

Effective writing in professional social work practice



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First published 2025.

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Introduction

This course introduces you to professional writing which is an integral aspect of social work practice. Social workers need to consider how their writing forms part of their communication and record keeping. Ensuring people who are being written about are at the centre of writing about their lives is a key guiding principle. Learning writing and critical analysis skills is a core part of professional development across the social work career.

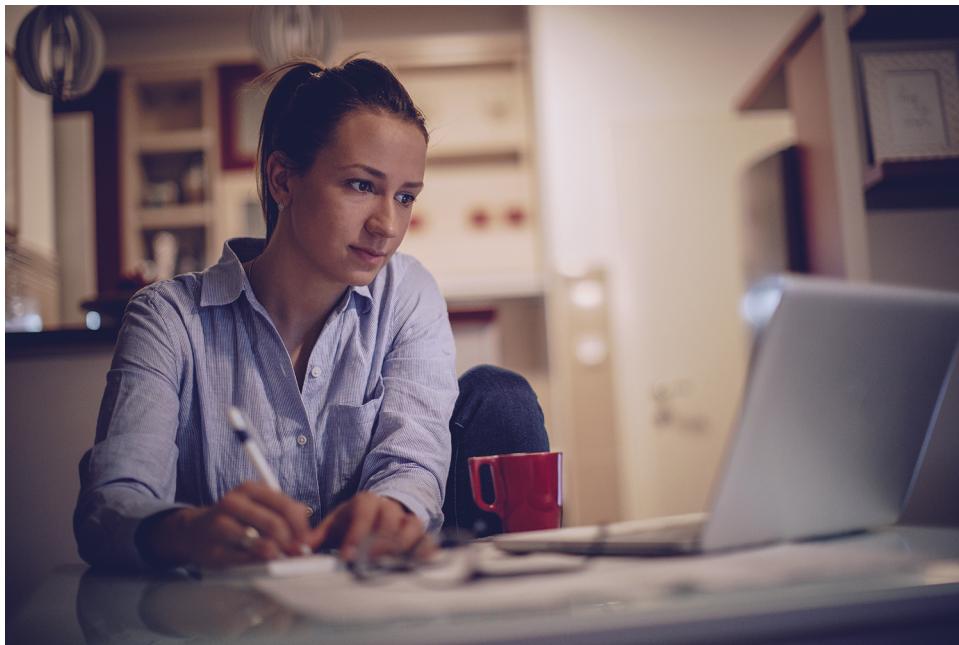


Figure 1

The course is organised in four sections about professional writing for social workers:

1. Writing in social work
2. The functions of writing
3. Writing style
4. Writing about yourself and others

Professional writing is an important part of social work practice. Social workers spend a significant proportion of their time doing a broad spectrum of written tasks. This part of social work is often presented as a burden outweighing other activities but it is actually a crucial way that social workers communicate, negotiate, present, articulate recommendations and demonstrate their values in action. The four sections will explore the nature of social work writing, some key issues to think about and draw from extensive research to highlight the skills that are involved. The course is relevant for social workers who are already qualified and those who are students. Ideas from the course may also be helpful to other health and social care practitioners who want to learn about writing in their practice.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University
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Learning outcomes

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- describe different types of social work writing
- understand the importance of professional writing as part of practice
- explain why writing is central to the lives of people being written about
- demonstrate description and analysis skills in writing.

1 Writing in social work

Social workers spend more than half of their time writing (Lillis et al 2020) so learning to write effectively for practice is a very important element of professional development across the career. This course focuses on developing your understanding of professional writing in social work and the ways in which you can become an effective writer.



Figure 2

In this section you will:

- learn about the WiSP Research project and
- listen to Vicki, a qualified social worker, talking about her experiences of learning to write as a social worker
- look at differences between writing activities.

1.1 Thinking about writing

As you progress through your career as a social worker you will have had to write different types of things. Lucy Rai developed a way to think about the purpose and focus of social work writing. The mnemonic CAPS, stands for Context, Audience, Purpose and Self (Rai, 2020). In summary, CAPS can help you focus on what you are writing, why you are writing and who the audience(s) are (Rai, 2020). You will develop your understanding and use of CAPS later in this course.

Professional writing, the writing undertaken in daily practice, is part of the core business of social work. Much of the content of this course is drawn from research undertaken at The Open University. The Writing in Social Work Practice (WiSP) project gathered and analysed examples of social work texts and documented the experiences of social workers' writing in children's services, mental health services and adult services teams. You can find more details about the research project using the links at the end of this course. The project also involved social work students, social work managers and service users. Figure 3 below details the data that was collected for this research study.

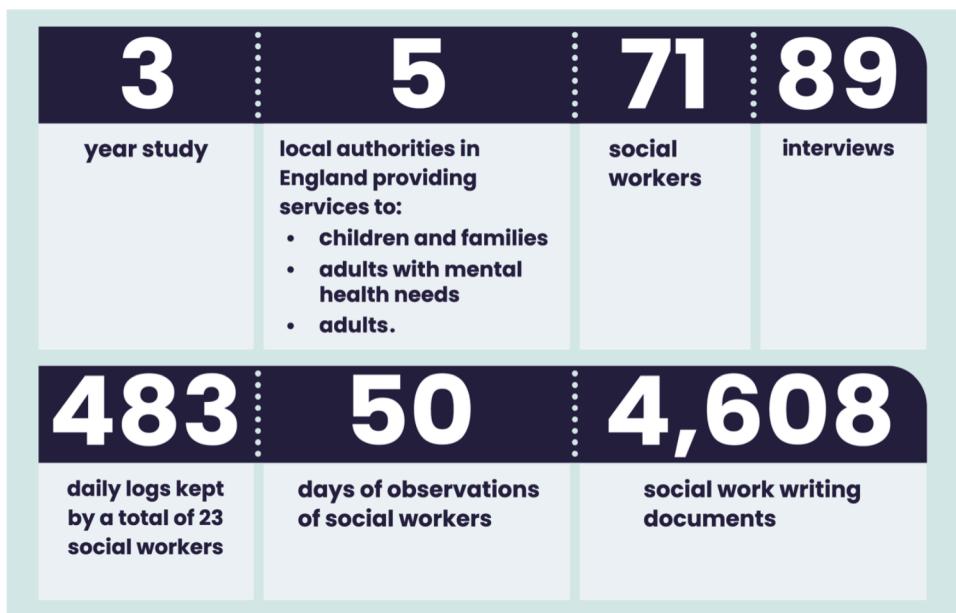


Figure 3 The Writing in Social Work Practice (WiSP) Research Project

The Open University social work team worked with a group of people who have experience of using social work services to develop resources based on the research which would inform students, practitioners, managers and policy makers. The following statement sets out the mission for writing in social work:

Everything about social work writing should reflect the views, voices and experiences of the people who are being written about. Writing should be respectful, and respect peoples' differences including any protected characteristics, preferences, interests and identities. Written products should be usable and understandable by all relevant stakeholders that need to access it. 'Nothing about us without us' is applicable to all aspects of social work writing.

WiSP information booklet produced in partnership with social work service users (Open University, 2023)

1.2 Experiences of writing

The findings of the WiSP project raise awareness of the importance of social work documents and some of the challenges that are faced by social workers in producing them. In the following activity you will hear from Vicki, an experienced social worker, talking about her own learning journey as she developed her professional writing skills.

Activity 1 Reflecting on writing as a social worker

Listen to Vicki, a social worker in the field of children and families social work. Here she reflects on how her writing has changed and discusses how to write in an accessible way. Don't worry if you do not fully understand everything in this audio, you will return to it at the end of this section and revisit some of the concepts that Vicki talks about.

Make some notes on the questions that follow:

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 1: Reflecting on professional language

1. What does Vicki say about her writing when she was a newly qualified social worker?
2. Why might social work records be important to children as they grow older?
3. Vicki discusses writing in an accessible way. What features does she describe as part of this?
4. What does she say about using professional language?
5. What changes has Vicki noticed in the way some professionals write?

Provide your answer...

Answer

1. Vicki says that when she was newly qualified she was less confident about writing 'in a clear and straightforward way' and she tended to use longer, more complicated language to compensate for her relative inexperience. She says she now feels that she did not generally consider the reaction of the child or parent in her writing.
2. Children may use their social work records to make sense of early childhood experiences. It's therefore important to write in a way that the child can understand, either now or when they're older.
3. Vicki suggests the following:
 - Avoid judgmental language e.g., *manipulative, needy*
 - Explain what things mean for the child
 - Avoid over-complicated sentence structure, for example use of the passive (e.g., *the child was placed in foster care by the Local Authority* (passive), *the Local Authority placed the child in foster care* (active)).
4. She always explains acronyms at first use (acronyms are words made from initial letters e.g., LAC for looked after child).
5. Vicki says she has noticed an increase in child-friendly writing e.g., Independent Reviewing Officers writing meeting minutes as a letter addressed to the child and a judge writing to children to explain their decisions.

1.3 Approaching writing

It is important to approach each new writing task by thinking carefully about what you are being asked to write and the function of this. You may find similarities between how you should approach some types of writing that you might be familiar with, such as 'essays' or 'reflective writing' but in any task you will need to read guidance carefully and understand the purpose.

Many of the writing skills that social workers develop as a student can be transferred to practice writing. Rai and Lillis (2012) interviewed final year social work students who suggested that they had been able to transfer their learning, even if it was difficult to pinpoint where or how. The following two quotes are from two of the students who participated in this study:

I'm really sure that having to sit down and agonise over those essays has helped me but I can't identify or pinpoint exactly where. But it has to have helped me because I do all sorts of reports for work and although it's nowhere near like writing an essay I think the fact that you have to focus on a certain point and draw out the significance of it helps you somewhere.

(Rai and Lillis, 2012 p. 359)

Definitely adaption is key, and I think from the variety of the writing skills throughout the three year programme. If there's something I've taken from it is having that variety of writing skills and being able to, to use that in practice.

(Rai and Lillis, 2012 p. 359)

These quotes from students suggest that they found that their academic assignments helped them learn to write as social workers, but that the learning needed to be transferred as there were still important differences. Some of the ways in which the learning needed to be transferred were not very clear to them.

Activity 2 Differences between writing activities

What do you think are the main differences between writing as a student and writing as a social worker, again using CAPS? Make a few notes about what these differences are before exploring the summary box that follows.

Table 1 Academic writing compared with social work writing

	Student writing	Social work writing
Context	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Audience	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Purpose	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Self	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...

Answer

Table 1 Academic writing compared with social work writing (completed)

	Student writing	Social work writing
Context	You are writing within a university in order to be assessed on a specific module.	You are writing within your role and on behalf of your employer. The documents you write may have a statutory function and the outcome can have a life changing impact on the people using the service.
Audience	You tutor or script marker.	Multiple and very diverse audiences. These may be known or unknown at the time of writing, but some may only read the document in the future.
Purpose	Assessment of your learning and feedback to help you develop your learning.	Multiple purposes including recording actions and decisions, detailing assessment, expressing professional judgements and recommendations, communication with service users and other professionals.
Self	You are a student, learning both about your subject and how to write.	You are a qualified professional with legal and ethical responsibilities to your employer and to the public.

Student social workers are still learning with support and guidance and so do not have the full responsibilities expected of a qualified social worker. However, they are still accountable for their writing within a student role. Consequently, an important element of your learning will be how to write the documents required within your own practice setting. The service users you work with (such as children and families, adults with mental health needs or older people) and also the setting will all impact on the kinds of documents you will write and how you are expected to write them. In the following section you will learn more about the different functions of social work writing.

2 The functions of writing

It is important to be clear about the different functions of professional writing in social work practice. The WiSP research highlighted how many kinds of things social workers were writing in their everyday work. This section explores the diversity of professional written documents and how they are a fundamental aspect of social work practice.



Figure 4 Writing for study and work

In this section you will:

- learn about the different functions of social work writing
- identify the differences between document types
- practice applying CAPS to social work documents.

2.1 Documents in social work practice

Social work services are delivered to a wide range of people and in many different settings, such as in the community, in hospitals, day and residential services. Within these services, social work writing has multiple functions, including undertaking assessments and reviews of risk and need, contributing to financial assessments and providing services to support service users, their families and carers. This wide range of activity is also reflected in the diversity of documents that social workers produce as part of their daily work. The WiSP research project identified eleven different functions of writing:

Table 2 The functions of writing

Function	Description
Administration	<i>Preparatory, interim or short texts, often as part of/ before larger activity, or one offs</i>

Applications for services, equipment, support checks and referrals	<i>Document often on a template to provide services/equipment or specifications</i>
Assessments	<i>Document often on a template to check or evidence eligibility or risk, usually in preparation for allowing or preventing service provision or moving onto a next stage in a process</i>
Case recording	<i>Ongoing logging of case activity, usually stored centrally on an authority-based IT system</i>
Communication with others	<i>Documents that set out formal arrangements, often with sanctions if not adhered to</i>
Diagrams/drawings/mapping	<i>Texts that illustrate a process or relationships, often accompanying other documentation</i>
Documents when working with clients	<i>Documents often completed whilst with clients, often to aid interaction/inform decisions</i>
Meeting-related paperwork	<i>Texts written in preparation for, during and to document meetings</i>
Reports	<i>Documents often on a template, with the purpose to evaluate, summarize, and/or state next actions to be done, after an event or process of engagement</i>
Training/supervision documentation	<i>Texts aimed at arranging, delivering, evaluating and undertaking training and supervision activities</i>

Activity 3 Mapping the functions of writing

Look at the clusters of different kinds of writing that social workers do. Map these against the 11 key functions listed in the left hand column of the Table. Select the relevant examples from the drop down menu.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Answer

Table 3

Functions of writing	Examples
Administration	
Preparatory, interim or short texts, often as part of/before larger activity, or one offs	to do lists; online diary entry; annual leave requests

Applications for services, equipment, support checks and referrals

Document often on a template to provide services/equipment or specific actions

housing application; third sector support check; referral for emergency home based respite care

Assessments

Document often on a template to check or evidence eligibility or risk, usually in preparation for allowing or preventing service provision or moving onto a next stage in a process

assessment of needs and outcomes; parenting assessment; risk profile

Communication with others

Sharing/requesting information, via different technologies and media

emails, instant messaging, letters

Contracts/contractual information

Documents that set out formal arrangements, often with sanctions if not adhered to

contact agreements; contract monitoring form

Case recording

Ongoing logging of case activity, usually stored centrally on an authority-based IT system

case notes; contact log; statutory visit record

Diagrams/drawings/mapping

Texts that illustrate a process or relationships, often accompanying other documentation

chronology; genogram

Documents when working with clients

Documents often completed whilst with clients, often to aid interaction/inform decisions

social stories; worksheets; flip charts in person-centred review

Meeting-related paperwork

Texts written in preparation for, during and to document meetings

agenda; minutes; list of people attending

Reports

Documents often on a template, with the purpose to evaluate, summarise, and/or state next actions to be done, after an event or process of engagement

pathway plan; AMHP report; best interest statement

Training/supervision documentation

Texts aimed at arranging, delivering, evaluating and undertaking training and supervision activities

report on a student; portfolio; supervision record

There are also many areas of guidance on different written documents produced by organisations, local areas and national policy which support social workers in their practice. We have included some links in the Additional Resources section of this course, but it is important to check on what your local expectations are in any practice setting.

2.2 Recognising the differences

Table 3 illustrates the many different functions of writing in social work, but the research team identified just four kinds of document which were the most commonly used across all service user groups. These four document types are:

Table 4 Four most common document types

Document type	Purpose
Case notes	The day to day record of all interactions and decisions made in relation to a specific person receiving a service. These are normally created on a digital system and need to be completed within specific timeframes
Assessment reports	Reports written by the social worker but often compiling information from many sources, including the service user. Assessment Reports also contain a recommendation.
Emails	Digital communication between the social worker and anyone else involved, including the service user and anyone involved in providing a service to them.
Handwritten notes	These can take many forms including notes taken during or shortly after a conversation or meeting, rough drafts of other forms of official documents such as Assessment Reports, writing or even diagrams and drawings, used during face to face meetings with service users.

You will come across many different types of texts that you have to write as part of your daily work which are essential. Of course exactly what you will have to write will depend on your particular area of social work. But there are three key types of writing that social workers carry out across all areas of practice: case notes, assessment reports and emails.

Activity 4 Identifying text types

Look at the brief extracts taken from social workers' writing. Which of the three key types of writing do they come from, case notes, assessment reports or emails? Select the relevant option from the drop down menu. As you do this consider your

reasons for making your decisions, thinking about the content, the language and purpose of each text.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



2.3 Using CAPS with social work documents

You have considered how to use CAPS to think about the Context, Audience, Purpose and Self in some written tasks, and now you will consider it in relation to document types.

Activity 5 Applying CAPS to social work documents

The following activity asks you to apply CAPS to what you have learnt about the three key social work documents of case notes, assessments and emails. For each one make some notes on how you think CAPS would apply to each if you were writing these documents.

Table 5

	Case note	Assessment report	Emails
Context	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Audience	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Purpose	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Self	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...

Answer

Table 5 (completed)

	Case note	Assessment report	Emails
Context	Case notes are intended to be daily,	Often statutory requirements or	Diverse contexts depending on the

	contemporaneous records (kept in real time) and are agency requirements	completed following agency policy. This can be one off or reviews or previous assessments.	purpose, but an important part of multi-agency working.
Audience	No explicitly stated audience/reader (except where emails are copied in as case note). Other social workers and the local authority are the implied readers.	Often not explicitly stated and varies according to specific type of assessment-service user (e.g. assessment of need), courts, local authority.	Named individuals.
Purpose	To record actions, events, interactions and correspondence relating to a specific individual.	To present an evidence based evaluation of the needs of and risks to specific individuals which constitute an argument for specific services and care.	To communicate with social worker colleagues, other professionals, clients and other involved parties about actions, requests, concerns.
Self	As the writer you are often the person responsible for the case	You could be the main author, bringing together contributions from other people, or a contributor if you are not the main case workers	Communication from you in your specific role. This may vary depending on who the email is to

In the next section you will explore how the style of writing in different social work documents might vary.

3 Writing style



Figure 5

Writing is part of your professional practice as a social worker and recognising what style is appropriate is a key skill. In this section you will explore how language, description and analysis are core components of effective social work writing.

In this section you will:

- look at the language used in three main document types
- match different writing styles with specific examples
- learn about description and analysis how to identify them in social work documents
- reflect on how to use description effectively in your writing
- explore how analysis is used in social work writing.

3.1 Language in social work writing

The language, or way in which you write, is likely to vary depending on whether you are writing a case note, an assessment report or an email. This can be related to the level of formality but also whether you are mainly describing events or using your professional judgement to provide analysis or make a recommendation. The next activity asks you to think again about different types of documents and the language that might be used in them.

Activity 6 Thinking about language in social work documents

Complete the following table, again thinking about the text types of Case Notes, Assessment Reports and Emails. For each one, think about the language that you would use. You can think about the following questions:

- How formal informal would the language be?
- Would the document be written in a template using prescribed section headings?
- Would you be including mainly description?

- Would you include analysis?
- Would you include a recommendation?

Table 6

	Case Note	Assessment Report	Email
Formal or informal language?	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Needs a template?	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Include description?	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Include analysis?	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Include recommendations?	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...

Answer

You might have thought that it would depend who the recipient of an email was, your relationship with the person and/ or their role. You may have thought that all or most professional documents should be quite formal. It is always important to think about the specific document and purpose in your practice area of social work, and if you are required, or if it is useful, to use a template. It is also essential to think about the language of the person you are writing about or to. What might be the issues if most communication is in English? You might be working with someone whose first language is not English. If you are working in Wales you will also be working with the active offer which will also be central to written texts. Adapting to the specific needs of individual people you are working with will also extend to considering how writing is clear for people who have Dyslexia. Considering individual audiences will therefore remain key. It is essential to reflect on these issues when you are undertaking your practice learning. We have collated our notes across these questions for each document type in the table below.

Table 6 (completed)

	Case Note	Assessment Report	Email
Language	<p>Describing language e.g. reporting what has happened, is happening (James has reoffended)</p> <p>Analytic language e.g. the social worker's professional judgement (Sarah lacks insight into her needs and any risks faced).</p>	<p>Describing language e.g. reporting what has happened, is happening James has reoffended</p> <p>Analytic language e.g. the social worker's professional judgement (Sarah lacks insight into her needs and any risks faced).</p> <p>Recommendations for actions/services Often structured by templated headings (e.g. health, education, nutrition, capacity.)</p>	<p>Greetings</p> <p>Requesting and giving information about people, meetings, services</p> <p>Thanking/acknowledging actions carried out</p>

Considering these questions helps to recognise what and how you write in your social work practice. The following sections explore this further, including types of writing and understanding in more detail the difference between description and analysis.

3.2 Professional language?

In the previous activity you saw how social workers need to use different language for different kinds of document. These differences in style of writing include not only the level of formality / informality and balance between description and analysis, but also decisions about the kinds of words you use, whether to include abbreviations and whether the document can be written as notes (with bullet points for example) or must include full sentences.

To illustrate this, complete the following activity and match the language styles to the examples.

Activity 7 Formal or informal?

Read the short extracts from genuine social work documents. Using the drop down menu, select which language type you think corresponds to the extract. Some extracts are listed more than once and therefore are examples of more than one language type. These are the language types included in this activity

- Formal language
- Informal language
- Professional language
- Full sentence
- Notes
- Abbreviations / acronyms

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Answer

Table 7

Example	Style
The chronology indicates that there is a pattern of domestic violence and concerns around alcohol use.	Formal language
Hello, hope all well with you.	Informal language
When Mary is low in mood she lacks motivation to complete daily tasks.	Formal language
A pattern of domestic violence.	Professional language
The chronology indicates that there is a pattern of domestic violence and concerns around alcohol use.	Full sentence
Explained mum needs to check baby skin.	Notes
Lacks motivation.	Professional language
T/C to father.	Abbreviations/ acronyms
When Mary is low in mood she lacks motivation to complete daily tasks.	Full sentence

Having looked at these examples, do you think that some aspects of style are more appropriate for some texts and not others? Are there aspects of style that you personally feel strongly about and if so what are these?

3.3 Description and analysis

Two of the most important elements of social work writing are description and analysis. Both are equally significant, but it is very important to recognise the difference between them and when each is required.

In simple terms, when writing a description, the social worker is providing factual information. This could be information that has been directly observed by the social worker or has been provided to them directly by someone else. Here are some examples:

Description:

- Rhiannon is 4 years old
- Anup informed me that she has lived alone at the same address for 18 months
- Mr McFadden has 1 visit a day from the home care service
- Dr Khan informed me by email that Tyrone has not had his MMR vaccination or been seen by anyone at the practice since he was 6 months old.
- Blake's parents met with me on the 17th July 2024 and stated that they no longer wanted their contact with Blake to be supervised.

Defining description and analysis can be difficult, a brief definition of each is included here.

Description in social work writing is reporting the details of what has happened.

Descriptions provide details of a situation, a person, a context, an emotional state, a physical need.

Analysis is evaluating and selecting the most important aspects of information and communicating these in a way that can be understood by different kinds of readers.

Here are some examples of analytical writing – or writing that demonstrates analysis – to illustrate how it differs from descriptive writing.

Analysis:

- Based on reports from the educational psychologist, Rhiannon's teacher and my observations, her language seems to be significantly delayed. This may have a medical cause, but her mother's depression and social isolation may also be factors.
- Mr McFadden's weight loss and confusion indicate that he would benefit from a second home care visit to make sure that he is eating at least one full meal a day.
- The information provided by Dr Khan suggests that Tyrone's physical health needs may not be met. Without the normal checks it is not known whether he is meeting his developmental targets and he is at risk due to the missed vaccinations.
- My professional judgement is that Blake would be at risk if his contact with his parents was unsupervised. This is based on observations of the contact provided by the family support worker who reported that they have missed or been late on 4 occasions out of 7 and that they do not interact with Blake or respond to him, even when he attempts to engage them in play.

The final example of analysis contains a 'professional judgement'. In other words, the social worker is expressing a view or judgement based on their professional analysis of a situation.

Professional judgement is central to effective social work writing. Key aspects of professional judgement in writing are the use of both description and analysis. The descriptive details that you include constitute the evidence for any analysis you offer, which will ultimately lead to specific outcomes: for example, the provision of a particular service, support package, a particular placement for a child or adult. Whilst writing relevant description may seem to be a relatively straightforward task, in practice it is more complicated and can take some time to learn to do well.

The difference between description and analysis is not always obvious when you are reading or writing a document. However, it is important to develop the ability to look at documents critically, even when you are the writer, and identify whether description or analysis is being used. The following activity provides some more practice in recognising description.

Activity 8 Identifying description

Look at the brief extract from a mental capacity assessment form below. Highlight what you consider to be description (using yellow) and what you consider to be analysis (highlight green). Click on the different yellow and green pen button options to change the colour.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



3.4 The importance of description

Description is generally needed to support professional judgements. A key challenge social workers face is how much description to include.

Activity 9 Why is description important?

Watch the video where Theresa (the coordinator and lead researcher of the WiSP project) and Lisa (an experienced social worker) are discussing the importance of careful description in social work writing. As you watch, make brief notes using the questions below.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1: What is description?

What is description?

What kinds of description are there?

Provide your answer...

Answer

There are many kinds but in the video they discuss describing places, people and their states, what's happened, who's involved, how someone's feeling, what the social worker has done.

How is description used in making decisions?

Provide your answer...

Answer

It is used to inform others about a situation and to provide evidence for any recommendations made.

What other tips does Lisa give about description and what to avoid?

Provide your answer...

Answer

Here are some points that Lisa makes:

- Use professional judgement.
- Describe anything that is directly relevant to the specific situation- description of a place for example, may be relevant to some situations and not in others.
- Think about what a reader (a manager, a panel member, a service user) may need to know.
- Avoid vague description.
- Too much description may detract (or distract readers) from the analysis.

3.5 The importance of analysis

Writing analysis can seem daunting to social workers irrespective of their experience but you can learn good skills in this from the early stages of your career. It requires you to not only collate factual information but also to use your knowledge and experience. The job of the writer is to select and present the factual information, apply their professional expertise based on knowledge and experience. In the following activity you will hear from Theresa and Lisa again. They explain how description is used alongside 'claims' and 'judgements'.

Activity 10 Identifying analysis

Watch the video of Theresa and Lisa talking about analysis on social work writing. Lisa says that analysis is 'threaded throughout all aspects of work'. As you watch the video make brief notes on how analysis is evident at the level of words and at the level of claims, or professional judgements that are reached.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 2: What is analysis?

What is analysis?

Provide your answer...

Answer

Words... Many words we use involve analysis or evaluation. Examples discussed were:

- *abusive*
- negative and
- *appropriate*
- positive

Claims

Answer

Claims... are statements which indicate a professional view or conclusion about a particular situation. A claim follows on from careful description which counts as evidence for the claim being made. An example discussed was:

Without Alice's support David cannot return safely home

[claim] following on from

David becomes agitated if his wife Alice leaves the room

...

David attempts to leave the premises unsupported

...[descriptions]

Re-watch the video of Theresa and Lisa talking about analysis and making claims in writing. Claims are a key part of expressing professional judgement. Note down the key points that Theresa and Lisa make about how claims should be written.

Provide your answer...

Answer

Here are some points they discuss:

- Any claim needs to be based on evidence and much evidence in writing is expressed as relevant and careful description.
- Claims do not need to be overstated or exaggerated in writing in order to be convincing – using hedging language such as '**appears** settled...**seem to be** in line with' may be more appropriate.
- Claims need to be carefully worded and in line with any description offered. If insufficient, irrelevant or vague description (evidence) is included in the written text, any claims made will not be convincing and may affect the outcomes of any report, such as services and resources.

For a more in-depth exploration of analysis you can find details in the [Additional Resources section](#) of this course.

3.6 Artificial intelligence and social work writing

Many social workers and organisations have been thinking about using technology and artificial intelligence (AI) to reduce the time it takes to produce written documents. This remains an evolving area of social work. In this course we have already explored the importance of the language used, and the focus required to ensure that professional judgements are communicated clearly and carefully.

AI has 'emerged as a transformative and disruptive force with potential to reshape social work practice' (Haider et al., 2025 p. 5) but there are some major ethical and professional issues to consider. Generative AI is being adopted by social workers and organisations to reduce what is perceived as administrative burden. Given the importance of language and nuance in the words we use in social work writing we need to consider the reliability of AI systems and tools. While arguments for the use of AI propose that this enables social workers to focus more fully on relationship-based practice we have explored within this course that social work writing is not a separate activity and it is through written communication and documents that social workers practice.

Haider et al., (2026) summarise some of issues that are vital for social work to consider:

- AI not yet reliable in predicting risk and making decisions
- Nuance and context
- Accountability, transparency and defensible-decision making
- Bias and inequality perpetuated by AI systems and tools
- Sensitivity, security of data and ethics

Social workers still need to use critical analysis within their tasks and formulate records. Social workers still need to engage with the ethical foundations of the profession and careful consideration of the legacy of the written record for people being written about. Developing skills in writing and critical analysis are therefore crucial to learn within the social work career alongside the use of any technology being used.

This section has focused on the details of social work writing in order to think about language at the level of the sentence and even individual words. As you spend more time in practice as a student social worker, try to notice the language that is used. Practice identifying where description, analysis and professional judgements are used within the documents you read and be aware of your own language as you write.

The final part of this section on social work writing will focus on you as the writer and on your readers, and how an awareness of both reader and writer has on writing.

4 Writing about yourself and others



Figure 6 Writing about others

In this section you will:

- consider who contributes to creating social work documents
- learn to identify the different voices within a document and how to use different points of view when writing
- learn about how to write a report 'to the child'
- reflect on applying learning to your practice.

4.1 Contributors to social work writing

Writing is primarily a form of communication, it conveys meaning from the writer to the reader. This process can be particularly complex when more than one person is contributing to a document and also when there are multiple readers, some of whom may be unknown or even reading the document in the future.

Activity 11 Who contributes to social work writing?

Look at the figure below and identify who are the potential contributors as well as readers of social work documents. You may be able to think of more people to add based on your experience.



Figure 7 Who contributes to social work writing?

Answer

- Social workers (in your own team and other teams)
- Line managers
- Other professionals such as doctors, health visitors, care workers, residential workers, benefit advisors, police, teachers, psychologists, occupational therapists
- Service users
- Family and carers

4.2 Identifying the voices in the social work documents

The WiSP project explored the different ways in which people contribute to social work documents. When writing an assessment report, for example, it is important that the views and wishes of the service user are represented clearly. Sometimes there are also family members and carers who provide information or whose views need to be included.

Assessment reports often need to include information from a range of other professionals who may provide factual information or expert opinions.

The task of the social worker is therefore not only describing and providing analysis based on their own observations and professional judgement, but drawing together and synthesising information and opinion from several sources. The way in which all of these 'voices' are represented is important so that the reader understands the source of the information or opinion. It is not uncommon for a report to include an opinion that the social worker does not agree with, but it is nonetheless important to include.

Activity 12 Who said

Read the following extract from an assessment report and identify the source of the information or judgement. Use the highlighting tool to identify which content is from. Click on the different yellow, pink and blue pen button options to change the colour.

- The social workers (blue)
- Santosh the service user (Yellow)
- Rachel the community nurse (Pink)

Interactive content is not available in this format.



This activity illustrates that weaving several voices together can be tricky. As a social worker you may also need to use different voices depending on your role and how you refer to yourself. The choices that you make about language can alter the way in which readers understand who's views are being expressed and the authority or expertise of the views.

The following illustrates some the different voices used:

Table 8

Point of view	Example	Comment
First person	I observed, I believe, I offered	The writer is taking clear personal ownership of what is being said
Passive voice	It was observed, it is believed, it was offered	Distances the writer personally from the statement and can also imply that the statement is commonly accepted as a fact.
Second person	You observed, you believe, you offered	Directed at a specific person, not normally used in formal / professional documents
Third person (impersonal)	The social worker observed, the authority believes, Social services offered	The person is less visible individually and the opinion or information is located in the organisation or role that they hold.
Third person (specific speaker)	Dr Jones observed, Dr Jones believes, Dr Jones offered	Identifies the person expressing the view who is not the writer.
Use of quotations	Mrs O'Rourke said she was 'at the end of her tether'	The use of speech marks indicates who expressed the opinion / provided the information. It also distances the writer from the content

Activity 13 Identifying the voice

Look at the examples from written texts and use the drop down feature to select the correct categories.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Answer

Activity feedback

Table 9

Example	Voice
I would strongly recommend that the children are placed on child protection plans	Written in first person singular
Jane disclosed that her Mother sexually abused her between the ages of 6 and 10	Written in third person
It was agreed there should be an adjournment.	Written in the passive voice
Her son gave her 'a dirty look'.	Use of quotations

The words and phrasing may also be different depending on who the writing is primarily addressed to as in the following two examples:

Table 10

Statement	Reader
The aim is to support John in transitioning in to his new flat, by providing support to him in managing his daily routine and preparing meals.	Addressed to an authority (implied)
I have attempted to contact you by telephone but got your answer phone.	Addressed to service user

4.3 Who is social work writing for?

There are many ways in which the choice of language may differ depending on who is the main intended reader. The examples here differentiate writing to an authority or organisation compared with to an individual person, in this case a person using the social

work service. The specific ways in which a social worker might write should also take account of factors such as the age, mental capacity, first language and specific communication needs of the reader.

In the following activity you will hear from Gillian, an experienced social worker in a role in England of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO).

Activity 14 Writing to the child

Watch the following video in which Gillian talks about how she thinks reports and case notes about children should be written. As you watch, note down how reports can be explicitly addressed to a child and what Gillian sees as the benefits of doing this

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 3: What is your current role?

What is your current role?

Provide your answer...

Answer

Here are some points that stand out from Gillian's comments:

- The main point is that reports (indeed all writing about a child) should be written in a way which explicitly addresses the child. An example would be to write 'you' in place of the child's name.
- Gillian likens this kind of writing to a 'conversation' with a child which means that it is important to explain what is happening and why in ways that a child will understand.

- Gillian talks about choosing the words used carefully, avoiding professional language that a child may not understand. She suggests using words such as referring to 'mummy and daddy' and describing the reason and outcome of a meeting instead of referring to it as a 'child protection plan'.
- Gillian makes the point that writing directly to the child is part of the core values of child-centred social work.

Perhaps a general point that Gillian is making is that just because particular ways of writing have become common in professional practice, these do not need to remain the same, if there are good reasons for writing in different or new ways these should be tried out.

4.4 Reflection

Writing is an integral part of your practice and the documents you write and contribute to can make a big difference to the lives of the people you support. It is through writing that you enact social work. While this section has not specifically addressed social work values, just as in any other aspect of practice, your writing should be based on the core values of social work. The written word is very powerful, and although many people, including service users, may contribute to documents, it will very often be the social worker who has the powerful position of deciding what information to include, what conclusions to draw and recommendations to make. Learning to write professional social work documents is a skill you will continue to develop throughout your career.

Activity 15 Reflecting on your own writing journey

In the final activity, listen again to Vicki talking about her learning journey. This time as you listen, identify three areas of your own writing that you will focus on in your practice.

Audio content is not available in this format.



[Audio 1 \(repeated\): Reflecting on professional language](#)

Provide your answer...

Answer

What you have identified in this activity will be unique to you. Here is an example of someone else's three areas of their writing practice that they will focus on:

1. Notice and change when I am using overly complicated language.
2. Write in a child-centred style in documents.
3. Use a more active tense instead of relying on long sentences that are in the passive tense.

Conclusion

In this course you explored how to write professional social work documents in practice. It has included some approaches that you can use to consider the purpose and audience of your practice writing. As you heard from Vicki, learning to be an effective social work writer takes time. You will develop your skills throughout your practice learning as a student social worker and beyond into qualified practice.

The WiSP project reminds us of the tremendous power of writing as part of social work practice, at the heart of which is a person for whom what you write will undoubtedly impact their lives. We also highlight how important critical analysis is within writing and the necessity to consider this and other ethical issues when using any AI systems or tools. Earlier in the course we highlighted the voices of service users and carers to which we now return:

‘Everything about social work writing should reflect the view, voices and experiences of the people who are being written about ... written products should be usable and understandable by all relevant stakeholders that need to access it.’

(The Open University, 2023)

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University
[Social Work courses](#).

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Additional resources

The [WiSPeR](#) website contains a wide range of resources aimed to support social workers, including those studying at university. You can explore the topics to continue to develop your knowledge and skills.

[Writing Analysis in Social Care](#) is an interactive learning resource which is freely available for any workers in the social work and social care field and relevant to all UK nations.

A summary of research into social workers' writing is the focus of Rai, L., Ferguson, G. and Giddings, L. (2025) 'Writing as social Work: thematic review of the literature', *The British Journal of Social Work*, 55(1), pp. 25–44. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae124>

BASW have produced [Generative AI & Social Work Practice Guidance](#), which is available to members on their website.

The TACT Fostering website has a section on 'Language that cares', which includes a glossary compiled by children and young people of alternative phrases that they prefer social workers to use.

Your nation's professional standards and codes of practice can also be reviewed for their expectations about writing. There are also specific policies and guidance documents which are relevant in different areas of practice. Some examples are listed below:

[The Promise Progress Framework](#) (COSLA, The Scottish Government and The Promise Scotland, 2024) is downloadable from their website, this is linked with the major Scottish policy and guidance following the Independent Care Review in 2017.

[Keeping the promise](#) (The Promise Scotland, 2025) contains links to the reports from Scotland's Independent Care Review, 2017.

For students based in Wales, a section (00:49:34 onwards) of the

[Student Connect Webinar on 'Recording and report writing in social work'](#) deals with writing specifically in accordance with the *Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014*.

The Scottish Government has information on developing chronologies as part of their [Getting it Right for Every Child \(GIRFEC\) guidance](#).

Iriss, the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services, has published the useful report [Chronologies in Adult Support and Protection: moving from current to best](#).

The Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS) has produced guidance on [Developing Practice for Care Records in Scotland](#).

The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) has a useful resource about [social work recording](#).

Research in Practice has a practice tool for [completing social work chronologies](#) on their website.

Social Care Wales has created [Friend not Foe: make recording personal and accessible](#), which is a guide to supporting meaningful, outcome-focused recording in social care.

The Healthcare Library of Northern Ireland has published a [supplement on record keeping and note-taking](#).

Social worker Rebekah Pierre's

[Open Letter to the Social Worker Who Wrote My Case Files](#) was published by BASW as part of National Care Leavers Week 2022. (Please note that this resource has a Trigger Warning because it contains extracts of case notes some may find upsetting, with reference to child sexual exploitation and domestic abuse.)

Acknowledgements

This free course was written by Dr Gillian Ferguson and Dr Lucy Rai.

The WiSP research project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council ES/M008703/1 and The Open University, UK.

This course is based on extensive ESRC funded research into social work writing ([WiSP](#)), undertaken by Professor Theresa Lillis (Principal Investigator), Dr Alison Twiner and Dr Maria Leedham and a web based resource for social care professionals designed by Professor Theresa Lillis and Dr Lucy Rai working with members of the former WiSP Advisory Committee (full details can be found [here](#)). Many of the activities within this course are drawn from the original research project and web based resources and further developed in collaboration with social work practitioners, academics and people with lived experiences of social work services lead by Dr Lucy Rai. We thank all the original researchers, the former WiSP Advisory Committee, social work users and social work practitioners. You can find out more about the research at <https://www.writinginsocialwork.com/>.

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