



Writing for Social Work

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LM Learning
Matters



1

How to be an effective writer

Introduction

In Chapter 1 you will consider who you are as a writer. What is the experience that you bring to your writing and what are the ways in which your past experiences can have an impact on how you write? You will explore the assignment guidance that you will encounter on your course and how you should interpret this when you write academic assessments. You will also consider the conventions, or expectations, of writing at university and how to develop your writing to meet these expectations. Social work is a relatively new academic discipline and we will explore the implications of this for your academic writing. Finally you will learn about the CAPS model, which will be used throughout this book to help you reflect and understand what different kinds of writing require of you.

Who are you as a writer?

When you think about writing what comes to mind? What memories does learning to write evoke for you? Throughout this book I will ask you to pause and do some thinking

and writing. You might like to set up a file or find a notebook to keep your writing in so that you can look back on your notes. The reason for these tasks is to help you learn about writing in the particular context that is relevant to you. For example, these first two related writing tasks arise from the fact that writing, like all forms of communication, is very individual and to develop your own writing you need to understand how your history and identity has shaped you as a writer.

Activity 1.1 Your language history

Read the following prompt questions and then write for about 10 minutes. Try to keep writing and if you get stuck turn to one of the other questions to get you moving again. Once you have finished, read your writing back to yourself and then find someone to share it with – this could be a tutor, fellow student, colleague or friend.

1. What language(s) do you speak at home? Was this the first language you learnt?
2. Do you speak any other languages or dialects? By dialect I mean different ways of talking within one language, so may refer to differences in pronunciation, accent or words used.
3. You may consider that you only speak one language fluently, but that the way in which you talk changes depending on who you are talking to.
4. Where or with whom would you use a particular language or dialect? Think about family, friends, education contexts and work.
5. Your choice of language or dialect in a particular context might be unconscious, but reflecting on it now, why do you think you change the way that you speak in each context?

Comment

Language is very important – it contributes to forming our identity and is also an expression of who we are. Language connects us with other people but can also isolate and exclude us from particular social groups. Writing in contexts like university and social work practice in the UK are generally expected to be based on a particular form of English, sometimes referred to as ‘Standard English’, which is significantly different from the way in which most people speak, even if English is their first language. Trudgill and Hannah suggest that only 15 per cent of the population in the UK would speak Standard English as their native dialect. Like all languages, English is organic in that not only does it have many varieties but changes over time. Standard English has no inherent superiority in terms of expression or clarity of meaning. It evolved from the language preferred by the governing and upper classes and then became standardised and stabilised over time, due to it being committed to print (Trudgill and Hannah, 2013). Standard English continues to be important as it is the basis of writing undertaken in schools, universities and many other formal contexts including social work. Familiarity with Standard English, therefore, can give you an advantage when learning to write in any of these contexts.

Activity 1.2 Your writing history

As with the previous writing exercise, read the prompts and then try to keep writing for ten minutes – if you get stuck go back to one of the other questions. Once you have finished, read your writing back to yourself and then find someone to share it with but this time try and talk to someone who knew you as a child and ask if they have any other memories of you as a writer.

1. What do you remember about learning to write?
2. Do you have any particularly positive or negative memories? What were they?
3. Can you think of any teacher comments about your writing?
4. Did you enjoy writing or was it something you struggled with?
5. Did you write outside school? For example did you keep a diary, communicating with friends in writing or maybe you wrote creatively such as stories or poems? When you wrote outside of school did you write differently?
6. As you grew up, did anything change about how you felt about yourself as a writer?

For some people the memories stimulated by these questions might be difficult or uncomfortable; for others these exercise might seem irrelevant. The following two case studies are adapted from real experiences of students who participated in research into social work student writing (Rai, 2008) and illustrate how powerful language and writing histories can be, and how they can influence our development as writers.

Case Study

Alisha

I was born in Jamaica but came to live with my grandparents when I was six. In Jamaica and at home with my parents I spoke Patois, I still use it with many of my friends and with family as it is the language that I am most comfortable with. It depends who I am talking with though, with some people I might use more London English but the odd word of Patois. In school I had to learn to speak differently and I remember it being hard to write when I first came to the UK. Lots of us Black kids were put in special needs groups because of our writing, but we missed out because teachers assumed we were not academic, but I wanted to read and learn. Our house was full of books and my grandparents and parents wanted me to do well in school. It was hard though because it wasn't just that I would use different words and have an accent, the grammar is different too, like the word order, so I had to work hard to learn to write in Standard English. I was also confused when I heard people say Patois isn't a language, it's just broken or bad English. I now understand more about where Jamaican Patois came from, how it developed from many languages. I am proud of it now, but as a child I felt embarrassed and even stupid at times. I still feel more 'me'

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speaking in Patios or with bits of Patios, but I would never use it at work or at uni. That makes it hard it do the reflective writing as I don't really feel as if I am writing as me, I have to think myself into someone else, the kind of professional me.

Case Study

Mark

I found a school report tucked away in a drawer. It said 'Mark is an able child until he puts pen to paper.' Even 40 years later that comment stung and brought back the hurt and humiliation I felt at school. I had lots of ideas, I enjoyed learning and I was always a very active participant in class. I actually also enjoyed writing, but my spelling was always poor and so my marks for written work were never good. Teachers' comments were that my written work was lazy and careless. As a child I assumed this to be true, and also that I just wasn't very bright. Looking back now I see things differently. I gained a degree and a master's, so I don't think I lack intellectual ability. What changed was that my spelling became less of an issue when I began to routinely write on computers with spell checkers. I am also now aware that both of my parents, one of whom qualified in medicine from Cambridge, and two other close family members also struggled with spelling. I don't think we were all careless and lazy so assume there could be an inherited problem, mild enough not to have seriously affected learning to read but enough to make spelling a struggle. The real impact on me was that for much of my adult life I have felt an imposter in the academic world. As a social worker I found numerous strategies to avoid writing in public unless it was mediated through a computer. The writing that I really enjoyed as a child was the writing that was just for me, like diaries I kept as a teenager. I do now also enjoy writing professionally, but only because I am less worried about getting caught out and judged for my poor spelling.

Comment

Mark and Alisha's reflections may have some resonance for you, or your experience may be very different. Whatever your own language and writing reflections they will have influenced your experiences as a writer and for some people such reflections can help you to understand and resolve writing difficulties that you encounter. One of the important lessons from such reflections is that the ability to write effectively relies on more than just the structure or surface features of written language, such as spelling, grammar and punctuation. Also, learning these surface features does not take place on a level playing field, it can be much more challenging for some people depending on a range of individual factors. Mark may have mild dyslexia which was never tested for or diagnosed but given his family history this may have explained his difficulty with spelling. Regardless of the cause, spelling was a challenge and this got in the way of Mark's ability to be a confident learner and also caused anxieties writing as a mature student and professional.

Alisha's experiences are not unusual. In my early career teaching in higher education I was asked to provide a study skills session for social workers who had all been referred due to concerns about their writing. I arrived at the session prepared to teach grammar. The experience I had over the following hour changed my career and stimulated a commitment to researching and understanding student writing in social work. The group were all women, all social work students and all shared a Caribbean heritage. All moved to the UK as young children, most from Jamaica but some also from the Dominican Republic and St Lucia. Rather than teaching grammar I listened. These women told me about how speaking Patois or Creole at home made them feel and how they felt about changing how they talked when at work, on placement and at university. They told me the Patois they spoke at home reflected history and how this history is evident in the structure and vocabulary of the languages. Most strikingly they explained how switching languages meant they needed to leave part of their identity at home, there seemed to be no place for it in their writing. I learnt a lot more from this group of students than they learnt from me, but this experience set me on a research journey which is reflected in this book. It convinced me that while learning the structure of written English is important, it is only one element of being an effective writer.

Learning the 'rules of the game'

Learning to write successfully in higher education can be a frustrating process. Students can feel confused and demoralised as they try to weave their way through the expectations of their university, course and tutors. Writing in higher education is not a game: it involves a significant investment of time and money and students will only pass their course if they can write effectively. Lillis (2001) suggests that as the main assessment tool writing becomes a tool for gatekeeping ... *with students passing or failing courses according to the ways in which they respond to, and engage in, academic writing tasks* (Lillis, 2001, p20). The allusion to a game indicates only that writing at university is a rule-bound activity in which students can win or lose. Frustratingly there is no definitive rule book and students need to negotiate complex written and unwritten requirements in order to succeed.

Case Study

Bernie

They give you so many rules, you can't do this and you mustn't do that, you must ensure that you do this and if this is missing blah blah blah, there is so much you have to remember that you just get scared, scared that you are going to miss something out. There is so much to remember that you might miss it out...

Bernie was just beginning her second year as a social work student at the time that she made this comment to me during a research interview. She enjoyed writing and

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was an experienced practitioner before being seconded onto her qualifying course by her employer. She was looking forward to her studies but quickly became demoralised when she began writing her assignments and receiving feedback. Despite reading all of the guidance carefully she found it confusing. The guidance was provided in so many places, each module had an assessment guide, there was a programme assessment document and the university also published assessment regulations. Bernie's first-level module also contained study skills teaching on writing and she had been directed to generic toolkits provided by the library. After her first course she thought she had familiarised herself with all of this information and she got a good mark on her year one assessments. She was devastated on getting a poor mark on her first second year essay after applying all of the advice and guidance, including feedback from her first year tutor. She felt like the rules had been changed and her confidence was shaken to the point that she found it very hard to begin writing any more assignments.

Comment

Bernie's experiences reflect some of the challenges for students in their writing. Bernie did not have particular difficulties with her competence in using written English, such as spelling, grammar and punctuation. The difficulties she faced arose from interpreting and applying the range of guidance on her course and her discovery that the expectations on one module differed from those on another. Bernie assumed that having succeeded on one module she could apply all of the same 'rules' to subsequent modules and receive similarly good marks. There are many reasons why Bernie may have received a lower mark for her assignment in her second module, but one explanation could be the differences in assessment requirements between different subjects within one course. The impact of inconsistent 'disciplinary conventions' are discussed below but first let us consider the sources of advice and guidance that Bernie drew on.

Support for academic writing in universities is most commonly offered through centralised learning centres, libraries or writing centres. Staff in these units may work closely with subject specialists or may offer support independently. There is a range of approaches commonly offered and these include:

- Skills development in discrete elements of written language, such as the use of grammar and punctuation.
- Development of generic study skills such as referencing, note-taking or information and digital literacy.
- Teaching generic academic style and conventions – this can include guidance on expectations around how to structure different kinds of text, appropriate vocabulary, good academic practice in the use of evidence and citations and using an appropriate 'voice'. These areas will all be discussed in more detail in the chapters that follow, so don't worry if they are not clear to you now.
- Writing within specific disciplines – although there are some broad principles of academic writing that are generic many are specific to the discipline that you are writing for. Some disciplines are relatively discrete, such as sociology, psychology or law. By this I mean that

they have developed as distinct subjects of study which do not draw on other disciplines. Social work, in comparison, is a complex subject which includes all of these disciplines and more. Again, this is discussed in more detail in the chapters that follow.

All of these approaches have a value but research undertaken into student writing has identified that it can be unhelpful for writing support to focus primarily on a 'skills approach' (Rai, 2014). This approach is based on the assumption that a writer will be successful if they are able to learn and transfer generic writing skills, such as grammar and punctuation, to all written tasks. While an ability to confidently and effectively use structural features of language such as grammar and punctuation is an important skill in the writer's toolkit, this approach has some important limitations. Firstly it is based on the assumption that effective writing relies *only* on the use of structural features. This overlooks the fact that effective writing requires much more than the correct language; for example, there are important differences across disciplines and specific writing tasks in how arguments should be constructed and knowledge used. Secondly a skills approach places responsibility for effective writing solely on the individual writer and as a result overlooks a complex range of other factors that influence the whether a piece of writing is judged to be good or bad.

Research Summary

Lillis (2001) suggests that rather than focusing on the student as a 'problem' to be fixed, there are a range of issues arising from the ways that universities assess writing and the expectations arising from the discipline and the university. Research in this field (Baynham, 2000; Horner and Lu, 1999; Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis, 1997, 2001; Street, 1984) has therefore challenged a skills approach, suggesting that it is important to think carefully about how subject specialists, policies and guidelines on writing or assessment and even some study skills support toolkits might contribute to the challenge of producing an effective text. This approach, referred to as the social practices approach, encourages educators to take a critical view on the guidance, support, assessment strategies and marking practices used in order to reflect on the ways in which these might contribute to the success or challenges experienced by students.

Note: The terminology may vary across universities but 'course' is used here to refer to the whole qualification or programme of study which contains several 'modules'. 'Module' is used to indicate a unit of learning within one or more assessments. Modules may be referred to in some universities as 'units' or even 'courses'.

Activity 1.3 Understanding the Guidance

The following section will introduce a range of sources of advice and guidance on assignment writing.

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If you are currently involved in a teaching programme as a student or educator, try and identify an example of a guidance document at each level.

1. How easy were they to find?
2. Did you find any duplication or contradictions in advice relevant to writing?

University-wide assessment regulations

It is usual for universities to provide assessment regulations that are applied across all subjects and qualifications. These regulations should inform students of the generic and minimum standards required of their writing in all assessments. Academic staff should refer to these regulations to make sure that guidance within a specific module or assignment is consistent. While this may seem straightforward, there may be a number of documents included in the overall university assessment regulations. For example, searching within my own university there are five documents relating to assessment regulations: an assessment handbook, rules on plagiarism, a code of practice for assessment, academic regulations and guidance for disabled students. This high-level documentation will include policies which would be applied if a student was considered to have breached them, such as regulations on academic conduct including plagiarism and cheating. All of these documents may have information relating to guidance on writing.

Course-wide assessment guidance

Some courses will provide guidance which is applied to all of the modules contained within it. This might be very similar to or make reference to the university guidance but also includes some elements that are specific to the course. Course-wide guidance may provide information on submission dates and procedures but it may also contain generic requirements around referencing and layout such as including the student's name and identifier. Course guides may also contain information on the assessment strategy. An assessment strategy provides information on the pass mark and the weighting for each assignment. The weighting refers to the proportion of the overall result that each assignment carries as illustrated in the following example of the first year of a course containing four modules (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Example of module weighting

Module	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3
A	25%	25%	50%
B	20%	30%	50%
C	50%	50%	Threshold
D	90%	10%	Threshold

In this example for Module A the final grade will be determined by calculating the proportion of the overall outcome for each assessment task. Assignment 1 would contribute 25 per cent of the final mark, assignment 2 would contribute 25 per cent and assignment 3 would contribute 50 per cent. This model is the same as in Module B but with different weightings. It is important to remember that the weighting is different from the pass mark. The minimum pass mark might be set at, for example, 40 per cent for all assignments. Depending on the regulations at your university you may need to achieve a pass (more than 40 per cent) in all assignments in order to pass the module. This is not always the case and you may achieve a pass if the average of all your marks meets the minimum pass mark.

Some assignments are not given a numerical grade, for example practice placements or practical assignments which have a simple pass/fail outcome. Such pass/fail assignments or often referred to as threshold assessments, in other words students must pass them in order to pass the module. A threshold assignment will therefore not be weighted and your 'grade' is determined based on those assignments which are marked using a numerical grade. Here is an example for Modules A and C (Tables 1.2 and 1.3) which illustrate the outcome of modules with weighted assessments where all elements of the assignment must be passed.

Table 1.2 Module A (all assignments must be passed)

	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Final outcome
Weighting	25%	25%	50%	
Student 1	60%	30%	80%	Fail (without a requirement to pass all assignments the weighted grade would have been 62%)
Student 2	60%	70%	40%	Pass with 51%
Student 3	60%	60%	60%	Pass with 60%

Table 1.3 Module C (all assignments must be passed)

	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Final outcome
Weighting	50%	50%	Threshold	
Student 1	60%	30%	Pass	Fail (without a requirement to pass all assignments the weighted grade would have been 45%)
Student 2	60%	70%	Fail	Fail (without the threshold the result would have been 65%)
Student 3	60%	60%	Pass	Pass 60%

Module-specific guidance

Specific module guidance is often the most easily accessible and the starting point for many students. Module guidance may refer students out to university and course-wide documents but also contains important and specific information about how individual assignments will be assessed. Academic assignments are normally assessed against learning outcomes. Advance HE, a UK-wide organisation that sets standards for higher education, defines learning objectives as ‘a statement of intention’ and learning outcomes as ‘a measurement of achievement’ (HEA, 2019). Module-level assessment guides will also detail the assessment tasks including word limits and submission dates. They may also include extensive advice on how to write your assignment but this will vary considerably across modules, courses and universities. Some courses may provide module-wide guidance which includes assessment and also a separate document providing specific instructions for each assignment, sometimes referred to as an assessment or assignment brief.

As Bernie discovered, applying the guidance from these resources can be a challenge but some students will struggle to even find all of the information they are expected to familiarise themselves with. How easy was it for you to find examples of guidance at the university and course level? It is not uncommon for there to be duplication of information across sources, but the problem arises where there are inconsistencies. Such inconsistencies may arise from errors, but more commonly from genuine differences in requirements between assignments and modules. There are many potential reasons for such differences, some may be intentional while others are not. For example, there can be intentionally different requirements arising from specific assignment types (such as an essay, case study, report or portfolio) but inconsistencies may arise from divergent expectations of different tutors’ departments responsible for drafting guidance. While this may sound alarming it arises from well recognised differences embedded in the ‘conventions’ of writing within individual disciplines.

Writing conventions

Academic writing conventions are the rules that govern how we are expected to write in the context of higher education. They apply to student assignments but also to writing published in books and journals. Some of these expectations are explicitly set out in written guidance, such as the assignment guidance for students discussed above or for published journal articles in the author guidelines provided by the editorial board. Table 1.4 is adapted from the list of requirements for author submission to the *British Journal of Social Work*, but most if not all of these points would be included in many undergraduate assignment guidelines:

Table 1.4 Example author guidelines

Journal author guidelines	Your own assignment guidelines?
Word length	
Referencing method	
Plagiarism policy	

Journal author guidelines	Your own assignment guidelines?
Use of literature to evidence claims	
Presentation style (word spacing, font, margins, etc.)	
Use of footnotes	
Use of appendices	
Use of key words	
Use of English (if this is the required language for submission)	
Format of figures and tables	
Layout, including use of title page and author details	
Confidentiality where data or practice is referred to	
Guidance on the use of abbreviations or acronyms	
Inclusion of critical analysis	
Structure (for example, use of introduction, conclusion and paragraphs)	
Inclusion of anti-oppressive/discriminatory perspectives	

Activity 1.4 Assignment guidance

Compare this list with the guidance on a recent assignment that you wrote or set for students. How many of these points are covered in relation to student writing?

Comment

Although it can be hard for students to navigate across guidelines on their writing, the kinds of areas listed above are normally explicitly stated. Academic writing conventions also include expectations of writing that are implicit. They do not appear in the guidelines but students can be penalised if their writing does not confirm to the expectations of the person assessing their work. These implicit expectations are also variable across individual assessors, modules, courses and universities. This can pose a challenge for students when moving between modules, courses or universities.

Research Summary

There has been considerable research into implicit academic writing conventions and the way in which these differ between disciplines or academic subjects. Lea and Stierer (2000) define academic conventions as generally accepted discipline-specific rules of writing – these include use of the first person, the structure, validity and use of evidence, the use of argument and the rules of referencing. Inconsistencies in disciplinary writing

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conventions reflect deep and significant differences in the ways in which knowledge and ideas are created and represented within disciplines. This point is illustrated by Coffin and Hewings (2003) in the following extracts from feedback on essays written by a student majoring in History and Politics on a course that also included a module on anthropology. The feedback on the left is on Paul's (not his real name) political history essay, marked by a political history tutor, the feedback on the right for an essay written for and marked by his anthropology tutor.

Paul

This is a very promising start to study of modern political history. You have argued your case well and supported it with appropriate documentary evidence . . .

Paul

You really have a problem with this essay, mainly for the reason that it is incoherent. It has no beginning, middle and end, no structure, no argument. May I suggest very strongly that you go to the study centre and make more enquiries about essay writing clinics.

(Coffin and Hewings, 2003, p45)

The feedback by the anthropology tutor does not signal disciplinary differences but rather fundamental problems with writing that result in the suggestion to seek help from the study centre. Taking Paul and Bernie's experiences together it is clear why some students can feel confused, demoralised and demotivated in their academic writing. Lea and Stierer (2000) suggest that students on practice-based courses, such as social work, face particular challenges as courses commonly include modules drawn from multiple disciplines, each with their own writing conventions. Social work courses, for example, can include modules drawn from psychology, sociology, law and social policy. These modules may be taught by subject experts from these disciplines and in some universities are delivered within different departments or even faculties. Some topics or modules within practice-based disciplines have also developed their own specific conventions. Rai (2004, 2006, Rai and Lillis, 2013) has explored the nature of academic writing in social work, in particular reflective writing for social work, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Learning the 'rules of the game', therefore, involves negotiating implicit as well as explicit writing requirements. Students need to find and negotiate formal, explicit guidelines on writing which will differ from module to module and even from assignment to assignment. Students often also encounter confusing grading and feedback from tutors which, while it might seem inconsistent, can arise from tutors conforming to disciplinary conventions that are not explained or necessarily consciously recognised by tutors.

An uneven playing field

Before you read on, review your writing on your personal language and writing histories and re-read Mark and Alisa's reflections. Despite his difficulties with spelling, Mark

completed his A levels and progressed directly to university to complete a BSc before gaining social work experience and then studying for his qualifying social work masters course. He could be described as a very traditional higher education student. Alisa's experiences were very different. Despite her motivation to study and support from her family she left school at 16, demoralised by what she experienced as a lack of support at school. She worked in various jobs and began childminding when she had a son in her mid-20s. As a single parent money was tight and she decided to look into training as a social worker. She began working as an unqualified social worker, took an Access course part time and began her training in her late 30s when her son was a young teenager. Alisa's journey into higher education is typical of 'non-traditional students'.

Non-traditional students are defined by Lillis as students who have been historically excluded from higher education. These include those who are from working-class backgrounds, mature students and students from wider linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds (2001). Lillis refers to there being an 'institutional practice of mystery' within universities which limits the participation of non-traditional students. By this she is referring to the existence of the writing conventions which underpin particular expectations of how academic knowledge is conveyed through writing which students are assumed to have acquired prior to university. Lillis refers to these ways of writing as 'conventions of literacy practice'. Put simply, students who arrive at university through a traditional route are frequently privileged in their familiarity with these conventions of writing, so many of the implicit rules of the game are already familiar, whereas non-traditional students may need to work harder to learn them. Lillis suggests that non-traditional students may have fewer opportunities to become familiar with the conventions of academic writing that students who access to higher education through more conventional routes gain over time. The gradual, incremental familiarisation with writing skills gained through systematic progression through the educational system, she suggests, advantages traditional students when they enter higher education (Lillis, 2001).

Social work has historically recruited significant numbers of students who could be described as non-traditional but over the past decade there has been an increase in fast track post graduate programmes (Hamilton, 2018). There are potential challenges in academic writing on social work programmes for both non-traditional students, as illustrated above, but also graduates from disciplines that are not closely aligned to social work. As discussed, academic writing conventions can be significantly different in particular disciplines. It can be particularly confusing for an experienced student who has performed successfully within one discipline to receive poor grades and critical feedback when writing assignments in a different discipline.

Case study

Rai (2006) reported the experiences of graduate social work students who identified the need to change the way they were accustomed to writing on previous higher education programmes studying different disciplines. One second year student participant, referred to as David, found some modules were more consistent with his previous studies, while the more practice orientated modules were very different:

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... the challenge has been I suppose not writing an academic essay... in [theory module] you would be unlikely to use the first person, I think that is basically the requirement to put the 'I' centre stage in [practice module]. I find it a little irritating... I feel that it is sufficient to demonstrate your understanding and not have to, well... the comments on the essay when you see it was that I was stand-offish. Um, I probably was but then again that's the way that I have been trained. (Student 'David')

Rai (2006: 792)

Here David is identifying a need to reflect and write in a more personal way than is expected in many disciplines. This can be challenging for experienced academic writers as it breaks some of the rules of academic writing commonly enshrined in disciplines which do not involve an application to practise. Reflective writing, for example, is commonly included in practice-based programmes such as social work. It has particular literacy conventions which can be unfamiliar to students transferring in from, for example, other social sciences such as sociology, psychology or social policy. Reflective writing will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Comment

The experiences of individual students as they embark on writing on a social work programme, therefore, will vary. There are pitfalls for both very inexperienced academic writers but also for the confident writer encountering unexpected new and contradictory conventions. Students may also discover that they find writing for some modules easier than for others. Students who are comfortable reflecting and writing about their own practice may find reflective writing much easier than students who have learnt to keep a degree of distance and objectivity (Rai, 2006).

Academic writing in the discipline of social work

As social work has developed into a discrete academic subject over the past sixty years or so, it has woven together a number of distinct disciplines together with practice learning. These individual disciplines, such as sociology, social policy and psychology, have their own established conventions around how to construct knowledge and present this in writing. This means that social work students can encounter differing expectations of their writing on individual modules or assignments, and these differences may be particularly significant where modules are taught within other departments or schools (Lyons, 1999; Baynham, 2000; Rai, 2014). While differences in writing conventions across modules is not uncommon, as we saw above with Paul's experiences in his politics and anthropology modules, it is a particularly strong feature of professional programmes such as social work and nursing:

So pity the poor nursing student, who is required to write at times like a sociologist, at others like a philosopher, yet again like a scientist and finally as a reflective practitioner.

(Baynham, 2000: 17)

The way in which social work curriculum is delivered and assessed varies considerably from university to university depending on the organisational structure of the faculties, schools and departments, as you can see in the following activity.

Activity 1.5 Where is social work taught in universities?

Try searching for 'social work' across a few university websites and make a note of the school or faculty that social work is taught in at each university. How many differences are there between universities?

Comment

Doing this search at the time of writing I found social work sited in the Department of Sociology at the University of Durham, the Department of Health Professions at Plymouth University, the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University and the School of Policy Studies at Bristol University. The departmental structure is important as it will determine whether all modules are taught within a bespoke social work curriculum area or whether some modules will be taught and assessed by lecturers in separate curriculum areas and possibly alongside students studying for different qualifications, such as sociology or psychology. The implication for writing when social work students are studying and being assessed across a range of disciplines is that they are more likely to encounter inconsistency in the expectations of their writing. This inconsistency can arise from where social work is located within the departmental structure and from the disciplinary specialisms of the lecturers setting and marking assessments. The degree of consistency will vary between universities, but even where all of the teaching is located within one department students can experience inconsistency between assessors.

While disciplinary variation can be confusing in social work writing, the centrality of practice-focused and reflective writing poses another challenge for many students. Social work programmes aim to teach students how to apply the abstract theory to practice situations. So, for example, students might learn about John Bowlby's theory of attachment (Bowlby, 1982), perhaps in a psychology module, but they would also need to demonstrate the application of this theory to their ability to understand, assesses and respond to issues of human development and parental bonding in their practice. Teaching students how to effectively apply theory to practice has posed a long-standing challenge for educators (Musson, 2017) and writing about theory in this context can also be difficult. Social work writing also frequently involves personal reflection as well as reflection on practice. The demands of reflective and practice-based writing can be considerable and will be explored in some detail in Chapter 4. Two issues that are worth briefly noting here, however, are the way in which reflective writing creates structural challenges and can potentially have an emotive impact.

Structural challenges

Much academic writing aims to be objective with the author being relatively invisible (Lillis and Rai, 2011) and one way in which this is achieved is through the avoidance of

the first person, for example 'In this essay I will . . .' When writing directly about reflections on practice, personal experience or professional development it can become clumsy to avoid using the first person, so, for example, 'The author reflected on working with Mrs X' (third person) or 'Work undertaken with Mrs X was reflected on' (passive voice). It is also somewhat artificial and contrived to imply this kind of academic distance between the author and the subject matter and for this reason there is more acceptance of the use of the first person in many social work assignments. The tenses used in reflective or practice-based writing can also be tricky as the writer will often need to appropriately use the past tense (to refer to events that have happened), present tense (to reflect on these events) and future tense to discuss future planned action (Bottomley et al., 2018). This contrasts with much academic writing, where there is an expectation that the same tense is generally used throughout.

Emotional challenges

Writing about social work practice and personal reflections frequently takes students into emotionally sensitive territory that is not common in academic writing (Lillis and Rai, 2011). Writing about emotionally sensitive experiences within a genre of writing where the author is traditionally objective can create a real tension for students. This tension is even greater because the writing is being assessed so both the feedback and grade are commonly based on a wide range of outcomes unrelated to the intrinsically emotive focus. Writing about emotive topics, such as abuse, mental illness and death is difficult enough, but when the writing is being assessed on outcomes such as correct use of language, structure, references and formulating an academic argument there is the potential for feedback to be emotionally sensitised.

Introducing CAPS

So far we have considered a number of reasons for why learning to write at university can be difficult, and why writing in social work might be particularly challenging. Throughout this book we will consider many different kinds of written text commonly used in both university and social work practice. CAPS is a mnemonic which is short for **C**ontext, **A**udience, **P**urpose and **S**elf and provides writers with a tool to use with any written task. It is particularly helpful when you encounter an unfamiliar text. The CAPS model will be applied throughout this book and will apply equally to writing tasks that are not covered here.

Context

All texts are written in a particular context and that context will have many implications for how it should be written. The two broad 'contexts' that have been discussed so far are university and practice. Both have complex organisational purposes, structures and cultures that have an impact on the conventions surrounding how students and practitioners are expected to write. These contexts will be explored in more detail

throughout this book, but there are many other contexts in which writing takes place, such as creative writing, writing in business contexts and writing for social media. You may not be consciously aware these contexts exist or that they have any influence over how you write but texts produced within institutional contexts, such as universities, in particular are influenced by some powerful norms and expectations. The academic writing conventions introduced in this chapter represent some of these norms and expectations within the context of universities.

As discussed above, it would be simplistic to assume that ‘university’ is one, homogeneous context. Universities are complex organisations with significant variation across institutions, faculties and disciplines. There are, however, some commonalities – for example, much of the writing within universities is broadly ‘academic’ and written either by students as part of their assessment or by academics as part of their role as researchers and teachers. Whether writing as a student or academic, there are both explicit and implicit ‘rules’ which govern how texts should be written which will have an impact on how effective or successful texts are considered to be. Writing in practice has similarly complex rules and expectations which are also frequently implicit.

Practice writing across social work contexts also shares some important characteristics but just as academic conventions vary across universities, disciplines and faculties, practice writing differs across localities, agencies and service user group. This can be difficult for student social workers who often gain experience of writing in one practice context during their placement and then move on to employment in a different agency or service user group where they find the expectations of how they should write are different. Experienced practitioners can encounter the same challenges which can be perhaps even more difficult where they have become skilled and confident writing in one practice context and then need to make adjustments to meet the expectations of their new team. This is not to suggest that there are no commonalities but there can be a lack of explicit guidance which means that practitioners who move between agencies or service user groups need to do some re-learning.

Context, therefore, is multi-layered and complex. Figure 1.1 captures some of this complexity in practice and academic writing contexts.

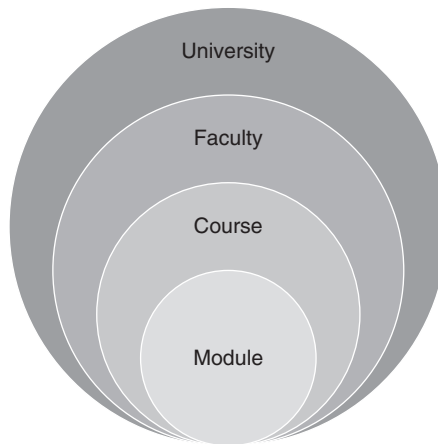


Figure 1.1 The university context

Figure 1.1 illustrates the contexts which impact on the academic writing within one university. There will be commonalities at all levels within different university faculties but there are also important differences. Figure 1.2 provides a similar illustration for practice writing.

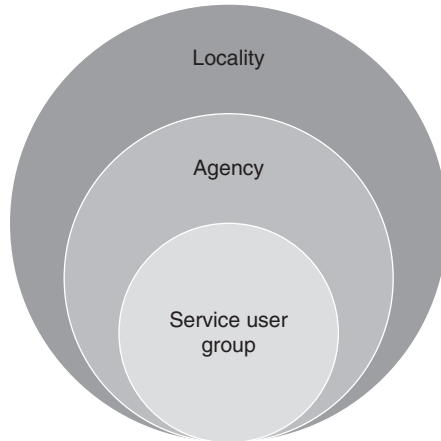


Figure 1.2 The practice context

As with the university context, there will be commonalities across all practice writing and also some within the agency, but there will be specific requirements which may differ across all of these levels.

Case Study

As a practitioner I worked in two different children and families services and then moved to an adult services team. All of these posts were within one agency, but there were significant differences between each context. My first role was within a child protection team, as it was called then, in a statutory social services team in England. I then moved to a family centre, which was jointly resourced and managed by social services and the education department. Finally I worked in a team that at the time was responsible for relocating long-term residents of hospitals for people with learning disabilities into the community. All of these teams had statutory responsibilities and there were common duties relating to data protection and access to files. Differences arose from the nature of the texts that were required and also the other agencies that each team was working closely with. The family centre included social workers and teachers, each with different roles but frequently working closely alongside each other, for example running therapeutic groups. In addition to the statutory functions of writing, such as recording and contributing to child protection assessments, the team undertook therapeutic writing alongside service users and also kept notes to facilitate planning, review and assessments within the team. The social work and teacher members of the team also had some specific requirements arising from the service that they reported to, i.e. social services or education. The community learning disability team was also multi-disciplinary and

included health service members, such as occupational therapists, community nurses and consultants. As with the family centre there were some requirements shared with statutory social work colleagues but others that aligned to the requirements of the multi-disciplinary team. In both teams there were also some expectations that related to the specific communication needs of the service user groups concerned.

Comment

Understanding the context is something you will learn as you become familiar with working in a particular role or team. Effective writing will have much in common with practice in a particular context but there may also be legislation or policy guidance that you will need to identify and familiarise yourself with.

Audience

The audience for your writing is the person who you are writing it for or who you intend to read it. For personal correspondence, such as emails or SMS texts, this is normally quite straightforward as the message is addressed to one or a selected number of specific recipients. Think for a moment about the audience for a novel or a newspaper article – both novelists and journalists are writing for many people who they are unlikely to meet, so how do you think that they adjust their writing for a specific audience? Both journalists and novelists need to think about a range of features such as age and level of education. Novelists might also make assumptions about the particular interests of their audience while for many journalists it is important to consider the politics or values presumed to be common in the target audience. The audience for a student assignment is very tricky. Some students will know who is marking their assignment and they might try and write in a way which they believe the marker will approve of and therefore reward with good marks. Many universities use anonymous marking or multiple markers so that the student does not know the individual they are writing for. Both scenarios can be problematic, and the significance of audience for assessed academic writing will be considered in more detail throughout Part One of this book.

Activity 1.6 Audiences

Have a look at the following list of potential audiences. What issues might you need to think about for each of them?

- 10-year-old looked-after child
- Colleague from education
- Family carer
- Line manager
- Prospective foster carers

(Continued)

(Continued)

- Magistrate
- Adult with a learning disability
- GP

The audience in practice writing is also complex, but for different reasons. Many social work texts have multiple audiences and it is not always clear at the time of writing who these may be in the future. The nature of these audiences varies considerably too; for example, an assessment report might be intended to inform a judge, fellow professionals, parents and a child. The demands and some techniques for addressing multiple audiences are considered in Part Two.

Comment

The issues you would consider when writing for each of these audiences are very similar to those you would consider for communicating in any other way, for example taking into consideration the level of understanding and the implications of this on the vocabulary you use. Writing has an additional layer of complexity in that it can be read by different audiences and these are not always predictable at the time of writing. This might have an impact on not only what information is included in a text but also how this information is presented. One example of an agency responding to the challenge of audiences with different needs is the Islington Independent Reviewing Officer team, who review the needs of looked-after children and have developed an approach to report writing which addresses the child rather than adults the who will also read the report. This is an interesting approach which is considered in more detail in Chapter 8. Decisions about who the primary audience is are influenced by the purpose of the text.

Purpose

It might sound simple to ask what the purpose of a text is but it is very important to think carefully about why you are writing a particular text and what is it intended to achieve. In the practice context written texts have many purposes including institutional accountability, informing decision-making and maintaining records of decisions. Some texts have a statutory function, some are – at least in part – therapeutic and most are integral aspects of social work practice. It can be all too easy, however, to undertake a particular written task because it is procedurally required without thinking too much about the purpose and intended outcomes of writing it.

Activity 1.7 The purpose of assessment

Think for a moment about how you would describe the purpose of an academic assignment. Try to think of a specific assignment that you are familiar with. Why do you think this particular assignment has been designed as it has? What should be demonstrated by writing it? Do you think that it has the same purpose for the student as for the assessor?

Comment

In broad terms the purpose of academic assignments in social work is to assess the ability of the student to demonstrate competence in order to gain credit and, ultimately, professional recognition. This high-level purpose is unlikely to help students write a specific assignment effectively, so it is important to drill down to a deeper level of purpose, for example by examining the learning outcomes underpinning the assignment. Every academic assignment will provide students with a description of the task and the learning outcomes or assessment criteria that the writing will be assessed against. This information should help students to provide what the assessor is looking for and what will gain them the marks needed to pass and gain better grades. The reality of assessment is more complex than this and will be discussed in detail throughout Part One, but this formal guidance is an important starting place. Writing assignments is not only about passing and gaining credit, it is also about learning. Some assignments will not contribute to gaining credit and may not be graded – these are called ‘formative’ assignments as opposed to ‘summative’ assignments which are assessed and graded. The purposes of a formative assignment include providing an opportunity for practising and gaining feedback without the risks involved in summative assessment.

Activity 1.8 Your assignment guidance

If you have access to the assignment guidance for a course have a look at each assignment and try to find the following elements:

1. A description of the task
2. Learning outcomes
3. Aims
4. Assessment or grading criteria

Comment

How easy was it to find this information? Did all of the assignments contain the same elements and were they easy to understand? Do you think that you would understand what the purpose of the assignment was based on this guidance?

Whatever the format of the guidance, courses should provide a clear explanation of the task and how it will be assessed. Students should be clear about whether the assessment is formative or summative and the elements that they will be assessed on. The complexity arises as some elements of academic writing are not explicitly articulated, as discussed above. This is not necessarily a result of a lack of care by the staff writing the guidance, but the subtle assumptions that are made about what constitutes ‘good writing’ or the network of guidance that sits in different places.

Self

The final domain to consider is you, the writer. Your identity as a writer will be a theme that will run through this book and is closely associated with encouraging you to think about writing primarily as a form of communication.

Research Summary

Research on writer identity, drawing on the work of Goffman (1956), suggests that just as we play roles in different social interactions, we play roles in our writing too (Ivanič 1998). Ivanič suggests that writers can at different times present different aspects of their identity in their writing which she refers to as the 'autobiographical' self, the 'discoursal' self and the 'authorial' self. The autobiographical self draws on the writer's personal history, values and beliefs. The activities at the beginning of this chapter reflect some aspects of the autobiographical self but it can include anything about who you are as an individual and all of the past and present experiences that contribute to who you are as a person and as a writer. Identity is a complex concept but one that is important both in social work and when thinking about writing. One important aspect is that identity is not single, uniform or static. Our identities change and shift over time and encompass the many facets of who we are. Not all of these identities, or aspects of our identity, are of equal significance at all times or in all contexts. Bruner (1957) proposed the concept of 'salience' to describe the ways in which identities come to prominence in particular circumstances, with some remaining to the fore most of the time. An example would be that my identity as a woman is persistently salient, while my identity as a dog lover or an academic researcher only become salient in particular contexts and encounters. While the autobiographical self in writing potentially encompasses all of our experience, some aspects of our identity and experience will be salient, or significant, in a particular context. The autobiographical self will change over time but will not differ significantly from text to text, unlike the 'discoursal self' and 'self as author'. Ivanič suggests that the writer's knowledge, values and engagement with the context of the text are reflected through their discoursal self, sometimes unconsciously. The self as author relates to the conscious creation of an argument or representation of beliefs by the author. Ivanič suggests that the self as author is achieved when the writer gains a level of expertise and confidence in their writing and articulation of the subject.

I will illustrate the way in which all three selves can play out in a text in the context of a newly qualified social worker I will call Mark writing an assessment report in professional practice.

Case Study

Mark's autobiographical self potentially includes everything about his identity and past experiences, but of particular relevance will be how he sees himself as a

writer and the personal values and beliefs he holds. Mark's autobiographical self will be an influence on everything he writes although it may change and develop over time. Mark's discursal self reflects his professional knowledge and values applied to, in this example, an assessment report. There could be contradictions between Mark's autobiographical self and his professional role, for example Mark's political views, values or personal experience may result in a desire to provide a service in a way which is not possible within the constraints of the agency that he works for, perhaps due to budget restrictions for example. As a newly qualified worker Mark may not yet have developed an authorial self, particularly with a complex text like an assessment report. He may still be learning the nuances of writing an effective report within this context and confidently using his knowledge, values and ability to analyse complex information to present a professional judgement.

Don't worry if the concepts of autobiographical, discursal and authorial selves seem a little confusing just now, they will be revisited throughout this book. Reflection on 'Self' for the purposes of thinking about CAPS involves reflecting on who am I writing as in this particular text. Often you may be writing from more than one position, and this applies to both academic and professional texts. As I write this I am writing as someone who used to practise as a social worker, a social work educator, a researcher, an author but also as someone who is on the same learning journey as you, trying to communicate ideas as effectively as I can.

Using CAPS to understand the demands of a new text

The reason that this book encourages writers to use CAPS as a tool for writing is that there are so many different text types which in turn vary from context to context. Writing an 'essay' is not the same on all courses in all universities: writing an assessment report for one agency in the context of mental health services will differ from a looked-after child assessment in the same agency but also from a mental health assessment in a different agency. There are of course some common threads in effective writing in both academic and professional contexts, but it would be misleading to suggest that it was possible to teach how to write a good essay or an effective assessment report in all contexts. Such a generic approach also leaves out the two most important players in written communication, the writer and the reader.

As you gain experience and confidence as a writer CAPS will become unconscious, and you will gain familiarity and confidence in your writing applied to a wider diversity of texts. CAPS is a tool to help less experienced writers, or writers encountering unfamiliar text types, to reflect on how to construct a piece of writing that will be as effective as possible for a particular context, purpose and audience. The following activity provides a step-by-step framework for using CAPS in both the academic and practice context.

Activity 1.9

Using CAPS in the academic context

1. Context questions

- (a) What is the question or brief? What are you being asked to do?
- (b) What are the learning outcomes or assessment criteria? Is there a marking grid or other guidance on what marks are given for and what might be penalised?
- (c) Is there general guidance at course, faculty or university level on how to write this particular kind of assignment, for example on referencing/academic conduct/plagiarism, formatting and layout or submission procedures?
- (d) Is there specific guidance for this assignment such as on word length, sources of evidence or reflections to include layout or the use of the first person?

2. Audience questions

- (a) Who will be marking your work? Have they marked and given feedback on previous assessments and do you know what they expect from your writing?
- (b) Will the assignment be double marked? Do you know how this works and what the purpose is?
- (c) Do you understand who your marker expects you to think of when you write your assignment? What assumptions can you make about the reader's understanding of the subject?

3. Purpose questions

- (a) Is the assignment summative or formative, in other words does it contribute towards your final mark or is it for the purpose of feedback and learning only?
- (b) How does this assignment contribute to your assessment on the course overall and why are you being asked to write it?
- (c) What knowledge, skills, values or reflections does this assignment require you to demonstrate?
- (d) What mark do you need to get to pass or progress with your course?
- (e) What do you personally want to achieve with this assignment?

4. Self-questions

- (a) How do you feel about your writing at the moment and this particular assignment? How confident are you and do you have any particular concerns? Is there anything that worries you and do you know what you can do about any concerns?
- (b) What have you learnt from previous assignments, either writing them or the feedback you received?
- (c) What knowledge, values, skills or experiences can you draw on to write this assignment?
- (d) What support do you have available to help you write?

Using CAPS in the practice context

1. Context questions

- (a) Is there any guidance on writing this particular text type? Are there any local or national policies you should refer to?
- (b) Do you need to draw on or refer to any legislation?

- (c) Does the agency you work for have any generic guidance on writing?
- (d) Does anyone need to sign off or approve your document?
- (e) Should other people contribute to writing the document?
- (f) Do you need to write the document using a digital system or template?

2. Audience questions

- (a) Who are you writing the document for?
- (b) Will it be read by more than one person?
- (c) What should you take into account in terms of making sure the document is accessible to everyone who needs to read it?
- (d) Are there specific issues of confidentiality you need to be aware of in terms of who will read all or part of the document?

3. Purpose questions

- (a) What do you want or need to achieve with this document?
- (b) What outcomes do you anticipate or plan to come from writing the document?
- (c) How will the document be used, now and potentially in the future?
- (d) Do you need to draw on or make links to other documents?

4. Self-questions

- (a) How do you feel about your writing at the moment and this particular document? How confident are you and do you have any particular concerns? Is there anything that worries you and do you know what you can do about any concerns?
- (b) What have you learnt from previous similar texts, either writing them or the feedback you received?
- (c) What knowledge, values, skills or experiences can you draw on to write this document?
- (d) What support do you have available to help you write and give you feedback?

These questions are not exhaustive and some may be irrelevant to a particular writing task, but they give you a starting point to reflect on how to plan and get started. You may want to use this as no more than a mental checklist, but you might find it helpful with some texts to use the questions as a reflective activity to help you plan your writing. If you keep a note of your planning, this can provide a useful resource to refer back to next time you write a similar text. As you read on CAPS will be considered in more detail in relation to specific kinds of writing in both the academic and practice contexts.

Chapter summary

In this chapter we have introduced the approach to writing that will be revisited throughout this book. You have reflected on who you are as a writer and how this might impact on your writings. We have explored how implicit and explicit expectations and guidance on academic writing and how to respond to the criteria which sets how your writing is judged. You have also been introduced to CAPS and the theory which underpins this

approach to writing. You will return to CAPS in each chapter and explore how this can be applied to help you adapt your writing to different purposes and contexts.

Further reading

Coffin, C and Hewings, A (2003) Writing for different disciplines. In C. Coffin, M. Curry, S Goodman, A Hewings, TM Lillis and J Swann, *Teaching Academic Writing: A Toolkit for Higher Education*. London: Routledge.

This reading is useful if you would like to understand more about writing in different academic disciplines. If you are interested in reading further on writing at university outside of social work this book as a whole gives a good introduction but is a little more challenging than Crème and Lea (2008).

Crème, P and Lea, M (2008) *Writing at University: A Guide for Students*. Open University Press.

This is an excellent introductory book aimed at undergraduate students and provides guidance on writing at university.

Rai, L (2020) Writing skills for social workers. In J. Parker (ed.) *Introducing Social Work*. London: Sage.

This chapter gives an overview of the approach introduced in this chapter and goes into a little more detail about the research that underpins it.