

PREFACE

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PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORKERS RELY HEAVILY upon accurate, substantiated, clearly written reports, accounts, and correspondence to facilitate desired changes in the circumstances and behaviors of individuals as well as institutions. The fate of individual clients can hinge upon process recordings that capture the essence of their personalities and the nature of the problems they are confronting for which clinical practice recommendations are formulated. Meanwhile, whole groups and communities, whether they are large or small and whether they are in the United States or other parts of the world, can be affected in significant ways by analyses undertaken to inform social policy formulations and program recommendations. Planning documents, budget justifications, grant applications, formal letters, and e-mail messages constitute some of the other vehicles for written expression that are vitally important in the everyday world of the professional social worker. For those professionals who strive diligently to wed research and practice, articles that they prepare for publication in scholarly journals typically must adhere to even more rigorous writing standards.

Our choice of words bears with it connotations as well as denotations that convey both intended and unintended meanings. Messages and their various meanings can influence how individuals, processes and interactions, situations, and environments are perceived, interpreted, and treated. Today, within our increasingly global context, there are heightened demands for precise communication to ensure that translations from English into other languages and vice versa are not replete with inaccuracies stemming from poorly constructed text. For these and many other reasons, the Columbia faculty concur that students, who are our future social work professionals, must achieve the very highest writing standards.

Professionals who adhere to uncompromised standards of writing excellence know the importance of keen critical thinking. They know how to extract relevant information, organize thoughts as well as research materials, and then draft and dispassionately edit subsequent versions as many times as necessary to produce an impeccable final draft. Because the achievement of writing excellence typically requires practice, our students are reminded often that mastery comes from taking every opportunity to write and to build their proficiency in this important form of communication.

We are fortunate to have Warren Green, our able and dedicated writing center director, who has worked for years with our students to further strengthen their writing skills, as a co-editor of this book. His imprimatur is everywhere in the school as our students take what they have learned from him into their academic and professional lives. He notes and emphasizes that the quality of one's writing reflects the quality of one's thinking. Hence, the process of improving writing skills begins with writers' working on their critical thinking skills in order to crystallize what they are attempting to communicate. We are fortunate as well to have Barbara Simon as co-editor. She is a masterful teacher who has seen thousands of papers by students in her courses. An individual who appreciates the richness of our language and the many implications of the written word, she could not be a better co-editor. Warren and Barbara lead a full roster of faculty who contributed the essays in this book. Each has brought to her or his assignment special expertise and insights that will benefit both social work students and professionals for years to come. Altogether, the essays that have been gathered here provide social workers with a comprehensive opportunity to improve their thinking and writing so that they may clearly communicate the unique contributions of social work.

We at the Columbia University School of Social Work subscribe to the highest standards for our students so that they might always put their best selves forward. We hope that we have contributed in some small measure toward that end through this publication's specific attention to the realm of professional writing and the excellence that we believe can be achieved through the acquisition and lifelong practice of exemplary writing skills.