

## BEST PRACTICES FOR TEACHING EFFECTIVE SOCIAL WORK WRITING SKILLS ONLINE

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**Abstract:** A number of research studies have documented problematic issues with student writing in undergraduate and graduate programs in the United States. Some discipline-specific writing courses have been developed to address these deficiencies, including some all online offerings. This paper critically synthesizes the latest available research on best practices in teaching effective writing in an online format, with a focus on social work graduate students. However, the teaching modalities examined herein can be applied in online writing courses in all human services professions and at all levels.

**Keywords:** graduate writing, online teaching, best practices, social work writing, professional writing

### Best Practices for Teaching Effective Social Work Writing Skills Online

Educators in higher education across the U.S. often lament the poor quality of writing manifested by their incoming and continuing students (Grise-Owens & Crum, 2012; Lillis & Turner, 2001; Ondrusek, 2012). Individual faculty members and educational programs work to address this concern by making curricular adjustments, adapting teaching strategies, and offering student support mechanisms such as writing centers. However, despite these proactive mechanisms, the problem persists and professional writing skills appear to have declined in graduate programs in many academic disciplines (Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2012). These deficiencies can negatively impact both academic performance and the ability to write effectively post-graduation.

This article affords an overview of the problem of poor writing in graduate programs and discusses its ramifications on both academic performance and more specifically, professional social work practice. It also synthesizes best practices for teaching professional writing in an all-online format and establishes this skill as a necessary component of effective graduate social work education.

### Overview of the Problem

A number of factors have contributed to the decline in the quality of graduate student writing skills in higher education in the United States. Contextually, higher graduate admission rates due to institutional financial pressures and fewer students seeking graduate education have led to increased competition for student admissions, negatively influencing admission practices (Sowbel, 2012; Allum, Bell, & Sowell, 2012). In social work education, the number of accredited social work programs has doubled in the past 20 years (from 99 in 1990 to 200 in 2010), while acceptance rates have jumped from 41% in 1975 to 75% in 2005 (Sowbel, 2012). This trend has diversified the quality of students entering these programs and brought with it a problem in terms of adequate qualification and preparation for graduate school. As well, in a profession where few students are terminated from educational programs for significant academic deficiencies, this ratio is particularly significant (Sowbel, 2012).

Professional graduate programs in allied health disciplines such as social work often attract working practitioners and are designed with that specific population in mind. In addition to their attributes, nontraditional graduate students also bring numerous challenges to the table, including maintaining full time jobs and families,

managing competing priorities, and dealing with other stressors that can shift their focus off of academic work (Gouge, 2009). Having worked in the field, many of these students may also believe their documentation skills are adequate and fail to recognize that different types of professional writing exist (such as academic vs. clinical documentation). Likewise, they may not fully recognize that the common elements of effective writing are essential to advanced social work practice.

Ondrusek (2012) identified twelve advanced writing competencies, including organization, mechanics, grammar, and citation of sources. Poor performance in these basic areas makes it particularly difficult to address more advanced writing skills such as process, argument, and scholarly identity. Often there is a false assumption that these skills were sufficiently mastered in undergraduate courses. As well, many students entering graduate programs are inexperienced at meeting the demands of academic writing because they came from undergraduate programs that did not sufficiently value or teach proper writing skills. Likewise, students from this background may not view writing as an essential professional practice skill, making assertions such as "I want to be a social worker, not a writer!" (Grise-Owens & Crum, 2012, p. 517).

Instructors are often hesitant to address writing deficits due to the significant additional time required to assist students in bringing skills up to the graduate level. Time consuming grading challenges can also reduce the likelihood that instructors will evaluate work negatively (Sowbel, 2012). Additionally, if instructors in graduate programs are inconsistent in their writing assessments, those who are more diligent may potentially receive lower student evaluation scores than those who are not attentive to writing skills (Grise-Owens & Crum, 2012; Alter & Adkins, 2006). This can be a disincentive to some in terms of the rigor with which they point out excessive student writing errors. The problem with grade inflation can also impact the degree to which educators are critical of student writing proficiency. These dynamics ultimately create an atmosphere that perpetuates a systemic problem of inadequate assessment of student's writing skills.

Despite these administrative, student, and instructor-based barriers, it is essential to recognize the importance of writing to all graduate students (Alter & Adkins, 2001; Sallee, Hallee, & Tierney, 2011; Weisman & Zornado, 2012). Ondrusek (2012) summed up the evaluative importance of writing, stating, "Writing is the vehicle that most graduate programs embrace as the means for reviewing how well students are able to assimilate knowledge and integrate that knowledge into new ideas" (p. 179). More importantly, post-graduation writing is at the core of most professional level jobs. If students/practitioners are not strong writers, it will certainly have a negative impact on both them and their future clients in the workplace.

### **Social Work Specific Concerns and Responses**

Alter and Adkins' (2006) study indicated that between one third and one quarter of entering MSW students did not possess adequate writing skills. Advanced standing and provisionally admitted MSW students manifested a statistically significant higher deficit in writing skills. The lack of APA citation skills is also problematic. Social work graduate students appear to be underprepared and become highly stressed when asked to format their papers in the most current APA format. The thought of learning writing as an additional practice skill can often result in increased student anxiety and poor performance on writing assignments. Consequently, it may be a false assumption that incoming social work graduate students possess the writing skills necessary to be successful.

Writing is an absolutely essential professional practice skill. Several specific educational competencies linked to accreditation are mandated in writing for social work students. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2008) provides ten core competencies, and some of those outline professional obligations involving writing. These expectations include the ability to "demonstrate effective oral and written communication"; "demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior, appearance, and communication"; and "critical thinking also requires the synthesis and communication of relevant information" in Educational Policy 2.1.1 and 2.1.3 (CSWE, 2008). All of these competencies are essential to providing direct services to clients.

Additionally, social work students, instructors and practitioners have certain responsibilities to clients, colleagues, practice settings, other professionals, and the broader society which are outlined in the *NASW Code of Ethics* (2008). The primary mission of social work has four components including helping meet basic needs, empowering people who are oppressed, addressing environmental barriers, and enhancing the well-being of people. Professional writing is essential to help achieve this mission and is a cornerstone of ethical social work practice (Weismann & Zornado, 2013).

Social work students are expected to leave their programs with highly developed writing skills that demonstrate strong critical reflection and analysis (Wiener, 2012). Instructors often work toward improving graduate student writing skills by providing direction, assistance, and feedback in order to meet that goal. In

social work programs, the tasks of curriculum development, admission procedures, and providing student supports are often adjusted in an effort to support struggling writers. Despite these efforts and adjustments though, many students remain in need of additional writing instruction. Teaching a required or elective course in advanced professional writing skills is one way to address this deficit and with the increase in online course offerings, this task must often be undertaken online.

### **Asynchronous Online Education: Patterns and Challenges**

**Online education trends.** Enrollment in online courses is increasing every year in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Carpenter, Brown, & Hickman, 2004; Robinson, & Hullinger, 2008). According to Allen and Seaman (2013), in 2013, 6.7 million students were taking at least one online course, compared to 570,000 from the previous year. These numbers are at an all-time high and are expected to increase in the immediate future. The popularity of online education is due to several benefits of this type of learning format including familiarity with technology, convenience and the increasing technological sophistication of students in higher education today.

A majority of college students today have grown up with Internet, email, and instant messaging. Emerging technologies have impacted the way students research, develop and publish their work. The option to use familiar online technologies in online classrooms can benefit students by reducing their anxiety about unfamiliar material (Griffin & Minter, 2013). According to the University of Washington (2013), online courses have several benefits for faculty and students. Instructors and students are able to work from home, making online courses convenient and flexible. For students who are struggling in a course, online courses allow students the capacity to re-watch recorded lectures, repeat exercises, and re-read peer discussion comments. They also incorporate new learning techniques and experiences that other instructional learning methods cannot. Extra free time is also a popular incentive for instructors and students in an online course. According to Gouge (2009), an online writing classroom frees student's time and allows faculty to spend more time reviewing and evaluating student work due to less time spent in face-to-face class.

Goodfellow and Lea (2005) highlighted the aspect of online instruction being replete with writing opportunities that, if framed appropriately, can encourage students to focus on writing skills development. In an online learning environment, communication takes place predominantly through writing encouraging clarity and conciseness. Rendahl (2009) cited a specific advantage of online writing class as the "opportunity for students to be immersed in writing" (p. 140) which is not something that can occur in hybrid or face-to-face formats. In fact, in traditional face-to-face interactions, there would be little opportunity for student self-expression through written communication. These benefits are useful in understanding the reasons for the increased interest in online learning from a student perspective.

**Online education challenges.** An online format challenges students in a number of ways ranging from increased social isolation to learning styles inconsistent with the online modality and the implicit requirement to use new or inaccessible technology (Cook, 2007; Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, & Killian, 2009). Gallagher-Lepak et al. (2009) highlighted technology as a disadvantage with an online course. The study discovered that when computer glitches and technical issues occur, it distracts students from learning to their full potential. Particularly when students become anxious regarding malfunctioning software or internet connections, the distractions may impact learning (Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011). All students may not have home-based internet access, making checking email and reviewing comments more challenging. The lack of availability of technology hardware such as computers and access to internet should not be taken for granted by professors and proactively addressed in teaching online courses.

Students with English as a second language (ESL) report a unique set of challenges related to online learning including discrimination and disenfranchisement by native English speaking students with word limits on assignments making expression of ideas more challenging for learners with ESL (Goodfellow & Lea, 2005). The authors specifically noted such issues as ESL students needing extra time to complete assignments when there is often a limited window of response opportunity and struggling with the ability to lucidly convey meaning and context in writing. The fact that in some universities there is no leeway for instructors to provide accommodations for students with ESL difficulties further compounds their struggles.

Several studies both inside and outside of the social work discipline describe innovative techniques and courses to address writing deficiencies with graduate students. Interventions ranging from face-to-face graduate student writing groups (Cuthbert & Spark, 2008) to optional support services and online courses (Goodfellow, Strauss, & Puxley, 2012; Rendahl, 2009) to programmatic changes in admissions, curricular revisions, and

support options (Alter & Adkins, 2001, 2006; Grise-Owens & Crum, 2012) are included in this literature review with a focus on application to asynchronous online teaching. Best practices for teaching online graduate writing courses are drawn from evidence gathered from multiple graduate program settings. These best practices can be utilized to overcome challenges and harness the strengths inherent in the asynchronous online format for teaching graduate writing online.

### **Best Practices Strategies**

Best practices for teaching graduate writing online can be divided into three areas: administrative, curriculum and instructional strategies.

### **Administrative Strategies**

As government subsidies are reduced in public universities, increased costs are passed on to students if cost savings cannot be realized within the university itself. Corporate models of education lead to administrative pressures on graduate programs to reduce costs which can lead to decisions that inadvertently decrease quality (Johnson, 2015). Administrators can foster high quality online courses through evidence-informed strategies including providing adequate web-based resources and faculty support, facilitating appropriate course size limits, and developing appropriate support services for students. These strategies will help insure that faculty and students have the appropriate support for their online writing courses.

**Appropriate course size limits.** It is up to graduate administrators and faculty to monitor the quality of educational offerings. Primary importance must be placed on the quality of the educational program. Increased financial pressure often results in increased online class sizes, which effectively reduce brick and mortar and faculty salary costs. This financial cost saving maneuver can easily overextend faculty resources and reduce the quality of educational programming (Griffin & Minter, 2013). Students in an online graduate writing course require a higher level of individual attention and these aforementioned factors make this more difficult to achieve.

Faculty report that teaching online can result in more front end course preparation than in traditional face to face courses. Online course sites, introductory videos, and resource lists must be completed prior to the beginning of the course. If the faculty member is not familiar with the online platform used by the university, training in that platform must be completed. Once the course starts, faculty members are often expected to maintain constant contact with students through email and phone contact. There are also additional assessment responsibilities involving discussion board assignments with multiple posts and responses that must be read and commented upon. For these reasons, it is reasonable to reduce the workload of online instructors in addition to keeping the class sizes low, below 20 students per class (Griffin & Minter, 2013).

**Adequate faculty support.** According to Griffin and Minter (2013), faculty need adequate training in online instruction. Both technical and pedagogical support are necessary for successful online teaching. This training support should occur both before and during the online course. Appropriate topics for technical training include the institutional content management system (such as Blackboard, Moodle, Coursera), and university resources available to support both students and faculty when problems arise.

Appropriate pedagogical support includes ongoing faculty development offerings on best practices for online education, experienced faculty mentors for new or adjunct online instructors, and library resources that can support online education.

**Adequate web resources for students.** Stine (2004) found that many instructors tend to worry about teaching writing online because students have to learn writing while simultaneously learning the relatively advanced computer skills required to complete online writing assignments. In response, Gouge (2009) maintained that a solid online writing program should focus more on writing rather than the technology. These authors thus acknowledged the importance of focusing on the course content in an online class rather than the technology.

Appropriate topics for technical training of students could include the institutional content management system and university resources available to support students when problems arise. Adequate technical resources can include a call center for troubleshooting support when course management systems are challenging students, library tutorials and librarians available for help regarding use of the university library resources online, and online writing center assistance.

Without adequate administrative support, it is unlikely that an online writing course will succeed. Faculty and students need appropriate training and support in addition to appropriate working conditions in terms of course sizes and faculty workload expectations to make online writing courses (or any online courses) successful.

### Curriculum Strategies

Once appropriate administrative supports are in place, curriculum design becomes the primary concern. The appropriate foci for a graduate level writing course class include advanced writing core competencies (Ondrusek, 2012). Exploring effective barriers to writing should be addressed within the curriculum design as well. These foci are described in detail below.

**Focusing on core competencies.** Ondrusek (2012) identified twelve advanced core competencies graduate writers must master in order to become strong writers. While all are considered advanced, these competencies are easily divided into basic, mid-level and highest level competencies for the basis of curriculum design. Basic competencies include mechanics/grammar, accuracy, content, and source citation; mid-level competencies include organization, argument/evidence/logic, audience/voice, and the highest level competencies include conceptualization/developing ideas/pre-writing, writer process, expression, critique, and developing scholarly identity (Ondrusek, 2012).

In designing curriculum, it would be most effective to begin with the basic competencies, move to the mid-level competencies, and then bring the highest level competencies to the forefront (APA, 2010). This would move students through a logical progression of the information they need to know to be a strong advanced level writer. Several of these competencies: conceptualization/developing ideas/pre-writing; writer process and scholarly identity formation; and critique & argument/evidence/logic will be discussed in more detail to highlight their importance.

**Break down the writing process.** Writing is a complex combination of skills that is best taught by breaking down the process. Ondrusek (2012) identified conceptualization/developing ideas/pre-writing as an advanced writing skill, and many others have determined teaching the writing process is important (Cone & Dover, 2012; Kinloch & Imig, 2010; Kuo, 2008; & Strachan, Murray, & Gryerson, 2004). Not only is teaching writing process important, but also continual coaching and guidance toward successful navigation of the writing process is an important consideration when thinking about assignment design and the flow of the course (Bean, 2011).

Kinloch and Imig (2010) developed an online writing workshop to interact with students at all phases of the writing process. The writing workshop modeled introductions, thesis statements, embedding quotes, and conclusions. Using a workshop format in a virtual classroom transforms writing into a structured method that does not leave students to fend for themselves. Cone and Dover (2012) developed a writing course that focused on the writing process, priorities, styles, purpose, and specifics. Their course was designed “to change nurses’ perspectives on professional writing, increase interest and enthusiasm, and reduce fear and avoidance of writing.” (p. 273). Developing skill in utilizing the writing process was an important topic in this course.

Some graduate programs conclude their course of study with a written project in the form of a thesis, which can place new demands on both students and instructors alike. Strachan et al (2004) developed a writing-based tool for thesis writing. This online tool provided instructional material, a writing space, and planning templates, with each step of the writing process included. Kuo (2008) advocated providing writing guidelines such as tips and sample paper sections to assist struggling students with the various parts of the writing process.

Sallee, Hallett, and Tierney (2011) modeled the writing process by presenting their own completed papers as well as ones that were in process to students in their courses. This allowed students to visually see real papers being broken down. Instructors who focus on breaking down the writing process have found that their students are more successful in their writing. There is no end to the variety of approaches used, however, teaching the writing process step by step is an effective approach to approaching this topic.

**Incorporate self-assessment and peer review.** Ondrusek (2012) identified argument/evidence/logic and critique as advanced writing core competencies. Incorporating peer review and self-assessment is a logical way to teach these skills when teaching writing online. Bean (2011) provided an excellent approach for designing writing assignments that challenge students to utilize critical thinking. The author advocated the use of short (one to two pages) argumentative essays that students rework through multiple revisions. This allows students to transfer learning from one essay to the next as increasingly complex essay topics are assigned.



Yang (2011) emphasized that it is beneficial for students to review each other's work and deliver helpful revision suggestions. Instructors who promote peer review sessions are encouraging students to collaborate and learn from each other. Coit (2004) demonstrated an overall improvement in student's quality of writing when peer reviewers were empowered to be the instructors in an online writing course. Similarly, Kuo (2008) emphasized when students provide feedback to their peers, they learn to critically analyze and revise their writing. Ultimately, peer review allows students to develop new ideas and perspectives as well as improve their own writing skills.

Peer review is an evidence-informed tool to use in an online writing course, but students need specific instruction on how to further develop their skills in reviewing another student's work. Pengitore (2005) explained that instructors should clarify their expectations to their students before beginning a peer review session. Students should focus on generalities-structure, topical sentences, and the use of quotes when reviewing another student's work. Grise-Owens and Crum (2012) advocated the use of a standard writing rubric in this process. Regardless of what factors the instructor chooses to focus upon in the peer review process, it is important to explicitly state those and offer guidance as to what an adequate writing sample looks like. The importance of peer review in an online writing course is a recurring theme in many articles that focused on online writing instruction.

Equal in importance to the ability to assess others writing is the skill of self-assessment. Weller (2005) and Weimer (2014) emphasized the importance of formative self-assessment and provide strategies for teaching this skill. Defined as the ability to evaluate one's own work and what is good and what needs improvement (Weimer, 2014), self-assessment is an important part of a writer's development. In understanding more about expected outcomes, students can determine how they can change their own writing process to help improve future writing.

Cho, Cho, and Hacker (2010) found that graduate students who were able to develop successful self-monitoring skills through self-evaluations and peer evaluations were able to improve their writing more dramatically than those who did not. This suggests it is helpful to combine the two processes of peer review and self-assessment. For example, the instructor could assign a student self-assessment of a writing assignment coupled with a peer review of the same assignment and then provide a third review utilizing a standard writing rubric (Grise-Owens & Crum, 2012). Then, all parties could review the resulting information in a small group forum online. An additional reflective essay regarding the learning outcomes of this process could also be beneficial (Weller, 2005). Assignments such as these can improve the writing skills of self-assessment, peer review, and simultaneous instructor feedback.

**Explore and reduce affective barriers.** Interestingly, Alter and Adkins (2001, 2006) reported that graduate students often fail to utilize no cost supplementary writing assistance offered in the form of online or face-to-face writing lab time or meetings with faculty members. When held to a high writing standard some students complain about faculty inconsistencies related to writing assessment. It is possible that these students respond with a degree of learned helplessness as they struggle to achieve good marks on writing assignments, yet are immobilized by the emotional impact of the situation.

Graduate students may not come to the writing process prepared to emotionally cope with the rigors of this task. A lack of confidence and high anxiety are commonly cited as difficulties (Ondrusek, 2012). The writing process may be lengthy with a high volume of feedback to sift through, and students may become defensive or angry as they review critiques they disagree with or do not understand (Ondrusek, 2012). Some students may also resort to taking an "adversarial stance" with faculty attempting to assist them with writing improvement (Grise-Owens & Crum, 2012, p. 520).

Reducing affective or emotional barriers to writing is possible from a curriculum standpoint. One strategy is to encourage students to support each other through peer review, online discussion forums, and forced editing practice of student work (Sallee et al., 2011). Offering multiple opportunities for peer review and group discussion of writing assignments is important because with each review and discussion, students become more adept at fielding questions or concerns about their work objectively (Cuthbert & Spark, 2008). Reflective discussion forum assignments give students opportunities to provide and receive support for writing challenges from both other students and instructors.

Developing a scholarly identity and a clear writer's process are important to include in any graduate writing course (Cone & Dover, 2012; Ondrusek, 2012; Sallee, Hallett, & Tierney, 2011). Encouraging graduate writers to find a personal writing process and style will assist them in developing a scholarly identity. As they become more comfortable in the writer's role and find writing strategies that help them complete writing projects successfully, students will feel more confident in their writing skills. Assignments such as reflective forum

discussions regarding exploration of personal writing identity and comparison and contrast papers of writer's with different writing styles will help facilitate identity formation.

Sallee, Hallett, and Tierney (2011) suggested the use of instructor role modeling is an important strategy in the development of a scholarly identity. Sharing a completed paper in various stages of the writing process is helpful because often students think writing is easy for instructors. Sharing a video lecture of instructor thoughts and struggles through the process unlock the mysteries of the writing process. It is helpful to see that these struggles are common, and that use of the writing process can result in a published (or at least completed) paper.

All of these curriculum development strategies are useful in the planning stages of the online graduate writing course. The course syllabus should reflect as many of these curriculum best practices as possible. Once the curriculum is fully developed, multiple instructional strategies are available to enhance the likelihood of student engagement.

### **Instructional Strategies**

Best online practice teaching strategies identified in the literature include utilizing engagement strategies, clarifying expectations, providing effective instructor feedback, and effectively using web resources. These strategies are further detailed below.

**Engagement strategies.** The success of an online course depends greatly on the active engagement of students. Sapp and Simon (2005) suggested that failure to engage students and make them accountable in an online course often results in course withdraw. Strategies such as holding interactive chat sessions, online office hours, and video or voice messaging will encourage students to engage more fully (Sapp & Simon, 2005).

According to Grise-Owens and Crum (2012) incorporating different techniques such as revision and collection are good writing results from engagement. Brescia and Miller (2005) assigned a student every week as an online discussion leader in a web-based writing course to help increase student interaction. Poniatowski (2012) indicated that the more interactive tools added to online writing courses provide more options for students to engage because if one tool doesn't appeal to a student another might. Instructors need to consistently sustain these types of engagement in online education.

It is the student's responsibility to fully engage in online courses but instructors play a big part in it as well. According to Robinson and Hullinger (2008), it is the instructor's role to create purposeful course designs that promote interaction, participation, and communication in an online learning environment. The more strategies used to engage students in an online course, the more likely they will become and remain involved in the course.

**Clarify expectations.** Online education is still new in terms of supporting traditional college course work. In order to reduce barriers, instructors should address and familiarize students with their expectations. For instance, Penigore (2005) suggested instructors should review expectations before giving any assignment to their students. Saveneye et al (2001) explained that the material and documentation used to give direction to students in face-to-face courses needs to be much clearer in online course. This is indicative of the fact that instructors need to be far more prepared and organized when teaching online.

Lillis and Turner (2001) focused more on the importance of instructors being clearer with instruction and terminology when teaching academic writing to students. They emphasized that students in higher education are confused about what is required in their academic writing when instructors use phrases without explaining them. Instructors need to clarify and explain these terms to avoid students from struggling in academic writing.

Along these lines, Grise-Owens & Crum (2012) provided a standard writing rubric to students to clarify terms and expectations of writing. This rubric included five areas of assessment: completion, organization, development, clarity, and credibility, and each area has specific points defining what full credit for that area includes. Grise-Owens and Crum (2012) found that using a standard writing rubric improved their social work students writing by providing faculty with a core evaluation instrument that facilitates clear instruction. It also provided students with consistent language when writing rough drafts, completing peer reviews, and reviewing faculty feedback.

Online courses that incorporate these strategies will help students stay on track throughout the entire online course. Addressing these issues in the beginning will reduce barriers and allow students to better enjoy learning in an online environment.

**Effective instructor feedback.** There is a wealth of literature concerned with the importance of teacher feedback in online writing courses. Pengitore (2005) emphasized the importance of providing meaningful feedback to students that is timely, specific, and constructive. Failing to offer feedback to students in an online class is similar to ignoring a student's raised hand in a classroom. Alvarez, Espasa, and Guasch (2012) explained that teacher feedback should focus less on providing correction and more on providing suggestions or questions that challenge students. Incorporating suggestions and questions is also a great way to familiarize students on the expectations of their instructors.

Instructors need to be aware that students can also take their feedback personally, so certain parameters need to be observed when following it. Without nonverbal cues such as voice tone and facial expressions, students can evaluate negative feedback the wrong way. For example, Ondrusek (2012) explained that just by highlighting areas that need improvement in student's writing, it could challenge a student's confidence and sense of self. Especially in a developing writers, this could be detrimental to learning. Instructors need to explain their reasoning behind any corrective feedback in addition to providing positive feedback on what the student is doing correctly.

Along with Pengitore's (2005) perception of the importance of student feedback, Sapp and Simon (2005) acknowledge that prompt feedback can help prevent students from feeling isolated and detached from the online course they are taking. Isolation is a major concern for students and instructors but with prompt and detailed feedback it can decrease the chance for isolation to occur. Efficiency in feedback among students and instructors could end up being the primary benefit of creating an online graduate writing course.

**Effective use of web resources.** There are many web-based tools and resources instructors can use to teach different kinds of writing online. It is important to understand that online tools can be used ineffectively in ways that are distracting and inhibiting, or they can be used to create new spaces and opportunities for student learning (Gouge, 2009). For example, it is not enough to simply place a link to the web resource on the course site; too much information can overwhelm students on information overload already. Maidment (2005) suggested that instructors should direct students to helpful resources and plan activities to introduce new tools to students. If the tools are on a course site without explanation as to the benefits or how to use them, students will not utilize these resources as often or effectively.

Emerging technologies have impacted the way students research, develop and publish their works. According to Griffin and Minter (2013), real-time collaboration software like Google Docs allows students to alter their work at the exact same moment as another. They cite the everyday use of technology such as posting on each other's Facebook walls, commenting on blogs, and tweeting out news as indicative of the increased opportunities available for writing purposes. Using this sort of interactive, collaborative process in online classrooms can be beneficial as students feel more socially connected to others. Instructors should insure the online tools they plan to use are well designed, easy to navigate, convenient, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive before incorporating into their online classroom (Griffin & Minter, 2013)

Many instructors are incorporating tutorials in their online classrooms. Roberts and Goss (2009) used a writing tutorial to improve their students writing abilities. The writing tutorial provided students with information on grammar, spelling, proper organization, flow, and APA style. Krause (2006) also presented an online writing resource to assist students with the fundamental of writing. The online writing resource provided course specific information, writing tutorials, and specific models of student writing. In addition, Englert, Zhao, Dunsmore, Collings, and Wolbers (2007) incorporated organizational tools such as graphic organizers and mapping tools, as well as assistive technologies to support writing performance. The organizational tools allowed students to map their ideas during the planning phase and then transform their ideas in the writing phase. The tools also highlighted the locations where appropriate writing procedures were defined on the web.

It is not necessary to create original resources as there are many web-based resources available for use in online writing courses. In particular, many online writing labs are maintained for student assistance. For faculty without a university online writing lab, the Purdue OWL is one excellent example of an online writing lab that is publicly available for all instructors to use (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>). These sorts of no-cost open access websites provide students with a reference point when they are struggling with their writing. As an added benefit, these resources are available to the student following the course.

### **Social Work and Online Learning.**

Social work curricula can be challenging to teach with any instructional delivery method. Ayala (2008) acknowledged that social work missions and values are a key component in social work education. In order to



teach social work education online, instructors would have to develop new models of teaching practice, while still promoting social works core mission and values.

Social work has been slow to adopt online education courses due the importance of human interaction in social work practice. However, with the inevitable shift to more curricula moving online, the profession must find ways to adapt traditionally face-to-face classes to an online format. Levin, Whitsett, and Wood (2013) conducted a study describing the development of a graduate social work online classroom. The findings from the study indicated that it is possible to successfully teach practice in an online environment.

It is crucial for social work education to meet the demanding needs of the ever-changing student population who want access to online courses. According to Ayala (2008), in the last decade social work education has advanced significantly with online education. Social work courses are continually being developed allowing social work students the opportunity to take classes online.

## Conclusion

Graduate programs expect students to know how to write before they enter graduate school but it is uncommon to see a graduate course with a predominant focus on writing (Sallee, Hallett, & Tierney, 2011). Graduate students are often penalized for their lack of advanced writing skill through unclear grading mechanisms without being provided supplemental help that would improve their writing. Writing deficiencies hinder advancement toward fulfilling degree requirements and ultimately present a major obstacle to graduate school success.

Even more concerning, after graduation poor professional writing can lead to negative consequences for clients in the workplace. Clients may experience harm as a result of improper documentation of service provision, court requirements, or treatment concerns. Poor written communication can also lead to misinterpretation in interdisciplinary collaborations resulting in inappropriate decisions being made about client care. Finally, social workers have an ethical obligation to write well (NASW, 2008), and it is an established core competency of written communication in social work practice (CSWE, 2008).

For these reasons, the significance of having advanced writing skill instruction available in a social work graduate program cannot be understated. However, these skills do not develop automatically. An online writing course is one possible solution, and it is important that this course take place within a more systemic intervention including administrative and programmatic strategies to alleviate the barriers to writing well. This critical review summarizes graduate student writing challenges and offers empirically supported best practice strategies for online writing instruction.

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