



DEVELOPING TOGETHER

SOCIAL WORK TEACHING PARTNERSHIP

How to write a good report

Social Workers have a professional requirement and responsibility in providing clear, concise and accurate records, whether this is as e.g. assessments, case recording, care plans, letters and court reports. Any contacts, interventions or work undertaken by Social Workers need to be recorded appropriately, for the service user / carer (s) and agencies / organisations etc.

Poor recording / written skills can lead to an assortment of issues, at the very least service user / carer needs not being met or risks not address accordingly etc. Being able to support service users is not the only important aspect of social work; all that work can be undermined by poor recording or reports that don't convey the issues, risks and concerns to other professionals.

1. Plan

If writing a report provokes anxiety, try this practical method to use to control those fears:

Take a big sheet of paper, turn it landscape, and plan. Jot down the report's purpose, for example: "This report will assess why Mrs X's care plan was changed on 21 June 2010, with reference to the headings X, Y, Z".

Jot down the key points you need to make under those headings and some notes for the introduction, which will briefly state the report's purpose and why it's needed. Planning will save you time by helping you see what you know and don't know, and what you really think (critical analysis).



DEVELOPING TOGETHER

SOCIAL WORK TEACHING PARTNERSHIP

2. Write first draft

Leave the plan overnight. Then find a quiet room away from distractions and write the first draft at speed. This gives you something to edit.

3. Write a summary

This stage is also when you can assemble the main news (key points and potential recommendations) and put it in a summary that will go at the start. If busy people read nothing else, they'll get the big picture.

4. Edit

The more times you can edit the report with a fresh eye, the better it will get. Don't be too easily satisfied and go back after a refreshment or a walk outside! In your editing:

- Use "I" or "we" to show what you or your team have found.
- Prune sentences to 15-20 words on average, linking them with sentence connectors such as but, so, yet and however.
- Punctuate properly.
- Use everyday vocabulary, avoiding or explaining any social care jargon – including unexplained acronyms – that people in other professions may not know.



5. Check

After you've checked for errors including spelling, punctuation, sentence structure etc., seek a second opinion from a candid colleague or outsider. Ask whether the report will make sense to your intended audience.

Common areas where some social workers slip up in reports:

Irrelevant, inappropriate information

"Michael is a large baby. Clearly his size is inherited genetically from his father, who is a proportionately large person."

From an Ofsted inspection of a Cafcass team, which criticised practitioner's files on children and families for containing "irrelevant, inappropriate" information.

"D has explained that she thinks she will shortly start her menstrual cycle. D is prepared for her first period. She would appear to have no outstanding needs in this respect."

From an Ofsted inspection of a Cafcass team, which found "the relevance of some statements was not clear" in a report on an 11-year-old girl.



DEVELOPING TOGETHER

SOCIAL WORK TEACHING PARTNERSHIP

Meaningless phrases

"She has a bubbly personality."

"You wouldn't believe the number of times that people say this," says Alison Paddle, former chair of Nagalro. "It doesn't mean anything and it's a cliché."

Illogical conclusions

"There was domestic violence but, because the parents had recently separated and the father was not on the scene, the kids were no longer at risk."

Consultant Joanna Nicolas was concerned to see this in a report recently because of the flawed conclusion reached by the practitioner. "We know from research that that's when the children are most at risk," Nicolas says.

The above has been adapted from an article which was published in the 29 July 2010 edition of Community Care under the headline, "How to write a good report".