



Open Research Online

Citation

Rai, Lucy; Ferguson, Gillian and Giddings, Lindsay (2025). Writing as Social Work: Thematic Review of the Literature. *British Journal of Social Work*, 55(1) pp. 25–44.

URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/98873/>

DOI

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

License

(CC-BY 4.0) Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from [Open Research Online \(ORO\) Policies](#)

Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

Writing as Social Work: Thematic Review of the Literature

Lucy Rai , Gillian Ferguson * and Lindsay Giddings

Faculty of Wellbeing Education, Languages Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK

*Correspondence to Gillian Ferguson, Faculty of Wellbeing Education, Languages Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK. E-mail: gillian.ferguson1@open.ac.uk

Abstract

This article offers a thematic review of research and analysis of academic and practice-based social work writing. It aims to highlight specific challenges, arguing that support is needed in the development of writing as a core element of professional practice. Social work writing in the United Kingdom has been framed as a 'problematic', time-intensive activity [Lillis, T. (2023) 'Professional written voice "in flux": The case of social work', *Applied Linguistics Review*, 14(3), pp. 615–41]. It records practice, but is also a vital tool for undertaking assessments, formulating professional judgements, decision making and multi-agency collaboration. However, the centrality of writing to social work practice is not reflected in the regulatory frameworks for the profession in the United Kingdom where it only appears in the context of 'report writing' and loosely 'communication'. The discussion is contextualised within a theoretical framing of social work writing followed by a discussion of student writing and then writing in professional practice. The article addresses the themes related to academic writing of concerns about the quality of writing; disciplinarity; conventions and implicit codes; and challenges to teach professional writing. In relation to practice-based writing, the article addresses the themes of social work as a 'writing intensive' profession; writing as enacting practice; and the challenges and experience of social work writers.

Keywords: documentation, recording, practice-based writing, professional practice, student writing, written communication

Accepted: June 2024

© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Introduction

This article provides a thematic review of research and analysis of academic and practice-based social work writing. This includes literature based on empirical research, practitioner reflections and theoretical analysis of existing literature publications, emerging primarily from the UK, the USA and Australia. Publications can broadly be divided into those focusing on student writing and practice-based writing. The review conformed to internationally accepted ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018). The article draws on a body of work undertaken in the UK which culminated in the *Writing in Professional Social Work Practice in a Changing Communicative Landscape* (WiSP) project. WiSP was a three year, nationally funded UK-based research project which concluded its empirical phase in 2019. At the time of writing, it is the most extensive original research undertaken in the UK on social work writing. The study developed from over twenty years of research at The Open University investigating both student and practice-based writing in social work practice (Rai, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014; Lillis and Rai, 2012; Lillis et al., 2012; Rai and Lillis, 2013; Lillis, 2017a,b).

WiSP focused specifically on practice-based social work writing, gathering data from five local authorities in England which deliver services to children and families, generic adult care and adults' mental health services. Data collected comprised eighty-one interviews with seventy-one social workers, field notes from ten weeks of observations, 483 days of social worker writing logs and 4,806 texts (Lillis et al., 2017; 2020). This project signalled 'the need for educators and trainers to pay attention to professional writing within programmes of study and professional development, an aspect currently largely missing' (Lillis, 2017a, p. 47).

This article aims to raise awareness of the challenges and importance of practice-based social work writing with educators, policy makers and leaders within the context of social work practice. It contextualises current debates about the nature of social work writing and highlights the importance of embedding effective educational practices for social during their qualifying training and post-qualifying careers.

Theoretical framing

Theoretical perspectives that have informed this body of work include sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, writing for academic purposes and writing across the curriculum (WAC). The underlying theoretical model for the WiSP project was a social practices approach to writing, which recognises that writing is a socially and culturally situated communicative activity (Lea and Street, 2006; Lillis, 2013; Lillis and Scott, 2007). Support for student writing has been influenced by several theoretical

perspectives ranging from writing being an individual skill attributed to the writer, through to a complex, contextually and institutionally embedded social communication, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 provides a relatively simple summary of three of the most influential approaches to academic writing addressed in this literature review. Overlaps exist, and within each there are different perspectives and applications. For example, the academic socialisation model includes WAC and writing in the disciplines, both of which have been highly influential within writing centres attached to higher education institutions in the USA. The social practices approach includes the concept of ‘academic literacies’, developed in the UK, but influenced by the theorisation of applying discourses on widening participation, diversity and social justice developed in the USA, South Africa and UK to academic writing (Lillis and Scott, 2007). Whilst Figure 1 relates to theorisation of academic or student writing, the concept of writing as a social practice has also been applied to other forms of writing, including professional or workplace writing (Lillis, 2023).

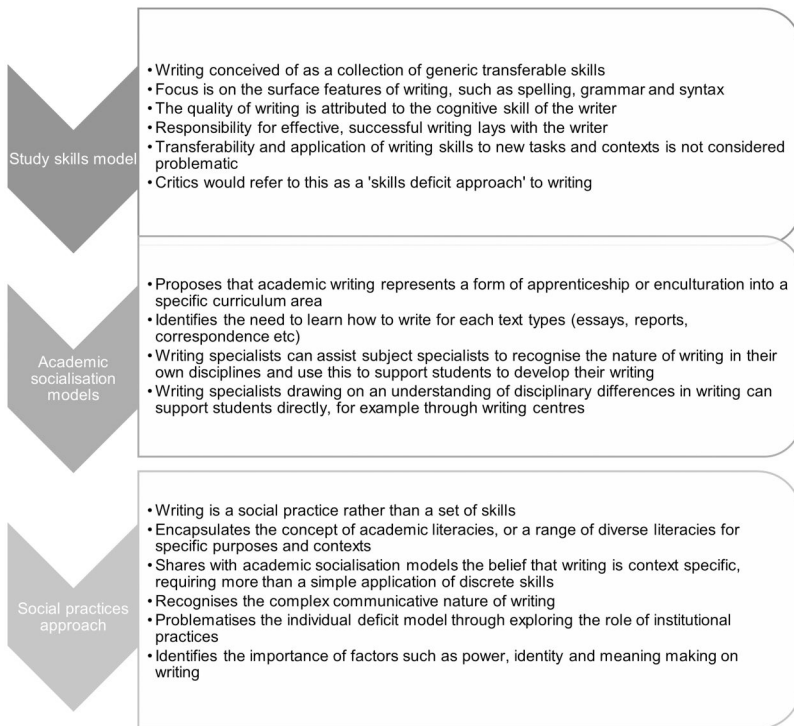


Figure 1. Theoretical perspectives on writing adapted from Lea and Street (2006) and Lillis and Scott (2007).

Student writing

Social work is a degree or postgraduate level academic and professional qualification; consequently, in the UK, during which students are assessed on their academic ability as well as their practice. Rai (2004, 2006, 2008) suggests that whilst students undertake practice-based writing as part of their practice learning, it is primarily the quality of their academic writing which is assessed. Rai and Lillis suggest that there are some elements of academic writing which can potentially help students develop their practice-based writing, but that these are often implicit. Social work programmes may not explicitly assess or teach students to transfer their academic writing skills to writing in a professional context (Rai and Lillis, 2013). Practice-based writing presents significantly more complex and varied writing challenges. Social workers may not encounter or have an opportunity to learn the range of practice-based writing tasks required until after they have qualified.

Reported 'poor quality' of writing/concerns about writing

Longstanding concerns have been expressed about the quality of writing in social work (Lillis et al., 2017; 2020). Whilst such concerns are directed at both students and qualified social workers, there has been an implication that responsibility begins at recruitment and teaching stages. The validity of these concerns is not taken for granted in this article, but the commonality of this theme across the literature highlights the importance of social work writing as a focus when the effectiveness or safety of social practice is scrutinised.

Concerns about the quality of student writing, initially identified in the USA, focused on what has been described as a skills deficit model. Alter and Adkins wrote that *the most serious deficiency has been in our students' declining ability to write* (Alter and Adkins, 2001). The same authors follow up study concluded that social work students *have the most trouble with producing a writing sample that marshalled evidence in a clear and persuasive voice* (Alter and Adkins, 2006). Also in the USA, Waller expressed concern about the quality of social work student writing and proposed a model of developmental writing tasks and feedback to increase criticality and the use of voice in writing (Waller et al., 1996; Waller, 2000). Moor et al. (2012), Kilgore et al. (2013) and Cronley and Kilgore (2016) all identified social work student writing as problematic and proposed more effective use of writing centres to directly support students or faculty staff and Woody et al. (2014) proposed a bespoke course to improve the quality of student writing.

In the UK, Nelson and Weatherald (2014) reflected a shift away from a skills deficit approach by identifying the need to prepare students for

particular challenges of practice-based social work writing, suggesting that some students struggled with writing due to coming from a non-traditional educational background. Horton and Diaz similarly proposed interventions to address identified difficulties that students had with the effectiveness of their writing, specifically critical thinking (Horton and Diaz, 2011). Increasingly, authors have foregrounded these more nuanced representations of the challenges of social work writing which move away from a deficit model. This is exemplified by Lillis and Rai, whose social practices approach questions the systemic responsibility of institutions, policies, managers and technologies all of which contribute to the quality and effectiveness of social work writing (e.g. Rai and Lillis, 2013; Rai, 2014). This body of work has been influential on thinking around social work writing, for example Jin *et al.* suggest that deficit approaches to student writing have disadvantaged students from non-traditional backgrounds, specifically those from 'racial and socioeconomic minorities, specifically at historically black colleges and universities' (Jin *et al.*, 2016, p. 464). Similarly, Christensen *et al.* (2017) recognised some of the complexities of social work writing, including the multidisciplinary theory base and the need to draw together theory and practice, both of which impact on the challenge of writing.

Educators appear to remain challenged by the most effective way to support students to develop the writing skills required for professional practice (Lillis and Leedham, 2024). Social work programmes in the UK offer varied approaches which include a traditional study skills approach, through which writing is presumed to be a transferable skilled and taught generically. Some universities now have writing centres modelled on those in the USA which offer more of an academic socialisation approach which recognises the specific nature of writing in the discipline of social work. Applying an academic literacies approach to student writing would involve not only a recognition of the specific disciplinary nature of writing in social work, but engagement of educators in addressing the institutional, cultural and social factors which impact on students' experiences of writing. In social work, one important area that has been explored is that of identity and reflective writing (Rai, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2021), both of which are addressed below.

Disciplinary, conventions and implicit codes

The emergence of academic socialisation approaches, and latterly academic literacies, has resulted in theorisation of the specific writing conventions primarily within student writing (e.g. Rai, 2004, 2006; Horton and Diaz, 2011; Jani and Mellinger, 2015) and academic social work writing for publication (Heron and Murray, 2004). The concept of writing conventions refers to specific, normally implicit, ways in which students

are expected to write. Examples include whether or not to use the first person, whether evidence can include personal or professional experiences and the structure of specific genres of writing such as essays, reports, case studies and portfolios (Rai, 2014, 2021). Social work has the complexity of drawing on a range of disciplines such as sociology, psychology and social policy, each with their own distinct writing conventions (Rai, 2014, 2021). As the discipline has evolved, social work has developed its own writing conventions, one important example being reflective writing. There is a particular challenge for students who have already developed writing skills in one discipline transferring these to social work where the conventions can be very different (Rai, 2004, 2006, 2008).

Writing from an academic socialisation perspective, Moor *et al.* suggest that ‘The challenge is helping faculty realise their knowledge is not transparent to students; it must be taught, intentionally and explicitly, in undergraduate social work classrooms’ (2012, p. 62). Making writing conventions explicit to students presumes that academic staff understand and agree on what these are; for them to be made explicit to students they must first be explicit to academic staff. The process of learning writing conventions is identified by Nelson and Weatherald (2014), drawn from Rai and Lillis, as being akin to ‘cracking a code’:

They were keenly aware of the professional importance of being able to produce clear and well-constructed written English and felt that this was knowledge to which they were entitled as part of their preparation for professional practice.

(Nelson and Weatherald, 2014, p. 116)

Embedded within the social practices approach is an understanding that students do not enter higher education on a level playing field. Individual social, educational, linguistic and cultural experiences and identities result in some students being able to interpret, consciously or unconsciously, the ‘rules of the game’ with greater ease (Lillis, 2001). The concept of implicit conventions which need to be interpreted and understood in order to write successfully, also opens up debates around the best way to support students in developing their academic writing. The social practices approach encourages educators to broaden their approach so that students are not perceived as solely responsible for the quality of their writing. Strategies could include reflecting on the transparency of marking criteria, the nature of assessment tasks and the guidance and support offered to students. One specific example, provided by Rai (2021) is the use of ‘language and writing histories’ which enable students to reflect on and share their journey in developing writing skills in order to open up a conversation with educators which can address not only the writing demands of a particular discipline or assignment, but individual strengths and challenges such as native language use, identity

and the way in which previous experiences and studies impact on their understanding of current writing (Rai, 2021, pp. 3 and 13).

Much of the literature on social work student writing focuses on enabling students to write effectively for their academic assessments. Assessed writing tasks includes the 'essay', although specific requirements of essays are complex and problematic. Lillis (2001) explored the term 'essayist literacy', a concept that challenges the belief that this form of assessed writing is a clear, transparent or commonly understood genre. In fact, the requirements of essays are complex and often implicit, representing very particular ways of constructing knowledge. Importantly some non-traditional students are more disadvantaged than others in accessing the requirements of essay writing, regardless of the discipline. Lillis defines 'non-traditional' as:

Students from social groups historically excluded from higher education: these include students from working-class backgrounds, those who are older than 18 when they start a university course and students from a much wider range of cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds.

(Lillis, 2001, p. 16)

Non-traditional students have a high representation on social work courses (Rai, 2008) and so are potentially more likely to encounter these challenges. Two of the ways in which non-traditional students can potentially experience challenges are as a result of their educational or linguistic history and cultural or identity dissonance. Prior educational experiences can leave non-traditional students less well prepared to decode implicit conventions surrounding essay writing. These implicit conventions include expectations around language (words, sentence construction, grammar and punctuation) and structure (introductions, conclusions, paragraphs, the use of headings and referencing conventions). Lillis's research also illustrates the deeper issues of 'meaning making' experienced by non-traditional students which can result in writers feeling that their language, identity or culture is excluded from conventional academic essay writing.

Lillis uses examples from her work with non-traditional student writers to illustrate how they are inclined to minimise or exclude aspects of 'themselves' which they perceive as being contrary to the social practice of essayist literacy in the university.

(Rai, 2008, p. 110)

Such regulation of student writers' voices and identities can be through the ways that knowledge is expected to be conveyed, such as the exclusion of writer's own views, thoughts or experiences (Lillis, 2001, p. 83).

Rai draws on Lillis's work in the context of social work students, focusing in particular on the ways in which writers struggle with the differences between essays and reflective writing (2004, 2006, 2008). Social

work students are challenged by the specific disciplinary expectations of writing in social work. Their academic writing can include diverse text types, commonly including essays and reflective writing. Rai suggests that the differences in writing conventions between ‘reflective’ and ‘essay’ tasks can be very challenging, largely because such differences are not explicit. Rai identifies reflective writing as a specific genre with its own distinct expectations, but also as a learning tool intended to help students become more effective reflective practitioners. Non-traditional students can be particularly disadvantaged when they both need to learn the ‘rules’ of academic writing and the sometimes-contradictory expectations of reflective writing (Rai, 2006).

Academic writing to teach practice-based writing

Writing on social work courses also has been researched in relation to how well it prepares students for writing as professionals, post qualification. Requirements and guidance on teaching practice-based writing in the UK social work curriculum is imprecise. Each of the four nations of the UK has a set of regulated education standards, which students must meet prior to qualification. Writing appears inconsistently across these standards, variously referred to as record keeping, report writing and a range of related professional skills, such as: demonstrating professional judgement; gathering, managing and evaluating information; and, communicating with service users, carers and other professionals, which includes writing as one of the forms of communication. Related competencies are also included which could be argued to contribute to effective writing, such as information sharing, using technology, using analysis and maintaining confidentiality (Social Work England, 2021; Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2015; Scottish Social Services Council, 2019; Social Care Wales, 2011).

Literature and research into teaching practice-based writing has primarily focused on writing in university, as opposed to the writing students undertake in their mandatory field practicum. Whilst writing is primarily assessed as ‘academic work’, the range of genres can include simulated reports and writing tasks which include reflections on practice or case summaries. Some authentic practice writing might be included in portfolios, which form an important part of the assessment of social work students’ practice competence. The practice writing itself, which can include documents such as anonymised extracts of case records, reports or assessments, meeting and supervision notes, are not directly assessed but referenced to as evidence of the student’s practice and referred to by the student and their supervisor portfolio commentary (Rai and Lillis, 2013, p. 362; Rai, 2014).

Despite the lack of systematic teaching of practice writing, students in this study identified transferable writing skills, such as selection of evidence, concise writing, analysis and reflection (Rai and Lillis, 2013, p. 359). Nelson and Weatherald evaluated a small-scale initiative which aimed to improve the ways in which social work programmes could better prepare students for practice writing. The authors suggest that in part practice-based writing in social work is challenging as it requires students to write about complex situations which ‘... involves careful use of the past and present tense, ability to express degrees of certainty and provisionality, accurate use of negative and adjectival forms, and subtle and sensitive use of vocabulary’ (2014, p. 116). This illustrates the close relationship between the technical skills of writing and the cognitive processes involved in practice-based writing, such as collecting evidence, synthesis of information and the ability to write rhetorically, or persuasively. In academic writing, rhetorical writing takes the form of developing a persuasive argument to address a question. In professional practice the purpose of rhetorical writing is to achieve an outcome based on evidence and the author’s professional view (Rai, 2021, pp. 57–58). This final element of practice-based writing emerges as an important and challenging element of practice-based writing.

Practice-based writing

The second part of this article considers themes arising from literature on writing in professional social work practice. Such writing is undertaken during practice placements and then after qualification where it forms a core element of social work practice. The discussion is organised into three areas:

- A ‘writing intensive’ profession
- Writing as enacting practice
- Challenges and experience

A ‘writing intensive’ profession

Drawing on Brandt (2005), Lillis refers to social work as a ‘writing intensive’ profession. This is defined as a profession *where 30 per cent of time is spent on writing or preparing for writing, pointing to professions where writing is explicitly a core part of the work* (2017a, p. 47). Table 1 outlines the typology of writing functions identified by Lillis. The WiSP research evidenced that the amount of time spent writing ranged from 50 per cent, based on social workers’ daily logs, but up to 95 per cent based on researcher observations (Lillis, 2023, p. 4), placing it clearly within Brandt’s

Table 1. Functions of everyday practice-based writing.

Functions of writing	Examples of texts
Administration <i>Preparatory, interim or short texts, often as part of/before larger activity, or one offs</i>	to-do lists; online diary entry; Annual Leave Request
Applications for services, equipment, support checks and referrals <i>Document often on a template to provide services/equipment or specific actions</i>	Housing Application; NSPCC Check; Referral for Emergency Home-Based Respite Care
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>	Assessment of Needs and Outcomes; Parenting Assessment; Risk Profile
Case recording <i>Ongoing logging of case activity, usually stored centrally on an authority-based IT system</i>	Case Notes; Contact Log; Statutory Visit Record
Communication with others <i>Sharing/requesting information, via different technologies and media</i>	Emails; instant messaging; Letters
Contracts/contractual information <i>Documents that set out formal arrangements, often with sanctions if not adhered to</i>	Contact agreements; Contract Monitoring Form
Diagrams/drawings/mapping <i>Texts that illustrate a process or relationships, often accompanying other documentation</i>	Chronology; Genogram
Documents when working with clients <i>Documents often completed whilst with clients, often to aid interaction/inform decisions</i>	Social Stories; Worksheets
Meeting-related paperwork <i>Texts written in preparation for, during and to document meetings</i>	Agenda; Minutes
Reports <i>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</i>	Pathway Plan; Approved Mental Health Practitioner Report; Best Interest Statement
Training/supervision documentation <i>Texts aimed at arranging, delivering, evaluating and undertaking training and supervision activities</i>	Portfolio; Supervision Record

Lillis et al. (2017 p. 33).

characterisation, despite the International Federation of Social Workers global definition of social work as a ‘practice based’ profession in which ‘practice spans a range of activities including various forms of therapy and counselling, group work and community work; policy formulation and analysis; and advocacy and political interventions’ (IFSW, 2024). The significance of writing is also not clearly signalled in the social work professional standards across the UK. These standards primarily refer to writing as

‘records/recording’ or ‘reports/reporting’ (Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2019; Scottish Social Services Council, 2019; Social Work England, 2019; Social Care Wales, 2022). In reality, social workers write a diverse range of text types as a core element of their professional role. The result is that whilst writing is a core element of social work practice, it is not identified as such in the professional standards. As suggested by Lillis, it is ‘central whilst invisible’ (2023, p. 6).

The WiSP research indicates that there has been an increased ‘textualisation’ of social work, or in other words that the emphasis and role of writing has increased as an element of practice (Lillis, 2023, p. 3). The WiSP research illustrates the way in which actions in social work practice are intrinsically associated with writing. The characterisation of social work as a ‘writing intensive profession’ (Lillis, 2017a, 2023) is also supported by the range and complexity of texts as well as the time spent writing. Lillis (2017a,b) identified eleven functions of practice-based writing and provided examples of text types drawn from children, adult and mental health services. This analysis illustrates the range of texts that social workers write, each differing with regard to the purpose, intended audience and method of writing, including handwritten, digital forms with prescribed fields and free text formats including emails and meeting notes.

Lillis *et al.* narrowed this list down to the four key genres of case notes, assessment reports, emails and handwritten notes. These were identified as ‘key’ as they were the most commonly used and were relevant to all service user groups of children, adults and mental health (Lillis, 2017a,b, p. 34).

Writing as enacting practice

Social work writing involves more than keeping an accurate record of facts. Writing in social work is a ‘high stakes’ activity (Lillis, 2017b, p. 485); life changing decisions rely on documents such as assessments and court reports. It is through written documents that social workers enact their practice based on their professional training and judgements. Documents often do not stand alone but have connections to other contemporaneous diverse text types as well as documents mapped across time, which are not necessarily clear or linear. The WiSP research gathered data which illustrates this concept of ‘text trajectories’ (Lillis, 2017b). These text trajectories reflect the complexity of the lives of individuals and families with whom social workers practice.

Creating a professional document involves collecting and collating information from a range of sources and analysing this information by drawing on professional experience and training. In some documents (such as assessments and reports) social workers are expected to use this analysis to present a rhetorical argument and make a recommendation

(Rai and Lillis, 2013; Balkow and Lillis, 2019). The acknowledgement that there is a rhetorical or persuasive element to writing in social work is not new (Alter and Adkins, 2001; Roose *et al.*, 2009; White *et al.*, 2009). Rai and Lillis (2013) identified the relationship between students developing the ability to build an argument and also reflection in their academic writing, and the analysis required in their writing post-qualification. Balkow and Lillis suggest that the distinction between ‘description’ and ‘analysis’ in practice-based writing is not clear:

Description and analysis are often talked about as if the difference were absolutely clear but as we’ve already discussed, careful description is what social workers are often expected to produce—and careful description always involves analysis, even if this is implied rather than made explicit.

(Balkow and Lillis, 2019, p. 15)

This hints at the complexity of ‘voices’ contained within social work documents. Lillis explores the notion of ‘professional voice’ which encompasses the agency of the writer, the context that writing takes place in and also the direct and indirect addressee. Lillis suggests that social work documents entextualise meanings through:

The immediate contexts of production; theirs (and others) specific histories of language use; their sense of agency as professional social workers and the discourses that may enact such agency; and, importantly, their imagining of how both real (e.g. a particular manager reading a report, a particular service user) and imagined addressees (e.g. more abstract entities, such as the “courts”) may engage with such texts.

(Lillis, 2017b, p. 621)

Social work documentation also includes the voices of service users, carers, family members and other professionals, or the *representation* of these voices mediated through the social worker writers. This process of mediating the meaning of texts is described as ‘literacy brokering’ (Curry and Lillis, 2013, p. 371). Literacy brokers are contributors to a final document who may not be visible or primary authors. Lillis suggests that there are differences in the visibility, power and agency of contributors, some of which depend on the nature and purpose of the document.

In the three examples of texts provided by Lillis (2017b), she explains that whilst the social worker was the visible author, or ‘lead orchestrator’, others contributed in different ways as ‘literacy brokers’ and each had different levels of power, visibility and involvement. Figure 2 summarises the different brokers that Lillis identifies in texts. The Institutional broker had the greatest level of power as the person able to sign off the documents. The practice expertise broker brought specialist knowledge or experience relating to a specific area of practice, in this case a family support worker who had worked closely with the family. The discursual expertise broker brought specialist knowledge of how to

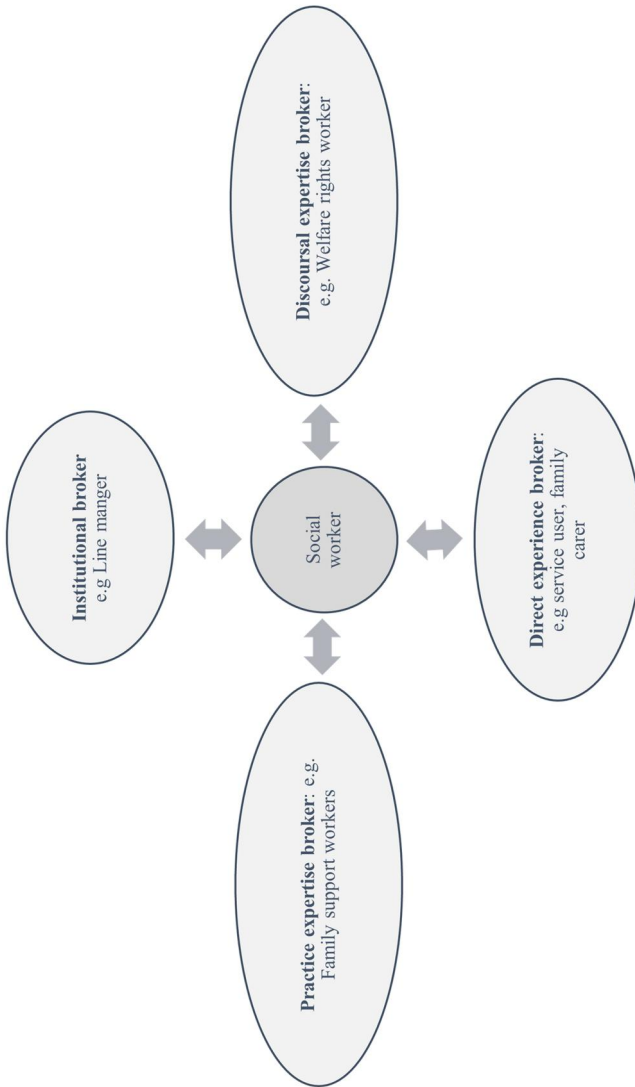


Figure 2. Literacy brokers based on Lillis (2017b, p. 636).

construct a text with a specific rhetorical function, in this case, an application for a specific welfare benefit. The final broker, not directly identified in Lillis (2017b), are the service user and their family, who may also be ‘unpaid carers’ (Oldridge and Larkin, 2020).

In addition to the literacy brokers, documents have different addressees, or potential intended readers, who also vary in terms of their visibility and time of access to the document. Lillis suggests that addressees can be primary or secondary, the latter unpredictable in terms of if and when they may read a document.

Lillis (2017b) suggests that whilst the expression of a professional view was expected by managers, social workers also expressed caution about including their views in writing. This caution arose from social workers experiencing their own individual judgements as being secondary to the position of the agency, which they represented. As a result, the study found that writers sometimes ‘hedged’ their own judgement or ensured that clear and direct evidence was given to support views expressed (Lillis, 2017b, p. 505).

The findings of the WiSP project illustrate the complexity of practice-based social work writing in terms of the diversity of texts, the multiple

Table 2. Addressees example 1: Court report.

Addressee	Primary/ secondary	Nature	Explanation
Court	Primary	Immediate and dominant	The report is specifically written for the court. It has the purpose of developing a rhetorical position based on an understanding of the information that the court requires.
Local authority	Secondary	Immediate and dominant	Whilst a secondary addressee, the local authority will also have immediate access to the report and is a dominant influence in how it is written.
Service user (child)	Secondary	Potential and future	Where the service user is a child, they should have access to the report or it should be explained to them based on their level of understanding. However, it is also important for the social workers to be aware that the service user may also read the report in the future, potentially many years later.
Other professionals, including a non-authoring social worker	Secondary	Potential and future	Many other professionals may have contributed to the report directly or indirectly and may also have access to it either immediately or potentially in the future. This could include another social worker.

(Developed from Lillis et al. 2017).

Table 3. Addressees example 2: Application for a welfare benefit.

Addressee	Primary/ secondary	Nature	Explanation
Benefit agency	Primary	Immediate and dominant	The report is specifically written for the benefit agency. It has the purpose of developing a rhetorical position based on an understanding of the information that the benefit agency requires.
Local authority	Secondary	Immediate and dominant	Whilst a secondary addressee, the local authority will also have immediate access to the report and is a dominant influence in how it is written.
Service user (adult)	Secondary	Potential and future	Where the service user is an adult, they should have immediate access to the report. However, it is also important for the social workers to be aware that the service user may also read the report in the future, potentially many years later.
Other professionals, including a non-authoring social worker	Secondary	Potential and future	Many other professionals may have contributed to the report directly or indirectly and may also have access to it either immediately or potentially in the future. This could include another social worker.

(Developed from [Lillis et al. 2017](#)).

voices contributing to the drafting of documents and the immediate and potential readers. [Table 2](#) and [Table 3](#) provide examples that show the nuances of social work writing for different audiences. Findings that are still emerging have also continued the work of [Rai and Lillis \(2013\)](#) on the expression of professional judgement and its role in combining descriptive and analytical writing. Through ‘text-orientated ethnography’ ([Lillis, 2017a,b](#)), the WiSP project also focused on the lived experience and challenges for social workers of producing professional documents.

Challenges and the experience of social workers

The WiSP research provided an insight into the daily writing experiences of social workers and some of the challenges they face through an extensive text-orientated ethnographic study. The study highlighted the time demands of writing on social workers, as discussed. It was notable from the WiSP research that although social worker participants estimated that they spent over 50 per cent of their time writing, for almost all this was a significant underestimate of between 10 per cent and 68 per cent. Only two participants overestimated their writing time and this was only by 6 per cent and 2 per cent, respectively ([Lillis et al., 2017; 2020](#)). The study also found that writing took place across, and often beyond, the working day. It was often

‘nested’ between other activities, such as phone calls, meetings and conversations with colleagues. Where the writing demanded greater concentration (such as a court or assessment report), participants reported working at home outside of normal office hours in order to have a less disrupted writing environment (Lillis *et al.*, 2020). Despite the centrality of writing to social work practice, there is an implication that it is experienced as an intrusion into the ‘real work’ and also not permitted the space within the working day to be completed effectively:

I would like to be able to actually focus on the direct work which is the reason I came into social work, and not you know walk away because I can’t give you the quality that I want—And it’s within that scenario I really would like to know you. There’s too many limitations because, you know, I’ve got to also get this written up.

(Lillis *et al.*, 2020, p. 468)

Lillis *et al.* also use the concept of ‘textual time’ (2020, p. 36 based on Smith, 2005) to explore the way in which writing is treated as an institutionally significant measurement of time. This arises in part from the accountability function of writing in social work, for example, case recoding evidencing that practice was actioned in line with statutory and agency requirements. The pervasive relationship between texts and timescales also reflects the way in which written documents often become a measure of work that is done. In simple terms, the level of activity of a social worker is measured by the texts that are written. This creates a tension for practitioners between time spent in direct contact with service users or other colleagues risks becoming invisible and texts produced which evidence ‘action’ (Lillis *et al.*, 2017; 2020, p. 36). Where writing becomes driven by institutional accountability demands it risks becoming ‘defensive’, with the purpose distorted so that the priority becomes evidencing institutional requirements rather than responding to the needs of service users (Balkow and Lillis, 2019).

Bureaucratisation of documentation in social work has also been driven by digital technology. White *et al.* (2009) reported on findings from a research study in England into the impact of the introduction of digital technologies to assessment in children’s services through the ‘common assessment framework’. The study suggested that the content of assessments was being driven by the technology and institutional demands, resulting in social worker professional judgement being curbed. Since this study, digital systems used in social work have developed, arguably now taking more account of both local agency requirements, practitioner and managerial perspectives. Holland reminds us that regardless of whether documentation is digital or not, ‘the recording of assessment work on standard forms constitutes an intervention in the assessment process that is not neutral’ (Holland, 2011, p. 25). Lillis *et al.* (2020) identifies the centrality of ICT systems for formal documentation despite social workers choices to also use a range of other writing

technologies, including handwritten notes, in part arising from a desire to maintain more agency over their writing (Lillis *et al.*, 2020, p. 474).

Conclusion

Writing in social work is central to practice but remains marginal in social work education and lacking a clear focus in UK professional standards. Whilst there has been some research into academic writing in social work, the WiSP project is one of the only national studies into professional writing in social work. This thematic review of writing across academic and practice domains highlights some important issues for educators, policy makers and practitioners. First, writing is a skill which needs to be developed both during qualifying training and beyond into practice. This requires clarity embedded in standards for social work education about the role of writing within social work practice and expectations of students and early career practitioners in developing this area of their practice. The WiSP findings suggest that practice writing is often experienced negatively; as an unwelcome demand, a distraction from ‘real practice’ and as a bureaucratic necessity. Despite the frustrations, the reality is that writing does much more than document practice. It is through writing that assessments are undertaken and reported, recommendations and decisions are made and daily practice is recorded. Writing constructs current decisions and documents service users’ lives which may inform reviews and are retained as future life histories. At the centre of all documentation is a life, a person for whom the documentation writes their life, creates opportunities, opens and closes doors and creates a history.

Finally, the WiSP project has worked with service users to disseminate the findings of the research. The following statement was created to guide best practice in social work writing:

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 Team, 2023)

Acknowledgements

None.

Funding

No sources of funding.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

References

- Alter, C. and Adkins, C. (2001) 'Improving the writing skills of social work students', *Journal of Social Work Education*, **37**(3), pp. 493–505.
- Alter, C. and Adkins, C. (2006) 'Assessing student writing proficiency in graduate schools of social work', *Journal of Social Work Education*, **42**(2), pp. 337–54.
- Balkow, M. and Lillis, T. (2019) *Social Work Writing and Bureaucracy A Tale in Two Voices A Discussion Paper from the Centre for Welfare Reform*, England, Centre for Welfare Reform. <https://citizen-network.org/uploads/attachment/667/social-work-writing-and-bureaucracy.pdf> (accessed July 8, 2024).
- BERA. (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, Fourth Edition (2018)*, London, British Educational Research Association.
- Brandt, D. (2005) 'Writing for a living: Literacy and the knowledge economy', *Written Communication*, **22** (2), pp. 166–97.
- Christensen, J., Hjortsjö, M. and Wärnsby, A. (2017) 'Academic writing in social work education: Reflections from an international classroom', *China Journal of Social Work*, **10**(1), pp. 69–78.
- Cronley, C. and Kilgore, C. D. (2016) 'Social work students and faculty: Testing the convergence of perspectives on student writing abilities', *Journal of Social Work Education*, **52**(2), pp. 214–33.
- Curry, M. J. and Lillis, T. (2013) *A Scholars' Guide to Getting Published in English: Critical Choices and Practical Strategies*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters.
- Heron, G. and Murray, R. (2004) 'The place of writing in social work: Bridging the theory-practice divide', *Journal of Social Work*, **4**(2), pp. 199–214.
- Holland, S. (2011) *Child and Family Assessment in Social Work Practice*, 2nd edn, Los Angeles, CA, SAGE.
- Horton, E. G. and Diaz, N. (2011) 'Learning to write and writing to learn social work concepts: Application of writing across the curriculum strategies and techniques to a course for undergraduate social work students', *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, **31**(1), pp. 53–64.
- International Federation of Social Work. (2024) Global definition of social work (IFSW pubd online 2024), available online at: <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/> (accessed January 20, 2024).
- Jani, J. S. and Mellinger, M. S. (2015) 'Beyond "writing to learn": Factors influencing students' writing outcomes', *Journal of Social Work Education*, **51**(1), pp. 136–52.
- Jin, S. W., Warrener, C., Mustapha, A. and Jones, K. C. (2016) 'An empirical assessment of writing and research proficiency in HBCU social work students', *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, **27**(5), pp. 1–9.
- Kilgore, C. D., Cronley, C. and Amey, B. (2013) 'Developing grass roots writing resources: A novel approach to writing within the social work discipline', *Teaching in Higher Education*, **18**(8), pp. 920–32.

- Lea, M. R. and Street, B. V. (2006) 'The 'academic literacies' model: Theory and applications', *Theory into Practice*, **45**(4), pp. 368–77.
- Lillis, T. M. (2001) *Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire*, London, Routledge.
- Lillis, T. (2013) *The Sociolinguistics of Writing. Edinburgh Sociolinguistics*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.
- Lillis, T. (2017a) 'Writing in professional social work practice in a changing communicative landscape (WISP)', *Impact*, **2017**(9), pp. 61–3.
- Lillis, T. (2017b) 'Imagined, prescribed and actual text trajectories: The 'problem' with case notes in contemporary social work', *Text & Talk*, **37**(4), pp. 485–508.
- Lillis, T. (2023) 'Professional written voice "in flux": The case of social work', *Applied Linguistics Review*, **14**(3), pp. 615–41.
- Lillis, T. and Leedham, M. (2024) 'Who is the 'I'? An exploration of social work professional written discourse and implications for social work education', *Social Work Education*, pp. 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2024.2314608>.
- Lillis, T., Leedham, M. and Twiner, A. (2017) 'If it's not written down it didn't happen': Contemporary social work as a writing intensive profession', *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice*, **14**(1), pp. 29–52.
- Lillis, T., Leedham, M. and Twiner, A. (2020) 'Time, the written record, and professional practice: The case of contemporary social work', *Written Communication*, **37**(4), pp. 431–86.
- Lillis, T. and Rai, L. (2012) 'Quelle relation entre l'écrit académique et l'écrit professionnel? Une étude de CAS dans le Domaine du travail social. [What is the relationship between academic and professional writing? A case study of social work]', *Pratiques*, **153–154**, pp. 51–70.
- Lillis, T., Rai, L. and Garcia-Maza, G. (2012) *Action Research Project on Case Notes Recording, Internal Report for a Local Authority in Partnership*, England, The Open University.
- Lillis, T. and Scott, M. (2007) 'Defining academic literacies research: Issues of epistemology, ideology and strategy', *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice*, **4**(1), pp. 5–32.
- Moor, K. S., Jensen-Hart, S. and Hooper, R. I. (2012) 'Small change, big difference: Heightening BSW faculty awareness to elicit more effective student writing', *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, **32**(1), pp. 62–77.
- Nelson, P. and Weatherald, C. (2014) 'Cracking the code—an approach to developing professional writing skills', *Social Work Education*, **33**(1), pp. 105–20.
- Northern Ireland Social Care Council. (2019) *Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers*, Belfast, Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, available online at: <https://nisc.info/app/uploads/2020/09/standards-of-conduct-and-practice-for-social-workers-2019.pdf> (accessed November 8, 2023).
- Rai, L. (2004) 'Exploring literacy in social work education: A social practices approach to student writing', *Social Work Education*, **23**(2), pp. 149–62.
- Rai, L. (2006) 'Owning (up to) reflective writing in social work education', *Social Work Education*, **25**(8), pp. 785–97.
- Rai, L. (2008) *Student Writing in Social Work Education*, PhD Dissertation, England, The Open University.
- Rai, L. (2012) 'Responding to emotion in practice-based writing', *Higher Education*, **64**(2), pp. 267–84.
- Rai, L. (2014) *Effective Writing for Social Work: Making a Difference*, Bristol, The Policy Press.

- Rai, L. (2021) *Writing for Social Work*, London, SAGE.
- Rai, L. and Lillis, T. (2013) “‘Getting it Write” in social work: Exploring the value of writing in academia to writing for professional practice’, *Teaching in Higher Education*, **18**(4), pp. 352–64.
- Oldridge, L. and Larkin, M. (2020) *Unpaid Care Global Growth and Policies for Sustainability*, New York, NY, Springer.
- Roose, R., Mottart, A., Dejonckheere, N., Van Nijnatten, C. and De Bie, M. (2009) ‘Participatory social work and report writing’, *Child & Family Social Work*, **14**(3), pp. 322–30.
- Smith, D. (2005) *Institutional Ethnography*, Walnut Creek, CA, Alta Mira Press.
- Social Work England. (2019) *Professional Standards*, England, Social Work England. available online at: <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards/> (accessed February 8, 2023).
- Social Work England. (2021) *Education and Training Standards*, England, Social Work England, available online at: <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards/> (accessed February 8, 2023).
- Social Care Wales. (2022) *National Occupational Standards: Social Work*, Cardiff, Wales, Social Care Wales, available online at: <https://socialcare.wales/resources-guidance/early-years-and-childcare/national-occupational-standards-nos/social-work> (accessed July 8, 2024).
- Scottish Social Services Council. (2019) *Standards in Social Work Education in Scotland*, Dundee, Scottish Social Services Council, available online at: <https://learn.sssc.uk.com/siswe/siswe.html> (accessed February 8, 2024).
- Waller, M. A., Carroll, M. M. and Roemer, M. (1996) ‘Teaching writing in social work education: Critical training for agents of social change’, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, **13**(1–2), pp. 43–56.
- Waller, M. (2000) ‘Addressing student writing problems: Applying composition theory to social work education’, *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, **5**(2), pp. 161–6.
- Woody, J. D., Zeleny, M. G., D’Souza, H. J., Harder, J., Reiser, J. and Szto, P. (2014) ‘Student progress in a social work writing course: Self-efficacy, course objectives, and skills’, *Journal of Social Work Education*, **50**(3), pp. 507–24.
- White, S., Hall, C. and Peckover, S. (2009) ‘The descriptive tyranny of the common assessment framework: Technology, child welfare and professional practice’, *British Journal of Social Work*, **39**(7), pp. 1197–217.
- WiSP Team. (2023) *Writing in Social Work Practice: Findings and Resources from the Writing in Social Work Practice (WiSP) Project*, England, The Open University.

© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

British Journal of Social Work, 2025, 55, 25–44

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

Original article