



Writing analysis in social care

A practical framework for supporting the writing of analysis in social care records.

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Iriss

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About the course

Welcome to the Iriss writing analysis online course. The aim of this course is to provide a practical framework for supporting the writing of analysis in social care records. This course aims to be relevant across social work domains.

This course has grown out of the recording practice project that Iriss has been running over the last 2 years. This project focussed on supporting social services practitioners to develop their skills and explore their ideas for improving their case recording. In 2019 we partnered with East Ayrshire Health and Social Care Partnership to look at the current strengths and challenges that social workers were facing in their recording practice. This practice based research led to a new partnership with Scottish Borders Council social work teams which focused specifically on analysis in recording. Through a series of workshops, we explored practitioners' relationship with analysis and together we looked at how we could support people to improve their written analysis and feel more confident. This course draws on the insights generated from the Iriss project and findings from the WiSP project, a research project exploring professional social work writing (www.writinginsocialwork.com).

How does the course work?

The course has 8 units. These are

1. Thinking about social work writing
2. What do we mean by analysis?
3. Description
4. Explanation
5. Evaluation
6. Recommendation
7. Representing the person's view
8. Writing as a process that supports analysis

Each unit is made up of written explanations that cover the key learning, and practical exercises that you can complete.

If you go online you can access additional audio and video recordings that give you more information and practitioners' views.

It is designed to be worked through in a linear way but if you find you need to go away and come back, or dip into specific bits, then feel free to use in whatever way works best for you.

The aim and learning outcomes of the course

The aim of this course is to provide a practical framework for supporting the writing of analysis in social care records. At the end of the course:

- You will have become familiar with one practical framework for supporting the writing of analysis
- You will have considered some aspects of the language of written analysis
- You will have reflected on your own practice of writing analysis

Analysis is central to everyday social work practice and involves paying careful attention to what is going on in any situation in order to understand that situation and make recommendations for support. Analysis can therefore be thought of as an ongoing process: The Oxford English Dictionary defines analysis as ‘The action or process of carrying out a detailed examination; the methodical or systematic investigation of something complex in order to explain or understand it.’ Analysis is an ongoing process that social workers are engaged in all of the time.

Analysis is of course also a product, a written record which captures key aspects of all the different parts of the analytic process- the thinking, listening and observing that social workers do. The written record of analysis involves selecting the most important details from all these aspects and writing in a way that makes these understandable to many different kinds of readers. Moving from analysis as process- a part of almost every moment of everyday practice and involving a wide range of professional skills, intuition and expertise- to analysis as a written product is central to the securing of services and providing good care for vulnerable young people and adults. Producing written analysis can also be challenging for many reasons.

As social workers you know a lot about analysis in social work writing. This course has not been designed to tell you how to do analysis - instead we are hoping to offer you a chance to clarify how you think about your writing at work, and help you to spend some time reflecting on what exactly is involved in the writing of analysis in your everyday practice.

thinking

about
social
care

writing



Thinking about social work writing

What do we know about social work writing?

Your professional writing is an essential part of your communication with the people you are supporting and the other professionals who are working with you to do this. Writing is also the key way in which services are secured and complex decisions made about how best to support vulnerable children and adults. As we know, there is a huge amount of nuance involved in describing what writing, or recording, practice is, what it entails and how it is defined. Broadly, social work recording is any written material about people who are supported by social work services. These records cover a range of content, such as: assessments, reports, case conferences, chronologies, records of visits and more. Written records carry a huge significance in practice because they have a big impact on people's lives.

Thinking about how and what you write is of course not primarily an 'administrative' issue.

Making decisions made about exactly what is written, whose views are represented, the language used to describe and analyse situations and lives are fundamentally ethical issues.

There is a moral imperative for practitioners to produce written records which are:

- **accurate**
- **clearly and fairly include the perspective of the person at the centre of the record**
- **clearly and fairly include the perspectives of family, friends and professionals involved with the person at the centre of the record**
- **represent the social worker's professional view**
- **In line with the general values and ethics of social work practice and social care**

Explore the project at www.writingin-socialwork.com

Whilst much has been written about social work writing and recording, only a small number of studies have set out to explore exactly what is involved in everyday professional social work writing. WiSP- Writing in professional social work practice in a changing communication landscape - is the first national (England-based) research project on writing in professional social work practice.

This project asked:

- What are the institutional writing demands in contemporary social work?
- What are the writing practices and perspectives of professional social workers?
- What are the challenges faced and solutions found?
- How are writing demands and practices shaping the nature of professional social work?

Through interviews with 70 social workers, researcher observations of 10 weeks of everyday social work practice, 481 days of writing logs kept by social workers and 4,608 texts collected and anonymised - over 1.2 million words of written discourse- they reached a number of key conclusions about social work writing. Some of the findings provide hard evidence for claims that are frequently made.

Writing in professional social work practice

Key Findings

A considerable amount of time is being spent on writing.

Most social workers interviewed said they spend more than 50% of their time on writing but on the basis of observation and logs, considerably more time is spent, with some days involving 90% of time on writing.

Writing takes place in most hours of most days and often alongside other activities and often outside of official working hours.

A large variety of writing is going on across range of types and technologies - 341 institutionally labelled different types of texts were identified.

- The large range of writing can be categorised into 11 broad types of writing (administration, applications for services, assessments, communication with others, contracts/contractual information, case recording, diagrams/mapping, documents when working with clients, meeting-related paperwork, reports, training/supervision documentation).

There are 4 key genres of writing: case notes, emails, assessment reports, handwritten notes.

Digital (usually using ICT systems) and handwritten writing (usually in the form of notebooks) is part of everyday practice for different purposes.

There are a small number of core words in social work written discourse - 128 'keywords'. Many of these words relate to description and evaluation.

Key variations in writing are rhetorical- that is the ways in which the text is organised and the language used in relation to the work . For example there are key variations in relation to VOICE

- Voice- of writer/social worker and how they present themselves including explicit evaluation and analysis
- Voice- how others' voices are represented in the texts
- Voice- who is being addressed and how.

Social workers have many profound concerns about writing

- The amount of time they spend on writing including time outside of official working hours
- The balance of time spent recording compared to time spent with the people they are working with
- The technologies they are required to use- some are not fit for purpose
- The 'quality' of their writing- there is often insufficient time for writing in ways they would prefer
- The feeling that the purpose of recording can get lost- that it becomes part of an auditable, monitoring, defensive system - rather than to support vulnerable children and adults
- The challenges around professional view/voice- how the social worker's voice should be represented alongside other voices in written records.

There was some evidence that social workers are not only carrying out the writing required for social care but are also mediating services with other agencies in order to support the people they are working with e.g. in relation to PiP (Personal Independent Payments, with the Department for Work and Pensions).

What makes social work writing so complex?

People become social workers for a range of reasons. Maybe they were drawn to practically supporting people, advocating for their rights, supporting mediation or pursuing social justice. It would be unusual to find a social worker who was drawn to the profession by a love of writing. Yet writing is often the vehicle through which you are making change for the people you support.

Social work writing is a particularly complex professional activity for a number of reasons. It encompasses not only what might be thought of as technical writing skill, but a reflection of the ethics and values of the profession. Each piece of writing has multiple audiences, it is completed under time pressure in often challenging and legal circumstances, and it has many forms. It must serve the people you are supporting, your colleagues, and the legal and justice systems that you are working within. In addition there are issues of confidentiality to contend with. Written social care records, furthermore, have a very long life. Whilst they may be written to serve an immediate purpose- to provide a particular service or to secure protection and care for a vulnerable child or adult- they may also be read many years later, for example by a young person who has experienced the care system.

Writing with both immediate and long terms purposes and with multiple audiences in mind makes social work writing a challenging task.

Why focus on analysis?

In our workshops with managers and frontline practitioners we had lots of discussion and reflection around the challenges that came up in social work writing. Some of the aspects that people find most challenging included

- Risk assessment
- Taking a holistic view
- Being able to analyse large quantities of information
- Linking information to the analysis or decisions made
- Writing clearly and concisely, including structuring writing
- Proportionate level of detail - not including too much and/or irrelevant detail
- Identifying actions and outcomes
- Presenting an argument, making recommendations
- Writing chronologies

When we reviewed this list with participants and managers, we saw that there was a theme running through these aspects. The workshops highlighted that when approaching recording, and in particular, analytical writing, there are a collection of interrelated skills that need to be in action at the same time- **both** critical thinking skills **and** writing skills.

In this course we explore a framework for thinking about analysis that can be applied across any kind of professional writing. The processes explored in the course will help you to think about how to use your writing as a process of analysis and ensure that you are able to centre the person you are supporting in your writing.

Practical exercise: thinking about writing

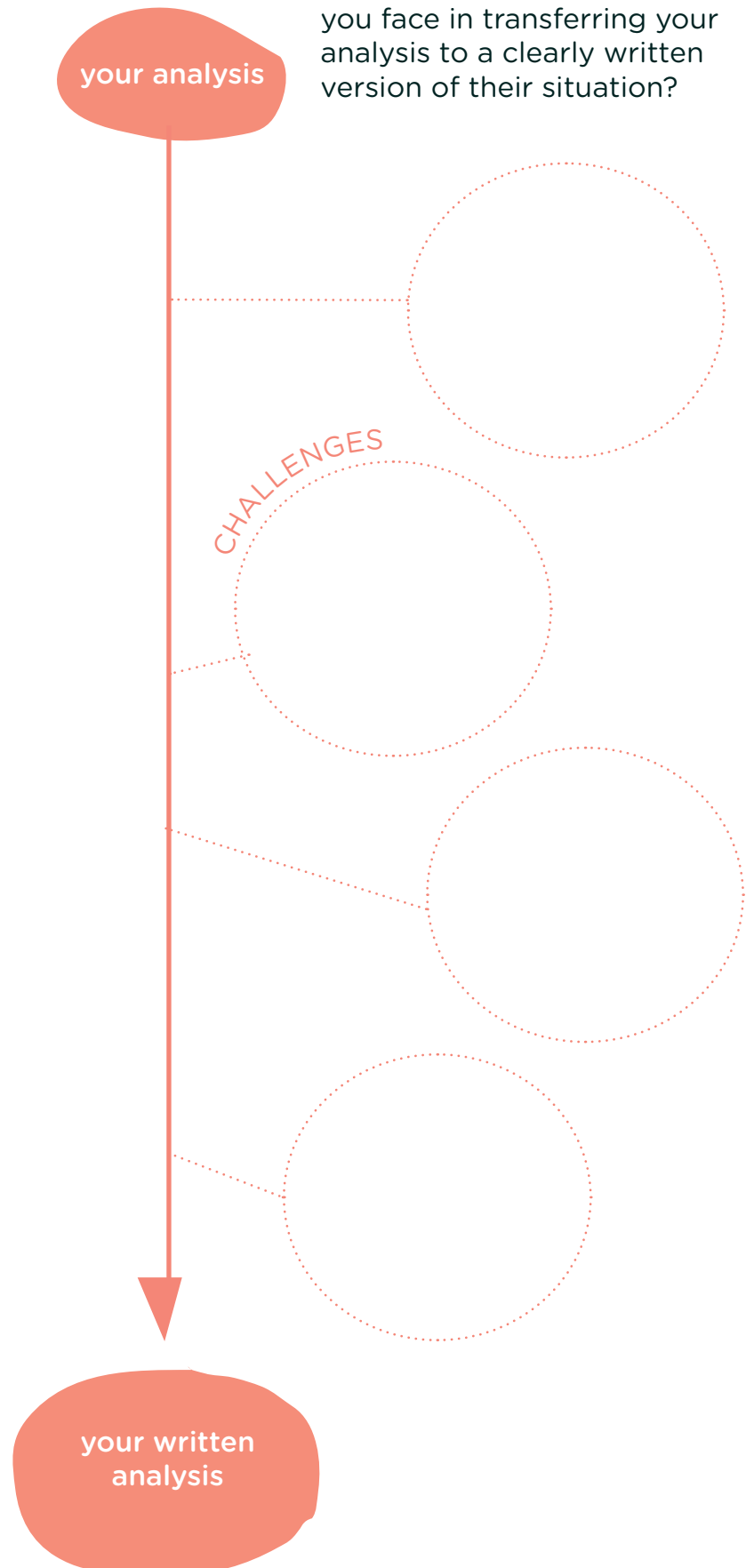
Think about a particular person or family you have been working with.


Think of all the time spent with them- the interaction you have had with them.

(face to face, on the phone, via whatsapp...)

Think of everything you have come to know about the person or family and your overall analysis of the situation.

What are the key challenges you face in transferring your analysis to a clearly written version of their situation?





WHAT
do we
mean by
ANALYSIS

What do we mean by analysis?

Analysis in practice

Analysis is central to everyday social work practice and involves paying careful attention to what is going on in any situation in order to understand that situation and make recommendations for support. Analysis is an ongoing process that social workers are engaged in all of the time.

Analysis is of course also a product, a written record which captures key aspects of all the different parts of the analytic process- the thinking, listening and observing that social workers do. The written record of analysis involves selecting the most important details from all these aspects and writing in a way that makes these understandable to many different kinds of readers. Moving from analysis as process- a part of almost every moment of everyday practice and involving a wide range of professional skills, intuition and expertise- to analysis as a written product is central to the securing of services and providing good care for vulnerable young people and adults.

In our workshops exploring social work writing, as a group we discussed what analysis as a product looks like. Practitioners felt that good analysis has a number of key features, but that in everyday practice it can be challenging to produce written analysis that includes all features.

Features of good written analysis identified by practitioners

FOCUS

Outcomes focused - short, mid and long term outcomes
States clearly what the outcomes or impacts will be and if these are positive or negative

STRUCTURE

Clear history running through - sequential and measured
Analysis provides the history of what's happened and what's been discussed

Clear reasoning, decision making and planning, all this is clearly connected to/ by the information previously given

CONTENT

Summarises and weighs up risks and risk factors, and shows protective factors, uses relevant risk tools

Contains the right amount of detail

Captures different perspectives in a non judgemental way

Brings in evidence, practice wisdom, information from other professionals, family, carers

Explains what's recorded and why

Weighs up the likelihood or probability of change/ impacts

HOW IT READS

Writer has a good understanding of the issues

Being able to get a sense of the service user and what they see as a priority

It is clear and concise

When required, analysis should be tailored to the requirement of the report / assessment and, distil the key information to inform the plan for the child / family.

"I feel like analysis is this thing, this concept. The best way I can describe it is that its like a butterfly, I can't quite catch it to give a proper description. Its holistic- its about layers. I'm constantly thinking about what is important and asking what is someone else going to get from this? It's about taking the information and making sure that it's going to be meaningful to the next person who is reading it"

Claire, Adult Social Worker

The ethical principles underpinning written analysis

Adapted from Ethical Professional Writing in Social Work and Human Services

Donna McDonald, Jennifer Boddy, Katy O'Callaghan, Poll Chester (2015) Ethical Professional Writing in Social Work and Human Services, Ethics and Social Welfare, 9(4):1-16.

There is no one stop shop, or template, for writing 'good analysis'. However there are some ethical principles that underpin written analysis as part of ethical practice in social care.

Respect for persons

Respect for human rights, dignity and worth is captured by good analysis. In writing, the values of acceptance and respect for both the reader and the subject of the writing can be demonstrated by the language used. Respect for persons involves writing with sensitivity and is about being able to see the world from the viewpoints of others. Good analysis demonstrates thoughtful use of language that avoids labelling, stereotyping and cultural or other bias.

Professional integrity

Good analysis writing takes account of organisational requirements and legal obligations. It also means being mindful of professional boundaries and responsibilities. This integrity then leads good analysis to offer clearly articulated and justified decisions, while taking into account the broader social context. Accuracy in recording leads to a fair representation of a supported persons' point of view, allowing records to be shared in an open and direct way.

Accuracy, judiciousness and credibility

Good analysis provides full and accurate information about peoples' circumstances and accurately records the information to give a clear understanding of their needs to other professionals working with them. It includes only essential and relevant details, and does not use emotive or derogatory language.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is essential to social work practice and writing reflexively is part of good analysis. Writing explores not only what an experience was, but considers the meaning the writer attached to it both at the time and subsequently, and how this meaning may influence practice in the future. Good analysis gives the reader a sense that the writer has a sense of "self" and has made connections between ideas, feelings and memories of experience.

Social justice

Strong analysis in social work writing is one of the tools that a social worker can use to challenge injustice, particularly as it relates to policies and practices. Good analysis openly values people's' lived experiences, is critically reflective, connects with the audience, and draws attention to social injustices to advocate for social change. It can challenge negative discrimination and recognise diversity by using language that is inclusive and does not further stigmatize already marginalized people.



A framework for thinking about writing analysis

DESCRIPTION

EXPLANATION

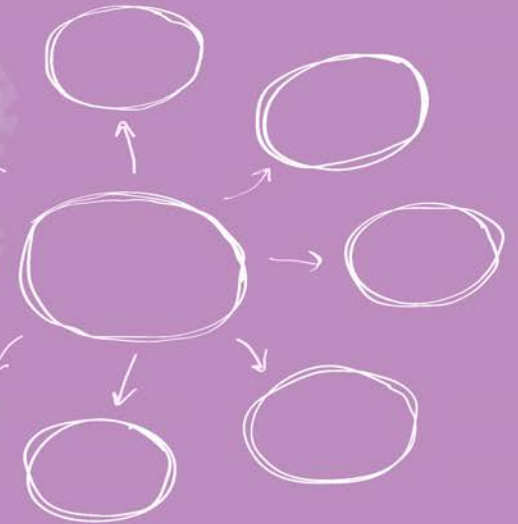
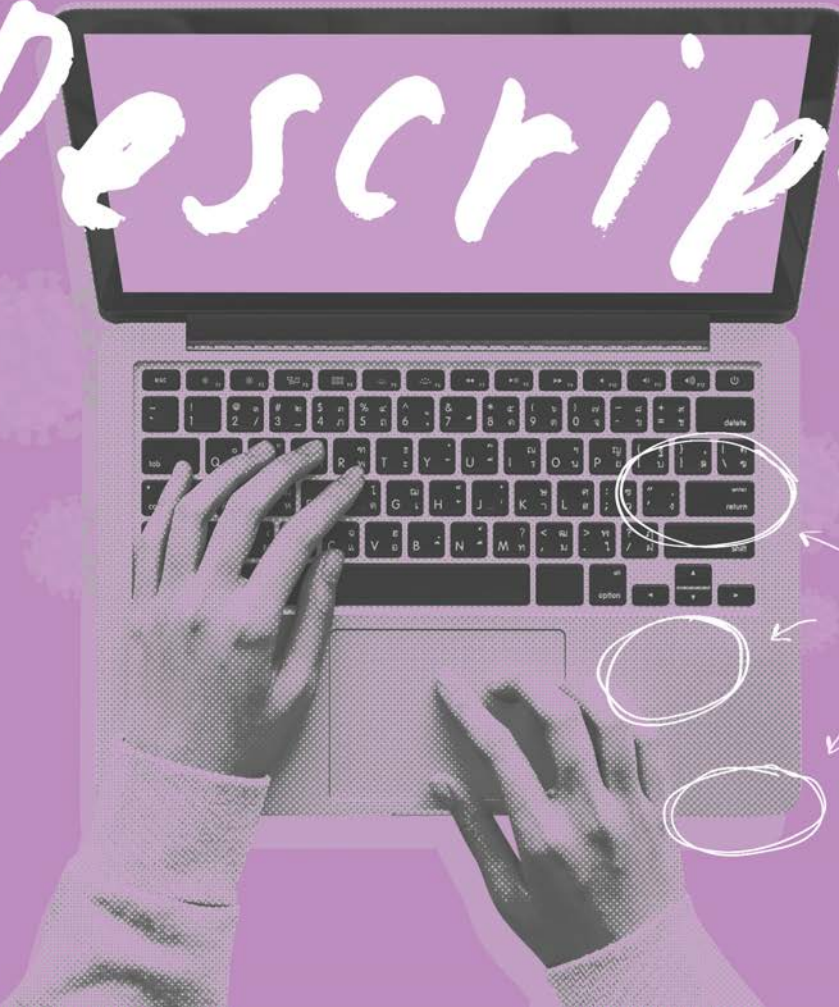
EVALUATION

RECOMMENDATION

Thinking about analysis can feel overwhelming, as it encompasses so much of your practice, and there is a lot to include and get right. Here we offer a framework that may help when writing analysis. There are many ways of talking about written analysis. 'Analysis' is sometimes thought of as one particular aspect or part of written records and there is often a section marked 'Analysis' in templated documents. But rather than think of analysis as one particular part of a written text, we think it is useful to think of analysis as being made up of 4 key elements: Description, Explanation, Evaluation and Recommendation.

Perhaps elements 2 and 3 are those we tend to think of as being most explicitly 'analysis' but 1 is a crucial element underpinning 2 and 3, and the success of 4, will depend on all three other elements being well presented in writing. In producing successful written analysis, it is important to think of all four elements. We will take you through each of these in the following units.

Description



Description

A working definition of description

Careful and accurate description is the bedrock of social work records. All kinds of description are essential, focusing on what has happened, who is involved, when events took place and for how long. This involves writing descriptions of people, their physical and mental states, as well as documenting what the social worker has said and done. Description is often thought of as relatively straightforward to write, but it is in fact quite complex, involving a lot of time and thought. It is impossible to describe everything that you observe (you would need two lives, one for living and one for documenting all that living) so to describe everything that is potentially relevant to understanding a specific situation involves selection.

Making decisions about exactly what to describe and how is already part of the analytic process.

Visit the online course at www.iriss.org.uk to watch videos on this subject

Visit the online course to hear Lisa Lewis, an experienced social worker, talking about the importance of description in written records. A key point Lisa makes is that description is not just about important background information. Description of relevant details is evidence. It is the careful and relevant descriptive detail that you provide that will be used as evidence in any explanation, claims made and conclusions reached.

Lisa talks about description always involving professional judgement. This means that writing good description takes time to learn. The more experienced the social worker is, the easier she may find it to decide which particular aspects of a situation need more detail and which need less. It also means that if you are earlier in your professional career, you may find it useful to have support to learn what counts as relevant description. e.g. with your manager, supervisor, mentor giving you explicit feedback on your writing.

Lisa talks of 'too much description' and how this may negatively affect how the record is written. By 'too much description', Lisa points to vague or 'flowery' language, comments which do not seem to help the reader's understanding of a particular situation. Lisa emphasises that too much unhelpful description can generate a negative response in readers, which may be highly consequential e.g. leading a panel to reject a particular recommendation.

Thinking about the language of description

The kind of language used to accurately and fairly describe a situation is usually as 'neutral' as possible. Of course, no words or phrases are ever completely neutral but we can certainly think of some being more neutral than others. Consider the two lists below of commonly used words and phrases in social work records and whether you agree with them being labelled 'neutral' or 'evaluative'.

From Maria Leedham, Theresa Lillis, Alison Twiner (2020) Exploring the core preoccupation of social work writing: A corpus-assisted discourse study. *Journal of Corpora and Discourse Studies*, 2(1):1-30

Examples of commonly used 'neutral' words in written records

awaiting, bail, belongings, bruising, co-funding, completed, discharge, discharged, Facebook, finances, follow up, homeless, home-environment, hygiene, invoice, laundry, look into, meals, medication, monitored, prescribed, prioritise, receives, rehab, requires, reside, residing, safeguarding, tenancy, toilet, top-up, unwell, urine, utilise, suffers, verbally, wheelchair

Examples of commonly used 'evaluative' words in written records

abusive, allegation, appropriately, ascertain, behaviours, clean and tidy, CSE (Child sexual exploitation) deteriorated, due to, DV (domestic violence) engaging, enjoys, high-risk, incidents, independently, manage, misuse, needs, prompting, routines, struggles, supervision, unable, unsure, wellbeing

Of course, whether words are considered 'neutral' or expressing a negative or positive connotation depends on the rest of the text- and the perspective of the reader. It may be surprising to think of 'routine' as an evaluative term but it's clear from an analysis of written social work documents that 'routine' is always used with positive connotations. 'Routines' seems to indicate a level of order and normality, thus the word 'routines' is used to refer to regular patterns of behaviour that are viewed positively.

The main point to remember is that language is the core stuff of written records and it conveys not just information but particular perspectives on a situation, so it's important to choose words carefully. And while using neutral language is important - providing a careful and accurate description is crucial- it may also be appropriate to use evaluative language in order to convey a particular perspective. If you decide to use an evaluative word or phrase, you need to make sure you include sufficient descriptive evidence to justify the use of such language.

Practical exercise

Take a look at a recent record (a case note, an assessment report) where you have described a particular situation.

- Does the detail you have provided give a clear account of that situation?
- What details have you included and why?
- What have you decided not to include and why not?
- Is there any language you have used that you think is evaluative or judgmental, rather than 'neutral'?
- If you have decided to use an evaluative word or phrase, have you included sufficient detail to justify this use?

Examples of 'neutral' words in your written record

Examples of 'evaluative' words in your written record

Reflections



Explanation

A working definition of explanation

Explanation is a key part of written analysis focusing on the **'why'** of a situation. Of course there are different levels of 'why', a more immediate level e.g. why Mandy didn't go to school on Monday (she said she didn't feel well), and a more fundamental level, that is why a particular situation arises in the first place (e.g. are there deeper issues connected to Mandy not wanting to go to school?). The two levels of explanation overlap of course but here we are focusing mainly on the first more immediate level: the second level might more usefully be considered under Evaluation, the third element of written analysis. Providing explanations at this more immediate level usually involves drawing on your observations and interactions, much of which you will have logged in a number of documents, e.g. case notes. It also involves you drawing on the accounts and perspectives of a number of other people:

- the people involved
- friends or family
- different professionals e.g. doctor, teacher, police, care worker, psychiatrists

It is important to include different accounts of why something is happening, make clear whose account you are including and on what basis. It is crucial to include the explanations and perspective of the person about whom the record is being written.

Professional Writing: A Guide for staff working in Children's Social Work. Aberdeen City Council. Working document. (2019). p4

“We have the responsibilities to ensure that we are representing our service users respectfully, and that we clearly understand that our ‘version’ of events is merely that: a version of events. One that we should convey confidently, analytically and backed up by evidence.”

It is also essential to include explanations by others relating to a particular person or situation: for example, an explanation provided by a teacher who knows a child well, over an extended period of time; an explanation by a psychiatrist based on three interviews.

Selecting and synthesising from the different accounts and perspectives is crucial because it will be impossible to include every detail and not all details will be equally important in helping the readers understand a situation. In carrying out this selection, you will often draw on existing written records. For example, when writing an assessment report, you will usually draw on case notes, perhaps a chronology summarising events and key moments, as well as notes you may have kept in a notebook. All of these will include particular moments of analysis and will inform the current analysis you are writing.

Hypothesising

One way of working out exactly what detail to include is to build hypotheses about a situation. Hypothesising involves you articulating some possible explanations about a particular situation and then testing them out on the basis of the evidence you have collated or are in the process of collating- that is your description of events and the different accounts and perspectives.

Sally Holland (2004) Child and family assessment in social work practice. London: Sage. p131

“The cornerstone of analysis in assessment work might be seen as the process of building hypotheses for understanding a family situation and developing these until they include a plan for the way forward.” Holland (2004)

Hypothesising is an important part of the analytic process, some of which you will include in written records- e.g. in case notes, assessment reports- but some of this process will be unwritten or not in public records, e.g. in your head or in notes you make. (see **Writing as a process that supports analysis**). It is important to state the particular hypotheses in your written records writing but of course your hypotheses may change over time, in relation to the evidence you collate.

For example in early case notes about a particular person or situation you may have several possible hypotheses about what is going on and you will include these: e.g. one possible explanation is that xxx; another is yyy. However, when writing what we can think of as ‘milestone’ documents, that is publicly significant documents, such as an assessment report being presented to a local authority panel or court, you will draw on all existing records to synthesise what you see as the clearest explanation, the hypothesis that is proven or demonstrated based on all existing records. Acknowledging that several hypotheses are possible can also help to strengthen your assessment of a situation. A written document showing that several hypotheses have been considered, but that there is more evidence to support one, will have more credibility and validity than a document which ignores possible hypotheses.

Consider the hypothesis below and the possible sources of evidence to support this hypothesis. Do you think there is sufficient evidence to support the hypothesis? What other evidence do you think might be considered?

EXAMPLE HYPOTHESIS	WHAT EVIDENCE DO I HAVE TO TEST THIS HYPOTHESIS?
<p>Sophie is at risk of sexual exploitation by her boyfriend</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sophie’s account of her boyfriend introducing her to several older men (documented in my case notes) • My observation on the five occasions we met that she seemed upset about her boyfriends’ treatment of her (documented in my case notes) • Sophie’s mother reporting Sophie did not come home several nights last week (documented in my case notes).

Thinking about the language of explanation

In providing explanations of a situation it is important to indicate clearly how explanations have been arrived at for example, by:

Reporting others’ accounts and views:

- Sophie explained that...
- Dr X based on his interview with Sophie states that, reports that, is of the view that..
- On the basis of my three 2 hour long visits at Sophie’s home, I consider that...

Offering a balanced account:

- While Ms X the teacher considers... Mr. X Sophie’s father considers...
- Ms X the teacher considers... however Mr. X Sophie’s father considers...
- There are different views about what happened on the previous weekend: x reports... y reports...

Making causal links reflecting the evidence provided:

- On the basis of the evidence to date, it seems clear that/ it is likely that/it is possible that/it is probable that.... so/ therefore/ thus....



Evaluation

Evaluation

A working definition of evaluation

As we have discussed, analysis as a process is part of everything that social workers do. It is evident in the written record through the selection of the particular detail you include and the specific language you use to provide an account of a situation. But there are also parts of the written record where you make your summary evaluation of a situation explicit.

Analysis, evaluation, professional evaluation, professional assessment, professional view are all terms used to refer to those parts in a written record where you offer your professional commentary and conclusion on a particular situation.

A key part of written summary analysis or evaluation is making claims. A claim is a statement asserting something to be true or accurate. Go online to hear experienced social worker Lisa talking through some examples of the claims made in written social work records.

The key points about making claims in written records are that:

Any claim needs to be based on evidence. What counts as evidence in written records are the careful descriptions and explanations you provide.

Claims do not need to be stated 'categorically', that is as if 100% true in order to be convincing. What is important is that the particular way a claim is worded is in line with the descriptive evidence available.

- Writing *Hannah **appears** settled* rather than *Hannah **is** settled* is an example of a cautious claim.
- Writing *The children **are** vulnerable* rather than *the children **appear** vulnerable* is an example of a categorical claim.

Claims need to be carefully worded and in line with any descriptive evidence offered. If claims are based on insufficient, irrelevant or vague description, any claims made will not be convincing and may affect the outcomes of any report, such as the allocation of services and resources.

Using external sources in evaluation

Using external sources of authority- published theory, research and legislation- are important in evaluating a particular situation and are used to underpin, explore and question evidence generated by a social worker. An understanding of relevant research and theory is central to professional practice, including analytic writing, and is reflected in the use of particular terms, such as 'attachment' (to refer to the relationship between a child and caregiver) or 'autism' (to describe a person's behaviour characterized by difficulty in social interaction and communication). However, explicit reference to the particular theories and research relating to the use of such terms is often not included. There is ongoing debate about whether theory and research should be explicitly referred to in written analysis but if you use specialist terms you may be asked to justify your use in particular situations, e.g. in court statements.

Legislation underpins many of the kind of records that social workers keep. There are statutory requirements to keep particular records and complete assessments to particular deadlines and timescales. Explicit reference to legislation may be important in offering an evaluation of a particular event or actions. For example, in one case record a social worker refers to legislation to support his action in carrying out an assessment, in a context where the person is unlikely to qualify for services:

"the duty to assess arises even if there is little prospect of the individual actually qualifying for the services, either because of resource limitations on the part of the local authority or because of the financial circumstances of the service user" (*R v Bristol City Council ex parte Penfold* [1998] 1 CCLR315). (Lillis 2017: 499)

For discussion, see <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2019/06/04/social-work-need-rethink-counts-evidence-based-practice/>

Your professional voice

A key issue in writing evaluation is how to present yourself, as the professional with specific expertise, in the written text. Research has shown that the professional view, or voice, of the social worker can sometimes seem to be missing in written records. There seems to be considerable use made of impersonal language constructions, such as 'it was considered that..', 'it was agreed that..', 'action was taken to..' rather than making explicit who considered, agreed etc..It is also the case that some social workers feel unsure about the validity of making their professional voice explicit.

Theresa Lillis,
Lucy Rai,
Guillermo
Garcia-Maza,
G. (2010)
'Action
Research
Project on
case notes
recording'.
Final Report.

"I don't think that professional opinion sits easily with social workers. We've been trained and that you don't give a view, you're not here to give your view." (Social worker, Adult Services)

Of course there is no place for unsubstantiated opinion or bias in professional writing. But there can sometimes be confusion about what being 'subjective' in professional writing means. Being 'subjective' in the everyday sense of simply expressing an unsubstantiated view is not acceptable. However, being 'subjective' in the sense of bringing your professional subjectivity to bear - that is, your insights, knowledge, careful weighing up of a situation based on evidence- is essential. The most obvious way to make your professional voice clear in writing is to use the first person: 'I consider that..', 'I have reached the conclusion that'...You may feel that other expressions also convey your professional view, e.g. 'On the basis of the evidence, it seems likely that..' but some readers may not 'read' this as being an explicit statement of your position so you need to align the expressions you use with expectations of different readers.

Thinking about the language of evaluation

In writing evaluations of a situation, there are particular kinds of language often used. It is useful to think about:

- **The language of the claim you make:** how categorical or hedged should your claim be based on the evidence included? e.g. *Hannah is settled* or *Hannah appears settled*.
- **Causal words and phrases:** what kinds of causal links can you make on the basis of the evidence? Causal words include *therefore, thus, so, because, as such*
- **Contrasting words and phrases:** are there particular contrasts you wish to emphasise? Contrasting words include, *nevertheless, however, on the one hand on the other hand, sometimes/at other times*
- **Professional voice:** how explicit is your professional voice? Explicit expressions of voice include *My view is, on the basis of x I consider that, I believe that...*
- **Specialist language and theory:** have you included any terms that implicitly refer to particular research, theory or legislation. Do you think you need to explicitly reference the source?



Recommendation

A working definition of recommendation

The immediate purpose of analysis is to lead to statements about which specific actions should be taken in order to support vulnerable children and adults, based on the evidence provided.

Making recommendations involves a clear statement about what the specific actions should be: for example, that particular services be provided for an elderly person at home, that a child be recommended to remain with or be moved away from their immediate family, that a young adult with mental health problems be offered support for managing everyday living.

Recommendations may relate to smaller or larger issues, and include specific actions that the social worker will carry out as well as actions that involve other people such as family members and other professionals.

A longer term purpose of all analysis is of course to provide a detailed and fair account of a particular person's situation, experience and circumstance that they may wish to read at some point in the future.

The requirement to provide a recommendation is often written into templated documents with words such as - Recommendation/Next steps/Action. Making a recommendation may seem straightforward. But of course many people's lives are complex as are their needs and requirements. So whilst much of the evidence will have already been collated- in the description and evaluation you have provided in multiple texts- careful analysis of all the evidence is part of reaching a particular recommendation.

Any recommendation made must be presented as a logical consequence of the evidence provided. It is also the case of course, that a specific recommendation may seem obvious to you even before collating all the relevant evidence in your detailed descriptions, but you will still need to ensure that any recommendation is warranted by information provided. Making a recommendation will also involve consulting with others- the service users, your manager, supervisor and is part of the analytic process (See process). In official documents, such as court reports, the recommendation may be literally in the voice of the local authority, rather than the individual social work, e.g. the local authority recommends that xxx.

Thinking about the language of recommendation

The language used to make recommendations for action includes:

Straightforward categorical recommendations for action:

- My recommendation is that-
- I recommend
- based on the evidence, it is clear that x needs
- the local authority recommends that...
- It is recommended that Andrew is placed into the care of [PC] under a kinship fostering arrangement.

Recommendations for further exploration before actions are agreed:

- I suggested that we have another meeting including me, Jane and her son to discuss further.

Recommendations relating to further social worker action:

- I confirmed that I will request the purchase order

Recommendations for actions by other professionals or carers:

- Ahmed needs to be registered with the GP and enrolled in an appropriate educational establishment.

Clear statement that recommendations cannot be made:

- As assessments are on-going recommendations cannot be made at this time

Representing the person's view



Writing about the person

Providing a fair and accurate representation of the service user's account, explanation and perspective is central to offering a valid and ethical analysis. A common way of reporting a person's account and perspective is to talk of the person in the third person (about her, him, them) and adopt a reporting voice. But of course there are many decisions to be made about exactly how to represent someone's view. Consider the different ways of reporting a relatively straightforward situation. How do even quite minor differences affect how the person is represented?

1. Letitia said she did not go to school because she was afraid.
2. Letitia stated that she did not go to school because she was afraid.
3. Letitia claims that she did not go to school because she was afraid.
4. Letitia said, 'I didn't go to school because I am afraid.'

Perhaps there is no significant difference in meaning or tone, between 1 and 2, although stated sounds more formal than said. The use of 'claims' in 3 suggests that the social worker is not necessarily convinced on what Letitia has said. The use of direct speech in 4 provides a slightly different tone : by using the first person account 'I am afraid' puts Letitia more centre stage in the account, perhaps drawing the reader in to her feelings in a way that third person reporting does not.

Including the person's perspective

At a more fundamental level, a core ethical commitment is to ensure that the analysis represented in social care records captures the person's perspective.

These examples are taken from www.servelec.co.uk/about-digital-care/our-news/the-language-of-social-work

Compare these pairs of statements

- a. Michael has low attendance at school and is disengaged with other pupils.
- b. Michael has been to 11 primary schools and feels like he's always losing friends.

- a. Michael has stolen previous foster carer's car in the night.
- b. Michael felt frightened and alone about being in foster care and took his foster carer's car to see his mum. He was shaken and deeply regrets his actions.

Whilst the **a** statements may be factually correct, the **b** statements emphasise Michael's feelings which help to explain his actions. Including such person-oriented statements bring a crucial layer of insight to the written analysis which is important in itself. It will also be particularly important for the person- in this case Michael- when coming to read and understand his situation and why particular actions were taken, in the future.

Writing to the person

A very different way of writing which is rather than write in the third person about someone, is to write in the second person to someone. Consider the extract written by an independent reviewing officer to a young person about their situation. What is the effect of writing to a person?

www.wisper.writinginsocialwork.com/resource/writing-to-the-child/

Rachel, your social worker said that you would like to return home to your parents but you are happy in your foster placement. You enjoy the food that your foster carer makes and you enjoy going to the library and to the park. You have said that you are not happy living with your elder sister as you say that she is not telling the truth about your parents. You have also said that she hits you and is not nice.

This example is drawn from the WiSPER resources. You can access a video with Gillian Lucas the reviewing officer and her views on why writing to the person, in this case a young person, rather than about the person, is important.

For discussion visit [The Love Inc project](http://www.aberlour.org.uk/services/love-inc-project) www.aberlour.org.uk/services/love-inc-project

Write Right About Me (WARM)
Miriam Smith
MirSmith@aberdeencity.gov.uk

The Independent Care Review The Promise (2018) emphasises the need for the voices of children to be heard and clearly represented in written records. It also draws attention to the need for written records to include explicit expressions of love and care towards the person being written about. There are several projects in Scotland which are working to put love at the centre of all recording practice.

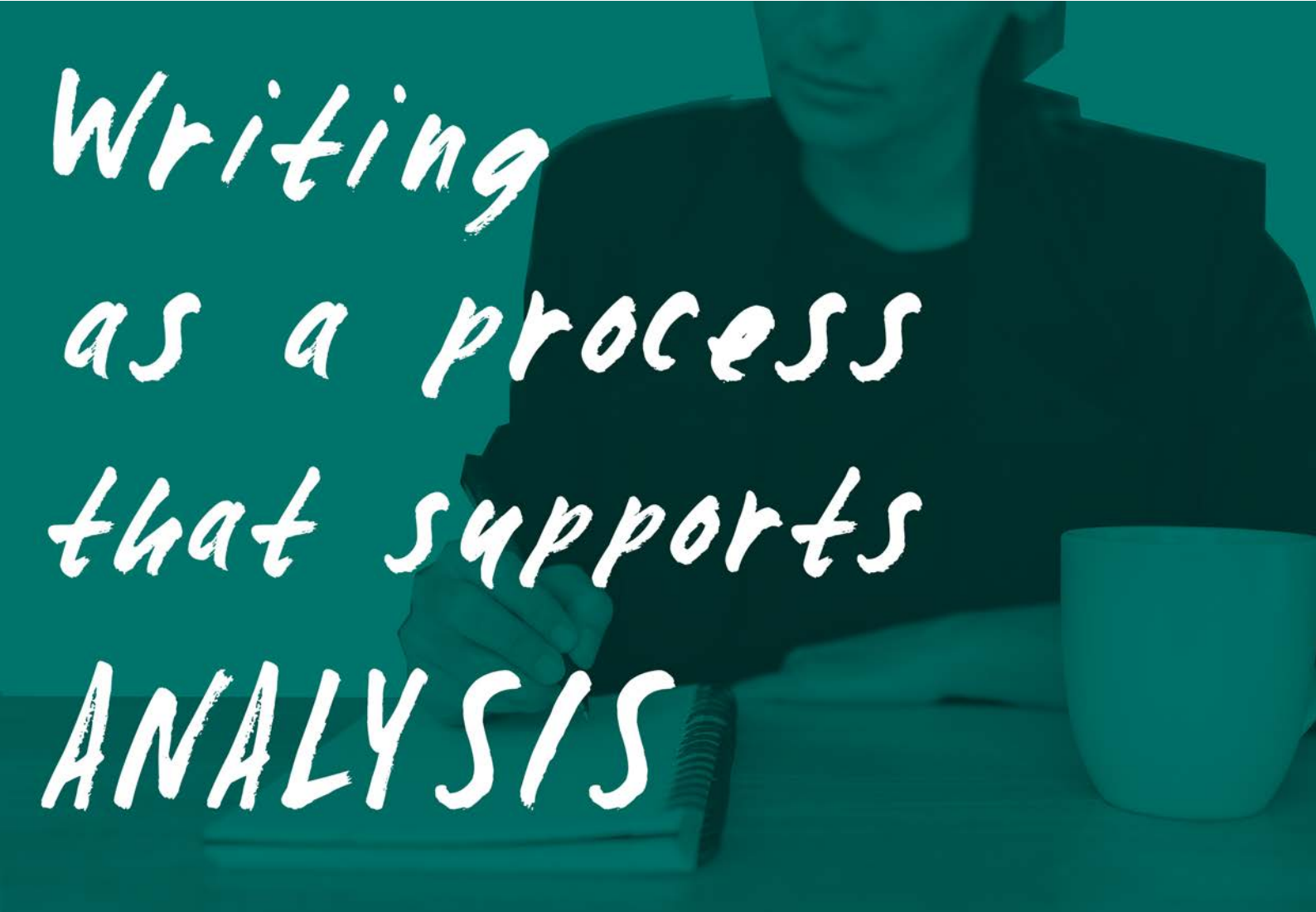
Practical exercise: the person's view

Think of/ reread a recent record (a case note, an assessment report).

If you have reported about a person's account and perspective, notice whether you have used direct speech, e.g. she said 'I am worried' or indirect speech 'she said she was worried' and consider how the language you have used changes the meaning or tone in any way.

Focus on whether you have used the third person (she, he, they) to write about them or used the second person (you) to write to them and the possible effect of choosing one over the other.

Notice if the record includes expression of care and love about the person. On the basis of your reflections, are there any changes you would make to the record? Why/why not?

A person is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark t-shirt, sitting at a desk and writing in a spiral notebook with a pen. A white mug is on the desk to the right. The background is a solid teal color. The text 'Writing as a process that supports ANALYSIS' is overlaid in white, with 'ANALYSIS' in all caps and a larger font size.

Writing as a process that supports ANALYSIS

Drafting and analysis is an iterative process

www.writinginsocialwork.com

"I think I learn by making handwritten notes, it's part of my learning style" (Social worker, Children's Services, WiSP project)

Most social workers make handwritten notes as part of their everyday practice for different purposes: to jot down specific details- dates, names, observations- whilst in meetings, talking with someone, observing in a particular situation. The notes are important in helping you remember specific details and usually form the basis for more detailed description, explanation and evaluation written in publicly visible texts at a later point, e.g. case notes and assessment reports logged on ICT systems.

Such notes- whether in handwriting in notebooks or in digital form on laptops - also have an important function in the process of analysis.

Note making, however brief, is a form of drafting ideas, helping the writer to question their thoughts and the links they're making, and identify any inconsistencies that come up. Drafting provides some space in a busy working day for reflection, for creating some distance (in time and perspective) between actual situations and events and critical reflection and examination of that situation. Creating opportunities for such reflection is central to analysis.

Drafting is usually considered a key part of producing high quality written texts of any kind (professional, literary, scientific) and given the complexity of social work writing, having time to draft written texts should be essential . Yet the reality for many social workers is that there is little time for drafting. This can mean that people feel they have to get it 'right' first time. Strategies that people use to create some time drafting and reflecting time are:

- Make brief notes on situations
- Make brief reflective comments about people, events and situations
- Write verbatim some comments that people say
- List questions about aspects that are unclear
- Write brief personal comments about feelings, concerns
- Talk with colleagues
- Listen to colleagues
- Ask colleagues for feedback on particular sections of a record

Practical exercise: drafting

Do you take notes and what purposes do they serve?

What particular value do you think your notes have in analysing a situation and in thinking about how you might write an analysis?

What strategies do you use to create space for reflection and developing an understanding?

Do you ask colleagues for feedback on sections that you are finding tricky?
Do you offer to give feedback to others?

The intuition iceberg

One example of a drafting strategy to support your development of hypothesis

Intuition is the process that happens when we draw on our experiences, recognising cues in a situation, spotting patterns and then building a narrative about what is going on. Using our experience to inform judgement is of course a very useful aspect of our professional practice, but challenges can pop-up when we need to demonstrate why we know what we know.

Unexplored intuition can be a vehicle for bias, informed by our life experience, and our culture. Everybody has bias; we need to be constantly examining how these elements of decision making impact on our written analysis.

By maintaining a healthy curiosity about your own intuition and cultural assumptions, you will be well placed to write thoughtful written analysis. Openly exploring what you don't know about a written hypothesis can help you build anti oppressive practices into your written analysis.

Exploring intuition questions

Consider these questions to help you explore what your intuition is built on.

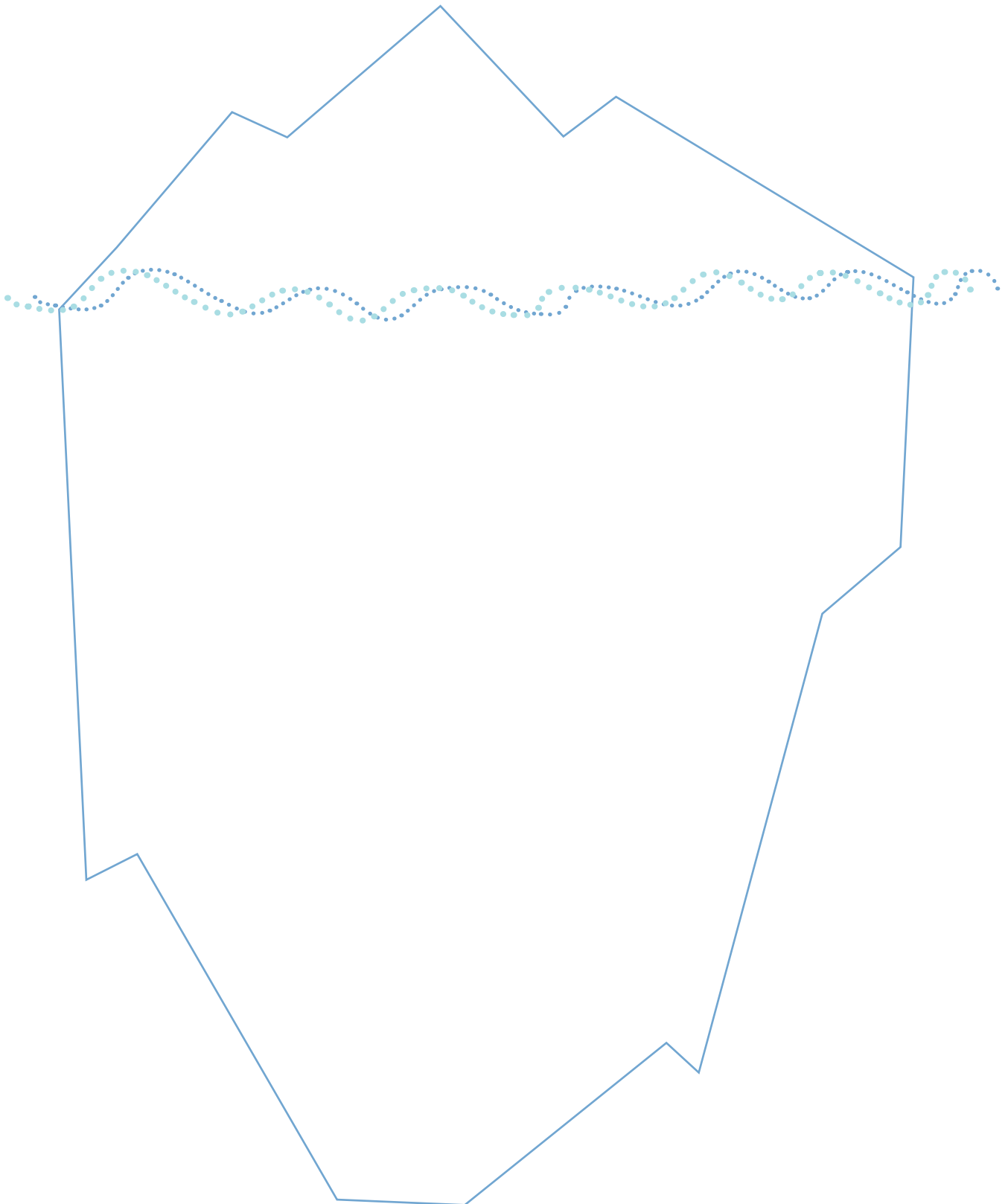
- How do I know what I know?
- Am I basing my decision on an experience I have had before?
- In what ways was this previous situation similar? In what ways was it different?
- Do I have particular professional knowledge that is related to this situation?
- Have I read the most recent research about this kind of experience?
- Am I taking a trauma informed approach to understanding the people I am supporting?

- Am I aware of what I don't know about this situation?
- Are the people I am working with different from me?
- Do we have different values or cultural beliefs?
- Have I explored the histories, inequalities and intersections of oppression that this culture may face?
- What is the context of my intuition?

- How do I feel about the situation? Am I experiencing a sense of anger, annoyance, relief, frustration, hopelessness, joy?
- Do these people 'do' family in a way that is different from my experience of family?
- Do I think this is good or bad?
- Do I feel any emotions about sharing my decision with the people I am supporting or my colleagues?
- If I had more time, what would I do differently?

Practical exercise: intuition iceberg

Think about a time you wrote something in your notes that was based on your intuition or professional judgement. Write that in the tip of the iceberg. This decision, the 'tip of the iceberg' represents a complex web of knowledge and experience that lies underneath. Using the **Exploring Intuition Questions** provided, write freely to explore what lies underneath your intuition.



Thankyou

Well done for taking the time to complete the course!

The aim of this course was to provide a practical framework for supporting the writing of analysis in social care records. We hope this course will have offered you a chance to clarify how you think about your writing at work, and help you to spend some time reflecting on what exactly is involved in the writing of analysis in your everyday practice. By working through the course, you should now

- Have become familiar with one practical framework for supporting the writing of analysis
- Have considered some aspects of the language of written analysis
- Have reflected on your own practice of writing analysis

If you are interested in exploring this topic further, there are many resources to explore in the WiSPER and Iriss resources. Please let us know how you got on, and whether this course was helpful or not, by emailing josie.vallely@iriss.org.uk

Further resources

Writing in Social Work Practice

www.wisper.writinginsocialwork.com

WiSPeR are a collection of resources developed to help practitioners to write more effectively in practice contexts and to encourage debate about the role of writing in professional social work. All of the resources on the site are free to use and will be of use to social work students, early career social workers as well as managers, trainers and educators who support them.

Iriss resources

www.iriss.org.uk/collection/recording-practice

On this page you'll find a collection of Iriss resources about recording practice in social services, including articles, learning reports and tools. During 2019/20 we worked with East Ayrshire Health & Social Care Partnership to explore recording practice from a cross-service perspective and in 2020/21 we continued to build on this work and take it in new directions. As new resources are produced we'll add them to this collection.

Language in social work on Iriss FM

www.podcast.iriss.org.uk/language-in-social-work

Is use of language something you carefully consider as a social worker? And is language important to social work practice? Sara Hitchin, Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Stirling certainly thinks so. Michelle from Iriss went along to University of Stirling to have a conversation with her about the importance of language and its relationship to social work values.

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