

Tips for Writing in Social Work: Structure and Format

A resource created by Simone Deahl for The Write Place

1. Structure your paper to fit the assignment

In high school, you probably learned how to write the “hamburger essay”: an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. The hamburger essay is an argumentative essay with one central thesis. If this is the only kind of paper you have ever written, then you may feel somewhat lost when it comes to writing your first paper for social work. Often in social work, you will not be arguing for one thesis, or even any thesis. You may write a variety of different types of papers: literature reviews, research proposals, grant proposals, policy briefs, case notes and assessments, and critical reflections. Structure your paper to fit the purpose of the assignment. Think about what the main themes or ideas of the paper are, and about the main tasks or components of the assignment are (hint: look at the rubric!). These themes or tasks can be different sections of your paper.

2. Use headings and subheadings

Headings help give your paper structure. They are a component of APA style, and for this reason many professors will expect them. Headings guide the reader, letting them know what to expect from each section. They can also guide you in the writing process. Breaking your paper into sections can help you to organize your thoughts and create an outline. You don't need come up a lot of creative titles; headings can be utilitarian. For example, if part of the assignment is about applying what you have learned to your future social work practice, you can use “Application to Social Work Practice” as a heading. Often, you can use the rubric as a guideline. (Bonus: this makes it clear to your professor that you addressed all the relevant parts of the assignment, making it easy for them to grade you.) You can also look at literature reviews published in social work journals to see examples of how papers can be organized into sections.

3. Use APA style

This is a set of guidelines for writing style, formatting, and - everyone's favourite - citation. There are many rules, which are very detail-oriented, so it will take time to get used to it all. Fortunately, there are many excellent resources out there to help you with this. Two of our favourites are OWL Purdue:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/general_format.html

and the APA website: <https://apastyle.apa.org/>, both of which have annotated sample papers. Put your paper side-by-side with the sample paper, and go back and forth until they match.

4. Get comfortable writing in first person

In social work, you are often asked to analyze your own experience and demonstrate awareness of your own internal processes. To do this, you need to write in first person, using phrases like “I realized” or “in the future, I will...” For students raised in North America, this may feel strange. One thing to keep in mind is that even though you are writing in first person, you are still writing a formal academic paper. You should still avoid contractions (e.g., “do not” instead of “don’t”) and use academic diction (e.g., “I did not have significant knowledge of...” as opposed to, “I didn’t know much about...”). Note that you are not going to be writing every social work paper in first person. It depends on the type and purpose of the paper. For a literature review, third person is usually most appropriate. A critical reflection assignment will almost always be in first person.