STRENGTHENING STUDENT WRITING:
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SSW FACULTY

To assist students in improving their writing, faculty members can always urge students to make individual writing counseling appointments with Debra Carney and Peter Sapira; please also encourage students to attend the small-group writing workshops offered at the lunch hours during the summer. (Please see the Summer Writing Workshop Schedule.)

And, ideally, all faculty members could

- Stress early and often the importance of effective writing in their courses and in the social work profession.
- Include a variety of writing assignments in your courses. (Please see Additional Ideas for Writing Assignments.)
- Use a common language to respond to student writing. (Please see The Language of Writing.)
- For all assignments, create a handout that specifies the task, purpose, audience, and desired manuscript form. Students will produce stronger papers if they understand exactly what we expect from them. (Faculty are welcome to make appointments with me to discuss creating effective assignments.)
- Clarify our grading criteria with students. Tell them exactly what criteria we use to assign grades. (Please see Criteria for Responding to Writing.)
- Make revision-oriented comments, focusing first on higher-order concerns (thesis, organization, evidence). Use more facilitative comments than directive or corrective ones. (Please see Types of Teacher Comments.)
- Make copies of strong papers and consider sharing one or two with your class, commenting specifically on what makes them outstanding pieces.
- Comment on drafts rather than final products if you can. Put minimal comments on papers that students will not revise. Please see Commenting on Drafts and The Basics: Responding to Student Writing.)
- Space deadlines so that we are not overwhelmed by drafts. In larger courses, divide the class in half or into thirds and require different due dates for these different groups.
- Use peer review. If we can’t find class time for peer review, we can ask students to meet outside of class to talk with one another about their papers. Peer groups work best when we’ve modeled the critiquing process in class, and when we provide students with checklists or guidelines for critiquing. Many teachers require that critiqued drafts be turned in along with final drafts so that they have some means of evaluating the peer reviews. (Please see Criteria for Responding to Writing, Guidelines for Providing Constructive Feedback, and Peer Review Check-Sheet)
- Visit the Moodle Page Writing Resources. There are handouts and video lessons on all aspects of writing. Please encourage your students to make use of these resources.
- When time is at a premium or a class is very large, use a grading scale or a scoring guide instead of making comments. (Please see Sample Scoring Guides.)
Additional Ideas for Writing Assignments

The more students write, the better they become at it. Both “low stakes” (shorter, more informal) writing assignments as well as “high stakes” (longer, formal) assignments help facilitate good writing and good discussions about writing.

“Low Stakes” Assignments

Logs and Journals
Students write short entries about ideas and issues they are exploring in their classes. We can encourage students to tie what they are learning in their classes to their own experiences, to use information gained from the lecture in new ways, to consider the pros and cons of certain propositions in their lectures, or to design new questions based on the lecture.

Lecture/Discussion Summaries
Students choose a lecture or discussion they have heard in our courses or another and summarize it.

Passage Summaries
Select two or three key quotes or passages from a reading. Have students write informal responses to these passages, then use the writings to initiate group discussions.

Feedback Freewrites
Allow time for students to comment on what needs clarification or to address a thought problem provided in the midst of the lecture or discussion. During an appropriate time in the class, we can pause to provide space for the students to write for several minutes.

Once the students have finished writing, ask one or two students to read what they have written or collect them to read a random sampling of the responses after class. These freewrites create a dialogue between us and our students and offer insight into the students’ thinking process as well.

Aside from providing valuable feedback, the freewrites also serve as a transitional period for the students. The break in the class to write will help students refocus their attention and can help increase their listening for the remainder of the class.

“High Stakes” Assignments

Break long or research assignments into smaller parts to identify problems and issues early. Some suggestions follow: Consider having students turn in brief statements of their research questions, planned approaches (outlines), and annotated bibliographies. (I note that many faculty are already doing this.)

The Language of Writing

For many students, a paper either “flows” or it doesn’t, and exactly why this happens is a mystery. Before they can talk more sensibly about writing, these students need to learn a few basic terms.

Some terms apply to the content of the paper:

- **topic**: what the paper is generally about
- **thesis**: a more specific statement of what the writer has to say in the paper about the topic
arguments  a series of statements that establishes the thesis

evidence  material the writer uses to support the thesis (a set of statistics, quotations from a text, historical facts, opinions of experts, interviews, personal experience)

analysis  A full explanation of how and why a configuration of evidence supports an argument

Note that many students have difficulty distinguishing between topic, facts, and thesis. The following illustrates their differences:

- EMDR therapy for post-traumatic stress (topic)
- Many clinicians use EMDR to treat people with PTSD (fact)
- Although a relatively new treatment for post-traumatic stress, EMDR is both effective and cost-efficient in addressing the disorder (thesis)

Some terms apply to the organization of the paper:

introduction  the opening paragraph, which at a minimum establishes the topic and the thesis of the paper

body  the part of the paper that develops the thesis by explaining the ideas, offering evidence, etc.

paragraph  the basic building block of a paper, typically consisting of an assertion or argument, supporting evidence and analysis

transitions  phrases or sentences linking a paragraph to previous ones

conclusion  the final paragraph that explains why the thesis matters, what we can learn from it, or what we should do about it

Some terms refer to the writing process:

pre-writing  the preparation a writer does before writing: making lists, taking notes, outlining, drawing diagrams, brainstorming, etc.

drafting  producing a full version of the paper

revising  improving a draft through reorganization; through addition, deletion, or substitution of material; and through rethinking and refining the thesis and arguments

editing  the final polishing of the paper, checking for spelling, punctuation and readability

Students need to be taught this language and shown how to use it. A good way to teach the content and organization terminology is to hand out a sample paper, break students into groups, and ask them to find an example of each term. A good way to accustom students to using the writing process terms (as well as to encourage them to write in stages) is to use the terms yourself in your syllabi and assignments, with specific due dates for papers at their different stages
Types of Teacher Comments

Corrective

These comments are copy-editing of syntax, grammar, and punctuation. However, research shows that when teachers correct every error, students learn less! In fact, making too many corrections has a negative effect on student writing.

Students learn best from corrective responses when we only correct a paragraph or a page, letting them see the pattern of their errors. Once they know their patterns, they can learn to correct themselves.

Directive

These comments instruct students to move a paragraph, omit a sentence, find another word, etc. Students learn best from directive responses if we give them a reason for following the suggestions.

Facilitative

These comments are mostly questions. How do you know this? Where is the evidence for this point? Is this idea connected to the idea that comes in the earlier paragraph? How? Or, these comments are statements that show a student how to broaden and deepen his or her thinking and writing. I think you need to write more about the importance of therapist cultural competency in working with Cambodian immigrants. When students answer our questions and respond to our facilitative statements, they become responsible for their own writing and re-writing decisions.

Evaluative

Giving a grade or a pass is an evaluative response.
Commenting on Drafts

There are a number of advantages to working more with drafts rather than more final products:

- The writer is still engaged with the material.
- The writer is still in a position to improve his or her writing.
- The writer is as ready as he or she will ever be to listen to and incorporate suggestions.

In fact, much research shows that students pay little attention to the comments they get on final drafts—which means that if teachers use their time responding to mid-process drafts, they can keep their comments brief on final products.

The 1992 Harvard University assessment report pointed to two main obstacles standing in the way of students’ writing improvement:

- Students don’t always understand teachers’ comments on their essays
- Students don’t always have specific strategies for revising

Clarifying Our Comments and Providing Revision Strategies

Essentially, we want to respond to a piece of writing as a communication, not a collection of mistakes. We also want to be as specific as possible.

**Make sure that our central comment responds to what the student is trying to say**, to the structure, coherence and presentation of his or her argument. A facilitative comment like this one is helpful:

*Is your point about the importance of a therapist respecting a Cambodian client’s cultural traditions or about why some clients are no longer following cultural traditions? The first is more relevant to your question. If that’s your point, you should only introduce examples of the second when they help develop your argument.*

A Smith College teacher says, “I try to find the point of highest intensity in the paper—the most insightful or complex or analytical moment—and mark it with a highly affirmative comment—‘yes!’ ‘excellent!’ ‘this kind of [strong argument] is just what you want more of in this paper.’ When I was a new teacher, I tended to dwell on the worst moments and try tactfully to explain why they were so bad.”

**Set Clear Priorities.** If we don’t, our students may respond to the easiest, most mechanical suggestions first, and never get to the more important issues. We might even want to tell our students that our comments will nearly always follow a specific format: for example, in descending order of importance, a) a comment on central focus; b) a comment on a specific point; c) a comment about issues of grammar and style.

This clarity will be helpful to them and will also save us time: we don’t have to reinvent the wheel with each student paper. Here’s an example of such comments: The student has written a section on the cultural practices that Cambodian immigrant clients attempt to maintain in their American lives.

*As it reads now, this chapter feels like a general description of Cambodian cultural practices. You can now step back and consider how Cambodian immigrants use their cultural practices both adaptively and*
maladaptively in adjusting to American life. Try to reach a conclusion about what seems to work best and worst for these clients in terms of maintaining and using their cultural practices.

b) You say that non-Cambodian therapists need cultural competency. What specific training do they need and how can they get it. How might the answers to these questions connect to your research question?

c) Keep working on your subject verb agreements. You have a lot of singular subjects taking plural verbs and plural subjects paired with singular verbs. This can confuse your reader.

**When we can, connect comments about issues of grammar and style to larger issues of communication.** We hope that the student will see the mastery of these skills not as an abstract ideal of correctness, important only to teachers, but as an important part of his or her development as an effective communicator in English. Here is an example:

Vary your sentence length. Notice that you use a lot of short sentences, one after the other. This tendency creates two problems: it makes for choppy writing, and it doesn’t show the relationship between your ideas.

**If we can, use common terms and link our comments to broader advice.** This fights students’ tendency to dismiss our comments as merely matters of personal taste. For example, instead of just writing, *I wish you had said more about the Buddhist idea of wisdom,* add, *this would have strengthened your paragraph development.* The student may be hearing something similar from instructors in other classes, and these comments will reinforce one another.
The Basics: Responding to Student Writing

Start with the Positive

Every paper, no matter how flawed, has some quality that we can praise: a lovely sentence, a well-organized paragraph, even the “seed” of an interesting idea. Comment on what works well in a paper before commenting on what doesn’t. Encouragement often increases a student’s drive and desire to improve.

Go With The First Impression

The problems that jump out from the paper are usually the ones to deal with first. Going with our first impression also speeds up the process of responding to writing.

Don’t Mark Everything

Our goal isn’t an error-free revision (which may involve no more than a rewriting that incorporates our corrections), but rather what the student can learn from this exercise. If a student writes sentence fragments, address that and let relatively more difficult issues of misplaced modifiers or pronoun-antecedent errors go until he or she has mastered the complete sentence.

Don’t Label

Especially avoid judgmental or abstract language: “unfocused,” “loose,” “doesn’t flow,” “awkward,” etc. Here we’re not providing strategies for revision, but offering opportunities for the student to misinterpret our comments as arbitrary: “She hates the way I write!” Instead, ask questions that indicate where the writer is actually confusing the reader: i.e., rather than labeling the writer’s thesis “unclear,” write, “I don’t understand this. Are you suggesting that agencies need to provide cultural competency training for non-Cambodian therapists or that agencies need more Cambodian-American therapists?”

Don’t Rewrite

Only very sophisticated writers will appreciate our revisions. Less accomplished writers won’t analyze what we’ve done, but simply dismiss it: “She wants me to write like she does.” Or they may simply copy it, not bothering to really learn the reason for the revision.

Don’t Overwhelm

This comment is unhelpful: “This draft could stand a good editing job—poor punctuation and grammar, and loose style of writing—besides a tighter construction and organization of ideas.” What’s left? And does the student have any idea about how to make “loose” writing “tight,” or even how to recognize it.

Also, avoid making marginal comments that contradict other marks. Don’t make detailed style and grammatical corrections and then write in the margin, "You don't need this paragraph."
Don’t Intimidate

The student who reads this comment will doubt that he or she can do the work: “The problem you want to write about is overwhelmingly complex, but you must do something with it. Your description only sprawls and does not begin to penetrate the heart of the matter.”

Don’t Criticize the Writer

“You must have read this study very carelessly” is a comment that we may have made to point to the writer’s poor analysis of the research. But, the writer can dismiss the comment as follows: “But I spent hours reading that study. You should look at my copy of the article; it’s all underlined!” The issue has become not the student’s writing, but the student’s behavior.

Evaluating the Final Product

If we’ve been able to comment on drafts, we can limit our remarks on the final product to brief ones: “You did a good job explaining some of the ways non-Cambodian therapists can work with Cambodian immigrant clients. I wish you had been able to develop some of those examples a bit more. I’ve marked those places where more explanation and analysis would have helped.”

If we’re unable to comment on drafts and are seeing the final product for the first time, we need to find ways to make our time commitment manageable and clarify for the students what the grade is based on.
Criteria for Responding to Writing

1. What is the quality of the content of the writing: the ideas, the perceptions, the point of view?
   a. is the basic idea or insight effective?
   b. is there logical reasoning, a valid argument?
   c. is there good evidence, examples?
   d. does it say something or is it a collection of thoughts- did the writer make it matter?
   e. is there too much abstraction or generalization?
   f. is there too little abstraction- too much detail clutter?
   g. does it do what it implies it will- satisfy the issues it raises?
   h. is there a unified, consistent point of view?
   i. is the piece fitted to the audience- does the writer understand their needs and perspective?

2. How well is the writing organized?
   a. is it unified around one central idea or going in several directions?
   b. is it arranged logically?
   c. is there a beginning that allows the reader to “get started”?
   d. is there a middle with sufficient weight?
   e. is there an ending with a sense of closure or completion?
   f. are the paragraphs developed coherently and with enough detail?

3. How effective is the language?
   a. are the sentences clear and readable?
   b. are the words used correctly?
   c. is it succinct enough for the purpose and audience- not too long, repetitive, dull?
   d. does the diction, mood, tone fit the audience and occasion?
   e. is the language alive, human, interesting- is there a human voice there?

4. Are there mistakes or inappropriate choices in usage?
   a. are there mistakes in grammar, usage, spelling, and typing?
   b. are there mistakes in references, graphs, or other special effects?
   c. is it neat and easy to read on the page?
Guidelines for Providing Constructive Feedback

1. Ask the writer at what stage she or he is with the writing, and what aspect of the project he or she would like feedback on.

2. If the writer is looking for general feedback and this is an early draft, look at the bigger issues first: purpose, voice, organization, and evidence. If this is a more final draft, assess these issues as well as technical and style issues such as sentence structure and mechanics.

3. Read the draft carefully. If possible, read it twice, making notes on the second reading.

4. Note parts of the draft that are strong for you and parts of the draft that need further attention. Be certain that you provide specific examples and explain your response.

5. Ask questions as well as make assertions. (Questions prompt more thinking on the part of both the writer and reader.) Instead of saying, “This is disorganized,” ask, “What is your most important point? Why have you placed it here? What is your pattern of organization?”

6. Don’t overwhelm the writer with feedback. Look for specific patterns in the draft and take into account the deadline to which the writer is working.

7. Good luck!
Peer Review Check-Sheet

Reader’s Name_____________________   Writer’s Name______________________

1. What do you like best about this work and why?

2. What is the thesis of this essay?

3. Where is this thesis established? Outline the organization that the writer uses to develop her paper and evaluate how well it is developed. Is the writer logical and are there adequate examples? How could the analysis be strengthened?

4. What other aspects of this paper most need more attention? Comment specifically on (1) the introduction, (2) the organization of ideas and evidence, (3) clarity of expression, and (4) spelling, word choice, and syntax.
Sample Scoring Guides

Minimalist

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More Detailed

**Quality of Ideas** (___ points)
Range and depth of argument, logic of argument, quality of research or original thought; appropriate discussion of the topic; appropriate awareness of opposing views.

**Organization and Development** (___ points)
Effective title, clear thesis statement; logical and clear arrangement of ideas; effective use of transitions; unity and coherence of paragraphs; good development of ideas through supporting details and evidence.

**Clarity and Style** (___ points)
Readability; appropriate voice, tone and style for assignment; clarity of sentence structure; gracefulness of sentence structure; appropriate variety of sentence structure.

**Sentence Structure and Mechanics** (___ points)
Grammatically correct sentences; absence of comma splices, run-ons, fragments; absence of usage and grammatical errors; accurate spelling; careful proofreading; attractive and appropriate manuscript form.