



2018

# Understanding Writing Challenges of Rural MSW Students: Preparing Students for Ethical Practice

Jennifer A. Shadik

*Ohio University*

Sarah B. Garlington

*Ohio University*

Terry Cluse-Tolar

*Ohio University*

Glenn Abraham

*Ohio University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/crsw>

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/crsw)

## Recommended Citation

Shadik, Jennifer A.; Garlington, Sarah B.; Cluse-Tolar, Terry; and Abraham, Glenn (2018) "Understanding Writing Challenges of Rural MSW Students: Preparing Students for Ethical Practice," *Contemporary Rural Social Work Journal*: Vol. 10 : No. 1 , Article 1. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/crsw/vol10/iss1/1>

This Teaching Article is brought to you for free and open access by Murray State's Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Rural Social Work Journal by an authorized editor of Murray State's Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [msu.digitalcommons@murraystate.edu](mailto:msu.digitalcommons@murraystate.edu).

---

# Understanding Writing Challenges of Rural MSW Students: Preparing Students for Ethical Practice

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Thank you to the students who participated for sharing a part of your journey. Your willingness to share your strengths and challenges will benefit future social work students and the programs working to enhance writing skills of MSW students.

## Understanding Writing Challenges of Rural MSW Students: Preparing Students for Ethical Practice

Jennifer A. Shadik  
Sarah B. Garlington  
Terry Cluse-Tolar  
Glenn Abraham  
*Ohio University*

**Abstract.** This study explores the attitudes and reflections of rural MSW students regarding writing. Twenty-seven students completed the modified Writing-to-learn Attitudes Survey (WTLAS). Fourteen completed an open-ended reflection where they were asked to assess their strengths and challenges in writing, as well as strategies for improvement. Results of WTLAS indicated students were anxious about writing, had difficulty organizing their thoughts, presenting their ideas clearly, and had little confidence in their writing. Results of the writing reflection indicated students were able to identify multiple challenges and strengths as well as means to remedy shortcomings. Qualitative analysis indicated the most frequent challenges were: clear and concise writing, time management, and APA style and format. The researchers review interventions implemented with an MSW cohort to enhance writing abilities and discuss the link between effective writing and ethical practice.

**Keywords:** writing, rural social work education, ethics, MSW

Writing is a social work practice skill with ethical implications at all levels of professional activity, whether related to client confidentiality, effective community education, social problem definition, or beyond. Within social work pedagogy, writing assignments have been linked with student self-efficacy and critical thinking, though research literature and curriculum discussions primarily focus on writing as a tool for assessing student learning. Social work graduate programs nationally share concerns about gaps in writing skills and general preparation for master's programs. A range of variables factor into writing as a challenge for graduate level social work students. This project focuses on the writing skills of students in a rural MSW program—rural in the course content focus, rural in campus location, and rural in the makeup of the student body—and the needs of these students in the context of barriers often identified for rural communities. These barriers include under-resourced public education systems, value preference for professional rather than academic skills, time constraints related to commuting, family commitments, and employment, etc. We begin by reviewing the literature to connect issues of rural educational context, writing as social work practice, and educational interventions related to writing skills. We then discuss the details of the study, including the collection of attitudinal and self-reflection data and the interventions incorporated into the graduate program. Using the results, we examine the attitudes and self-reflection of rural MSW students regarding writing skills as part of a larger study designed to increase the effectiveness of writing interventions. As research is limited regarding rural social work students and writing challenges, this study contributes to the knowledge base on how to meet the needs of rural MSW students.

## **Rural Social Work Education**

Addressing the need for social workers in rural areas requires effectively educating students coming from and returning to small communities. Rural students often enter MSW programs with particular academic needs. Students come to graduate programs with many different professional experiences, educational backgrounds, and motivations. Faculty structure programs to balance accommodating student preparedness with maintaining rigorous standards to ensure competent graduates. Social work programs have an ethical responsibility to train social workers from marginalized communities to serve those most in need. For practicing social workers, thoroughness and clarity in documentation are required in assessment, planning, and service delivery (Reamer, 2005). Providing effective, quality social work education to students who come from and will return to rural communities contributes to addressing many of the Grand Challenges—health equity, youth development, and family violence, for example. At the core, building rural community capacity through quality social work education addresses extreme economic inequality.

Students from low socioeconomic, rural areas can bring a particular knowledge base and skillset to social work practice necessary to work within their own and other marginalized communities. Students may also come from under-resourced educational settings, have families and full time jobs, and may be first generation college/graduate students. These factors bring challenges that can manifest in poor academic performance unless programs incorporate more intentional pedagogical design. The theoretical frames of transition theory (Flaga, 2006; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995), social class analysis (Ashley, 2001), and adult learning/literacy theory (Albertinti, 2008; Alter & Adkins, 2001; Ball & Ellis, 2008) highlight the range of strategies to shape curricula for particular students' needs. The research literature regarding a similar transition between community college and university can help us understand the structures needed to support students transitioning from undergraduate programs with fewer resources and less rigor to MSW programs with higher expectations (Flaga, 2006; Laanan, 1996; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Transition theory incorporates some elements of class analysis, pointing to the particular strengths and needs of economically disadvantaged students (Ashley, 2001; Flaga, 2006; Gibbons & Schoffner, 2004). Adult learning and literacy theories help bridge the curricular questions of utilizing student strengths while addressing major gaps in academic and professional skills, with a specific focus on writing (Ashley, 2001; Ball & Ellis, 2008; Grise-Owens & Crum, 2012).

Research shows additional barriers for students coming from rural communities related to writing skills and attitudes towards writing. Parents and other stakeholders in the community may not emphasize or understand the value of writing as a professional skill, whether based on their own literacy or a view of limited local employment options (Azano, 2015; Brashears, 2008; Budge, 2006). Budge (2006) argues that the quality of education in rural communities is directly linked to the ability of community leaders to connect the purpose of education with community development: “The separation of schooling from the context most known to students—their places and communities—has detrimental effects on the individual and the common good” (p. 9).

This is not to suggest that rural education programs do not have unique and valuable characteristics. The positive connections among rural schools, families, and the communities in

which they are located have been shown to have favorable effect on student academic performance (Agger, Meece, & Byun, 2018; Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012). The existence of supportive teacher-student relationships in the rural setting is also seen as a factor in the development of student motivation toward academic achievement and success (Byun et al., 2012; Hardré & Sullivan, 2008). This reinforces the need for a strengths-based perspective in addressing the academic needs of rural MSW students—connecting the valuable professional and personal experiences of students with the ethical requirements of practice through rigorous, supportive program structures and content.

### **Writing as Ethical Practice**

The challenges social work students, and in particular MSW students, have regarding writing skills is the subject of much research. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) required attention to writing skills in the 2008 EPAS through the practice behavior “demonstrate effective oral and written communication in working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities and colleagues” (CSWE, 2008, p. 4). In the 2015 EPAS, further attention is drawn to writing as an ethical and professional behavior: “Social workers demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior; appearance; and oral, written, and electronic communications” (CSWE, 2015, p. 7).

Writing is ethical practice when considered in social workers’ professional contexts and the weight of communication in decision making about individuals’ and families’ lives. Effective writing regarding clear communication of ideas, mastery of mechanical detail, and adaptation to different formats and audiences is directly related to a social worker’s ethical responsibility to confidentiality and competence (Dolejs & Grant, 2000; McDonald, Boddy, O’Callaghan, & Chester, 2015). The ethical writing model proposed by McDonald, et al. (2015) integrates an ethical focus with training on writing including:

Reflective mindfulness of the client-centred focus of writing responsibilities; a sound understanding of the values and principles of the social work and human services professions as highlighted in the unifying themes in various codes of ethics; and competence in compositional, rhetorical and technical writing skills. (p. 359)

### **Educational Interventions**

From the research on effective methods for improving writing skills in academic settings, three key areas stand out as strategies for addressing concerns. Research that focuses on the development of writing skills in social work students reflects the general themes in similar discussions across disciplines. The key areas that research identifies as effective in addressing concerns regarding student writing skills are oriented to providing access to writing support resources (both within programs and general university support), addressing student perceptions and anxieties around writing, and building instructor knowledge and skill to incorporate writing development into coursework.

Most programs that identify student writing skills as a concern begin with increasing access to resources such as university writing centers, tutors, or writing-specific workshops

(Alter & Adkins, 2001; Alter & Adkins, 2006; Grise-Owens & Crum, 2012; Horton & Diaz, 2011; Leon & Pepe, 2010). The effectiveness of these resources depends on a range of factors, including whether the participation is voluntary or required and whether the resource is one of many interventions. Simply referring students who struggle with academic writing to a non-program specific writing center without required follow up does not show significant change (Alter & Adkins, 2001).

Much of the research about writing and social work pedagogy fits with the “social practice approach” (Rai, 2004, p. 160) that emphasizes the need for students to incorporate reflection on their own identity and social context in relationship to their writing skills and attitudes towards academic performance (Jani & Mellinger, 2015; Nielsen, 2014; Nelson & Weatherald, 2014; Rai, 2004; Rai, 2006; Wiener, 2012). This approach also highlights the need to identify barriers specific to a social work program’s student population (such as the rural context of the program in this study). Jani & Mellinger (2015) discuss the role of self-efficacy in building social work writing skills, and social context, such as class, race/ethnicity, or experiences of oppression, is key to facilitating the development of self-efficacy. When addressing student perceptions and anxieties about writing, research also supports the need to integrate conversations about the value of writing as a professional and ethical skill into all aspects of a social work program (Jani & Mellinger, 2015; Nelson, Range, & Ross, 2012; Nelson & Weatherald, 2014; Rai, 2004; Rai & Lillis, 2013).

Finally, the role of the instructor cannot be overstated in addressing writing skill development at the programmatic level. Research shows that effective programmatic changes include incorporating writing into all social work coursework, building in peer review structures to writing assignments, ensuring consistency in grading through shared rubrics and checklists, and providing instructors with intensive, writing-focused training (Alter & Adkins, 2006; Falk & Ross, 2001; Grise-Owens & Crum 2012; Horton & Diaz, 2011; Jani & Mellinger, 2015; Luna, Horton, & Galin, 2014; Magen & Magen, 2010; Nelson et al., 2012; Nelson & Weatherald, 2014; Rai, 2004; Rai & Lillis, 2013; Sallee, Hallett, & Tierney, 2011; Wiener, 2012; Woody et al., 2014). Specific types of assignments are recommended to facilitate the engagement of students and instructors in detailed feedback and development of writing skills, such as mock poster presentations, peer review and discussions, sequenced drafts, and reflection papers (Grise-Owens & Crum, 2012; Wiener, 2012). Rubrics, checklists, and writing standards are offered as tools to increase the consistency of assessment across programs (Grise-Owens & Crum, 2012; Magen & Magen, 2010; Nelson et al., 2012). Interestingly, however, the emphasis is on the consistent use of these tools by all instructors within a program, with some research demonstrating the need for “structured training” of faculty as a way to ensure faculty commitment (Sallee et al., 2011) to the quality and process of writing instruction. Different programs have implemented various ways to enhance faculty commitment and skill in addressing writing concerns. Some programs include a training process for faculty, provide APA workshops for students and faculty, and build in incentives for faculty for the time, training, and effort required to facilitate these gains (Woody, et al., 2014).

More research is needed to understand the most effective interventions to address poor writing skills in social work graduate students. The components addressed in the existing

literature emphasize the importance of implementing multiple strategies that go beyond referring students to traditional writing skill development resources.

### **Method**

This study examines the attitudes and self-perceptions regarding writing in master's level social work students in a rural program. Data were collected through writing assignments and an attitudes survey.

### **Data Collection**

Students in their final year of a rural focused MSW program in the Midwest were eligible to participate in the study. IRB approval was obtained before beginning the study. Students completed the Writing-to-Learn Attitude Survey (WTLAS; Schmidt, 2004) on the final day of the last semester of the program. Additional questions were added to the WTLAS that ask students if they used the Writing Center, how many times, and what other interventions they utilized to improve their writing skills.

Additional qualitative data were collected in an open-ended reflective questionnaire regarding students' perceptions of their own academic strengths and weaknesses and the strategies they employed to address weaknesses. This questionnaire was an extra credit assignment in a required course, offered to all of the students before their final semester in the program. Results from the 14 students who consented to participate in the qualitative component of the study are included.

### **Intervention**

The research team implemented a series of interventions to support writing skill development, based on the research literature, including a range of group and individual activities. The interventions discussed are a combination of those already used in the program and those added for the study. Analysis of intervention effectiveness is beyond the scope of this paper; however, discussion of interventions is included to provide context to students' experiences and responses. All students received written feedback on their assignments throughout the program with an emphasis on early identification of writing challenges. All students participated in a series of three writing workshops: a) APA style and format, b) writing and documentation skills, and c) synthesis and application. These were designed according to research literature and instructor-identified needs specifically for the study. Individual students were referred to the university's Writing Center and the student's program advisor for additional support as identified by instructors involved in the study. Individual students were also required to revise or submit drafts of assignments as identified by instructors. Both the use of referrals and drafts/revisions as writing support were existing interventions within the program. A peer writing partnership structure was incorporated into one of the required courses, initiated for the study. This involved breaking a major writing assignment into sections to be completed as drafts, shared with writing partners, commented on by partners, and then revised for the final course assignment.

## WTLAS Analysis

The Writing-to-Learn Attitude Scale was originally designed to measure the impact of writing to learn assignments on undergraduate nursing students' attitudes about writing (Schmidt, 2004). The instrument measures apprehensions about writing abilities and perceived benefits of writing-to-learn activities, utilizing a Likert scale (Schmidt, 2004). Since this study involves graduate social work students, one item on the scale was slightly edited. Item 14 asks students to rate, "I would enjoy submitting my writing to magazines for evaluation and publication" (Schmidt, 2004, p. 462). We revised this item to read "journals" instead of "magazines." One item was added to the scale asking students to rate the degree to which writing skills are necessary for success in social work.

The WTLAS was used in the study to gain quantitative information concerning students' writing concerns as a complement to the qualitative data collected. The scale also provided scripted responses that students may not have considered in their qualitative responses. Twenty-seven students completed the WTLAS and data were analyzed using SPSS. Table 1 provides a summary of the findings. Likert scale responses ranged from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*. Findings indicate apprehension about writing especially in the areas of enjoying writing (Table 1, Item 6), submitting writing for publication (Table 1, Item 11), and comparing writing skills to others (Table 1, Item 14). Responses to Item 3, "I get nervous when I am asked to write," exhibited large variability ( $SD = 1.122$ ) consistent with our qualitative findings on anxiety and writing detailed below.

Findings also indicated a wide range of responses when rating "Critiquing a classmate's writing for conceptual clarity results in increased understanding for both of us (Table 1, Item 15)." Peer review has been noted in the literature as a method to improve student writing (Grise-Owens & Crum, 2012; Wiener, 2012) and students were engaged in a writing partner assignment. Some students identified the writing partner assignment as contributing to their growth as a writer when asked during the qualitative data collection. However, results from the WTLAS indicate that this sentiment was not broadly experienced.

Consistent with the literature related to writing as ethical social work practice (McDonald et al., 2015), most students indicated that writing skills are necessary for success in social work (Table 1, Item 23). At the same time, students tended to disagree that "The technical aspects of writing (punctuation, spelling, etc.) are more important than other aspects" (Table 1, Item 21). Technical writing skills are an important feature of McDonald et al.'s (2015) ethical writing model.

In addition to the WTLAS, students were asked about working with the Writing Center. While physically located on campus, the Writing Center provides virtual access for students unable to come to campus for meetings. Fourteen students reported being referred to the Writing



Table 1

*WTLAS Descriptive Statistics*

Item	Mean	SD
<b>Factor 1: Apprehensions about Writing Abilities</b>		
1. Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time.	4.37	.688
3. I get nervous when I am asked to write.	3.48	1.122
4. I like to write my ideas down.	1.74	.526
5. I feel confident in my ability to express my ideas clearly in writing.	1.89	.698
6. I enjoy writing.	2.52	1.051
8. I have a terrible time organizing my thoughts on papers.	3.81	.834
9. I like seeing my thoughts on paper.	2.22	.801
10. I avoid writing if possible.	3.67	.679
11. I would enjoy submitting my writing to journals for evaluation and publication.	3.63	1.115
12. I never seem to be able to write my ideas down clearly.	3.89	.641
14. I don't think I write as well as most people.	2.93	1.207
17. I am no good at writing.	3.81	1.075
20. It's easy for me to express my ideas in writing.	2.41	.747
22. I don't like my writing to be evaluated.	3.19	.963
<b>Factor 2: Perceived Benefits of Writing-to-Learn Activities</b>		
2. Impromptu focused writing in class helps me to solve problems or clarify concepts.	3.07	.997
7. Brainstorming, freewriting, or listing ideas before writing helps me find out what I know and think about a topic.	2.19	.962
13. Writing micro-themed (brief summaries) makes me aware of the most important points in reading assignments.	2.52	1.014
15. Critiquing a classmate's writing for conceptual clarity results in increased understanding for both of us.	2.56	1.251
16. Writing personal experience pieces makes me see connections between what I am learning and my own life.	2.19	1.111
18. Writing to different audiences makes me aware of how much the reader or listener affects the way I state information and concepts.	2.44	.698
19. Good writers make better grades in college than poor writers.	1.93	.997
21. The technical aspects of writing (punctuation, spelling, etc.) are more important than other aspects.	3.63	.967
23. Writing skills are necessary for success in social work.	1.59	.888
24. I use journals to enhance my understanding of course materials.	2.41	1.217

Center for help with their writing by one or more professors in their classes. Three students reported using the Writing Center after being referred, two making one visit and one making five visits.

## **Qualitative Analysis**

The qualitative data regarding student self-assessments were analyzed using detailed thematic coding, validated by three researchers conducting analysis and recoding according to identified themes. Given the expectations that social workers have competency in verbal and written communication, it is important to help students improve in these areas. In order to better understand the needs of rural MSW students related to written communication, students were asked for their assessment of their strengths and challenges in writing, as well as plans for how they could improve their writing moving forward. Themes will be discussed in order of decreasing frequency.

**Strengths.** Eleven strengths were identified by students. These included: working to improve, specific strategies utilized for success, finding literature, enjoyment of writing and content, formal writing skills, knowledge of APA, using literature, mechanics, organization, clarity and detail, and synthesis. As two themes were endorsed with the same frequency, the four most often identified will be discussed.

The most common response (n = 10) was working to improve. These responses included a focus on determination to improve and willingness to seek feedback on their writing. One student stated, "I seek out feedback from my professors and use this feedback to become a better student and writer." A different student stated, "Another strength that I have is that I want to learn and improve my writings." A third noted, "My strength is that I continue to work hard as a student. I can receive constructive criticism and grow from my mistakes."

Students (n = 4) identified current strategies they utilize to assist them in their writing. These included: reading work out loud to catch mistakes, using a thesaurus, and making an outline. A student noted, "...one of my strengths is reading my work out loud and finding minor mistakes I made." Another stated, "My experience with writing has led to certain skills, such as always keeping thesaurus.com open when writing papers." Another acknowledged that preparation before writing was helpful, "I write the best papers when I prepare an outline and I prepare headings before starting any writing."

Finding literature and enjoyment of writing and content were tied (n = 3). Some students had confidence in their ability to find relevant literature. "I think my ability to find and incorporate literature is a strength." Others acknowledged that they enjoyed writing. "Since I started college, writing papers has been one of my favorite forms of expression or evaluation." Other students focused on enjoyment of the content they were writing about "My strengths are that I enjoy the subjects and love to find out (more) about the topics."

**Challenges.** Students identified eleven challenges in writing. These included: clear, concise, and detail oriented; time management; APA style and formatting; proofreading; mechanics; emotional challenges; organization of papers; synthesis; writing formally; using

tools; and finding literature. Several of the most frequently cited items were tied, thus the top six themes will be discussed.

The two most common responses ( $n = 10$ ) were challenges with clear, concise, and detail oriented writing and time management. Students struggled with being clear while providing enough detail and staying concise. “My personal writing skills have room for improvement in many areas. Among them are my lack of clarity. Another area I would like to focus on is learning how to elaborate and provide more detail.” Another noted, “I also struggle with being what I will call ‘appropriately’ concise in academic writing; I fluctuate between being too concise and too wordy at times.” A different student noted, “I have been working on learning how to expand on and go into more detail with the information I am putting into my papers.” Time management included getting started on assignments and procrastination. Students stated that time management was an ongoing challenge as they struggled to start writing projects and/or procrastinated. One noted, “I tend to procrastinate and do not give myself much time to perfect my writing. I always think I will need less time than I actually do.” Another student noted the importance of building in enough time, “If I take the time to write ahead of time, this gives me more time to proofread. This will help me from making the small mistakes I have been making in the past.”

Two themes were tied at nine students each. These were APA style and formatting and proofreading. Many students noted that expectations around APA were lower in their undergraduate programs and they did not feel confident in using APA style and formatting. One noted:

Prior to the Master’s program, I had minimal experience using the APA manual. I was really lacking in the ability to cite and reference information correctly. I feel that I have made progress in doing this, but still need to work on improving this skill.

Similar challenges were noted by other students, “The APA format has been one of the biggest challenges for me to learn. I am still struggling but have improved over the semester.” Proofreading was a challenge for many; some noted they did not take the time to proofread, thinking the errors had already been found or felt too time pressed to proofread. “I think the biggest challenge and tip I have come to find in writing is proofreading. With autocorrect and spell check, I often assume that everything is crisp and perfect. To my surprise this is often the opposite.” Students acknowledged the negative impact of not budgeting time for proofreading. One stated, “I have learned that I make many typos and need to allow time to review my assignments. My challenges have been poor time management. This has led to many mistakes in my writing.”

The next most common theme ( $n = 7$ ) focused on the mechanics of writing. Students identified challenges with spelling, grammar, punctuation, and sentence formation. “I also know that I need to focus on details in my writing. I do not always implement perfect grammar in the paper and I know this is one of my weaknesses.” Another student acknowledged, “I have learned that I need some work on not only sentence formation but also formatting my papers. I have had several points deducted from my papers for run on sentences and the use of contractions.”

Emotional challenges were the next most common theme (n = 6). These students identified anxiety and lack of confidence as challenges in their writing. “My lack of confidence in my writing ability holds me back from doing well at times.” Another noted, “I still have a few things I need to work on such as my level of anxiety about writing papers and somewhat procrastinating because I get anxious about assignments.” Still another identified, “I waste time being unproductive in fear of making mistakes.”

**Strategies.** After identifying their individual strengths and challenges related to writing, students were asked to identify strategies they could use while in the MSW program to enhance their writing. Student-identified tactics they could use to assist in improving their writing skills were condensed into eight different themes. The three most common will be discussed: seeking and using feedback, time management, and proofreading and editing their work.

Students (n = 13) noted that seeking and using feedback from professors or others was a strategy they could utilize to improve their writing. “Due to the writing partner assignments in class, I have become more comfortable having peers review my work before I turn it in and give me feedback.” Students identified that peers and colleagues could provide helpful feedback, “It would be beneficial for me to have people edit my work before I turn it in. This tends to help me get a different perspective and catch the grammar mistakes that I have missed...” Other students identified using resources at the university, such as the writing center or professors. “I will go to the library (writing center) and ask for help to improve on my writing skills.” Another stated, “I feel that submitting my paper to my professor (as a draft)...was very helpful because she provided me with feedback and I was able to use this feedback accordingly.”

The next most common theme (n = 12) was time management. Students identified that starting earlier, preplanning writing assignments, spending more time on assignments, and taking breaks would benefit their writing. One student who identified procrastination as a relevant issue identified a plan for managing this:

I have struggled with procrastination in the past and this is also something I am working on. When I first know about an assignment I have started a Word document with a cover page, headers, page numbers, etc. This helps me to work on the paper earlier and procrastinate less.

“Next semester I am going to be more serious about working ahead of time. I want to have a draft finished in time to be able to ask for feedback from my (professors) so that I can turn in the best assignment possible.” Another noted, “I also want to manage my time better, which is sometimes difficult in an MSW program. Having better time management will allow me to have more time to review my assignments.” Students’ responses indicated an understanding of the connection between time management, proofreading, and the quality of the final product.

The third most common theme (n = 8) centered on proofreading, which was often connected to time management. Students identified the need to revise, edit, and read their work aloud in order to catch errors. “I need to learn to write ahead of time so that I have time to edit later and I do not miss details.” Others identified specific ways of proofreading to help them be

more successful, “I will take the time to proofread my papers by reading them out loud to catch minor mistakes.”

Students were able to identify strengths and challenges related to their writing. They also identified strategies to help them improve. Students noted the importance of professional writing skills for social workers. One stated, “The goal is to write papers that could be seen as professional and make me proud to be a social worker.” Helping social work students improve their professional communication skills is an important aspect of professional development. Better understanding their existing strengths and challenges allows faculty to better meet their needs while in graduate school.

## Discussion

Results of this study were consistent with literature indicating graduating students may feel underprepared for professional writing (Rai & Lillis, 2013). Regarding writing, the students endorsed feeling nervous, lacking confidence, and struggling with writing ideas down clearly. This is consistent with the findings of Sallee et al. (2011), that graduate students have identified feeling overwhelmed with the process of writing. This study advances the literature regarding specific challenges of rural students. As faculty better understand their unique challenges, we can design relevant interventions to better meet their needs; this allows MSW programs to respond to the ethical requirement of graduating students who can communicate professionally and effectively.

Our findings support research suggesting that students have a tendency to write at the last minute and turn in the first draft (Sallee et al., 2011). This indicates that educating students regarding expectations of graduate work may not be enough. Some would likely benefit from a structured peer review process where the writing process is broken into segments and they are provided feedback from peers. Another option is breaking assignments into pieces where students are given the opportunity to revise and resubmit work so they can apply feedback from professors to enhance their writing.

Research including student perspectives of their writing is limited (Cronley & Kilgore, 2016; Jani & Mellinger, 2015). Previous literature has discussed challenges in affective aspects (Miller, Grise-Owens, Drury, & Rickman, 2008) and psychological issues (Jani & Mellinger, 2015). This research expands on previous work by providing specific examples of emotional challenges experienced by MSW students. These students commented on issues with confidence, anxiety about writing, and fear of making mistakes.

Some of the previous work focused on student perspectives has asked students to rate their challenges and confidence using pre-selected items (Cronley & Kilgore, 2016). This research expands on previous research by allowing students to self-identify challenges and strengths related to their writing, without being restricted to specific prompts. This allows a wider variety of possible responses to help us better understand the range of challenges and strengths related to writing.

As previous studies on this topic have included undergraduate social work students and students studying in urban locations, this work extends prior contributions with a focus on MSW students from rural areas. While some of the themes uncovered in this study have been mentioned in prior studies; others were not. One of the specific themes of note regarding challenges included: clear, concise, and detail oriented writing. An important finding regarding strengths included: the high percentage of students working to improve their writing, emphasizing their determination and willingness. In addition, the students in this study were asked to identify specific, concrete steps they could take to improve their writing, which allows them an identified way to take action regarding writing challenges.

In order to produce graduates who are competent writers, one must not assume they already have the required skills. Increasing student skills in writing is likely to increase their confidence and self-efficacy related to writing (Woody et al., 2014). The workshop interventions provided helped students connect strong writing in academic work to professional documentation and assisted them in seeing the necessity of strong writing skills. It is our ethical duty to students and their future clients to help ensure students are able to clearly document services provided, articulate clinical reasoning, express whether clients have complied with court requirements, and persuade grantors of the benefit of providing funding to an agency program. Clients and agencies depend on the ability of social workers to write in a clear and professional manner (Alter & Adkins, 2001); it is our ethical responsibility to those we work with and for; furthermore, effective communication is a mandate of CSWE (2015).

In-person writing workshops, detailed feedback from faculty, and referrals to writing centers are some of the interventions recommended for graduate social work students (Woody et al., 2014), as well as breaking assignments into smaller pieces and peer review (Sallee et al., 2011), structured modeling process, and checklists for mechanical errors in writing (Nelson et al., 2012). We were able to use several of these interventions with rural MSW students who generally live off-campus and have a variety of responsibilities in addition to being a full-time student. The data regarding student attitudes, as presented in this paper, support the literature's emphasis on utilizing a range of strategies to address barriers to high quality professional and academic writing. While there are challenges for nontraditional students engaged in graduate work, particularly those coming from rural communities, these are not insurmountable.

## **Limitations**

This study focused on students in one MSW program. It is possible that they experience unique challenges, and their experiences may not be reflective of the larger population of MSW students. This research included a small sample size, and would be strengthened by including more students from multiple schools serving students from rural areas. Given student responses regarding anxiety, the interventions we implemented initially, may not be sufficient to improve student writing skills, partly because they do not address student anxiety directly. Moving forward, we will use these attitudinal data to connect the literature on student writing interventions with the barriers that rural, non-traditional social work students face.

## Conclusions

Social work programs have an important role in educating students for rural practice as rural communities frequently face a shortage of professionally trained social workers (Daley & Avant, 1999). Graduate programs focused on recruiting and training rural social workers have the opportunity to satisfy the need for highly trained social workers in small towns and rural communities. As these communities often have specific needs due to limited availability of services, economic struggles, and distance from larger service providers, it is important that social workers have the capacity to provide a range of services and communicate effectively. High quality writing skills are necessary for effective social work practice (Grise-Owens & Crum, 2012; Jani & Mellinger, 2015; Rai & Lillis, 2013). Social work programs must acknowledge gaps in writing skills and identify student challenges as well as strengths. In so doing, social work programs have the opportunity to train social work students to meet the needs of rural communities and meet the ethical mandate of effective communication for clients frequently residing in underserved and oppressed communities.

## References

- Agger, C., Meece, J., & Byun, S. (2018). The influences of family and place on rural adolescents' educational aspirations and post-secondary enrollment. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 47, 2554-2568. doi: 10.1007/s10964-018-0893-7
- Albertinti, J. (2008). Teaching of writing and diversity: Access, identity, and achievement. In C. Bazerman (Ed.), *Handbook of research on writing: History, society, school, individual, text*, (pp. 387-397). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Alter, C., & Adkins, C. (2001). Improving the writing skills of social work students. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 37, 493-505. doi: 10.1080/10437797.2001.10779070
- Alter, C., & Adkins, C. (2006). Assessing student writing proficiency in graduate schools of social work. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 42, 337-354. doi: 10.5175/JSWE.2006.200404109
- Ashley, H. (2001). Proficient working-class student writer's second voice. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 35, 493-524. Retrieved from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40171522>
- Azano, A. (2015). Addressing the rural context of literacies research. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 59, 267-269. doi: 10.1002/jaal.480
- Ball, A. F., & Ellis, P. (2008). Identity & the writing of culturally & linguistically diverse students. In C. Bazerman (Ed.), *Handbook of research on writing: History, society, school, individual, text* (pp. 499-513). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Brashears, K. (2008). Considering student writing from the perspective of parents in one rural elementary school. *The Rural Educator*, 30, 14-18. Retrieved from: <https://journals.library.msstate.edu/ruraled/article/view/457>

- Budge, K. (2006). Rural leaders, rural places: Problem, privilege, & possibility. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 21(13), 1-10. Retrieved from: <http://www.umaine.edu/jrre/21-13.pdf>
- Byun, S., Irvin, M. J., & Meece, J. L. (2012). Predictors of bachelor's degree completion among rural students at four-year institutions. *The Review of Higher Education*, 35, 463-484. doi: 10.1353/rhe.2012.0023
- Council on Social Work Education (2008). *Educational policy and accreditation standards*. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/2IRrtDP>
- Council on Social Work Education (2015). *Educational policy and accreditation standards*. Retrieved from: <https://cswe.org/getattachment/Accreditation/Standards-and-Policies/2015-EPAS/2015EPASandGlossary.pdf.aspx>
- Cronley, C., & Kilgore, C. D. (2016). Social work students and faculty: Testing the convergence of perspectives on student writing abilities. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 52, 214-233. doi: 10.1080/10437797.2016.1151275
- Daley, M., & Avant, F. (1999). Attracting and retaining professionals for social work practice in rural areas: An example from East Texas. In I.B. Carlton-LaNey, R.L. Edwards, and P.N. Reid (Eds.), *Preserving and strengthening small towns and rural communities* (pp.335-345). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Dolejs, A., & Grant, D. (2000). Deep breaths on paper: Teaching writing in the social work classroom. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 20(3/4), 19-40. doi: 10.1300/J067v20n03\_04
- Falk, D.S., & Ross, P.G. (2001). Teaching social work writing. *The Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, 6, 125-141. doi: 10.18084/1084-7219.6.2.125
- Flaga, C. T. (2006). The process of transition for community college students. *Community College Journal of Research & Practice*, 30, 3-19. doi: 10.1080/10668920500248845
- Gibbons, M. M., & Schoffner, M. F. (2004). Prospective first-generation college students: Meeting their needs through social cognitive career theory. *Professional School Counseling*, 8, 91-97. doi: 10.1002/j.2161-0045.2010.tb00186.x
- Grise-Owens, E., & Crum, K. (2012). Teaching writing as a professional practice skill: A curricular case example. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 48, 517-536. doi: 10.5175/JSWE.2012.201000030
- Hardré, P. L., & Sullivan, D. W. (2008). Student differences and environment perceptions: How they contribute to student motivation in rural high schools. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 18, 471-485. doi: 10.1016/j.lindif.2007.11.010



- Horton, E. G., & Diaz, N. (2011). Learning to write & writing to learn social work concepts: Application of Writing Across the Curriculum strategies & techniques to a course for undergraduate social work students. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 31*, 53-64. doi: 10.1080/08841233.2010.539141
- Jani, J. S., & Mellinger, M. S. (2015). Beyond “writing to learn”: Factors influencing students’ writing outcomes. *Journal of Social Work Education, 51*, 136-152. doi: 10.1080/10437797.2015.977177
- Laanan, F. S. (1996). Making the transition: Understanding the adjustment process of community college transfer students. *Community College Review, 23*(4), 69-84. doi: 10.1177/009155219602300407
- Leon, A. M., & Pepe, J. (2010). Utilizing a required documentation course to improve the recording skills of undergraduate social work students. *Journal of Social Service Research, 36*, 362-276. doi: 10.1080/01488376.2010.494086
- Luna, N., Horton, E. G., & Galin, J. R. (2014). The effectiveness of Writing Across the Curriculum in a baccalaureate social work program: Students’ perceptions. *Advances in Social Work, 15*, 390-408. Retrieved from: <http://journals.iupui.edu/index.php/advancesinsocialwork/article/view/15692>
- Magen, R. H., & Magen, J. G. (2010). Revisiting Aunt Fanny: Evaluating professional writing. *Social Work Education, 29*, 792-809. doi: 10.1080/02615471003599327
- McDonald, D., Boddy, J., O’Callaghan, K., & Chester, P. (2015). Ethical professional writing in social work & human services. *Ethics and Social Welfare, 9*, 359-374. doi: 10.1080/17496535.2015.1009481
- Miller, J. J., Grise-Owens, E., Drury, W., & Rickman, C. (2018). Teaching Note: Developing a professional writing course using a holistic view of competence. *Journal of Social Work Education, 54*, 709-714. doi: 10.1080/10437797.2018.1474152
- Nelson, J. S., Range, L. M., & Ross, M. B. (2012). A checklist to guide graduate students’ writing. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 24*, 376-382. Retrieved from: <http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/pdf/IJTLHE1295.pdf>
- Nelson, P. & Weatherald, C. (2014). Cracking the code: An approach to developing professional writing skills. *Social Work Education, 33*, 105-120. doi: 10.1080/02615479.2012.740453
- Nielsen, K. (2014). Self-assessment methods in writing instruction: A conceptual framework, successful practices, & essential strategies. *Journal of Research in Reading, 37*, 1-16. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9817.2012.01533.x
- Rai, L. (2004). Exploring literacy in social work education: A social practices approach to student writing. *Social Work Education, 23*, 149-162. doi: 10.1080/0261547042000209170

- Rai, L. (2006). Owing (up to) reflective writing in social work education. *Social Work Education, 25*, 785-797. doi: 10.1080/02615470600915845
- Rai, L., & 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*, 352-364. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2012.719157
- Reamer, F. G. (2005). Documentation in social work: Evolving ethical and risk-management standards. *Social Work, 50*, 325-334. doi: 10.1093/sw/50.4.325
- Sallee, M., Hallett, R., & Tierney, W. (2011). Teaching writing in graduate school. *College Teaching, 59*, 66–72. doi: 10.1080/87567555.2010.511315
- Schlossberg, N. K., Waters, E. B., & Goodman, J. (1995). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing.
- Schmidt, L.A. (2004). Psychometric evaluation of the Writing-to-Learn Attitude Survey. *Journal of Nursing Education, 43*, 458-465. doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20041001-04
- Wiener, D. R. (2012). Enhancing critical reflection & writing skills in the HBSE classroom & beyond. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 32*, 550-565. doi:10.1080/08841233.2012.722183
- Woody, J. D., Zeleny, M. G., D’Souza, H. J., Harder, J., Reiser, J., & Szto, P. (2014). Student progress in a social work writing course: Self-Efficacy, course objectives, and skills. *Journal of Social Work Education, 50*, 507-524. doi:10.1080/10437797.2014.917895