

# Leadership Ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

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## Strengthening Your Writing Skills: An Essential Task for Every Social Worker

You've probably chosen the social work profession because you want to work with people. With this mindset, you may not perceive writing skills as essential to your professional success. You may view process recordings and research papers as remnants of the past and consider documentation one of the least fulfilling aspects of your job.

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

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.**

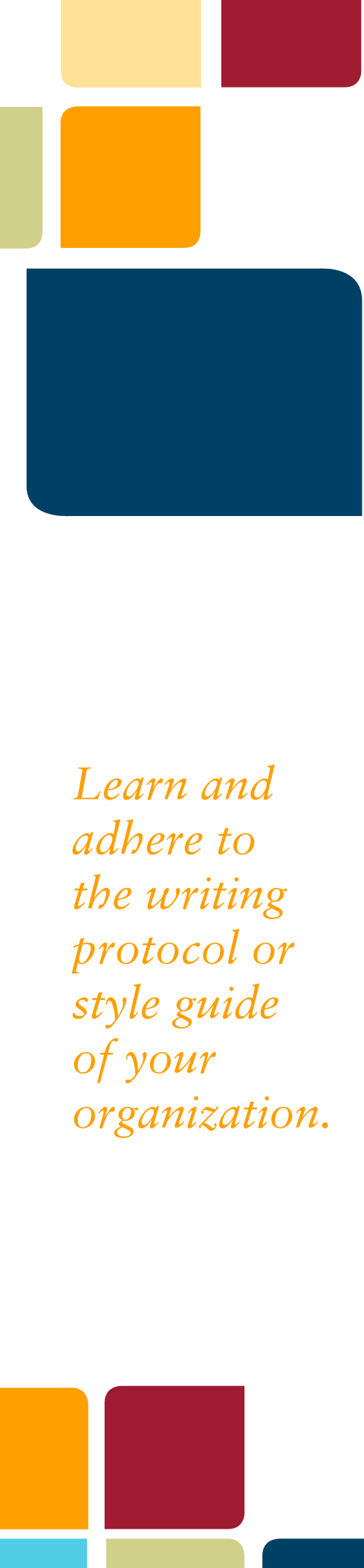
Many organizations have guidelines for use of language. These guidelines may address topics such as grammar, formatting, preferred terminology, and acceptable acronym usage. Consistent application of such guidelines enhances the professional image of both your individual work and your organization.

If your organization doesn't have a written style guide, be aware that organizational style preferences may

Strong writing enables you to communicate your message succinctly and persuasively. Similar to other social work skills, writing



National Association of Social Workers  
750 First Street NE, Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20002-4241



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still exist. 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 unaddressed 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* (1999), can improve your writing.

» **Social work reference books.**

No need to dig through old class notes—reference books such as the *Social Work Dictionary* (Barker, 2003) and *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Mizrahi & Davis, 2008) can provide current information. Other valuable resources include *Professional Writing for the Human Services* (Beebe, 1993) and *Social Work Documentation* (Sidell, 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 other 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 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. Helpful 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, friends, family members, and even constituent 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.

» **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—but even 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, newsletter articles, and portions of grant applications or reports may be appropriate to use. Keep in mind, of course, your ethical responsibility to protect confidential information about your clients and organization.

» **SEEK OPPORTUNITIES TO WRITE.**

You don't have to be published in a peer-reviewed journal to gain writing experience (NASW, 2011). The next time you attend a conference, facilitate a group, or organize a program, take 15 or 30 minutes afterward to write a summary. If your organization publishes a newsletter, write an article. The more you write, the stronger your writing will become.

» **BE AWARE THAT EVERYTHING YOU WRITE REFLECTS ON YOU AS A PROFESSIONAL.**

The growth of social media and technology has been accompanied by the increasing use of communication shortcuts, such as "text speak." Although you don't need to approach every email as a dissertation, be aware that your colleagues may perceive extensive use of abbreviations, slang, and emoticons on the job as unprofessional.

» **READ, READ, AND READ.** We all know babies and children absorb language through exposure. We may take for granted, however, the many ways in which this learning continues throughout the lifespan. One of the best ways to improve your writing is by reading well-written texts by other people. Such works need not be limited to high school or collegiate recommended reading lists. Journal articles, personal essays, fiction, and multiple other genres can model effective writing. Even careful reading of an email message or memo by a colleague whose writing you admire can be instructive.

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## RESOURCES

### » NASW Press reference books

[www.naswpress.org](http://www.naswpress.org)

- › *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, 20<sup>th</sup> ed. (2008)
- › *Professional Writing for the Human Services* (1993)
- › *The Social Work Dictionary*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (2003)
- › *Social Work Documentation: A Guide to Strengthening Your Case Recording* (2011)

### » Online style manuals

- › APA Style Help  
[www.apastyle.org/apa-style-help.aspx](http://www.apastyle.org/apa-style-help.aspx)
- › *The Chicago Manual of Style Online*  
[www.chicagomanualofstyle.org](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org)
- › *NASW Press Author Guidelines* (n.d.):  
Tools for Authors (Chapter 8)  
[www.naswpress.org/authors/guidelines/08a-tools.html](http://www.naswpress.org/authors/guidelines/08a-tools.html)

### » Online dictionaries & thesauruses

- › *The American Heritage Dictionary & Thesaurus*  
[www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com);  
[www.thesaurus.com](http://www.thesaurus.com)
- › Merriam & Webster Dictionary & Thesaurus  
[www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)
- › *Roget's International Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* (Mawson)  
[www.bartleby.com/110/](http://www.bartleby.com/110/)
- › Medline Plus/Merriam-Webster medical dictionary  
[www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/mplusdictionary.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/mplusdictionary.html)
- › ALM legal dictionary  
<http://dictionary.law.com/>

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