CRITICAL PUBLISHING

Academic Writing and Referencing for your Social Work Degree

CRITICAL STUDY SKILLS

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Chapter 1
Academic writing: text, process and criticality

Learning outcomes

After reading this chapter you will:

- understand what it means to be part of the academic writing community;
- be aware of the different text types you might need to produce as a student social worker;
- have developed an effective, systematic approach to the academic writing process;
- understand what it means to write critically;
- have learned about the foundations of different academic text types in social work, in particular, the critical essay.

Many aspects of your social work degree will be exciting and enjoyable. However, you will also face a number of challenges. You need to assimilate a great deal of information, and engage in new ideas and intellectual processes. What's more, you need to become proficient in academic writing, and learn how to produce the different types of text that are common in social work.

Academic writing is central to your university studies, as written assignments and exams will be one of the main ways in which you are assessed. This chapter explores the nature of academic writing in universities, and helps you to develop an effective, systematic approach to the academic writing process. All assignments are different, and universities vary slightly in terms of the types of writing assignments they employ. This chapter focuses on some general principles which can be applied to most academic writing, including what it means to write 'critically'. It also discusses some of the most common features of individual text types in your discipline, with a particular focus on the critical essay.

Academic writing at university: a new start?

Reflection

1) Do you enjoy writing? Why/Why not?
2) What kind of things have you written in the past (eg essays, reports, exams, articles, blogs, stories, poems)?

3) Do you have recent experience of writing academic essays? (If English is not your first language, were these in English or your first language?)

4) What comments have teachers or other people made about your writing in the past?

5) How do you feel about starting your first/next written assignment at university?

Social work students in the UK come from a range of backgrounds: some come straight from A levels (or Scottish Highers); some have been away from formal education for some time, maybe working and/or bringing up a family; some come from other countries to study in the UK. This means that students starting university may in terms of their current writing abilities, their experience of academic writing, and how confident they feel about tackling written assessments.

So where do you fit in?

You may be feeling confident. You may be relishing the prospect of writing your first assignment, seeing it as an exciting opportunity to explore your subject and demonstrate your knowledge and ideas. You may be able to draw on recent experience of academic writing and positive feedback from teachers.

Conversely, you may be feeling rather apprehensive about your first written assignment. Like many students, you perhaps see academic writing as one of the most difficult challenges of university life. There are a number of reasons why you may be feeling apprehensive. You might not have much experience of academic writing. Or maybe you do have experience, but it might have been a long time ago, or in your mother tongue, not English. You may have struggled with writing in the past and received some negative comments from teachers. All of these things can make the prospect of that first written assignment rather daunting.

CROSS REFERENCE

Chapter 2, Coherent texts and arguments, Editing and redrafting for coherence, The truth about writing!

When starting to write at university, it is important for students to draw on any strengths they have in terms of ability and experience. But it is also important for all students to identify aspects of their writing which can be improved on. At university, you are part of a **writing community**, comprised of students, lecturers and researchers, and all members of that community are constantly striving to improve as writers, even those who publish in journals and books.

You should commit yourself to improving as a writer throughout your degree programme, and beyond, in your professional life. It is not a question of achieving perfection; it is rather a case of committing yourself to making many small improvements over time, and not giving up when faced with a disappointment or hurdle. University lecturers see many students develop into very good writers after a shaky start. What these students have in common is a positive attitude, an ability to reflect on and critically assess their own work, and a willingness to seek and act on advice.

This book will support you in your development as a writer by helping you to approach writing in a systematic way. It will enable you to:

- analyse and respond to writing tasks;
- plan and structure your writing effectively;
- achieve clarity and coherence in your writing;
- produce writing which is accurate and academic in style;
- write critically in assignments;
- use and reference sources appropriately;
- prepare assignments to a high professional standard for submission.

This chapter sets you on your way by exploring the context of academic writing at university and providing guidance on how to approach writing assignments during your social work degree.

Academic writing for social work undergraduates

Undergraduate social work students may be asked to produce a number of different types of academic writing, including essays, written reflections, exams, reports, reviews of journal articles, and dissertations. This chapter sets out a general approach to academic writing that will help you with all types of assignments. It also provides specific information on essays, written reflections, exams and dissertations. Advice on practical writing tasks in social work is provided in *Communication Skills for your Social Work Degree*.

CROSS REFERENCE

Communication Skills for your Social Work Degree

- **Essays**. There are different types of essays. The main one, sometimes called a 'critical' or 'analytical' essay, requires you to explore a particular topic in depth, usually in response to a question or statement, and to explain your own viewpoint, or 'stance', supported by arguments and evidence. A 'reflective' essay requires you to analyse and evaluate a particular experience, explaining its impact on your understanding and future practice.
- **Written reflections**. Social work students are often required to produce short written reflections on their experience in practice, sometimes as part of a **portfolio** linked to their practice placements.
- **Exams**. In exams, you may be required to provide short or long written responses to questions or statements. These are usually designed to demonstrate that you have assimilated and understood the core work covered in a particular module. They may require you to recall factual information and/or to explain and support your viewpoint on a particular issue you have examined as part of your studies.
- **Dissertations**. A dissertation is a long evidence-based or research-focused essay written in the final year of your undergraduate studies.

CROSS REFERENCE

Studying for your Social Work Degree, Chapter 6, Assessment

Each of these types of academic writing will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

The writing process

Writing is a process and it involves a number of stages, including:

- 'unpacking' (analysing and understanding) the writing task and any guidelines provided;
- drawing up a provisional plan/outline;
- identifying relevant material that you need to read;
- reading and gathering information;
- drafting, redrafting, editing;
- revisiting and reworking your plan/outline;
- formatting your text;
- double-checking the assessment guidelines;
- proofreading.

It is important to fully engage with the writing process, and to understand that the *writing* process is part of the *learning* process. Writing is not just a question of getting fully formed thoughts down on paper (apart from in exams); it is a way of *clarifying your thinking* on a particular topic. Woodford (1967) put this nicely many years ago:

> The power of writing as an aid in thinking is not often appreciated. Everyone knows that someone who writes successfully gets his thoughts completely in order before he publishes. But it is seldom pointed out that the very act of writing can help to clarify thinking. Put down woolly thoughts on paper, and their wooliness is immediately exposed.
>
> (p 744)

Top tips

Engaging with the writing process

1) Try to develop good writing habits. Write little and often, especially if you have been away from formal education for a while.
2) Adopt a write-read-edit-read approach to writing (discussed in Chapter 2). When you stop to read what you have written, stand back from the text. Put yourself in the reader's shoes and make sure that everything hangs together, makes sense, and flows smoothly.
3) Try to get some feedback during the writing process. You may have the opportunity to submit a first draft to a lecturer, or you could ask a fellow student to read something and give feedback. If you do ask a friend or fellow student, it's a good idea to ask them to *summarise* what they think you are trying to say. If you only ask them if they understand what you have written, they may just say yes to be polite!

CROSS REFERENCE

Chapter 2, Coherent texts and arguments, Editing and redrafting for coherence

Your exact approach to the writing process will depend on the particular context of the assignment and your individual way of working, but some essential aspects of the writing process are discussed in the following sections.

Approaching a writing assignment

A writer needs an audience, a purpose, and a strategy, and these things are interconnected (Swales and Feak, 2012, p 10). When approaching a writing assignment, ask yourself:

- Who is reading my work? (your audience)
- Why am I writing? (your purpose)
- How will I achieve my purpose? (your strategy)

CROSS REFERENCE

Analysing a writing assignment

Your purpose is to meet the requirements of the assignment, and satisfy the needs and expectations of a particular reader. To determine your purpose, you need to analyse the wording of the task or question carefully. It may specify certain aspects of the topic that you should cover, and the verbs it uses, such as 'describe', 'explain', or 'evaluate', will determine how you treat this content. However, notwithstanding these specifications, there is no single 'right answer': different students will respond to a task in different ways. Your individual approach and strategy will determine:

CROSS REFERENCE

Appendix 3, Key phrases in assignments

- the selection of content (information, arguments, evidence etc);
- the way this content is structured and organised.

The person reading your essay must be able to discern *why* you have included particular content and organised your essay in the way that you have.

The question of the 'reader' is a tricky one. Of course, the actual human being reading your assignment is your university lecturer – probably the one who set the task and taught the module. However, lecturers often ask (or expect) you to imagine a 'hypothetical' or 'target' reader. This is usually someone with a similar level of knowledge to your own, or someone with a similar level of education but who is not an expert in social work. Lecturers want you to write for such a reader because they want you to *demonstrate* your understanding, and you cannot do this if you assume too much knowledge on the part of the reader. It is not uncommon to ask a student about something which is unclear in their essay, only to have them explain that 'the lecturer already knows this'! But this is not the point. The lecturer wants to know that *you* know this, and that you can explain it to other people, including non-experts, in a clear way. Always ask yourself:

CROSS REFERENCE

Chapter 2, Coherent texts and arguments, Editing and redrafting for coherence; Developing a coherent argument and expressing criticality

- What can the target reader be expected to know?
- What does the target reader need me to explain?

A good writer anticipates the reader's questions, and does not ask them to guess, fill in gaps, or work out how one thing relates to another.

Analysing a writing assignment

One of the most common – and perhaps surprising – reasons for low marks in written assessments is the failure on the part of the student to read the assignment title or question thoroughly enough. A student may go on to produce something which is interesting and of a good standard, but if they do not directly address the specific task, they will not meet the actual requirements of the assignment and so will end up failing. It is therefore essential to start any assignment by carefully analysing the assignment title or question.

CROSS REFERENCE

Appendix 3, Key phrases in assignments

You should read the title or question several times to 'unpack' it and get absolutely clear in your mind what is expected of you. It is helpful to highlight **key terms**, including verbs commonly occurring in academic assignments such as 'assess', 'discuss', and 'compare and contrast'.

CROSS REFERENCE

Studying for your Social Work Degree, Chapter 6, Assessment, Feedback on academic work

Assignments usually come with a set of assessment **guidelines** and marking **descriptors** detailing the various criteria that you need to meet in order to achieve success. These criteria relate to areas such as:

- task achievement;
- content and organisation;
- relevance to social work practice;
- writing style;
- referencing.

Be sure to read and digest these guidelines and descriptors as they are the very same ones that assessors will use to mark your work.

Task

Unpacking essay titles and questions

Look at the essay titles below. What are the key terms? What are you expected to do in your essay? What will be your purpose in writing? What type of content and organisation could help you to achieve this purpose? (Make some notes before you look at the model analyses provided.)

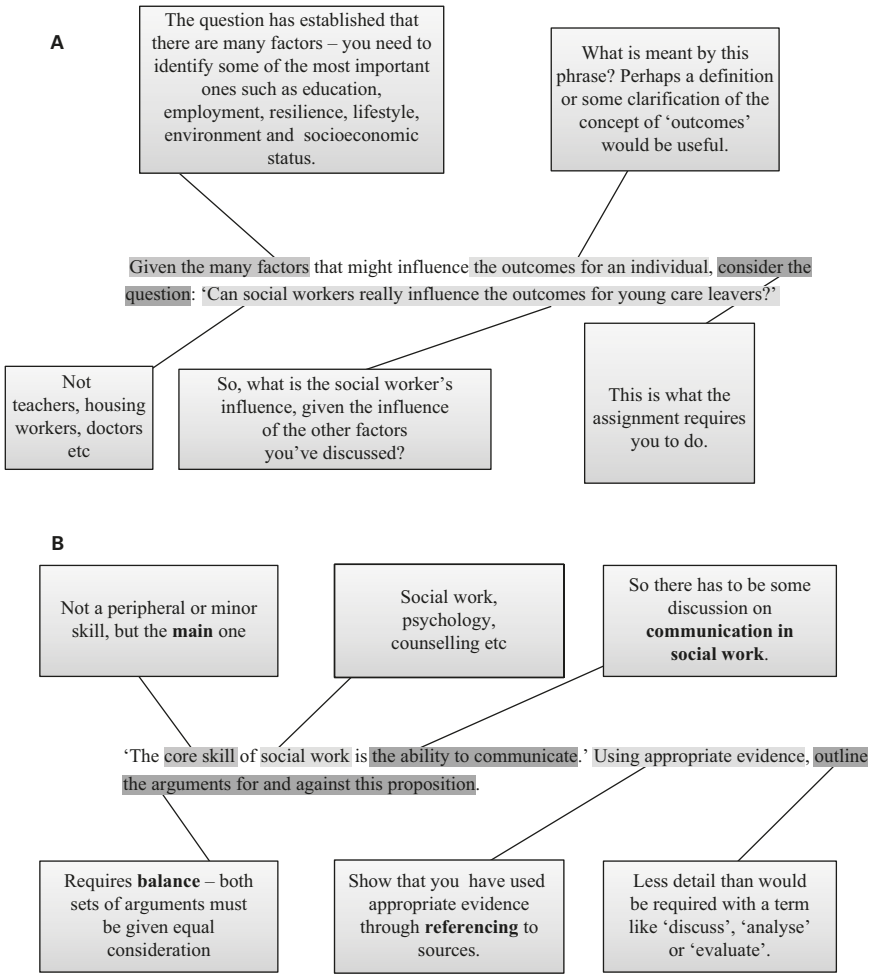
A

Given the many factors that might influence the future of a young person leaving the care system, consider the question, 'Can social workers really influence outcomes for young care leavers?'

B

'The core skill of social work is the ability to communicate.' Using appropriate evidence, explore the arguments for and against this proposition.

Discussion: unpacking essay titles and questions



Planning

Always begin an assignment by considering the constraints of the task: how long it should be and how long you have to write it. You could then draw up a provisional schedule which allocates time to the various sub-tasks. This schedule should leave sufficient time for you to read through and proofread the whole text several times before submitting.

A good piece of writing starts with a good plan or 'outline'. This should be primarily based on your analysis, or 'unpacking', of the task, but it should evolve as you engage in the reading and writing process. Your outline is therefore much more than a list of items related to the assignment topic: it is a developing conceptual representation of your response to the task. For example, in relation to the essay titles analysed above, your outline would reflect your position, or 'stance', in relation to the given topic, ie:

CROSS REFERENCE

Chapter 5, Preparing your work for submission, Editing and proofreading your final text

- A: the extent to which you believe, supported by your investigation of the arguments and evidence, that social workers can influence the outcomes for young care leavers
- B: your assessment of the evidence you find to support or challenge the main proposition that communication is the core skill of social work

An outline should identify key sections of the text (with possible subheadings), and, in a critical essay, the arguments and evidence that would feature in each one.

CROSS REFERENCE

Writing critically

As discussed earlier in this chapter, different students will approach the same task in different ways. Sometimes an essay title will specify broad organisational requirements. For example, in B above, you are asked to 'outline the arguments for and against' the proposition. However, you might decide either to look at all the 'for' arguments in the first half of the essay and all the 'against' arguments in the second half, or, alternatively, to examine the proposition from both angles with reference to a series of different areas of social work. In other essays, you may have more leeway. One common approach is to examine different positions one by one, finally making a case for the one which the majority of the evidence seems to support. Another approach is to make a strong case for one particular position right from the start, while acknowledging and examining alternative (but in your view, weaker) viewpoints along the way.

CROSS REFERENCE

Chapter 2, Coherent texts and arguments, Planning for coherence

Top tips

Aligning your outline and the task requirements

When your outline is well developed, go back to your initial analysis of the task to make sure that you have addressed all the points that you originally highlighted, and that you have achieved the required balance in your response.

Reading and information gathering

Most academic writing assignments require you to read about a particular topic and use scholarly sources to inform your ideas. A good place to start the reading for an assignment is your lecture notes. These will provide an overview of the topic, and they will probably include links to some relevant literature, such as key chapters from core textbooks, and important journal articles, case studies, official reports etc. At the beginning of your studies, lecturers will tend to direct you to relevant sources in this way, but as you progress through your degree, you will be expected to explore the literature more widely and independently. As you develop these research skills, you will be increasingly assessed on your ability to find and select sources, and to use your critical judgement to assess their relevance and credibility. Lecturers will expect you to refer both to sources which support your position on a topic, and sources which challenge it.

CROSS REFERENCE

Studying for your Social Work Degree, Chapter 4, Critical thinking, Applying and developing your critical thinking skills; Chapter 5, Academic resources: technology and the library, The university library

Academic texts can at times appear long and difficult to read when you first approach them. It is essential that you devote enough time to reading, but it is also important that you develop effective reading strategies so that you use that time efficiently. When you approach a book, chapter or journal article, first adopt a 'global' approach, ie identify:

- what you expect to find out from it, and how these things relate to your assignment;
- the main message (the author's purpose in writing), and how this relates to your assignment;
- the main points made by the author(s), and how they relate to the main message of the article, and to your assignment.

As you think about how what you are reading relates to the assignment in hand, you might use highlighting, annotations, or note-taking to reflect this. You should also mark or make a note of parts of the text that you think you may need to read more closely at some stage.

Top tips

Strategies for effective reading

1) Use features such as contents pages, indices, abstracts, introductions and conclusions to help you assess the relevance of a book, chapter or article and find specific content.
2) Note how textbooks and journal articles on a particular topic are interrelated. Important books and articles are likely to be referenced by other scholars, and your initial reading may provide links to other sources that could be useful for your essay. This becomes more important as you progress in your studies.
3) You are likely to encounter unknown words in academic reading. Some of these might be subject-related terms, such as 'assessment' or 'intervention', which you should familiarise yourself with; others may be formal words which are uncommon outside academic writing, such as 'analogous' or 'dichotomy'. If English is not your first language, there may be quite a number of words which are new to you. There is a limited amount of time you can spend reading, so you need to make decisions about how much time to spend investigating unknown non-technical words. Looking up every word you don't know will eat into your reading time and disrupt the reading process. What's more, it is unlikely that you will be able to remember all of these words in the future. Try using these two questions to determine whether or not you should look up a word:
   - Does the word prevent you from understanding the general meaning?
   - Is the word repeated a lot in this text or related texts?

CROSS REFERENCE

Studying for your Social Work Degree, Chapter 4, Critical thinking, Active reading