Professional Writing for Social Work Practice
Daniel Weisman, MSW, PhD, is professor emeritus of social work, Rhode Island College, and former chair, Bachelor of Social Work Department. He directed Rhode Island College’s Applied Research and Training Project, and evaluated programs for several Rhode Island state departments, as well as private nonprofit agencies in numerous states. He was a certified site visitor for the Council on Social Work Education. He has coauthored four other books, including *Professional Writing for the Criminal Justice System* (Springer Publishing Company, 2017) and *Professional Writing for Social Work Practice* (Springer Publishing Company, 2013); written chapters in several anthologies; and published articles in social work and labor studies journals.

Professional Writing for Social Work Practice

Second Edition

Daniel Weisman, MSW, PhD, and Joseph Zornado, PhD
To Vivian, Lori, Meredith, Debbie, Emily, Clara, and Jack, and to our students who inspired this book.
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Preface

Goal of the Book

As in the first edition, this revision introduces writing as an essential component of professional practice, and it presents students with examples of the challenges that arise every day in social work practice. Similar to what was done in the first edition, we used an approach that corresponds with the way most of us learn: inductively, from the specific to the general, and through practice, feedback, and more practice. We present the writing process as moving from early “low stakes” stages to the “high stakes” final product. Our goal is to provide the social work student with the tools to move through these stages quickly and efficiently, in the context of practice situations, producing end results that will meet the requirements of professional practice.

New to This Edition

Why do we need a second edition of this book? Since the book’s first publication in 2013, we have been collecting feedback from our students as well as colleagues around the country who used the first edition. We also used the first edition at our school in three ways: adopting it for a specific MSW writing course; using it to support writing modules in BSW foundation courses; and relying on it as a resource for providing writing tutoring for students in both programs.

Based on our experiences and the feedback we received, we made several additions and improvements. First, the addition of five new chapters:

- Critical thinking—what it means, how it is essential for practice, how to develop the skills, and how to apply those skills to professional communication
- Cultural competency—similarly, what it means, how it is essential, how to work on the skill, and how to apply it to professional communication
- Writing as a process—how to take comprehensive field notes; how to convert field notes to a first draft; how to revise the first draft in light of professional writing criteria of critical thinking, cultural competency, comprehensiveness, objectivity, and organization; and how to produce the final draft, free of writing errors
- Writing with mind and body—practicing and integrating critical thinking into all aspects of professional practice
- Fundamentals of writing—a chapter that introduces, highlights, and summarizes our Glossary of Writing and Writing Errors, an explanation of the basic components of professionally crafted sentences, paragraphs, and full documents
Second, additional improvements to the first edition:

- We used the two themes of critical thinking and cultural competency throughout the book to illustrate and reinforce how both are central to practice and communications about practice.
- We used the four-step process of taking field notes, writing drafts, revising drafts, and then correcting structural writing errors in every chapter throughout the book in case examples from actual practice reports.
- Every chapter includes in-class individual and interactive exercises and suggested assignments.
- We included a new appendix containing case studies for students to practice their writing. Again, these examples came from actual practice situations.

Contents of the Second Edition

- New chapters on critical thinking, cultural competency, the four-step writing process, integrating mind and body, and foundations of writing
- Revised chapters applying the four-step incremental process and two themes of critical thinking and cultural competency to writing in the context of foundation curriculum of social work education: Human Behavior in the Social Environment, Practice, Social Policy, Research, and Field (agency-based writing)
- A chapter for students to assess their writing: a case study report with writing errors linked to our Glossary, which explains the reason for each correction
- A Glossary of writing for professional practice
- Resources for writing grant proposals, advocacy pieces (e.g., letters to editors), reports of client satisfaction surveys, and case notes
- Appendices of additional resources
  - Extra cases for students to practice with
  - Guides for resumes and cover letters (job searching)
  - Glossary of Writing and Writing Errors

Instructors’ Resources

We designed the first edition to be adopted across the foundation curriculum, meaning BSW and first-year MSW foundation courses. We subsequently found that some programs preferred to use it to support designated writing-for-practice (or writing-intensive) courses. Thus, for the second edition we developed resources so that instructors and programs can use it either way, in addition to an as-needed writing resource. The Instructors’ Guide, available on request from Springer Publishing Company (email: textbook@springerpub.com), includes:

- A model syllabus for using this book in a writing course
- Suggestions for using the book in writing modules across the foundation curriculum
- Instructional tools, assignments, and individual and interactive activities to engage students with their thinking and writing
- PowerPoints to accompany the book, for use in classes
Additional “Lessons Learned” About Writing for Practice

Our former students often contact us to share their new experiences as practitioners. Most of these alums talk about the rewards of practicing in professional settings, along with the enormity of the challenges they faced as new social workers. For the most part, these newly minted social workers love their jobs and feel well prepared to move into their careers.

With very few exceptions, our grads thank us for paying attention to their writing when they were in our classes, acknowledging that they sometimes disregarded our corrections on their writing assignments, and now wish they had given more thought to their writing. When they became employed, their agencies required documentation that would serve specific purposes: narrate completely but briefly their work with clients; inform supervisors and funders about client progress; describe episodes; help future workers pick up cases; explain to court officials the status of cases; advocate on behalf of clients, agencies, and communities; and explain to other agencies the reasons for referrals. In all settings, these reports need to be as comprehensive, brief, and precise as possible, well organized, and free of basic writing errors.

Writing Is a Process

As we undertook the challenge of trying to prepare students for the demands of writing for practice, we found that correcting papers was important but inadequate on its own. In our writing classes, we discovered that professional communication is a process rather than an overlay or toolkit. Writing well with a process you can rely on will help you accomplish your responsibilities with a high level of quality and professionalism. Without a writing process, the task may seem overwhelming: gather and sort through the necessary information, but then how do you determine what is necessary and what is not? Then you have to write it so that it makes sense, and convey it in appropriate language, and get it on paper (or computer screen) in (gulp) error-free writing. If you break this down into separate tasks and practice the skills required, you can move through writing tasks with confidence. Perhaps the most important state of the writing process occurs when the writer must move between a jumble of notes to a logical, organized rough draft—this is often more challenging than the other stages combined, including grammar and spelling.

For this book, we developed a process that moves from collecting and then organizing essential information the worker must include, in note form, to a draft narrative in sentence and paragraph form, to a refined draft that completely and briefly reports the information, to a final draft that the writer has reviewed for basic writing errors (syntax, sentence structure, punctuation, grammar, and organization, using our Glossary as a resource). The book applies this process in every chapter, using examples and exercises.

Competent Professional Writing Is Required for Ethical Practice

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics:

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to
the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession’s focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living. (Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers. Copyrighted material reprinted with permission from the National Association of Social Workers, Inc.)

Consider the four components of our primary mission:

- Enhance human well-being
- Help meet basic needs
- Empower people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty
- Address environmental forces

None of these purposes can occur without keeping written records of our work and communicating our insights to others. In the narrowest sense, we can help “meet basic needs” temporarily, but the purpose of the profession is to enhance the human condition, which requires written communication among social worker practitioners, between practitioners and clients, and between practitioners and society.

Furthermore, the NASW Code of Ethics delineates social workers’ ethical responsibility to maintain client records (3.04 Client Records):

(a) Social workers should take reasonable steps to ensure that documentation in records is accurate and reflects the services provided.
(b) Social workers should include sufficient and timely documentation in records to facilitate the delivery of services and to ensure continuity of services provided to clients in the future.
(c) Social workers’ documentation should protect clients’ privacy to the extent that is possible and appropriate and should include only information that is directly relevant to the delivery of services.
(d) Social workers should store records following the termination of services to ensure reasonable future access. Records should be maintained for the number of years required by state statutes or relevant contracts. (Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers. Copyrighted material reprinted with permission from the National Association of Social Workers, Inc.)

Maintaining client records is a component of one ethical standard (#3). There are five additional standards. A look at the full list of six ethical standards comprising the Code of Ethics confirms the importance of competent written communication:

1. Responsibilities to clients
2. Responsibilities to colleagues
3. Responsibilities in practice settings
4. Responsibilities as professionals
5. Responsibilities to the profession
6. Responsibilities to the broader society

All of these basic responsibilities comprise our identity as a social work professional, and none of them can be performed without adequate written communication skills.
In recent years, documentation as a component of “risk management” has garnered considerable attention. Risk management means protecting clients, agencies, and social workers with regard to potential and actual cases of complaints or litigation. This places a burden on social workers to document our work accurately, competently, and appropriately.

Employers Need Competent Documentation

A training program for new child welfare workers in several states begins with the following statement:

Excellent writing skills are as important to serving children and families as a fleet of county vehicles or good foster homes. Child welfare professionals must be able to express their thoughts in descriptive, concise, and accurate terms. The keys to comprehensive and descriptive writing are good grammar, appropriate punctuation, and correct spelling. Finally, the child welfare professional must know how to construct efficient sentences and cohesive paragraphs. (Child Welfare Institute, Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families)

Much of social work practice must be documented and reported to organizations that fund our efforts, as well as organizations responsible for accreditation. A considerable amount of social work intervention is reimbursement funded, meaning agencies and practitioners are paid by insurance companies and health plans, including Medicaid and/or Medicare, for services provided. Sometimes our work is contract- or grant-funded, requiring periodic reports of activities and results to the funder, and sometimes there are applications requesting refunding. Agencies that provide health, mental health, residential, and/or child-care services may be subject to periodic accreditation reviews, requiring so-called “self-studies” that comprise narratives of the work and the outcomes, as well as reviews of client files. In all of these circumstances, written documentation of our work must be complete and well-written.

Final Thoughts

For most of our students, writing has been both challenging and empowering. Challenges emanate from the nature of the profession’s work, often high-stakes and pressured. As one of our colleagues once stated, “If it isn’t well documented, it didn’t happen.” This book begins with the understanding that we must be able to report completely, accurately, briefly, and in competent and well-organized prose. For this to occur, our thinking must be well disciplined, hence our attention to critical thinking, cultural competency, and incremental steps.

Empowerment comes from the results we see when our work is both effective and well documented. Our students and graduates consistently express their satisfaction when they see results of their work. As we say repeatedly in this book, writing is an integral component of practice. With that understanding, we wish you well as you move toward becoming a practitioner.
Acknowledgments

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To the Reader

Perhaps one of the most valuable things about this book is that it recognizes that learning to write for professional practice means learning how to write in different contexts, for different circumstances, and with different purposes and audiences in mind. We begin with the premise that effective writing requires critical thinking, engagement in cultural competency, and a commitment to learning. According to most current research, we learn how to write even as we learn about a particular discipline. Each discipline has its own culture, its own ways of communicating, and so, as we learn the language of our discipline, we learn to write in that discipline. What we have to say as social workers, and how we have to say it if we are to say it effectively, go hand in hand.

Writing for social work practice is a lot like writing in any discipline or profession—writing is a form of communication that depends on readers as much as writers. When we write we join in on a conversation—sometimes it is informal and casual, and other times it is quite formal and serious. These conversations were going on long before we arrived on the scene, and will continue long after we leave. Meanwhile, there are rules of communication at work determined by long practice, and many of these conventions are widely shared, while others are limited to the specific discipline of our field. As we join the conversation, it is important to learn and respect the communication conventions of our chosen discipline in both content and form.

This book invites you to pay attention to how others have been writing in the field of social work for many years. This book invites you to read and learn by practicing, and by becoming aware of the content and form of the writing “conversation” going on all around you in the social work world.

This book helps you to understand both the “what” and the “how” of professional writing for social work practice. And practice you must. People learn to write not by being told about writing, but by digging in and working with writing, and by writing their own words day in and day out. Only through practice can writers improve, grow more confident, and become fluent in the communication conventions of their discipline. Perhaps more than anything else, effective writers feel a profound stake in their work. This means that they believe what they have to say matters; they write with a clear purpose in mind, and how they present their work matters just as much.

Getting the formatting, as well as the grammar, spelling, and punctuation, right also matters. Professional writing requires that you figure out what you need to say and be sure you understand why it matters. Then, make sure it follows standard conventions of
written English. Craft your ideas so they look credible, neat, and clear. That way you will have a much better chance of being taken seriously by your reader, and a much better chance of accomplishing what you set out to do with your writing.

We believe this book is special because it was written by a professor of social work and a professor of English. Each knew something of the other’s discipline when we began. As we put this book together, we found ourselves increasingly informed by the other’s field. The product is a fusion of writing and practice, for practice. We kept the material focused on writing for practice.

We also were guided by the current knowledge about how adults learn: The book moves from specific to general, while remaining interest centered from beginning to end. The cases in each of the chapters come from actual social work practice and are based on actual documents produced by social workers. The cases cover a range of practice situations and populations. Each case offers a learning experience for excellent writing. Each case offers an interactive experience for the reader. We hope you will enjoy this experience of learning by doing in the context of real practice.

Best wishes,

Daniel Weisman and Joseph Zornado
Share

Professional Writing for Social Work Practice, Second Edition
Critical Thinking in Social Work Practice

What you will learn in this chapter:
- The difference between cognition and metacognition
- The definition of critical thinking and why it is important to social work
- The key habits of mind practiced by critical thinkers
- The relationship between critical thinking and effective professional writing for social work
- How to integrate critical thinking into practice and professional communication

Why Critical Thinking in Social Work?

What it means to write well depends specifically on the writing task at hand. Because there are many different types of writing practiced by the social work professional, your first task as a writer is to discover and understand the purpose of your writing. What form should it take? Who will be reading the writing you produce? When must it be ready for review? Writing becomes vastly more difficult if the writing assignment is unclear, or if the writer is uncertain about the purpose of the task. The first lesson we can take away from this simple beginning is that in order to succeed as a writer, we must first take responsibility for the writing task in a detailed and mindful way. To write effectively as a social work professional (or, for that matter, any kind of writing for the professional environment) takes discipline and practice. With discipline and practice (and some constructive feedback along the way), skills and confidence grow. Fortunately, the skills required to write well are the very same skills any professional needs to work effectively both as an individual and as a member of a team.

Getting Started

Effective writing requires some basic knowledge about the kind of writing your job requires, be it as simple as a drop-down menu or a form with boxes to check off with only a small area for comments, to a longer and more detailed incident report, or some other more involved writing project that brings together information from multiple sources.
Whatever the nature of the writing, effective writers understand formatting requirements and work to fulfill them. Consider the fact that in many instances readers may only know a writer’s work by what is on the page. For this reason, among others, careful attention to formatting issues such as grammar, spelling, and syntax helps us to establish a writer’s credibility in the mind of the reader. If a document is sloppy, incomplete, and poorly formatted, it is less likely that a reader will take the content of the writing seriously. The writer’s credibility will be in question, and this can have serious consequences in human service settings for all those involved.

Knowing how to check off boxes and format a brief statement in an assigned space is an important opportunity to practice careful attention to detail, but it is only the beginning. During your career, there will be regular opportunities for professional writing of various lengths and purposes. It is the aim of this textbook to introduce you to a number of the most common types of writing as well as to help you practice fundamental skills that all effective writing shares.

As you begin, consider the fact that all of your professional writing could be made public if conditions warrant. This means that even the smallest note, email, Tweet, or online comment might become an important piece of information in a later review. Every digital scrap of information can be retrieved and may someday be read publicly. Even handwritten notes can be accessed in the future, unless they are destroyed rather than filed. We are not arguing against documentation. Rather, we are emphasizing the importance of purposeful and disciplined professional writing.

To avoid embarrassing and potentially damaging mistakes, practice self-discipline and mindfulness. If possible, avoid rushing your work. Give yourself an opportunity to reread and potentially revise whatever you write and send out into the world. Always write with a sense of professional responsibility and purpose even when completing the most seemingly innocuous tasks. Strive for clarity across every writing platform.

For more involved writing tasks, such as progress notes, court letters, incident reports, and references, it takes an effective thinker to produce effective, well-informed, and well-reasoned writing. What is it then to be an effective thinker? Effective thinking is “critical thinking.”

Critical thinking is, broadly speaking, the ability to interpret, analyze, and evaluate ideas, information, and arguments. Critical thinking represents a number of habits of mind. The habits of mind of effective critical thinkers can be learned, improved upon, and developed with practice and discipline. According to experts, critical thinking is often seen as a basic competency, very much like reading and writing.

Critical Thinking Is Metacognition

Critical thinking takes a modicum of courage, and may put you at odds with dysfunctional thinkers. Critical thinking refers to a state of mind as well as a mental practice in which an individual makes time for moments of critical reflection. Reflection is the practice of the mind’s ability to think about its own thoughts. In other words, reflection is a form of metacognition. Metacognition refers to the mind’s ability to stand back and
examine the process of cognition, and as a result come to a deeper understanding of how and why we believe and act the way we do. Metacognition is self-reflection: deliberate and disciplined critical assessment of one’s own thinking, questioning why we think as we do.

The practice of metacognition (as opposed to ordinary, day-to-day on-the-job cognition) is essentially the process of thinking about thinking. Cognition is a word that signifies the individual’s working mind, that is, the thinking part of the mind that functions throughout the day. Metacognition is the practice of observing one’s own cognitive functioning after the fact so that one might reflect and learn, in order to (a) improve on one’s performance in the future or, (b) avoid making the same egregious mistake again, or (c) to pass on whatever it is we want others to emulate.

Metacognition is a rather peculiar feature of the human mind and in many ways it is the natural enemy of denial. Conscious awareness, on the one hand, allows us to take stock of our thoughts and then hold them up to skeptical inspection in a time of reflection and assessment. Denial, on the other hand, is a defense mechanism of the mind that is often so habitual that it becomes an “unconscious” process by which an individual avoids emotional conflict and anxiety by refusing to acknowledge facts that, if recognized consciously, may become intolerable.

Metacognition, then, is a process governed by a commitment to the truth. Others must help us with this process in order to provide a feedback loop by which we can analyze our thinking in light of the evidence as it is understood by other critical thinkers. In this way, we can foster our own growth and development as professionals and as people, while avoiding solipsistic, delusional thinking.

It takes some courage, and it is difficult to do alone. Metacognition allows us to think about ourselves, our habits, our assumptions, and hold the contents of our thoughts up for scrutiny in the hopes of coming to an objective understanding of why we think the way we do. An undisciplined or fearful mind unused to critical thinking can convince itself of almost anything, or be easily convinced by others. Beware of the hallmarks of this kind of narrow thinking, for it is often based on appeals to intuition, tradition, history, and/or authority that may very well be in conflict with the material facts.

Critical Thinking Exercise

The concept of “culture of poverty” has many adherents, and has been the basis of many of our policies for dealing with the poor. The theory posits that the poor develop their own dysfunctional culture, which perpetuates poverty through generations. Put on your critical thinking hat and think of reasons some people would accept this theory; suggest alternate theories that may explain the incidence of poverty in the same family over time, and disproportionately in some ethnic or racial groups. As a critical thinker, what evidence would you look for to test the culture of poverty theory as well as opposing theories? What would it take for you to accept one explanation over others?

Critical thinking, then, helps us to determine the relationship between our thoughts and our feelings, and the ways in which we act on them. To be engaged in metacognition
means to take responsibility for our professional (and personal) lives in a more complete way than simple obedience to authority. Exposing our thoughts to others—as well as to ourselves—might seem like we are exposing our mistakes, or biases, or questionable beliefs, or patterns of justification and rationalization that we might not want others—let alone ourselves—to know about. Effective metacognition is fundamentally a practice rooted in humility that requires courage and maturity, practice and discipline. Only by questioning our views and beliefs can we grow. (In the next chapter, we expand this discussion to include our prejudices.) By reflecting on who we are and what we believe, we come to know ourselves, and when we know ourselves we come to know others. Critical thinking helps social work professionals develop into conscious agents who serve to motivate others by their example.

Critical Thinking as a Habit of Mind

The habits of mind practiced by critical thinkers take honesty and courage, but the very habits of mind that lead to effective critical thinking also lead to effective writing and a more effective professional life in general. Although critical thinking may be considered a basic competency for educated people, it is also true that the social work professional has a responsibility to reflect on and understand her or his own life before trying to serve others. Critical thinking requires reflection and reflection requires a space not filled by distraction. Finding a quiet space may be difficult given the intrusive nature of technology and the incessant demands for our attention, but find it we must if we are to master critical thinking and become effective writers and professionals.

Reflection is not the same thing as obsessing over one’s thoughts. To reflect means to take a step back, to relax, to come down, to calm down in an effort to take stock of one’s previous thoughts, feelings, and actions as if they belonged to someone else.

Effective reflection requires a commitment of time and space from day to day. Day-to-day activity causes certain thought patterns to arise, as well as longer term habits of mind we learn growing up to kick into gear. Combine these habits with the emotional rigors of one’s professional responsibility and we might find ourselves obsessing over our thoughts with no way out. We become lost in the closed maze of our own thinking. Trapped, we go around and around with little or no positive outcome for all of our worrying.

Metacognition (thinking about thinking), on the other hand, asks us to take a step back from our thoughts as if viewing the action of our minds from above, or from the outer rim of the storm. It starts with a brief moment of breathing, centering, and becoming aware of our core. Breathing helps to drop our awareness from the top of the head to the center or the body. From here, we can begin to understand that our thoughts are deeply entangled with, and are in fact symptoms of, our feelings.

Effective metacognition requires that we address our emotional lives in order to calm our cognitive lives long enough to take stock. Centering can be accomplished in short bursts, perhaps while driving the car in silence, or while exercising, or simply walking. Ideally, the goal is to quiet all distractions and practice centering, breathing, and becoming aware of the tensions, feelings, and thoughts that inform so much of what we think, believe, and do.
Critical Thinking

What: Active listening is the ability to hear and understand another’s ideas and opinions. Without it, communication fails. A social worker must be able to give thoughtful consideration to others, especially when there are differing opinions.

Why: Effective critical thinking leads to problem solving because it requires the ability to approach a problem or an issue from multiple perspectives. Critical thinkers understand that most issues are multifaceted and multidimensional. Critical thinkers are creative thinkers, and creative thinkers solve problems.

How: Ask questions. Seek the truth. When reflecting on your own thinking, begin by articulating what you think you know about the issue at hand. Search for the assumptions that inform the premise of your knowledge. Do the assumptions in your thinking inform a premise that subtly assumes the conclusion you want even before engaging in evidence-based reasoning?

Writing: Words are power. Be sure to find the most appropriate vocabulary you can manage when assembling any kind of professional writing.

Metacognition Exercise

Many social workers enter the profession after having themselves been in need of (and/or received help from) social workers during their lives. Others have experienced need and/or help in their families or among friends. Visualize yourself in that situation, and think of how you might engage metacognition skills when you encounter a client system facing the same challenges you recall from your past experiences. How do you protect yourself and your future clients from your personal reactions as well as basing interventions on what worked or did not work for you?

Critical Thinking and Human Dignity

Social workers may find that the habits of mind that comprise critical thinking are at odds with the work of the professional community’s dictates, rules, regulations, and desire for order and control over all of their members. Some organizations require discipline and obedience. Critical thinking is not necessarily opposed to discipline or obedience, but when critical thinking is absent from professional hierarchies, the end result is often an organization that may seem to prioritize surface-level thinking, memorization, and non-reflection. Indeed, sometimes the hive mind resists the practice of critical thinking by its members; however, whenever control is gained over individual members by institutional rules and regulations that champion unthinking obedience, something of our humanity is lost, and we lose our ability to empathize with those we serve.

Dewey (1910) suggests that critical thinking is a way to a more informed and thoughtful group mind. Dewey famously defines critical thinking as the “active, persistent, and
careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.” In other words, because critical thinking requires an examination of the “grounds” or “premises” or “assumptions” that support our thinking, we have a better chance of recognizing false assumptions, misinformed premises, and “thin ice” where the “solid footing” for our position should have been. Dewey suggests strongly that we can grow our active agency in the world through critical thinking. Critical thinking requires reflection, honesty, humility, and, in the end, leads to the judicious and responsible use of power, and not its abuse.

Other critical thinking experts agree. According to Ennis (2011), “critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do” (p. 12). Critical thinking is involved—whether we recognize it or not—in how we make decisions. It is difficult, if not impossible, to function well if we are rigidly single-minded, unreflective, and dishonest with ourselves. From this frame of mind interpersonal conflict is sure to follow, and in the name of “being right,” everyone else must be wrong. This may be effective for creating enemies, but it is not effective for solving problems.

Critical thinking is to practice a form of mindfulness. To be mindful means to stay alert and aware even to your own thoughts, and from where they arise, and when, and why. However, this is not to say that one must always be in a meditative state! There is a time for reflection and there is a time for action. Nothing takes us out of our own awareness faster than a mind easily distracted when it should be alert and poised to respond.

Practicing mindful, critical awareness prepares you to accomplish effective writing. When reflecting on past events, take notes when possible about whatever it is you are responsible for, especially if you must write about it later. Use your smart phone or other electronic device to dictate notes for review later.

**Mindfulness Exercise**

Imagine you are working with a client whom you dislike for any of several possible reasons; for example, someone who expressed racist or homophobic views. Your work with this person may not involve discrimination or animosity, but you have sharp feelings, maybe even some feelings of guilt, about empowering him or her. What steps might you take to meet your professional and ethical obligations to the client, your employer, yourself, and the profession? How do you manage and channel your reactions to this person? Whom might you involve in this process? What might you keep to yourself? Share with others?

**Think About This . . .**

- Critical thinking leads to ethical thinking. Individual and group integrity remains central to the well-being of any organization because it ensures respect and fair treatment of its members. Social work professions often include integrity management to foster ethical behavior and personal integrity on the job. These include responsibility to oneself as well as to the group, reliability, and being able to follow one’s internal moral compass.
Diversity can mean many things: age, sex, ethnicity, physical or cognitive ability, education, socioeconomic level, and so on. Effective critical thinking prepares you to negotiate and thrive in an increasingly diverse environment. Critical thinking helps you to uncover your own biases and unwarranted beliefs based on fear and ignorance that prevent you from thinking effectively and behaving in a way that preserves the dignity of the people you serve.

How much do you agree or disagree with these statements? What are your reasons and additional thoughts?

On Writing

When the time comes to produce a professional piece of prose, regardless of size or purpose, reflect on the topic or event again and remember every detail, then check your notes and begin to write your first draft. Be sure to allow enough time so that you can produce at least two rough drafts before submitting the final draft to a supervisor.

Remember to consider your audience. Audience is key. Who will read what you write? Do you know what this reader expects to see in terms of form and content? Whenever possible prepare your first draft in a quiet moment. Give yourself a set amount of time to work and do your best to not let anything intrude on your writing time. Get it done. Do not wait. Procrastination leads to anxiety and anxiety leads to rushed and hurried writing that is less effective, less informed, and less professional than writing as close as possible to the event you are reporting.

Your first draft is the place to “get it all down” before you forget relevant details; it should be as complete, clear, and specific as you can possibly make it. Be sure to write in complete sentences and observe the basic rules of grammar, stating clearly and concisely the facts relevant to the topic or event. In order to describe accurately what you wish to report, you have to first see it clearly in your own mind, in accurate sequential order and detail.

Good writers pay mindful attention to their environments. Stay alert and awake to the present moment and your eyes and brain will record the information you will need to think about and write down later.

To be an effective writer then is to be able to know with confidence the purpose of the writing in some detail. Critical thinking is skilled work. It is not true that we are naturally endowed with the ability to think clearly and logically. Critical thinking is a human potential, but it must be developed like any other potential.

Critical thinking might be defined as an approach to ideas from the standpoint of deliberate consideration. Analysis is the ability to break a literary text or argument down into parts and to discover the relationship among the parts, how they function together, and what assumptions are at work, what conclusions are drawn. Look for cause and effect in your logic, and subject the chain of reasoning to skeptical inquiry. Remember that correlation does not prove causation: Two phenomena may occur together, but they may be caused by a third factor, or the correlation may be happenstance. Beware of simply accepting things because someone in authority proclaims them. Albert Einstein once remarked: “Foolish faith in authority is the worst enemy of truth.” Critical thinking requires a skeptical, inquiring mind.
Critical Thinking and Collaboration With Colleagues

- Critical thinking leads to the ability to work with others; to respect another’s opinion; to listen to and acknowledge the feelings, perception, opinions, and ideas of others; to complete tasks that contribute to the larger goal; and to the ability to know when to support group decisions even when members are not in total agreement, and when not to support group decisions that are counter to the highest standards of professional conduct.

- Because the world is ever and rapidly changing, employers are interested in hiring workers with a commitment to continued learning. Critical thinking fosters a commitment to lifelong professional engagement that will prepare individuals to meet the unknown demands of the future, including the ability to anticipate, respond to, and manage change when necessary.

Critical thinking requires persistence: One must consider an issue carefully, and more than once. Pay very close attention to the evidence: Evaluate the evidence put forward in support of a belief or a viewpoint. What are the implications? Learn to follow things through to their logical end point and then consider whether such an end point is rational, desirable, acceptable, and supported by the empirical evidence. Compare the same issue from the point of view of other theorists or writers and understand the nature of relative truth claims versus absolute truth claims. Look for ways to argue and explain why one set of opinions, results, or conclusions is preferable to another, and then argue the opposite.

Critical thinking requires questioning and the active process of metacognition. Critical thinking is essentially a quest for evidence and proof. Critical thinking and a healthy skepticism about what we think we know encourages individuals to question their own assumptions because our perspectives and assumptions are often biased and one-sided, incomplete at best, inadequate and misleading at worst. This is not to say that we can never be certain about anything. Rather, any claims to certainty need to be based on research and evidence; certainty needs to have a foundation on information beyond our own inner thoughts.

It is important to remember that our perceptions are biased and skewed—they are subjective. So is our interpretation of evidence. We should consider alternate interpretations of evidence, not just the first theory that comes to mind. Consequently, we should not reject or accept anything out of hand. Rather, we should ask for evidence in all things. We should be inquisitive; we should be reflective; we should be skeptical.

Interpreting Evidence

- Critical thinkers are evidence-based thinkers. They know how to find accurate and meaningful data and base their decisions on the evidence. Data collection methods, including surveys, interviewing, use of databases, and observation, are activities that require effective reading and writing skills. Archival research and online web sourcing are useful tools as well. Effective writing requires you to develop the ability to manage information and determine relevance and significance.
Why Bother?

What one sees and hears in the field requires critical thinking skills in order to achieve understanding. Although critical thinking is the opposite of denial, it is equally opposed to unreflective thinking. Unreflective thinking is not merely uncritical cognition. Rather, it is the kind of thinking that jumps to conclusions or accepts some evidence, claim, or decision at face value because it confirms what we already believe. Unreflective thinking asks no questions and does not seek the truth because it assumes authority over the truth without investigation. Like denial, unreflective thinking is inherently defensive and self-justifying; it justifies beliefs or positions already held and often justifies conclusions already drawn from evidence unrelated to the matter at hand, and skips reasoning all together.

Critical Thinking Checklist

✓ Just the facts: Wherever and whenever possible, strive for independent confirmation of the facts as you know them. But remember to also consider how you know them. This means to be willing to compare what you know with what others know, and always with an open mind. Only when we are open to points of view and alternative ways of seeing can we hope to find the truth.

✓ Do not fall in love: To find the truth you have to be on guard against getting overly attached to an explanation just because you may have come up with it. Listen to others whenever possible. As you do, use the opportunity to assess both your argument as well as all others.

✓ Because I said so: Arguments from authority based on “how things are done around here” should make the critical thinker deeply skeptical. Such claims to traditional practices promote mistakes and have led to heinous behaviors. Without critical thinking and a healthy dose of skepticism, such mistakes will happen again.

✓ Do the math: If whatever you are investigating or writing about requires you to measure, be accurate with your numbers. It could make all the difference. Quantitative data rely on physical measurements, usually with statistics, whereas qualitative information is based on perceptions, recollection, categorization, and summary. Both methods have strengths and flaws; use critical thinking skills to question all evidences, methods, and research reports.

✓ When making a case and drawing a conclusion from the evidence, be sure every stage of your argument—including the assumptions you make at the outset—work together without contradicting each other.

✓ Critical thinking fails when practitioners are obliged to ignore facts.

Conclusion: Why Critical Thinking for Social Work?

We live in a time and in a culture that is, on the whole, unreflective and often champions oversimplified cognition. Unfortunately, oversimplified cognition can lead to the worst kinds of outcomes especially when we work under stressful conditions; such environments can lead to the intellectual and emotional collusion that informs “group think” based on simple, unreflective cognition. Group think is prone to corruption because
communal collusion often ignores, or worse, supports a culture that is ultimately intellectually lazy. Critical thinking helps to ensure effective, mindful social work practice.

Social workers face three fundamental challenges in professional practice, requiring strong critical thinking skills in response. As Mumm and Kersting (1997) explain, social workers need to be able to “explain their rationale for the assessment and intervention procedures they use.” Consider the example of “the social worker who reports choosing an intervention such as self-disclosure because it ‘seemed right,’ but is unable to otherwise ascribe a reason or intent to this choice” (Mumm & Kersting, 1997). For example, a social worker may employ one theory without awareness of its weaknesses, especially in regard to an ecological view of a client’s problems. In this situation, a social worker may work on intrapsychic issues although work on immediate issues related to the client’s environment would best address the client’s need. Problems arise if you cling “tightly to one practice model, attempting to fit all clients into that mold. This can lead the social worker to view clients as resistant or unmotivated when they do not change as the theory prescribes” (Mumm & Kersting, 1997).

Gambrill (1997) maintains that “successful compared to unsuccessful problem solvers think more about their thinking. They critically review their assumptions and reasoning. They are their own best critics. They ask questions about the accuracy of data. They ask: What evidence supports this claim? Has it been critically tested? With what results? Are there plausible alternative views?” (p. 101, used by permission of Oxford University Press, USA). Later, Gambrill (1997) explains that critical thinking requires:

- Complete examination of all the evidence
- Scientific reasoning; identify and test all assumptions
- Honest reflection about our own thinking
- Willingness to accept evidence-based conclusions, even if they make us uncomfortable
- Testing common wisdom and beliefs
- And is searching for the truth in any given situation based on evidence, not whim, fear, or defensiveness.

References

Jones’s Family Case Study: Writing Self-Assessment

What you will learn in this chapter:

• The process of writing a case report, from field notes to final product
• Self-assessment of writing strengths and areas for improvement

This chapter presents a case study overview that takes you through a model writing process, from information gathering in the form of client notes, to preparing a first, rough draft drawn from those notes, to a final draft that includes a guide to careful editing. This chapter also offers you the opportunity to practice your own writing in terms of preparing a mock report for an agency’s records. By the end, you will understand how a writing process breaks down into stages and you will have practiced the writing and thinking skills required at each stage.

The following example came from the file of a family receiving services from the state child welfare department. A caseworker in the department wrote this report to update the client’s file, and assist in planning next steps. This is a routine social work reporting activity. The information in the report indicates that the family presents several challenges and shows strengths that might be developed with support. The social worker’s task in generating a report from field notes, or notes from a case file as in the case that follows, is to organize the information into a logical order, like a narrative, but a narrative that is filled with specific, factual information based on his or her observations and other information from the client’s file.

Remember that others will likely read this file, including people who hold decision-making power over you, your position, and your agency or department. Consequently, you want your final version to be a successful example of professional writing.

Following are organized field notes, which we have sorted into thematic groups. The writer is the caseworker (CS) for the department of child welfare (DCW).

Jones’s Case: Field Notes

BCI = Bureau of Criminal Investigation
CW = caseworker

(continued)
Notes From Reading Files, Interviewing Workers, and Direct Observations

MO, Alice, 23
FA, Keith, 25
Married two years ago, together a year earlier
Sons, Evan and Eli 2¾ and 3½
Only other family – Alice’s sister, in Y-Town – 7 mi away
Residence: 1 br apt, out-of-state landlord

History—From Client File

BCI-FA DV Hx – not recent
Prev DCW investigation of neglect – neg
DCW file – MO “long history of psychosis and trauma.”

Current Case Opening

A Week Ago

Caller (MH caseworker) – MO non-compliant w/Tx plan, off meds, self-medicating – pot etc.
CW saw FA throwing things and threatening MO w/kids present
DCW SW Home Visit
• Ch unsupervised – hazardous items – knives, glass, HH chemicals
• Food and old dishes out
• Dirty surfaces – incl old food, grease
• Offensive smells
• DCW SW unable to get adequate parental response
DCW – kids unsafe – MO called Maternal aunt – temp placement

Note: Missing articles, “the” and “a,” are deliberate and common omissions in clients’ files. Each human service agency has its own protocols.
This Week

Maternal aunt changed mind – “I just cannot handle two small ch”
DCW wkr tried to work with aunt, but not successful
Placements: Eli – non-rel foster; Evan – county emergency shelter (children)
Parents evicted when landlord saw conditions of apt – now w/ friends
Mom hospitalized briefly for psychotic episode – MH eval + substance eval – now in OP Tx
FA – ref to DV and substance Tx
Kids – ref for child dev eval, Evan at the shelter, Eli at MH agency
Fam referred to another agency for outreach re. family support, MH and substance abuse

Caseworker’s Additional Notes

Fam has strengths/ Re-evaluate in 6 mos/ Suggest referrals – nutrition, job training, MH assessment, employment potential and literacy.

Writing Exercise

Write a one-page (12-point double-space typed or handwritten equivalent) summary of this case, following the guidelines listed in Chapters 1 and 2: organization, completeness, nonjudgmental, characterizations supported by evidence. You should use full sentences and only the abbreviations approved by your agency, in this case those in the box, mentioned earlier. Once you have completed your own Jones case report, read our Rough Draft. How does your first draft compare with ours? How would you improve ours? Yours?

Our four-step writing process is (a) field notes (provided earlier in this chapter); (b) first draft, converting field notes into narrative form; (c) refined second draft, revising the first draft with attention to completeness, objectivity, organization, and basic writing; and (d) final draft, reviewing the report for remaining writing errors. In this exercise, we show you all four steps, and ask you to compare your drafts with ours, including the fourth step: Correct all the writing errors you can identify.

■ First Draft

This is a deeply troubled family. All four members have severe deficits. Mom has mental illness; dad is violent and abuses drugs; children are highly at risk of harm.

Alice is 23. Keith is 25. The boys are 2½ and 3½.

There is no family support – nearest relative is Alice’s sister, 7 miles away in Y-Town. Eventually we got the sister to take the kids while the parents were in Tx. That fell through and the kids are now in non-relative care.

The family’s home was a mess when the case was opened. There was dirt and leftover food all over, plus strong smells. Also, dangerous items such as knives, cleaning chemicals. The parents were unable to accept responsibility for cleaning up the place. After a home visit, the DCW SW decided the children were at risk. Maternal aunt agreed, briefly it turned out, to take the kids while parents underwent Tx for their problems. After a couple of days, the aunt refused to care for the kids, and we had to place them elsewhere.
Meanwhile, the out-of-state landlord evicted the family because of conditions in the house. Currently both parents are in Tx for their MH and substance problems, mom especially because she had an episode after the kids were placed. Both kids are undergoing developmental assessments. We recommend that when the family is reunited, they be connected to a community agency that will conduct outreach to them for their various needs.

**EXERCISE**

Write a 300- to 500-word critical assessment of our first draft, mentioned earlier. Does the report make sense? Is there anything missing? If so, are these judgments paragraphs in the best order? How can it be improved? Also, did you find the writer making any personal judgments about the Jones family? If so, are these judgments warranted or do they indicate an issue with cultural competency? Compare the next draft with this one. Optionally, you may try writing a second draft, based on the insights you gain from thinking critically about the first drafts, yours and ours. Compare your list of improvements and/or revised draft with our next draft. In practice, as a beginning social worker, you would seek feedback from your supervisor, or someone else familiar with your agency’s writing. In the draft that follows we corrected errors of organization, comprehension, and subjectivity.

**Revised Draft**

Here is our second draft (step 3). Compare your revisions with ours.

**Jones’s Case: Family Composition**

This family is constituted of mother, Alice Jones, age 23, father, Keith Jones, age 25, and there two children, Evan, age 2¾ and Eli, age 3½. Although, Mother and father have been married for 2 years but lived together for a year before that. The family reside in a one bedroom house in Xtown that they rent from an out of state landlord. Mother and father described no family support other then mothers sister who lives in Ytown (about seven miles away).

**Background Information**

A BCI report reveals that father has a history of domestic violence. Previous DCW involvement includes allegations of neglect. Reports indicate that mother has “a long history of psychosis and trauma.” The current opening occurred following reports to DCW that mother was not taking her psychiatric medication, not in counseling and “self-medicating with marijuana and other drugs.” The caller also stated that father had been violent throwing things and threatening mother in front of the two children. When DCW worker went out to the home they assessed that the children were unsafe. I feel as though the children could not be safely maintained at home. The living conditions in the home presented with multiple hazards, and parents' demonstrate a lack of understanding and limited ability to alleviate these conditions. DCW worker and mother were able to reach maternal aunt by phone, and she agreed to take the children temporarily.

**Current Situation**

After the children were removed, maternal aunt had 2nd thoughts and asked that DCW place the children elsewhere. Maternal aunt stated that she was sorry but that she “just could not handle
two small children. DCW tried to address maternal aunts concerns, but she maintained that she could not do it. The oldest child, Eli, is currently placed in a non-relative foster home. The youngest child, Evan, is placed in the county children’s emergency shelter. Mother and father were evicted from their rental apartment when the landlord saw the condition of the home. Mother had a brief stay in the hospital following a psychotic episode. The two are currently together; “staying with friends.” Mother has been referred to and received a substance abuse and mental health evaluation. She’s being seen on an outpatient basis for both. Father was referred for domestic violence treatment and substance abuse treatment. The oldest child, Eli, has been referred for a child development evaluation. The youngest child is being assessed through the children’s shelter. The family was also referred to a local agency for outreach services specializing in family support, mental health, and substance abuse as well.

Notes for Follow-Up
What I think is that this family is having more strengths than the record reflects, and should be re-evaluated in 6 months. In addition, this family may benefit from more referrals; nutrition, job training, mental health assessment, develop their employment potential and improve their literacy skills. These resources may be of benefit to them.

EXERCISE
Individually or in groups, review our revised draft and list the improvements we made over the rough draft. What did you find? Look for organization, completeness, objectivity, sensitivity, characterizations.

Debriefing
Here are our improvements over the first draft, based on the themes we discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

- Organization: We imposed and labeled an organization of information: family composition, background, current situation, and follow-up. This is semichronological but, more important, a logical presentation of information that helps the reader understand the family, its strengths, and its challenges.
- Completeness: We provided all the relevant information so that the next worker (or even ourselves) can pick up the case and move forward.
- Objectivity: The first draft contained judgmental language and unsupported assertions about the family members, which we eliminated or corrected in this draft. We backed up any characterizations with explicit empirical evidence that supports our observations.
- Sensitivity: As we wrote this, we thought of how the family members might react to our report. Would they feel valued and respected? If this family is different from you along any demographic criterion, you want to be sure you have considered the differences between your privileges and theirs.

Final Step and Self-Assessment
Correct the basic writing errors in the previous draft. We inserted 42 errors that you want to avoid in social work writing. How many can you find? After explaining the 42 errors, we categorize them by types, so you can assess your strengths and areas for improvement: punctuation, modifiers, homophones, sentence structure, syntax, parallelism, grammar, spelling,
and word usage. If you missed our errors in any category, we suggest that you consult that category of writing in our Glossary of Writing and Writing Errors, in the Appendix section of the book. Then you should practice the writing exercises in any of the chapters that follow, paying specific attention to the areas of writing you identified as your priority to improve.

■ Final Draft: Corrected Draft

The revised draft mentioned earlier included 42 errors that we tagged, corrected, and explained, in the corrected draft that follows.

Each number in the corrected version refers to an explanation that follows.

■ Family Composition

This family is comprised of mother, Alice Jones, age 23, father, Keith Jones, age 25, and their two children, Evan, age 2¾ and Eli, age 3½. Mother and father have been married for two years but lived together for a year before that. The family resides in Xtown, in a one bedroom house that they rent from an out-of-state landlord. Mother and father describe no family support other than mother’s sister, who lives in Ytown (about seven miles away).

■ Background Information

A BCI report reveals that father has a history of domestic violence. Previous DCW involvement includes allegations of neglect. Reports indicate that mother has “a long history of psychosis and trauma.” The current case opening occurred following reports to DCW that mother was not

Explanations for Corrections

1. Incorrect word. “Comprised” is appropriate; “constituted” is not.
2. Homophone: “their” is the possessive; “there” refers to a place.
3. “Although,” does not begin a sentence. The sentence stands without this introductory phrase. With this introductory word—“Although,”—it is an incomplete sentence.
4. Numerals 1 to 10 should be spelled out. (This may vary in some agencies.)
5. Syntax: “resides” is the verb form for a singular noun (family). The family resides.
6. Misplaced modifier. General rule: A word or phrase that adds information to a noun or noun phrase (words containing the noun), should be as close as possible to the word(s) being modified. In this case, “that they rent...” modifies (or elaborates on) the house (noun), not the town (different noun). In other words, the house gets rented, not the town, so “that they rent” should be placed as close to the house as possible.
7. Punctuation: “out-of-state” should be hyphenated because it is one entity.
8. Homophone: “than” versus “then.” “Than” is for comparisons; “then” refers to time or sequences.
9. Mother’s: Apostrophe belongs before the “s” because this is the singular possessive case (mother owns something [sister]; it is mother’s sister).
10. Sister is followed by a comma, not a semicolon. Commas separate phrases from each other, and signify pauses for the reader, so that sentences make sense. Semicolons separate two complete sentences that can stand on their own, or (usually) multi-word items in a list (usually after a colon).
11. Quote marks go after periods and commas in the United States. In the United Kingdom and commonwealth countries (e.g., Canada), all punctuation goes after the quotation mark.
12. We inserted the word “case” because it was not clear what the sentence was about.

(continued)
taking her psychiatric medication, not in counseling,\textsuperscript{13} and “self-medicating with marijuana and other drugs.”\textsuperscript{14} The caller also stated that father had been violent,\textsuperscript{15} throwing things and threatening mother in front of the two children. When DCW worker went out to the home, she\textsuperscript{16} assessed that the children were unsafe. It appears that\textsuperscript{17} the children cannot\textsuperscript{18} be maintained at home safely.\textsuperscript{19} The living conditions in the home present\textsuperscript{20} multiple hazards, and parents\textsuperscript{21} demonstrate a lack of understanding and limited ability to alleviate these conditions. DCW worker and mother were able to reach maternal aunt by phone, and she agreed to take the children temporarily.

\section*{Current Situation}

After CPS removed the children\textsuperscript{22}, maternal aunt had second\textsuperscript{23} thoughts and asked that DCW place the children elsewhere. The maternal aunt stated that she was sorry but that she “just could not handle two small children.”\textsuperscript{24} DCW tried to address maternal aunt’s\textsuperscript{25} concerns, but she maintained that she could not\textsuperscript{26} do it. The oldest child, Eli, is currently placed in a non-relative foster home. The

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youngest child, Evan, is placed in the county children's emergency shelter. The landlord evicted mother and father from their rental apartment when he saw the condition of the home. Mother had a brief stay in the hospital following a psychotic episode. The two are currently together, "staying with friends." Mother has been referred to and received a substance abuse and mental health evaluation. She is being seen on an outpatient basis for both. Father was referred for domestic violence treatment and substance abuse treatment. The oldest child, Eli, has been referred for a child development evaluation. The children's center is assessing youngest child. The family was also referred to a local agency for outreach services. The agency specializes in family support, mental health, and substance abuse.

Notes For Follow-Up

I think this family has more strengths than the record reflects, and should be re-evaluated in six months. In addition, this family may benefit from more referrals: nutrition, job training, mental health assessment, employment, and literacy. These resources may be of benefit to them.

27. "Children’s" is the proper way to write the possessive for children. Although it is plural, the apostrophe comes before the "s." "Men’s" and "women’s" are other examples of this exception.

28. Passive voice [In several subsequent sentences, there is passive voice wording because we do not know who took the action described. For example, we do not know who referred the mother to mental health and substance abuse services, or who is providing the services.]

29. “Two” (not “too”): another homophone. “Too” means “also” or “excessive.”

30. We added a comma to separate two thoughts.

31. Period inside the quotation mark.

32. “Received” is spelled incorrectly.

33. “She’s” is a contraction for “she is.” Contractions should be avoided in professional writing.

34. Another homophone: “scene” and “seen.”

35. “Children’s” is the plural possessive.

36. “Thru” is too informal—“through” is the correct word; the wording was passive voice. We eliminated “thru” and “through” by rewording the sentence in the active voice.

37. The original sentence contained a misplaced modifier and a redundancy. “Specializing in family support, mental health, and substance abuse as well” modified the agency, not the “outreach services.” The agency specialized in those services; outreach is one way they did it. So “specializing in ....” should be placed closer to “agency” than “services.” The second problem was “and” and “as well.” They are redundant; one should be deleted. In order to solve both problems, we revised the sentence into two sentences.

38. Unnecessary verbiage: “I think” is more concise than “what I think is.”

39. Syntax error—the tense should be simple singular for consistency with the rest of the paragraph.

40. Homophone: “then” refers to time; “than” is for comparisons.

41. Spell out numbers from one to ten.

42. Punctuation: colon, not semicolon, because “nutrition, job training, mental health assessment, employment, and literacy” are elaborations of “referrals,” not a free-standing sentence. Semicolons separate two complete sentences, to show the sentences are closely connected. Colons show that an elaboration or list follows.

43. Parallelism. The list was: nutrition, job training, mental health assessment, develop their employment potential and improve their literacy skills. The first three led with nouns (nutrition, job, and mental health); the last two led with verbs (develop and improve). When items in a sentence are listed or presented as parallel to each other, they should be characterized in similar language.
Self-Assessment

How many errors did you find? More important, what patterns do you see in the errors you found and the ones you missed? We grouped writing into categories; you can focus on working on those topics that gave you the most trouble. We explain each of these topics in detail in Appendix A: Glossary of Writing and Writing Errors.

Punctuation

Commas, semicolons, colons, apostrophes, hyphens, and placement of quotation marks have very specific uses and are not interchangeable (corrections 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 21, 24, 25, 27, 30, 31, 33, 35, and 42). Commas separate words and phrases to make sentences read clearly and precisely. Semicolons separate two complete sentences or multi-word items in a list, usually after a colon, which means “as follows” or “specifically.” Apostrophes serve two purposes: to show the possessive or to join two words together (correction 33). Here are examples of the two uses:

- “My brother’s feeling badly today.” “Brother is” becomes “brother’s” with the apostrophe (other examples of contractions: it’s, isn’t, doesn’t, I’ll, you’d).
- “My brother’s grammar book got him through his college writing courses.” Here, the apostrophe connotes ownership.

Quotation marks are handled differently in the United States than in UK countries. In the United States, when a quotation ends, the quotation mark goes outside any commas or periods. On some occasions the quotation is inside another punctuation mark, for example, a question mark or an exclamation point if the quote itself is a question or exclamation. And semicolons and colons go outside the quotation mark.

Misplaced Modifiers

Misplaced modifiers are words or phrases that get positioned incorrectly in sentences (corrections 6, 19, and 37). The general rule is to place modifying language as close as possible to the objects or actions being modified. Often, misplaced modifiers will be placed at the end of a sentence, several words or phrases away from their targets, or inside a verb phrase. For example, “to be safely maintained at home”: “to be maintained” is the verb phrase; “safely” should go before or after “to be maintained” and not in the middle of the phrase. Because we tend to talk this way, it feels awkward to move modifiers to more appropriate places in sentences, but our narratives represent our professional selves, and serve our clients with clarity and competence.

Passive Voice

Passive voice (corrections 22, 28, and 36) is when the subject of the sentence is either missing or receives the action of the verb rather than taking action. For example, in the sentence, “Rainy weather is forecast for tomorrow by the National Weather Service” the verb is “is forecast.” Who did the forecasting? Answer: the National Weather Service. So, to be in the active voice, the sentence should read: “the National Weather Service forecasted rain for tomorrow.”
Homophones

Homophones are words that sound the same but mean different things (corrections 2, 8, 26, 29, 34, and 40). There are dozens that can confound and change the meaning of your writing. We listed the most common confusing sets of words in Appendix A: Glossary of Writing and Writing Errors. There are no shortcuts: you will need to learn the ones you use or confuse frequently.

Sentence Structure

Sentence structure (corrections 3, 16, 18, 37, and 42) covers a number of writing issues: incomplete and run-on sentences; syntax; redundancies; the passive voice; and parallelism. We listed these separately in this list for your convenience.

Syntax

Syntax (corrections 5, 16, 18, and 39) refers to (in)consistency in tense (past and present) or amounts (singular and plural). For example, if you tell a story in the present tense, stay in the present tense throughout the story unless you refer to something that existed before the story began. When relating events in the past tense, stay in the past tense unless you refer to a situation or condition that still exists. Sentence subjects and verbs must agree in terms of singular (e.g., I, you, she, he, it get singular verbs) and plural (e.g., we, you [more than one person], they get plural verbs).

Parallelism

Parallelism (correction 43) means items that have the same level of narration should be worded similarly. Here’s an example of a parallelism problem: When I arrived at the family’s home, I found the children doing their homework, the parents preparing dinner, newspapers being read by the cousins, and laundry being folded by the brother-in-law. Correct wording: When I arrived at the family’s home, I found the children doing their homework, the parents preparing dinner, cousins reading newspapers, and the brother-in-law folding the laundry. [We introduced all four phrases with the ing verb form, and in the active voice.]

Grammar and Spelling

Grammar and spelling: (other than punctuation and sentence structure) (corrections 4, 20, and 32).

Word Usage and Professional Language

Word usage and professional language: (corrections 1, 4, 7, 12, 17, 19, 23, 33, 36, 38, and 41). Some wording may be grammatically correct, but too informal for professional purposes. One example is contractions: he’s, it’s, didn’t. Contractions are grammatically acceptable but do not belong in professional narratives.
Conclusion

The most effective way to engage any writing task is to break it down into parts, and tackle each part separately and in stages. Committing to a writing process will help any writer who wrestles with procrastination or writing insecurity. Just take one step at a time and realize that each stage is manageable if you have completed the stage before. Chapter 3 has demonstrated the steps involved in developing a professional case report that is comprehensive, accurate, objective about the facts, culturally competent, and well-organized, and demonstrates a general facility with the English language. In the chapters that follow, the exercises help you to concentrate your efforts on practicing with each of the four stages of the writing process modeled here.