



WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Writing in Social Work

The Hunter College social work curriculum is divided into four major methods: Casework, Group Work, Community Organizing and Planning, and Administration. As a student, you will encounter specific assignments for each of these major methods as well as for particular courses in the school's core curriculum such as Human Behavior and the Social Environment, Social Research, and Professional Seminar and Social Policy. In most cases, an instructor will require that you document your written assignments using **APA (American Psychological Association)** format for reference citations in text and for your References section, which appears as a list alphabetically arranged by author, at the end of your paper. Familiarizing yourself with this format and having examples of it by your side while you are writing is a valuable strategy.

The social work curriculum entails a significant amount of both writing and research. You will encounter assignments as varied as **research papers, research design proposals, literature reviews, and observational reports and case study analyses**. It is important for you to understand the general stipulations of each of these types of writing assignments as well as be prepared to assess and work with the particular terms of each instructor's assignments. In some classes, such as Social Work Research, which is required of every matriculated student, your instructor will provide detailed information of the parameters and expectations for your writing assignment. However, paper requirements will often vary among different classes and instructors, and matters of style, format, and length need to be addressed.

RESEARCH PAPERS

In most classes, you will be assigned research papers, which may range from a relatively short assignment, 5-7 pages, to a longer, more complicated assignment, 15-20 pages. Regardless of length, a research paper requires a plan; when you receive the assignment from your instructor, you will need to begin your process of critical thinking on the subject matter.

Choosing a Topic

It is usually a good idea to do some reading on the general topic before you begin to narrow your topic area. That way, you will be better prepared to proceed with your research. If you are given a free range of choice for your research topic, you will find that the following suggestions for this selection process are helpful.

- select a topic that is personally and professionally stimulating to you: something that is close to your heart and or your experience;
or
- select a topic that offers a new challenge to you, a subject area that may be relevant to your professional work in the future;
and always
- select a topic that is “researchable.” If you choose a subject area that is too broad, your research will be confusing and time consuming, and, in most cases, inadequate in response to the assignment. The subject matter for your research paper must offer a sharp focus. Therefore, at an early stage in your research and writing, you will have to streamline your thinking.

Primary and Secondary Sources

In the field of Social Work, you will be expected to cite and document your sources according to APA guidelines. While researching your topic, be aware that there are two types of sources available: primary and secondary.

- **Primary sources** are “first-hand” sources, such as interviews, case studies, conference papers, and raw data.
- **Secondary sources**, such as textbooks, journal articles, and scholarly essays, provide information written about primary sources. In a research paper, it is necessary to use secondary sources—the thoughts and interpretations of others—but it is also essential to evaluate and analyze them.

Your instructor may specify which type of source will be useful for your assignment, but, in general, using both primary and secondary sources is appropriate.

Direct Quotation and Paraphrase

If you have included the exact words of an author, you are using a direct quotation. These directly taken words must have quotation marks placed around them, and you must also provide citation information: the author's name and the year of publication.

If you have used the idea of an author but have communicated that idea in your own words, you are employing a paraphrase, which does not receive quotation marks, but does—and this is very important to follow—receive the same citation information as a direct quotation. Always provide a citation to someone else’s writing or ideas—whether the words come from your professor, a text, a film, an interview, or online.

In the field of social work, you will frequently be required to paraphrase an author's thoughts. Paraphrasing is an important and necessary critical thinking and writing skill for academics and practitioners in this field (and others as well). Since paraphrasing demands that you, in effect, put the author's ideas into your own words, it also means that you must fully understand what the author is communicating and be able to express this meaning in your own words. This is not the same as using a thesaurus and changing each word to a corresponding synonym. Therefore, it is necessary to practice the skill of paraphrasing, which can be done alone or, better still, with a partner.

- **Practice Exercise**

Select a short passage from a theorist in your field and verbalize what the author(s) is communicating. Begin by allowing yourself the time and freedom to use comfortable language (rather than terminology found in your discipline—if you are not yet familiar with it). Make sure your partner understands what you are saying, and then read the author's exact words and decide whether or not you have articulated the same idea but have found your own way of saying it. Next, write down your paraphrase, and then read your written words aloud. Finally, go back to your written paraphrase and compare it, side-by-side, with the author's words. At this stage, you must determine whether or not you have borrowed a significant amount of text from the author—this would still be considered plagiarism. If you feel there is a word or short phrase that must remain in its original form, place quotation marks around it.

Unintentional Plagiarism

Some writers say that while they are writing a draft of their paper, they incorporate general ideas from authors' texts, which are not situated right in front of them. Doing this is not advisable since unintentional plagiarism—taking without acknowledgement the words and ideas of other authors—will almost certainly occur. Sometimes, we absorb an author's thoughts so naturally and thoroughly that we lose track of where the idea came from: ourselves or someone else? It is important to check our writing to make sure that we give credit to other writers if we have used their ideas. Moreover, ethically, you are obliged to represent authors' ideas accurately, and even if you are giving them citation credit, it is all too easy to misrepresent their thoughts unless you have their words before you. Therefore, an efficient note-taking system is a significant consideration during your writing preparation. While you are reading and taking notes, you need to specify the author, text, page number—and even paragraph—from which your commentary has resulted.

Documentation

You must refer to authors by their surname, not including their first name or the title of their article or book. This information (first name and title) will be presented in the References section at the end of your paper. If you use the author's surname or refer to authors or researchers in the sentence containing their words or ideas, you must include, in parentheses directly following the name or assigned reference, the year of publication. If you provide a

paraphrase or direct quotation without mentioning the name or referring to an author or researcher, you must include the author(s) name and the year of publication in parentheses at the end of that section or sentence.

When you are using secondary sources, you will always come across authors who are quoting and paraphrasing other authors. When you encounter this type of citation, you must remember that the words (be they directly quoted or paraphrased) you have chosen to use from your secondary source do not come from the original source; they have been presented to you via your secondary source. Therefore, your responsibility is to cite and document the secondary source you have in your hands. This holds true for your References section as well. If you are directly quoting what your secondary source has, in turn, quoted from an original source, you must include the secondary source's name and the year of the text's publication.

For example, in the following passage, Spinelli has directly quoted Rollo May:

Rollo May's (as cited in Spinelli, 1989) suggestion that "We need a form of psychology that does not dwell on behavior to the exclusion of experience" helps clinicians to approach clients in a more holistic frame.

Note: In the above example, your secondary source is Spinelli, who has directly quoted Rollo May; therefore, you must provide the citation information for Spinelli's text. The same citation information would apply to a paraphrase, but you would not need the quotation marks, only the correct citation information.

Using Outlines

Depending on your writing and organizational style, preparing an outline of your paper is a good way to organize your thoughts. In some cases, an outline is required by the instructor as part of the assignment and must be included in the paper. An outline can also be an excellent tool if you have any questions or doubts about your handling of the subject matter because you can show it to an instructor or writing tutor for advice. Don't worry if you don't follow your outline exactly, it will most likely change once you begin writing.

Parts of the Research Paper

A research paper has an introduction, which presents your subject matter and also clearly states your thesis statement or central idea. Thus, the introduction informs your readers of what you will be writing about in the rest of your paper. The body of the paper incorporates your research findings, expounds a thoughtful evaluation of your sources, and, overall, provides substantial evidence for your thesis statement. The conclusion, which closes the paper, may sum up your thesis or central idea, but it is not a word-by-word copy of what you have written in the introduction since the conclusion should reinforce your research finding.

RESEARCH DESIGN PROPOSALS

As part of the core curriculum, you will take Social Work Research Methods, a two-semester course in which you will learn basic research methodology. You will learn about empirical research, problem identification and formulation, literature reviews, definitions, and measurements of variables, which will cumulate with a final research proposal. The final written proposal will include these sections:

- Statement of the research problem and its relevance to social work research, practice, or policy
- Review of related literature
- Research methodology including design and sampling plan
- Definition and measurement of study variables
- Data collection plan and description of instruments to be used
- Plan for protection of human subjects including informed consent and voluntary participation

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a literature review, you will summarize the selected literature of your chosen topic, an activity that will be called upon for other assignments as well. Each summary will present the overall purpose of the work, and the most important information contained in the source. If you are asked to critique the literature, it is important to not only summarize but also to evaluate the literature, analyze it, and explain how you feel about the work. You might, for example, consider if the author(s) has good resources to support the thesis, if there were problems, experimental errors, biases, or concepts not addressed, and, if so, why you think this is the case.

OBSERVATION REPORTS AND CASE STUDY ANALYSES

In your first semester of Human Behavior and the Social Environment, you will most likely encounter an assignment that involves observing the behaviors of others, analyzing and interpreting behaviors, and linking your findings to relevant literature and research.

While this assignment varies in design, there are some general guidelines to follow.

- There will be a list of questions to answer about each of your observations.
- It may be helpful to answer each question specifically although your final draft should do so in paragraph form, not as a numbered list of questions and answers.

- Start by presenting the general information concerning the observation. This refers to the so-called “who, what, and where” of observing: Whom did you observe? What did you observe? Where did the observation take place? This is similar to the presentation of a case study of a client(s) or community with which you are working.
- After you present the observation, you will answer each question in paragraph form, referring both to the observation you have presented and the links to the literature that support your analysis or interpretation.
- As in a research paper, you should adhere to APA citation and cite all references to the literature. This is very important. If you do not cite these references, you are committing plagiarism.

Citing and Documenting Sources

In your References section, you must alphabetically arrange all your sources, according to APA documentation guidelines. Your instructor may also require an annotated bibliography, in which you provide a concise and clear summary of each source used.

Following are some examples of APA documentation style: citing sources in your writing and listing sources in your References section.

In-text citation

A paraphrase of a text with two authors:

Ex-mental patients released from institutions but given no follow-up care will almost surely fail to cope with the stresses of living on their own (Bassuk & Gerson, 1978).
or

Bassuk and Gerson (1978) hold out little hope for ex-mental patients who are released from institutions but are given no follow-up care.

Listing sources in your References section

A journal with one author:

Stoner, M. (1999). Life after foster care: Services and policies for former foster youth. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 26(4). 159-175.

A journal with three authors:

Scannapieco, M., Schagrin, J., & Scannapieco, T. (1995). Independent living programs: Do they make a difference? *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 12(5). 381-389.

A separately paginated issue of a periodical article:

Bassuk, E. L., & Gerson, S. (1978, February). Deinstitutionalization and mental health services. *Scientific American*, pp. 46-53.

GETTING HELP WITH YOUR WRITING

If you have a problem with an assignment, seek guidance. Ask questions of your instructor if you are uncertain about what is expected. Furthermore, in preparing outlines and drafts, it is constructive, and oftentimes necessary, to review your writing with an instructor, tutor, or colleague, who will provide you with feedback. **The Hunter College RWC** provides students with peer tutors, with whom you can work individually during any stage—from outline to final draft—of your writing process. We are located on the 7th floor of the Leon and Toby Cooperman Library in the Silverstein Student Success Center at the 68th Street campus.