Writing for a Journal: Blood, Sweat, and Tears

by Mel Gray

AS A SEASONED REVIEWER FOR MANY social work publications, I find myself making the same or similar comments about the content and structure of articles. I thought that it might be useful to offer some observations in a way that would be accessible and helpful to those who were disenchanted about their lack of success in getting published. I have also taken note of comments made to me about their frustration with journals that fail to give useful feedback and with their struggle to just get their first words on paper.

The Myth That No One Is Interested

Among social workers are those who feel that they cannot write and, even if they could, no one would be interested in what they have to say. They need the “get it down” approach, and they need to learn to use it naturally.

The experiences that are familiar to us are often construed as uninteresting to others. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons social workers do not write about their practice. This is ironic because social workers often spend more time than other professionals keeping records and writing reports of one sort or another. Unless this writing is translated into an accessible form, valuable case studies and other impressions and experiences may be lost, leaving the profession all the poorer as a result.

Get It Down and Then Give It Structure

For those who have a problem getting started, and most of us do, the best thing is to “get it down.” Granted, it is one thing having an idea and quite another getting it down on paper. So how do you start? Anne Lamott says it best: “The first draft is the down draft — you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft — you fix it up. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth to see if it’s loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy” (Lamott, 1995, 25-26).

Don’t be discouraged if, of the twenty pages you’ve written, nineteen need to be extracted. Better to start with one good sentence or idea than to subject your reader to twenty pages of nonsense. There are few experienced writers who do not flounder in despair and on the way to finding the central argument or theme around which to structure their work. It is every writer’s rite of passage to the writers’ club. They know well what beginners have yet to learn: easy writing makes hard reading. Still, the rewards — personal and professional — of seeing their ideas in print spur them on.

The “Shitty First Draft”

The novice may not realize that the first version of a
paper is a first draft and usually not a very good one at that. Anne Lamott (1995) calls it the "shitty first draft." It is "twice as long as it should be with a self-indulgent or boring beginning, stupifying descriptions . . . , lots of quotes . . . and no ending to speak of" (p. 25). She adds that "all good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts . . ." (p. 25). Admitting to the necessity of multiple drafts is especially a problem when writing a paper drawn from a much larger piece of work such as a thesis or dissertation. It is difficult to condense something because it is not easy deciding on what "pearls of wisdom" should included or deleted.

Creating Structure

It is always helpful, even when this is not required by the journal, to write an abstract in which you say exactly what the paper will cover. Not only does this alert the reader to the paper’s subject matter, but it also disciplines the writer to keep the paper focused. Begin with the main subject of the paper: For example, "This paper describes a research study designed to investigate common problems experienced in writing for journals . . ." followed by the central thesis or argument, "that most people give up too easily . . ." and what the paper aims to do — “to guide aspiring writers and to encourage more social work practitioners to write about their practice.” The abstract or introductory paragraph should describe the main themes to be covered in the paper, which then provides a structure for the content that follows. The human body serves as a useful metaphor for the parts of your paper as shown in Figure 1 — especially in how it applies to the standard scholarly article. Depending on the topic, other structures may need to be devised for essays, narratives, or other literary forms.

Finding Your Own Writing Style and Voice

Although most journals have certain standards and requirements regarding writing style, good writing requires that, as writers, we find a personal style that will lend an authentic voice to our work. Social work journals seem to demand different degrees of scientific rigour, some that lean toward content based on empirical research and others accepting experiential, practice-based work. There are several manuals of writing style, many books on writing, and numerous research texts to guide the aspiring writer. It is easy enough to learn about the technical aspects of writing for journals; what is more difficult is finding your own voice, a unique writing style, a means of self-expression through which your perceptions and values are revealed. This is a tough call. Where does one begin?

For me, the idea for a paper comes when I least expect it. This happens sometimes when I’m traveling or when, in my mind, I have put aside something on which I’m working. It begins with a ream of text wafting through my mind, almost as if my mind and body are going on separate journeys. I love the reverie of composing glorious prose in my head. It has a certain "unreality" to it. You can take your mind anywhere you want it to go. Then comes time to try to get it down on paper and it just isn’t the same. It doesn’t sound right. It’s like trying to sing a wonderful melody which, in your own voice, sounds out of tune.

Writing is not easy, especially narrative writing. By its very nature, it offers scope for a creative, interpretive, and subjective form of self-expression, but herein lies the rub.

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**Figure 1. The paper's structure.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Head names it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exact description of the ground covered in the paper. Start with a working title.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Skeleton structures it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of exactly what the paper will cover.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outline of the ground you want to cover in the paper.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>Mind informs it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concise description of current literature on your topic, related policy, and context.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body of the paper</td>
<td>Body contains it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The way you structure the main body of the paper depends on its purpose, whether to report on empirical research, practice experience, or to tell a story.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Tail ends it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of the paper's content with recommendations for future work on the topic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Our creativity is something which needs to be nurtured. Writing about creativity, Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1998) says that frozen feeling leads to frozen creativity: “Coldness is the kiss of death to creativity... When writers, for example, feel dry, dry, dry, they know that the way to become moist is to write. But if they’re locked in ice, they won’t write” (p. 182-183). For her the solution is to “go ahead, struggle through it. Pick up the pen already and put it to the page and stop whining. Write... thing cannot freeze if it is moving. So move. Keep moving” (p. 183).

Ann Lamott advises that one should start with descriptions of every day things. However, it always seems to me that everyone else’s days are much more interesting than mine. She also advises that we start with writing our life stories. I tried this and it read like a “Dear Ann” column. Imagine if I told my life story, especially for a social work audience, all their worst suspicions about me would be confirmed — I would feel naked and exposed at the thought of someone else seeing into my soul. So for me, writing in narrative style is the most difficult to master. It took me years to develop an academic, scholarly writing style. I have become accustomed to writing from a distance where I feel safe by allowing the third person to speak through me with technical accuracy in a strict format.

A friend challenged me to write a narrative essay. Boy did I sweat. I had for some time wanted to write about the relationship between social work and photography, two of the passions in my life, so I decided that this topic would lend itself to a narrative piece. I slogged away at the keys for days on end and finally plucked up the courage to send my friend, an experienced social work writer and one whom I admired deeply, my first attempt. This was his response:

*I truly enjoyed your work (not yet an essay — more of an account) — but it is really the start of something big that I hope you will continue to work out. I can’t resist using the term that I borrow from the most instructive book on writing (Anne Lamott’s Bird by Bird — you have to get it, can’t write without it) a shitty first draft: As she says, “All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific thirds drafts.” (For me it is often fifth, sixth, etc. drafts). The peculiar problem in writing the personal essay is that as you get closer to the deeper, inner core of the work (the personal) you are that much farther removed from your own good judgment and “objectivity.” It is easy to get so enamored with your own rhetoric that you lose sight of the big picture — like, in photography, being fascinated with a lovely flower or child and not seeing the old beer can in the background... Your ideas on creativity and the relation of photography and social work are lovely and what you should be writing about. Junk everything else — it only detracts discursively from the essential topic. Try to develop it as best you can as a shitty first draft: just do what you can do. Write what you can and then put it aside for a few days and look at it again.*

A sinking feeling of Titanic proportions gripped me. Ego in tatters, I began slashing my work, hurt, angry, fragile, disappointed, and ready to give up. I was left with three measly pages out of twenty which, needless to say, I did put aside and that was many moons ago! One really has to have a strong urge to master the art of writing. It is tough but I take heart from the knowledge that even experienced writers end up with old beer cans strewn through the pages of their successive drafts!

**Conclusion**

This is my meager offering on the joys, frustrations, suffering, and reward of writing. I hope that what I have written will help others and, in some way, be “a small part of the solution” (Lamott, 1995, p. 235) to your writing problems. As Anne Lamott says, we should try, against all odds, to get it down. Old habits die hard as we struggle to break down the barriers to our creativity. Writing is a journey of self-discovery, an adventure of dramatic proportions to destinations any where. Of one thing you can be sure, where you end will be a long way from where you started. On the way, you will have discarded all your old route maps and erected new signposts. Best of all, you will feel an immense sense of accomplishment, a feeling of having grown in some indefinable way. Like all sequels, in which the next story is an untold portion of the last episode, this feeling of achievement becomes the spur for your next creative project.

**References**


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