Good writing is essential to effective social work practice. However, consider the many ways in which social workers use writing skills every day:

- Documentation
- Presentations
- Program reports and evaluations
- Grant applications
- Communication with colleagues
- Policy advocacy
- Media engagement
- Consumer outreach
- Web communication
- Research
- Professional education

Strong writing enables you to communicate your message succinctly and persuasively. Similar to other social work skills, writing can be improved through the integration of theory and practice. The following strategies may be useful for enhancing your writing:

- **LEARN AND ADHERE TO THE WRITING PROTOCOL OR STYLE GUIDE OF YOUR ORGANIZATION.** Many organizations have guidelines for use of language. These guidelines may address topics such as grammar, formatting, preferred terminology, and acceptable acronym usage. Consistent application of such guidelines enhances the professional image of both your individual work and your organization.

  - If your organization doesn’t have a written style guide, be aware that organizational style preferences may vary.
Learn and adhere to the writing protocol or style guide of your organization.

Still want to improve your writing? Such conventions may be set by a key leader or by a department or individual responsible for the organization’s marketing or communications. It may take a bit of detective work on your part to piece together this information, but the time and energy devoted to the task will be worth the effort. You may even find it useful to develop, in collaboration with your colleagues, a style guide for organizational use.

» USE REFERENCE BOOKS. If you packed your reference books in the attic after completing that last term paper, now is the time to unearth them. If you recycled them, don’t worry—many references are now available online, free of charge. The following references are essential tools for every social worker:

- **Thesaurus and collegiate dictionary.** Just as the social work profession evolves, so, too, does the English language. A dictionary and thesaurus constitute basic tools for every writer.
- **Style manual.** A style manual can provide valuable guidance, answering questions that may be unanswerable in organizational writing guidelines. Manuals commonly used in the social sciences include the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2010) and The Chicago Manual of Style (University of Chicago Press, 2010). Even a quick perusal of Strunk and White’s highly readable classic, The Elements of Style (1918), can improve your writing.
- **Social work reference books.** No need to dig through old class notes—reference books such as the Social Work Dictionary (Baity, 2003) and Encyclopedia of Social Work (Munirah & Davis, 2008) can provide current information. Other valuable resources include Professional Writing for the Human Services (Beebe, 1993) and Social Work Documentation (Skell, 2011).
- **Specialty dictionaries.** Use of legal, medical, and other specialty dictionaries can ensure clear, accurate communication. If you work with people who speak languages other than English, you may also need access to a phrase book or dictionary specific to those languages.

Your organization may prefer a specific dictionary, style manual, or reference book. Check before investing in such resources, and be aware that these publications occasionally undergo revision.

» MAKE USE OF ACADEMIC WRITING CENTERS. Many colleges and universities have writing centers. Some are specific to social work programs; others are available to the entire student body and even alumni. A number of these writing centers offer online resources to the public.

» TAKE A WORKSHOP OR CLASS. Community colleges, municipalities, governmental programs, and community-based writing centers are but a few of the entities that offer workshops and classes in writing and editing. An increasing number of distance education options also abound. Think about the type of writing you do most frequently—whether it’s work with eight authors, the difference between affect and effect, or whether to use a serial comma; make a note of what you learned or, at least, where you found the information. The more you write, the less you may need those reminders—but even professional writers need to proofread their documents because their computer programs will do the job for them. Helpfully, though computers can be, they are far from infallible. Make a practice of reviewing your own work for errors in spelling, grammar, and style. One effective technique is to read your work aloud, this may help you analyze the flow of a document and identify previously overlooked mistakes. Another useful strategy is to take a break from a document before finalizing it. Even the best writers can get too close to their work to notice typos, formatting inconsistencies, or awkward phrasing.

» ASK OTHERS FOR FEEDBACK ON YOUR WRITING. Colleagues, family, friends, and even constant focus groups or other professional writing circles can offer valuable input on your written work. Start with someone you trust and be clear about the kind of help you need. You may want proofreading without comment on your content, for example, or you may be interested in gauging the clarity of your message. Try to be open to the responses you receive, keeping in mind you are not obligated to accept every piece of advice offered.

» KEEP TRACK OF THE WRITING TIPS YOU LEARN—AND APPLY THEM CONSISTENTLY. No matter how many writing resources you may have at your disposal, it is easy to get tripped up by annoying style and grammatical details. Ironically, even after you find an answer to your question, you probably won’t remember that information the next time you need it. Each time you check a reference book to determine how to cite a work with eight authors, the difference between affect and effect, or whether to use a serial comma, make a note of what you learned or, at least, where you found the information. The more you write, the less you may need those reminders—believe it or not! Professional writers and editors maintain and rely on personal style sheets to ensure accuracy and consistency in their writing.

» SAVE WRITING SAMPLES. You never know when you will need writing samples for a job application. Your favorite term paper may be appropriate to use in some circumstances, but having a couple other options available is a good idea. Brochures, reports, newsletters, and portions of grant application reports may be appropriate to use. Keep in mind, of course, you are responsible for protecting confidential information about your clients or organization.

» SEEK OPPORTUNITIES TO WRITE. You don’t have to be published—peer-reviewed journals to gain experience (NASW, 2011) and get a glimpse of the organization’s writing style. In some cases, your organization may provide you with outlets in which to publish your work. You may also consider joining a writing group, which can offer valuable input on your written work and provide opportunities to learn from and review the work of others. You may even find that writing with a local writing group can improve your writing. Even casual conversations with colleagues can improve your writing.

» BE AWARE THAT EVERYTHING YOU WRITE REFLECTS ON YOU PROFESSIONALLY. Given the technological advancements in the field of business and the proliferation of social media, workplace communication has become more informal and accessible to the public. The growth of mass media and technology has accompanied the increase in communication shortcuts, such as text messaging and social networking. These communication shortcuts, such as text messaging and social networking, are accompanied by increased use of slang, and emoticons on the Internet. Babies and children absorb these communication shortcuts through exposure. They may even learn to speak “textese” or “chatspeak” even as early as grade school. Although you don’t need to approach every email as if you were speaking to someone from another country, it is important to consider the appropriateness of your writing in a variety of situations. For example, some organizations may require that you use a more formal tone than you might use in your personal life. It is important to be aware of the tone and style of your organization and to write appropriately for different audiences.

» READ, READ, AND READ. The best way to improve your writing is by reading the works of other writers. Make a practice of reading the writing of others, and consider the resources available in your community. If you don’t know where to start, look for a basic course on the fundamentals of writing. Whether you invest a few hours, a day, or a semester, you are likely to pick up tips that will improve your writing.

» PROOFREAD YOUR WRITING. Many people think they don’t need to proofread their documents because their computer programs will do the job for them. Helpfully, though computers can be, they are far from infallible. Make a practice of reviewing your own work for errors in spelling, grammar, and style. One effective technique is to read your work aloud. This may help you analyze the flow of a document and identify previously overlooked mistakes. Another useful strategy is to take a break from a document before finalizing it. Even the best writers can get too close to their work to notice typos, formatting inconsistencies, or awkward phrasing.

» ASK OTHERS FOR FEEDBACK ON YOUR WRITING. Colleagues, family, friends, and even constant focus groups can offer valuable input on your written work. Start with someone you trust and be clear about the kind of help you need. You may want proofreading without comment on your content, for example, or you may be interested in gauging the clarity of your message. Try to be open to the responses you receive, keeping in mind you are not obligated to accept every piece of advice offered. You may even find that writing with a local writing group can improve your writing. Even casual conversations with colleagues can improve your writing. Even casual conversations with colleagues can improve your writing.

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No time to write? Consider collaborating
Tips from the Society for Public Health
Social workers in direct practice are among the busiest
and finding time to write for publication can be challenging.
Collaborative writing can be helpful because 1) mutual
and ideas enrich the work, 2) workload is shared, 3) an
author can supplement deficits of other(s), and 4) experts
can mentor new ones. Potential writing partners might
professionals and volunteers from: your project team,
agency, local schools, colleges and universities, health
service agencies and foundations, or other community
organizations. Be sure to decide order of authorship,
responsibilities of each author before you get started.

Be aware that everything you write reflects on you as a professional.
One of the best ways to improve your writing is by reading well-written texts by other people.