the support they need. As a rule of thumb, it's best not to rely on personal experience alone, on only one source, or on non-peer-reviewed sources, to support important elements of an argument.
  - For more information on identifying the vital claims in our arguments, see the Purdue O.W.L.'s section on Logic in Argumentative Writing.
- *Paragraphs don't stick to one idea:* Revision gives us the perfect opportunity to make sure we "package" our ideas efficiently. When writing a first draft, it's easy to get side-tracked and develop too many ideas at once. Each paragraph should sustain and develop *one* main idea, and we should start a new paragraph when we find we're shifting gears.
  - For more information on how to construct effective paragraphs, see the Purdue O.W.L.'s section on Paragraphs and Paragraphing.
- *Important ideas are too broad to be supported:* It's usually easy to catch this problem in the "re-outlining" steps, but we should keep an eye out for claims that are too broad. Each time we re-read one of our major claims, we should keep in mind the interrogative pronouns, and ask ourselves *who (or for whom), where, when, how,* and *why*. If the answer is "for everybody," or "everywhere," or "since the beginning of time," then the claim is probably too broad.
  - For more information on creating effective claims, see the Purdue O.W.L.'s section on Paragraphs and Paragraphing.

Why Proofread?

This guide gives "revising" and "proofreading," separate sections, because really they're two different processes. It's easy to confuse the two, especially when a deadline looms, and we find we want to look over a paper as fast as possible before turning it in. Although revising is often a more time-consuming process, proofreading deserves its own separate time and place. As always, this guide advises us to **start early**, in order to leave enough time near the *end* of the process.

The Details Matter

Whereas revisions address large-scale structural issues and involves making changes to the argument, proofreading addresses the correct use of language and format, including grammar, style, and APA documentation.

These issues are not simply trivial matters; they have a profound effect on how others perceive our writing, and in today's technologically-mediated world, they also have a profound effect on how others perceive *us*, particularly if they rarely see us in person.

- **How you say what you say…** *is* **what you say.** When we need to communicate important information, seemingly minor errors can change the message, creating confusion.
- **How you say what you say… is how you** *appear*. Errors in spelling and grammar subtly bias the reader *against* the writer's argument. Presenting a paper with spelling errors (e.g. in using their/there/they're, or its/it's) is like attending a business meeting in sandals—it makes readers take us less seriously!
- **How you** *cite* **what you say… is how you present yourself as an expert.** Errors in documentation not only place us at risk of plagiarism; they also make it more difficult for others to understand where we got our information, and to develop further research. They can also decrease our reader's sense that we know what we're talking about, eroding our *ethos*.

We can proofread effectively in many different ways, so the following instructions are just intended to get us started.

F.A.Q: Can I automate this? Many students have asked whether there is an automatic, free, online system to check papers for errors. Let's address this quickly and succinctly: **No.** Grammar, spelling, and style are too complex for today's technology to handle as yet— particularly the technology available for free on the Internet. I have personally tested 16 of the

most popular free online grammar/spell-checkers, and all failed so miserably that it was embarrassing. They simply do not catch 90% or more of egregious errors.

Instead of turning to technology, this guide recommends using your own brain and eyes, in three easy steps:

STEP ONE: Wait

Proofreading effectively means seeing the document clearly, and that means, just as in revising, it's best to wait a day or two after we've finished our *final draft*. When I go back over a document I've just finished writing, I tend to see **what I meant to say**, instead of **what I actually wrote down**, and I've met many who share the same experience. Even egregious spelling, grammatical, or documentation errors just won't register if we just finished writing.

STEP TWO: Alienate

When we do sit down to proofread, it helps to make the document *look different*, giving us further distance from our original intent in writing. Like most students, I write on a computer, and that means when I turn to proofreading, I often want to print out my document. Everything looks different on paper! It might also be useful to change the font, or the background color.

If possible, it's also useful to have someone else read my text back to me—I catch all kinds of errors when I hear them in someone else's voice, or when I hear someone else stumble over a strange construction.

Finally, perhaps the easiest method for alienation is to partner up with someone else whose grammatical and stylistic skills I trust. I'll read her paper while she reads mine, and we both benefit!

STEP THREE: Corrections

So we're beginning to read—how do we know when we've made mistakes? Some mistakes will be glaringly obvious on a second read-through, but others tend to be a bit sneaky. There are many possible areas to cover, so this guide will only touch upon a few general ideas, and then refer to other resources.

Occam's Stylistic Razor: Once again, this guide borrows from the common logical precept of "Occam's Razor." Occam 's razor suggests that the simplest explanation is the best, and so, as we proofread, it will be useful to keep in mind that the *simplest sentence* is often the best. We may be tempted to "complicate" our writing, so that it "sounds academic," but unless our *idea* is every bit as complicated as our sentence, we do better to simplify.

Correction Areas: It's often easier to tell *that* there's a problem than to see how to fix it, so this guide provides a brief reference manual to common problems. Most sections include links to further resources, if we need more information.

- Punctuation
- Spelling
- Incomplete or Incoherent Sentences
- Academicitis

Punctuation

- Written language has inherited most of its features from spoken language, so even though we mostly read silently, it still activates important speech-processing parts of our brains. Punctuation tells us how to *breathe*. It shapes the words, instructing us when to pause, when to stop, and how to get ready for what's coming next. When it's inaccurate or missing, a reader may effectively "stumble" or "run out of breath"—that is, a reader may get confused about how to understand what we've said. Reading aloud and attending carefully to how punctuation shapes our breath can help us identify areas where it might not be working correctly. The following bullet-points suggest additional resources on punctuation, on the Purdue O.W.L. website.
  - *The Comma*. The comma tells us when to take a breath, and also signals the end of a phrase, or an item in a list. The lowly comma *is not strong enough* to join clauses that might otherwise work as complete sentences on their own. For even more information, see this brief presentation.
  - *The Semicolon*. The semicolon tells us when to breathe *and* connect to another clause by way of a conjunction. That is, it *replaces* "and" or "but." Semicolons *can* join clauses that would otherwise work as separate complete sentences.
  - *The Period*. The period segments our writing into distinct thoughts, giving us a chance to breathe between sentences—but it's important to remember that those thoughts can be quite complicated. The link above provides more information about how to manage complexity within individual sentences.
  - *The Paragraph Break*. Although we don't often think of the paragraph break as "punctuation," it really does signal a longer pause, a chance to *catch our breath* before moving on to a new idea.
  - *Quotation Marks*. These help us change "register" within a paragraph—notice how the word "register" feels different in these sentences? Quotation marks make the enclosed words feel different from their surroundings, either to indicate that they are a special term or phrase, or to indicate that they came from another source.

Spelling

- Standardized spelling helps readers remain confident that they are interpreting our work correctly—homophones like they're/their/there can damage or destroy our readers' confidence. We shouldn't assume that our word processor's spell-check program is going to catch everything, since many words might "look" or "sound" right, but may not be spelled correctly for the context. In addition to the specific section below, I recommend the Purdue O.W.L.'s section on proofreading for errors.
  - *The Apostrophe*. Technically a matter of punctuation, the apostrophe actually works more like another "letter," letting us know what kind of word we're dealing with. Apostrophes should mainly be used to indicate possessives and contractions (the latter of which are sometimes outlawed for formal writing).

Incomplete or Incoherent Sentences

- Ordinarily, sentences have a subject (an actor, a "do-er"), and a verb (the action, what's being done); often they have an object (what's being "done-to"). If a sentence lacks one of these main elements, or if it has too many of them without organizing them correctly, then it may become grammatically incorrect, or at the very least difficult to read. Here are some common problems:
  - *Fragments*. These sentences lack either a subject or a verb.
  - *Run-ons*. These sentences have too many Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) sequences, without clearly subordinating some of them to one main Subject-Verb sequence. For more information on subordination, see the Purdue O.W.L.'s subordination page.
  - *Comma Splices*. The lowly comma is not enough to connect two complete sentences.
  - *Agreement*. Especially in complex writing, it's easy to lose track of the relationship between subject and verb, but these should agree in number, and all verbs should use tense appropriately. For more information on tense, see this guide's section **How Do I Start? – Part 2**.

Common Academicitis

- Academic writing, in particular, lends itself to a few common but problematic grammatical constructions. Strong, clear writing assigns the "subject" role to persons, groups of people, or organizations, and uses clear, specific verbs to designate action. Academic writing, all too often, puts abstract concepts in the "subject" role, and assigns them vague actions— usually little more than variants on "to be." Such constructions might not make trouble if they only appear once or twice in a large writing project, but they tend to come in flocks, and that's a problem. Overall, we should watch out for the verb "to be" in all its forms, and see if we can rebuild sentences that use it.
    - *There Is / There are:* If too many sentences start with "there is" or "there are," the sentences themselves will be bulky, and the structure will get repetitive.
        - Example: **There are** many ethical issues that a social worker must consider. (The sentence's primary subject is the vague pronoun place-holder "there," and the primary verb is "are," a weak verb.)
        - Example Corrected: **Social workers must consider** many ethical issues, as codified in the NASW Code of Ethics. (The sentence's primary subject is "social workers," a clear, specific category of real people, and the primary verb is "must consider," a relatively clear and specific verb.)
    - *Another… is…:* Another common problem for academic writing is the one that this sentence demonstrates: starting a sentence with "another problem…" or "another way…". This sentence structure quickly gets repetitive, and it detracts from our argument by transforming it into more of a *list*. Perhaps even more importantly, though, it's grammatically complicated, and in a way that will create contorted sentences, not to mention errors.
        - Example: Another common **problem** for academic writing **is** the "another… is…" construction. (The sentence's subject is "problem," a vague, abstract concept, and the verb is "is," a weak verb.)
        - Example Corrected: **The "another… is…" construction can** also **cause trouble** in academic writing. (Here, the sentence's subject is the phrase "the 'another… is…' construction," a clear and specific concept, and the verb phrase is "can cause trouble," which is strong and specific.)
    - *Nominalizations:* Like their name, nominalizations transform a verb (to nominalize) into a noun, by adding a suffix like "-tion." Nominalizations tempt us because they compact an action into a one-word kernel, but used together, they create opacity, as well as proliferating "of the" clauses. For a humorous discussion of nominalizations and how they impede clear writing, see Helen Sword's column on "Zombie Nouns."
        - Example: The **separation** between producers and their means of production, the commodification of labor, and the private **ownership** of means of

production on the basis of the control of capital (commodified surplus), **determined** the basic principle of appropriation and distribution of surplus (citation withheld). (The sentence's subjects are "separation" and "ownership," both abstract nominalizations, and huge bundles of prepositional phrases crowd the space between them and their verb, "determined.")

- Example Corrected: **Those in power appropriate** and **control** surplus by separating producers from their means of production, turning labor into a commodity, and only allowing those with great capital to own the means of production. (The sentence's main subject is "those in power," a specific group of people, and it appears right next to the main verbs, "appropriate" and "control." This construction sets up a clear actor and action, a relationship that helps the reader make sense of what follows. The nominalization "production" remains—nominalizations are handy sometimes, but it's best to get rid of the other 7 nominalized verbs in the above example!)

o *Passive Voice:* Because they remove a sentence's subject and create a "to be" verb, passive voice constructions are weaker, and make reading more difficult. That means they should be avoided, except where required, and even then, there are correct and incorrect usages. For further information, see the Purdue OWL page on [Passive Voice](#).

- *Passive Voice Used Incorrectly:* "That means they should be avoided." Yes, this guide itself is not immune. For some examples that demonstrate how to change passive to active voice, see the Purdue OWL page [here](#).
- *Passive Voice Used Correctly—to describe data-collection activity:* "Fourteen subjects were interviewed." For more examples of useful passive-voice moments, see the Purdue OWL page on [Using Passive Voice](#).

[Back to Top](#)

<u>Conclusion: Where Do I Go From Here?</u>

This guide has attempted to help us hone our writing process by offering best practices, examples, and exercises for each step, but we should remember that the project of "learning to write" ***never ends***. Each of us will continue to learn for exactly as long as we continue to write and think critically. This ongoing process can sometimes be painful, but more often it will offer us new ways to re-evaluate our work *earlier* in each project.

Recognize Patterns

As we receive feedback, we should learn to recognize when others' reactions appear to highlight patterns. These patterns can help us at any stage in the process.

> *Example – Outlining:* I myself tend to put important claims near the end of my critical writing. At heart I suppose I am a storyteller, so I like to leave the "climax" for late in my work—but this narrative habit makes an *argument* more difficult to follow, particularly within the U.S. American academic context. Over time, upon feedback from many others, I recognized this pattern, so now, even as I develop my outlines, I tend to ask myself: Does this belong at the end… or at the beginning.

> *Example – Proofreading:* Early in my writing career, I had a tendency to use nominalizations. A pattern of feedback—which didn't always identify nominalizations themselves—gradually taught me to recognize when my writing was becoming needlessly abstract and stilted. I learned to eliminate nominalizations *before* I learned the name for them, by looking for those stilted sentences in my proofreading process.

Keep Up a Dialogue

Writing can often feel like an isolated and isolating practice, something we do alone in front of a computer. We may need a patch of silence in order to get words on the page, but we should also actively cultivate collegial relationships with our fellow students. "Revising buddies" can help us develop best practices *much* more effectively than our instructors' comments on our papers (which often arrive too late to help us improve any one specific project).

Every paper develops an argument, and every paper *also* participates in a conversation. It's easy to forget that second part, but collegial relationships can help.

Further Resources

This guide has focused on one primary, specific writing situation: writing as a student within

college-level social work courses. But we will face many more writing contexts throughout our professional lives, and each will bring new challenges, which will mean we'll need to fine-tune our writing process over and over again. Fortunately, a variety of useful resources have already been created to help us move forward.

Outside Resources:

- *Writing Skills for Social Workers:* This volume focuses specifically on the writing situations we will face as practicing social workers. It is available at the UT Arlington library.
  - Reference Citation: Healy, K., & Mulholland, J. (2012). *Writing skills for social workers*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- *Writing with Style: APA Style for Social Work:* This volume provides APA style advice specifically tailored for social workers.
  - Reference Citation: Szuchman, L.T., & Thomlison, B. (2004). *Writing with style: APA style for social work*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole-Thompson.
- *Proposal Writing:* This volume focuses specifically on the writing situation we face when we need to prepare a grant or research proposal.
  - Reference Citation: Coley, S.M., & Scheinberg, C.A. (1990). *Proposal writing*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- *Communicating in the Health and Social Sciences:* This guide provides a broader context for the writing we do in social work.
  - Reference Citation: Higgs, J. (2005). *Communicating in the health and social sciences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- *The Purdue Online Writing Lab:* As suggested throughout this guide, the Purdue O.W.L. should remain a useful resource throughout our careers.
  - Reference Citation: The Purdue University Writing Lab. *Purdue online writing lab*. (2012). Retrieved from http://owl.english.purdue.edu.
- *Guidelines for Social Work Literature Reviews:* This is actually a resource available on the Purdue O.W.L., specifically focused on writing literature reviews.
  - Reference Citation: Driscoll, D.L. (2010). Social work literature review guidelines. Retrieved from http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/666/01/

UT Arlington Resources:

- *The School of Social Work Writing Resources Office:* Readers of this guide are probably already familiar with the Writing Resources office. Our Writing Resource Coordinator is available to work with you, one-on-one, to develop useful skills for every stage in the

writing process.

- *The UT Arlington University Writing Center:* The University Writing Center can provide assistance with developing arguments, using APA style, and developing proofreading strategies. Online appointments are also an option.
- *The UT Arlington Library Social Work Subject Guide:* Curated by Social Sciences Librarian Brooke Troutman, the Subject Guide suggests useful databases to search, as well as a variety of other library resources.

Return to the Previous Section,
Why Proofread?

A Writing Guide for Social Work

Created in 2011-12 by Christopher D. Kilgore for the School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Arlington