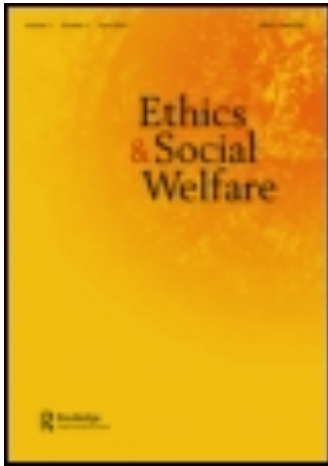


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Ethical Professional Writing in Social Work and Human Services

**Donna McDonald, Jennifer Boddy,
Katy O'Callaghan and Polly Chester**

Social workers write a lot and their writing has a major impact on people's lives. The complexity of their writing task arises because they must deal with confidential client information while usually writing for multiple audiences. This means that social work students must achieve more than the basics of technical writing skills. The purpose of this article is twofold. First, after reviewing the literature on the importance and challenges of writing well in social work (and having hosted a number of writing workshops for social workers and human services practitioners), we argue that the development of students' writing skills must be framed within the social, political and ethical professional circumstances in which students will be working in the future. By teaching writing skills through the lens of the profession's ethics and values, students will be instilled with a greater understanding of the importance of writing. Second, we propose a model of ethical professional writing which integrates three essential elements that must conjoin in tandem: reflective mindfulness of the client-centred focus of writing responsibilities; a sound understanding of the values and principles of the social work and human services professions as highlighted in the unifying themes in various codes of ethics; and competence in compositional, rhetorical and technical writing skills. In particular, this article focuses on the second element of this model which is concerned with having a sound understanding of the values and principles of ethical professional writing. We conclude that this framework will promote writing competence and benefit clients.

Keywords: Ethical professional writing; client-centred writing; writing values and principles

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A great writer has a high respect for values. (André Maurois, *The Art of Writing*)

We all write. While writing is a crucial daily activity for social workers, the issues identified in this article are relevant to all professions who serve people in their core role. On any given day at work, we might write emails, reports, letters and briefs for our managers, case file notes, case plans, funding applications, submissions and so the list goes on. The single unifying feature of all that writing is its subject: ‘the client’. That client might be a whole population cohort such as people with disabilities in need of support services or Indigenous peoples living in remote areas; children at risk of family violence; migrants seeking access to health services; or the client might be a single individual—perhaps the next person on the ‘must contact’ list.

If our observations, judgements and recommendations are not clearly conveyed in our writing, serious repercussions can—and do—arise for our clients. Social workers must write well to pursue social justice with competence and integrity. Indeed, mindfulness in *how* and *why* we write as well as *what* we write reflects our commitment to the values and ethics of professional practice.

Despite agreement in the literature about the importance of writing (see Bender and Windsor 2010; Cuthbert and Spark 2008; Healy and Mulholland 2007; Heron and Murray 2004; Luiselli 2010; Malekoff 1999, 2006; Staudt, Dulmus, and Bennett 2003; Steinberg 2007), our experience tells us that students are still graduating without the overall writing proficiency to equip them for the breadth of professional situations they are likely to face. While the acquisition of technical writing skills provides a basis for a degree of grammatical proficiency, students need more than this.

After reviewing the literature on why writing is important in social work and why it is difficult to do (and having hosted a number of writing workshops for social workers and human services practitioners), we argue that writing skills must be framed within the social, political and ethical professional circumstances in which students will be working in the future *in addition to* the technical framework which is most often used. Social workers work within the context of a prescribed set of ethics, values and responsibilities. We therefore propose a model for ethical professional writing which recognises that, by teaching writing skills through the lens of the profession’s ethics and values, students will be instilled with a greater understanding of the weight of responsibility they bear for their clients every time they write, even if it is just a one sentence email written in haste.

Why Good Writing Matters in Social Work and Why it is Difficult to Do

Social workers tend to think of themselves as ‘people people’ and most understand the importance of verbal communication. They also write a lot and their writing has a major impact on people’s lives (Dunlap 1997; Glicken 2008). One study found social workers spent between 15 and 20 per cent of their time

on writing tasks (Carney and Koncel 1994). They write in several genres including formal documents such as annual reports, grant proposals and programme evaluations; marketing materials such as brochures and descriptions of services; organisational guides such as agency manuals; academic portfolios including lecture notes, conference presentations and journal articles; and social work records and case notes. Much of this writing, particularly agency documentation, tends to be seen as an administrative task, an unnecessary burden or a necessary evil, and is resisted by many social workers (Cumming et al. 2007; Gelman 1992; Waller, Carroll, and Roemer 1996).

Carney and Koncel (1994) note that social workers' writing is the major mode of communication about a client to clinicians, insurance companies, courts and government agencies, and it stays in the client's record for life. Falk and Ross (2001) state, 'Social workers who can write a well-constructed report, a clear description of a client, or a persuasive memorandum or letter are more effective at serving the interests of their client' (125) and all those who are working to assist that client.

Significantly—and this is not always sufficiently understood by novice or even experienced social workers—those social work reports do more than 'communicate'. They also have the power, long past their original purpose, to shape the lives of people (D'Cruz 2004). Social work reports not only address their intended audiences in a particular (and perhaps local) organisation for a specific purpose in the immediate present, but they also have the potential to reach unintended, unforeseen audiences in entirely unpredictable circumstances across vast geographies of space, down the multitude of years in time—even many decades later. Consider, for example, those historic, damning case file notes written in the twentieth century about Aboriginal Australian children stolen from their families (HREOC 1997) or about babies forcibly taken for adoption from their young mothers even while they were still in hospital (see Australian Government Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2012). Thus, case file notes are powerful. Things written in administrative haste or case-load fatigue may result in carelessly consigning the prospects of a client to an unforeseen fate.

Alter and Adkins (2006) assert that writing has never been more important for professional social work:

[I]t is not overly dramatic to say that the lives of clients can be significantly diminished by a social workers' inability to write well, or significantly enhanced by strong writing proficiency in social workers. (493)

Organisations and agencies are increasingly required to respond to risk and high levels of accountability (Cumming et al. 2007; Gelman 1992; Oglensky and Davidson 2009). In a review of social worker documentation practices in a hospital, Cumming et al. (2007) concluded that written communication is an area of potential ethical risk and needs to be seen as an 'integral part of clinical practice and not an administrative side-task' (254).

Language must be precise to avoid misconceptions. These misconceptions can be perpetuated over a person's lifetime. This was illustrated during one of our ethical writing workshops when an example of careless writing (and it has to be said, careless reading by subsequent social workers; indeed, the task of responsible reading is a prospective area for further research) was provided by an Australian child protection worker as follows:

A social worker describing a family situation noted in her case notes that a 'touching event' had occurred between a 12 year old boy and his 10 year old stepsister. However, when that boy was 14 years old, a new social worker was called to the family home for an entirely different reason, and in writing up her case notes referred to the event of two years earlier as 'sexualized behavior'. A visit by a third social worker a further two years later resulted in the boy's records being updated to label him as a 'sex offender' based on her reading of the one 'touching event' recorded four years earlier. The boy, by now 16 years old, was forbidden to be left alone with his 14 year old sister—even though no further comment or complaint about 'touching', let alone 'sex offences', had been made by any family member. (Child Protection Workshop notes, 16 May 2012)

Even simple documentation tasks are not necessarily managed well by social workers. Social work records have been found to contain contradictory opinions, crude judgements, rumours and unsubstantiated allegations (Gelman 1992). This was demonstrated in one of our ethical writing workshops, where an Australian child protection worker described an incident where the social worker had not described his or her observations in an objective manner:

A report to the Child Safety Department from a community agency referred a family to the Child Safety Department on the basis that the family's home was 'a cess-pit' and 'unhygienic'. Upon reading the report, a Departmental case worker decided to visit the house to ensure the children living there were safe. The case worker discovered that, while the house needed some maintenance and was somewhat untidy due to the presence of three young children, there was no evidence that it was unclean or unsafe. (Child Protection workshop notes, 16 May 2012)

While clients are the main beneficiaries—or unintended victims—of social workers' writing, writing also provides an opportunity for learning and influencing professional practice through the publication and dissemination of research (Heron and Murray 2004). Scholarly writing by social workers allows those who work directly with clients to have a voice in academic and policy debates (Heron and Murray 2004).

As well as being important to the client and the profession, the practice of writing brings professional benefits to the writers themselves. Writing can help social workers develop a professional identity and learn the ropes of the job through the processes of information gathering, hypothesis generation, analysis, evaluation and reflection (Oglensky and Davidson 2009). This professional socialisation happens through 'the acquisition of values, attitudes, skills and

knowledge pertaining to a professional subculture'. Miller (1991) extols the role of writing in professional socialisation, whereby:

the individual must learn the common sense of the professional community ... such practical awareness is particularly essential to learning how to talk and write like a professional. (58)

Miller says professional writing is about 'constructing shared knowledge' and allows the writer to 'question and act on shared problems through language'. It is a means of 'reflecting on oneself and acting on one's world' (69).

At the same time, Miller chafes at 'the limitations of formulaic approaches to written products and processes ... outside the classroom' (58). He astutely observes that 'problems and audiences have histories and the novice [student writer] cannot easily draw on the shared practical wisdom that the community has developed to address such problems' (58). Miller's complaint about 'formulaic approaches' strikes at the nub of the issue. Effective writers need more than grammar. They need the reflexive mindset of ethics, values and accountability to transform their writing from a paper-based product to a dynamic process that best serves their clients.

The Importance of Ethical Professional Writing

The need for more effective teaching of writing during undergraduate and graduate degree programmes is a long-held concern. Over two decades ago, Simon and Soven (1990) found evidence of writing deficiencies amongst social work students and practitioners, and they advocated the inclusion of more and different writing instruction in social work programmes. In 1992, Reynolds et al. also suggested writing instruction in a variety of forms for social workers, so they can 'become more fully aware of rhetorical situations and navigate their inherent complexities' (xvi). In 2001, an American survey of staff in 21 social work schools found a significant proportion of social work students lacked the writing skills to carry out their social work responsibilities effectively (Falk and Ross 2001). Other researchers in the USA have noted a decline in writing skills amongst social work students, and that the lack of focus on writing skills has been a gap in their professional training (Alter and Adkins 2001; Oglensky and Davidson 2009; Waller, Carroll, and Roemer 1996).

A 2004 survey by Carney and Koncel found that social workers struggled with three particular writing challenges: working with confidential information, producing under tight time constraints and writing for multiple audiences. Their most difficult tasks were assessments, letters and evaluations where all three challenges have to be balanced concurrently. Social workers also reported their difficulties in exercising discretion about the client's best interest when deciding what to include in letters to advocate for the client without harming the therapeutic relationship or revealing information that might be potentially harmful to clients and what language to use to convey subtle nuances of a

client's character and the complexities of their life. The survey respondents said the easiest tasks were short, formulaic and objective or written to a single audience such as case records (Carney and Koncel 1994). However, there is no such thing as a single audience. Social workers need to understand 'the tensions and complications that results when almost everything they write will have multiple audiences, purposes and uses' (Reynolds, Mair, and Fishcer 1992, 2).

Most professional writing courses are based on the foundation skills of grammar. In this way, the focus for developing writing skills is on the 'how' of writing, rather than the 'why' of writing. Thus, the technique and technology of writing are emphasised rather than the rationale, benefits or consequences of effective writing for clients. Such an approach ignores the legal, political and ethical dimensions and implications of writing. As social work educators, we have observed that students are unaware of the impact of their writing—for better or worse—on their clients. Even when students have at least a passing familiarity with the foundation skills of grammar, many appear to lack mindfulness of the values and principles underpinning professional writing. A study of 24,000 US undergraduates by sociologists Arum and Roksa (2011) supports this observation. Their study found a loss or diminishment of skills in writing, cultural awareness, political participation and critical thinking by students.

Oglensky and Davidson (2009) who contend that 'the process of mastering a clinical writing genre also requires students to understand and employ essential professional thought processes, practices, and norms' (139) designed a writing course for social workers that combined practical writing skills with their professional values. Their approach was to strengthen writing ability while simultaneously promoting habits of thinking and practice that instil professional identity and discipline in students who will soon be employed as social workers.

A similar approach was adopted by Falk and Ross (2001) who developed a framework that integrates 'instruction on writing with acquisition of social work knowledge, values and skills and the development of the professional self' (125). Their Integrative Approach lists nine purposes of writing for social workers—including, among other things, to describe, analyse, be accountable and persuade—and links these with writing and social work skills. For example, one purpose of writing is to 'understand and care for the self' (127). This can be practised through reflective writing, personal journaling and free writing. Such a process would assist writers with getting started with writing, overcoming barriers to writing, writing freely and self-knowledge. Falk and Ross (2001) say this approach helps students see the centrality of writing to social work. 'It puts writing at centre stage, demanding attention, practice and mastery' (139).

Our Approach to Ethical Professional Writing

Similar to Falk and Ross who identify a relationship between writing and the acquisition of social work knowledge and values, and like Oglensky and Davidson, we believe that a values-based approach to writing is the pathway for improving

students' professional writing skills. However, we depart from Oglensky and Davidson who focus exclusively on report and record writing in medical and hospital settings using a model which, as they themselves acknowledge, is complicated and difficult to retain.

Instead, our model focuses on a broad range of practice settings (both government and non-government) and writing genres, with the focus instead being on values and principles rather than the genre itself. Unlike Falk and Ross, whose emphasis is upon 'mastery' of skills, our proposed approach is based upon the marriage of mindful reflection together with writing proficiency. We argue that clients need to be at the centre of writing instruction, rather than the task of writing itself. Thus, our approach focuses on ethical reflective mindfulness as a core element for proficiency in writing. Our approach responds to our observation that even when students know how to write proficiently, particularly as it relates to grammar and the like, they still do not fully comprehend the potent consequences of their writing for clients.

In building on the work of Falk and Ross (2001) and Oglensky and Davidson (2009), we turned to the core values and principles of practice as outlined in various social work codes of ethics, including in Australia (AASW 2010), the USA (NASW 2008), Britain (BASW 2012), Canada (CASW 2005) and New Zealand (ANZASW 2008), as well as the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW 2004). Core values emerge, including social justice, respect for human rights, dignity and worth, and integrity. Other key principles discussed in social work literature and codes of ethics include reflexivity, authenticity and sensitivity. Our model also recognises the importance of purposeful writing, taking into account these values and principles, particularly as it relates to writing persuasively for the benefit of clients.

The different criteria for effective writing in the genres of composition, journalism and technical and professional writing essentially lie in a shift of emphasis on certain skills from one discipline to another. Composition with its liberal arts tradition focuses on rhetorical skills, including the five canons of rhetoric, invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery. These rhetorical skills are said to provide a broad, ethical, values-based foundation (Miller 1991; Spigelman and Grobman 2006) and would be particularly important to social workers involved in persuasive writing and advocacy. Technical writing tends to focus on organisation, clarity, conciseness and accuracy (Solomon 2004) as well as basic skills such as good grammar and revision. Other professions call for a broader and more interdisciplinary focus for writing programmes, bringing together the rhetorical and the practical skills needed by writers in the workplace (Spigelman and Grobman 2006).

We propose that the unifying values and principles in the various codes of ethics when centrally integrated with the necessary skills for proficient writing establish the foundations of ethical professional writing. Thus, ethical professional writing by social workers—and all professionals who serve people—rests on the integration of three essential elements conjoined in tandem: reflective mindfulness of the client-centred focus of writing responsibilities; a sound

understanding of the values and principles of the social work and human services professions as highlighted in the common themes across the various codes of ethics; and a sound competence in compositional, rhetorical and technical writing skills. In the following section, we illustrate how this relationship works by examining each value and principle in turn.

Values and Principles

Social justice

Social justice is central to social work practice. Social workers must ‘promote social justice, in relation to society generally, and in relation to the people with whom they work’ (IFSW 2004). Thus, social workers should use writing to challenge injustice and unhelpful status quos, particularly as it relates to policies and practices. They can use writing as a tool for social change, by connecting with an audience, advocating for clients, critically reflecting on practice (Ellman et al. 2012), drawing attention to pressing social needs and pushing for anti-oppressive policy changes (Adamek 2011). Thus, developing student skills in writing can help strengthen their commitment to and fight for social justice (Epple 2010).

According to Wronka (2008), social justice can act as a framework for writing and practice interventions. This means that social workers in their writing should challenge negative discrimination and recognise diversity by using language that is inclusive and does not further stigmatise already marginalised people. As a participant in one of our workshops on ethical professional writing said, ‘Descriptors such as ‘selfish’ or ‘lazy’ are crudely judgemental and need to be avoided, particularly as the people concerned have a right to read their files’. However, writing from a social justice framework means more than carefully selecting words. It also involves openly valuing clients’ lived experiences, being critically reflective, connecting with the audience and drawing attention to social injustices to advocate for social change. This may be challenging and requires students to openly engage in critically reflexive practice and supervision.

Respect for persons

Respect for human rights, dignity and worth is a cardinal social work value and is captured in all codes of ethics. For example, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Statement of Principles states, ‘Social work is based on respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and the rights that follow from this’. This principle is reflected in the social work value of acceptance, which combines ‘a recognition and endorsement of the other’s autonomy (his or her own separate views, goals, feelings, experiences, and

capacity to act) with a feeling of affiliation with or connection to him or her' (Berlin 2005, 483).

Berlin (2005) says acceptance reminds social workers to minimise the controlling aspects of their interactions with clients and to 'work toward resolutions that are meaningful to the client and in the service of his or her most deeply held goals' (483). Linked to acceptance is the concept of respect. Respectful relationships with clients are those in which the client is not only cared for but also allowed to be different and self-determining (Sennett 2003).

In writing, the values of acceptance and respect for both the reader and the subject of the writing can be demonstrated by the language used. All language is embedded within particular social systems and most language is infused by ideology. Accepting and respectful language would be non-gender specific, culturally inclusive, and would not be judgemental. The tone of the writing would be open, not condescending or controlling.

Professional integrity

Most codes of ethics discuss the importance of operating with integrity (see, for example, BASW 2012; AASW 2010; CASW 2005; NASW 2008), with the IFSW explicitly stating that 'social workers should act with integrity'. This involves being mindful of organisational requirements and legal obligations. It also means being mindful of professional boundaries and responsibilities. One incident was described to the research team where a mental health social worker in writing an assessment about a client wanted to impress the other staff reading the assessment with her knowledge of psychiatric conditions. Rather than describing what she saw of the client's behaviours, she presented a diagnosis of the behaviour using psychiatric terminology. Such an approach is problematic and does not reflect the requirements of the profession around integrity. Closely aligned with this value is the need to be accountable and transparent in writing, thus writing with accuracy, judiciousness and credibility.

Accountability and transparency

The need to be accountable features through all social work codes of ethics, being repeatedly stipulated as a requirement of practice. For example, 'Professional accountability requires members to maintain accurate client records, and to take all reasonable steps to ensure the confidentiality of this information' (ANZASW 2008, 4). Accountability has been described as liability to 'being called on to give an account of what one has done or not done' (Banks, cited in McAuliffe and Chenoweth 2008). Accountability is about being open, transparent and honest (McAuliffe and Chenoweth 2008). To be accountable, social workers need to clearly articulate and justify their decisions, while taking into account the broader social context in which they operate.

Transparency is related to accountability and according to the CASW (2005) 'Social workers value openness and transparency in professional practice' (7) including with their clients and other stakeholders. Sharing records with clients in an open and direct way is one way social workers can be transparent and accountable to their clients. It has been shown to overcome much of the hostility that has traditionally been directed at the social services (Gelman 1992). Transparency is said to help to lessen the distance and power differential that may exist between the worker and the client. Transparency is improved by giving clients information and involving them in decisions (Gray, Plath, and Webb 2009). Increased access to information over the Internet and the evidence-based practice movement is encouraging greater transparency of what is done and its effects (Gabbrill 2001).

Accuracy in recording and the ability to produce a fair representation of a clients' point of view is important for transparency and accountability. Quality record-keeping ensures the accountability not only of workers to their clients but also of workers to their employers and organisations to their funding sources (Gelman 1992).

Accuracy, judiciousness and credibility

Social workers need to discover full and accurate information about clients' circumstances and accurately record the information to give a clear understanding of their needs to other professionals working with those clients. The AASW Code of Ethics (2010) states that:

Social workers will record information impartially and accurately, taking care to: (i) report only essential and relevant details; (ii) refrain from using emotive or derogatory language; (iii) acknowledge the basis of subjective opinions; (iv) protect clients' privacy and that of others involved in the situation. (29)

Thus, records must be useful and accurate to minimise risk and exposure to liability claims (Gelman 1992), and writers must be careful about using personal codes in case notes. For example, as one practitioner described in a workshop, 'I read a case note that used the abbreviation "BP" to describe a client's condition. This could have meant any number of things about this client, each requiring different responses—Borderline Personality, Bipolar Disorder, Blood Pressure'. Misunderstanding what was meant by 'BP' could have had serious consequences for the client. A further example was described to the research team where an acute care team used a whiteboard to communicate key information about clients to the next shift. Under the comments for particular client, the action was documented as 'close follow-up'. The team interpreted this to mean cease servicing and close the case. However, the intended meaning was to provide active support and closely monitor the client. Accuracy in writing means there are no errors, including errors of fact, number or date,

nor any incorrect grammar, punctuation, vocabulary or spelling and correctly acknowledging and identifying sources.

Accuracy in writing also requires judiciousness, that is 'done with good judgment or sense' (Oxford English Dictionary 2012). Social work is complex and issues are rarely straightforward. Social workers are constantly required to exercise their judgement when making decisions about what is ethically right or wrong and what is in the best interests of their clients. In designing writing assessments for social workers, Oglensky and Davidson (2009) say the most complex writing skills are those related to 'the overall "sense-making" function' (147). They say that being able to 'add up' information within the clinical logic of each field is a complex business:

The professional must evaluate the material specific to the case, while taking into account disciplinary knowledge, theory and expertise regarding what it means ... the student must learn to put the pieces together, identify patterns, prioritise concerns etc. (Oglensky and Davidson 2009, 147)

Credibility combines the elements of trustworthiness and expertise, and is underpinned by accurate, clear and transparent writing. It is defined as the quality of being believable or trustworthy, worthy of confidence or reliable (Collins Concise Dictionary). According to Harper and Lantz (1996), a client may assign credibility to a social worker because of his or her education position, role, age, gender and other factors over which the practitioner has little control. Credibility can also be achieved when clients have favourable experiences with social workers that foster respect, confidence, trust and hope (Hepworth, Rooney, and Rooney 2010). In writing, credibility is about having faith in the competence of the writer. This requires using reliable information, getting the facts right and providing complete information. It is also about being consistent in messages, so that the words on paper match what is said, as well as actions, policies and plans. Credible communication is clear, not ambiguous or prone to exaggeration (Booher 1999). For example, a participant in a workshop was preparing to meet a new client when she read the client's case history and noted that a client worked at a 'porn shop'. When she later interviewed the client, she realised that she actually worked in a 'pawn shop'. Authors can appear to lack credibility when their writing is poor.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the ability to locate yourself in the picture, to understand and to factor in how what you see is influenced by your own way of seeing, and how your very presence influences the situation in which you are placed (Fook 1999). Reflexivity is essential to social work practice as it ensures that we practice in a manner that is consistent with our values and ethics, being aware of the impact we have on others. Writing reflexively not only explores what the experience was but also considers the meaning the writer attached to it both at the time and

subsequently, and how this meaning may influence practice in the future (Coles and Dunworth 2009). Falk and Ross (2001) advocate reflective writing to discover your 'self' and connections between ideas, feelings and memories of experience.

Authenticity

Social work educators (Hepworth, Rooney, and Rooney 2010) define authenticity as 'the sharing of self by relating in a natural, sincere, spontaneous, open and genuine manner' (107). Similarly, writing with authenticity is also about being yourself. It has been described as:

Writing with your own true voice. Writing that is personal and human, unique to you, reflecting your experience. Writing with clarity and simplicity to allow your readers to learn who you are and who you're being. (Patterson 2012)

Sensitivity

Writing with sensitivity is about being able to see the world from the viewpoints of others. When things are written down, they can become defining. This principle is particularly important for social workers conveying confidential information for multiple audiences, including the client and their family: 'To be effective social workers must be exquisitely sensitive to the experiences and feelings of those they try to help and able to describe these experiences and feelings' (Falk and Ross 2001, 4). Thus, language needs to be used sensitively to avoid labelling, stereotyping and cultural or other bias.

Purpose

The purpose and direction of social work comes from its value systems. Purposeful practice means deliberately acting in accordance with the values and purpose of the profession. Social workers must make sure what they write relates to the purpose of the task. Ovretveits' research (in Cumming et al. 2007) found that much of social work recording is irrelevant to task and purpose. For example, an incident was recounted to the research team about a newly employed social worker at a Migrant Resource Centre who wrote a letter of introduction to clients that focused on his hobbies and interests. The letter did not indicate that he had formal qualifications, or a background in supporting people who had been through trauma, or had the capacity to understand and work with cultural differences. Had the letter been sent out unedited, clients would have been wary of the new staff member and unclear about who he was.

Writers, particularly when writing for busy people, must concisely state pertinent facts without commenting on irrelevant issues. Unnecessary, purposeless verbiage creates a barrier to communication. Straying from the issue, inserting personal opinions, using pompous language or rambling about

superfluous details leads the reader to quickly lose interest and the client loses out (Dunlap 1997):

It is bad manners to give (readers) needless trouble ... It is bad manners to waste their time. Therefore brevity ... then clarity ... and how is clarity to be achieved? Mainly by taking trouble; and writing to serve people rather than to impress them. (Lucas 1955, 51–59)

Persuasion

Social work writing also seeks to persuade. The ability to exercise influence through persuasion is important in the human services. Funding bodies must be persuaded to invest in programmes; legislative and policy making bodies need to be persuaded to establish workable programmes; community agencies must be persuaded to refer clients; community members may need to be persuaded to serve as volunteers; and so on. ‘The process of persuasion involves your presenting good reasons to people for a specific choice among probable alternatives’ (Larson, cited in Simons 2008, 244).

Persuasive writing is effectively communicating these good reasons. It involves using principles such as emphasising advantages or rewards, being readily understood, showing compatibility of values and so on (Simons 2008). If used ethically, persuasive writing is not about trickery or manipulation but about targeting information for a client-centred result. Lucas (1955) sees all writing as being strategic, ‘Just as the art of war largely consists of deploying the strongest forces at the most important points, so the art of writing depends a good deal on putting the strongest words in the most important places’ (212).

Conclusion

Social workers come to their profession for a range of reasons: to pursue social justice; to right wrongs; and to mediate, support, advocate and reform. In this article, we argue that ethical professional writing by social workers is client-centred and thus an essential tool of practice. This requires social workers to integrate three core elements when writing: reflective mindfulness on their responsibilities; putting into practice their social work values and principles as expressed in codes of ethics; and achieving technical competence in their compositional skills. In turn, this requires a renewed approach to teaching current and future generations of social work students the reflective art of ethical writing. In this way, we improve our prospects for the pursuit of client rights and the betterment of the social work profession.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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