

# Tips for Writing in Social Work: Accurate and Respectful Language

## A resource created by Simone Deahl for The Write Place

Writing is one of the ways in which social workers serve their clients. Even routine paperwork can have a huge impact on a client's life. Consider this real-life example: when working with a family, a social worker wrote in her case notes that a "touching event" that occurred between a brother and sister. Years later, a different social worker became involved, read the case note, and wrote in her own report that "sexualized behaviour" had occurred. The boy was then labelled as a "sex offender" and was prevented from being alone with his sister (McDonald et al., 2015).

This handout will give you tips on how to use language in a way that is clear, accurate, and respectful. These are best practices that apply to any piece of social work writing, whether it is a clinical case note, a policy proposal, or a research paper for school. Please keep in mind that these tips are not meant to be used as hard-and-fast rules. Language changes over time, with conventions coming and going. Social workers need to consider the context in which they are writing; the intended audience and any other people who might potentially access the document (such as a court of law); the reason for writing and the purpose that the information serves; and any possible unintended consequences (McDonald et al., 2015).

### 1. Use inclusive, non-biased language

- Use gender-neutral wording, and avoid assumptions about sexuality, culture, etc. **Examples:** "firefighters" rather than "firemen"; "colleagues" or "guests" rather than "ladies and gentlemen" (includes non-binary people); "partner" rather than "spouse" (includes people who are not married)
- Do not use "he/his" as a default pronoun. Instead, use one of these options:
  - "he or she"
  - "s/he"
  - alternate paragraphs between "he" and "she" – but make sure that you are not doing so in a way that reinforces gender stereotypes, for example by using "he" in a paragraph about truck drivers and "she" in the next paragraph about nurses.
  - "they" as a gender-neutral singular pronoun - this has historically been viewed as grammatically incorrect but is gaining acceptance.
  - re-phrase in order to avoid singular pronouns. **Example:** from "a social worker cares about his clients" to "social workers care about their clients."

### 2. Default to person-first language

- Person-first or people-first language views people as being separate from their problems, and puts the person first (Collier, 2012). The intention is to avoid dehumanizing people and to promote empathy. **Example:** "a person with diabetes", rather than "a diabetic person" or "a diabetic." Person-first language has been widely adopted as a norm within social work.
- Caveat: some people and some communities prefer identify-first language (Collier, 2012; Liebowitz, 2015), **Examples:** "a disabled person"; "an autistic person." People may feel that these characteristics are an intrinsic part of who they are and should not be separated from their personhood. Or they may view these aspects of their identity as neutral or positive, rather than seeing them as inherently negative. If

you are writing about an individual, the best course of action is to ask them how they would like to be described (Liebowitz, 2015), keeping in mind that how someone describes themselves may be different than how they would like to be described by others. If you are writing a paper, try to find out if there is a prevailing preference within the community you are writing about (Liebowitz, 2015). If you are unsure, it is usually safest to default to person-first language.

### 3. Use language that is neutral and non-emotional

- When writing about social problems, mental health problems, and disabilities, be cautious of emotionally laden words. You don't want to write about people in a way that invokes shame or pity or that reinforces stereotypes.
- “Burden”, “incompetence”, “defective” – can suggest inferiority (Government of Canada, 2013).
- “Tragic”, “suffers from”, “disease”, “patient” – can suggest pain and hopelessness. While some disabilities and mental disorders cause pain, not all do (Government of Canada, 2013).
- In healthcare or hospital settings, people are generally referred to as “patients.” However, in most other social work settings, the term “client” is preferred, as it is thought to indicate a more equal relationship. Some social workers prefer to refer to the people they work with simply as “people”, as in “people who consult a social worker” (Béres, 2014).
- “Victim” – can be disempowering. Preferred alternatives are “survivor” or “person who has experienced [event].”
- Characterizing people who have problems or disabilities as “brave”, “inspirational”, or “heroic” – can be patronizing, objectifying, and othering (Government of Canada, 2013).

### 4. Report the facts, not your personal judgements

- When describing clients or client interactions, report what happened as neutrally and objectively as possible. If you must make an assessment or form an opinion, support it with facts. **Example:** “Mr. White was drunk and behaved rudely,” is subjective and vague. “Mr. White smelled of alcohol and his speech was slurred. He repeatedly insulted group members, calling them ‘idiots’ and ‘airheads’,” is objective and specific.
- Using direct quotes from the client can be a way to capture the flavour of the case while making it clear that you are not injecting your own opinions or judgements. **Example:** “Sheila said that growing up, she had felt ‘suffocated’ by a mother who was ‘a control freak.’”

### 5. Clearly identify sources of information or opinions

- In academic writing, you must cite your sources and make it clear which ideas are yours and which are other writers’. When writing about a client, you also need to identify where the information comes from: is it something the client said, a report written by another professional, your own observation?

### 6. Be careful not to exaggerate research findings

- Accurately convey degrees of certainty:
  - “Are compatible with”, “is consistent with” – the evidence is compatible with the researcher’s interpretation, but is compatible with other interpretations as well (Railsback, n.d.)
  - “Suggests”, “supports” – the evidence supports the researcher’s interpretation over other interpretations (Railsback, n.d.)
  - “Indicate”, “show”, “demonstrate” – the evidence strongly supports the researcher’s interpretation, to the extent where “hardly any other interpretation is possible” (Railsback, n.d., E3)

- “Prove” – the researcher’s interpretation is absolutely correct, and no other interpretation is possible. (Railsback, n.d.) Within social sciences research, it is almost never possible to “prove” something.
- Be clear about the difference between correlation and causation
- Be careful not to over-generalize through the use of all-or-nothing statements. **Example:** “Trauma is passed down intergenerationally as survivors of child abuse repeat abusive behaviours with their own children.” This suggests that all survivors of child abuse go on to abuse their own children.

## 7. Explain acronyms and abbreviations

- In academic writing, it is expected that acronyms and non-standard abbreviations will be written out in full the first time they are used (Purdue Online Writing Lab, n.d.). This also applies to professional documents such as case notes (McDonald et al., 2015). Failing to explain abbreviations can confuse future readers, resulting in information being lost or misunderstood. **Examples:** the University of Western Ontario (UWO), diagnosis (dx)

## References

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