

# leadership ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

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## publishing as a practitioner

Social work practitioners often see practicing and publishing as distinct enterprises. But publishing shouldn't be the exclusive domain of researchers and academics.

With their frontline view, social work practitioners are credible spokespersons on a range of important social issues, and their opinions and observations can shape public opinion and public policy. Social work practitioners also have gained useful experience about interventions that work or don't work. This information, once published, can inform and advance the field. All social work practitioners can and should publish – and there are a range of opportunities for doing so.

### » WHY PUBLISH IN THE FIRST PLACE?

Publishing can be personally gratifying as well as career-enhancing. Publishing provides recognition of your ideas and interventions, which can reflect positively on both you and your employer. Publishing can also foster a network of individuals interested in your particular topic or intervention - who can offer feedback to enhance your work (SOPHE, 2010).

Publishing also advances the profession as a whole. The more social workers are seen as thoughtful commentators and experts, the more likely public awareness of the profession's diverse practice roles will also increase (NASW, 2010).

### » IF YOU ARE NEW TO PUBLISHING -START SMALL!

There are some relatively easy – and quick – ways to begin publishing:

#### Op-Eds

An "opposite editorial" is written to persuade an audience about a particular topic and is typically published in a newspaper in the opinion section. Op-eds are usually 750 words or less. The more tailored an op-ed is to the issues specific to your community, the more likely it will be published (NASW 2010).



National Association of Social Workers

National Association of Social Workers  
750 First Street NE, Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20002-4241



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### Letters to the Editor/Replies to articles

A letter to the editor is a short written response to a current event or news article. Letters to the editor are typically 250 words and are published in newspapers or magazines. A reply to an article, which can vary in length depending on the publication, should identify an important omission or defect in the article. Magazines and journals love to receive replies; this indicates that people are reading the publication and taking its content seriously (Brooks, 2008). In addition, most publications now accept reader comments on their blogs and on specific article pages.

### » MOVING FORWARD ON THE PUBLISHING CONTINUUM

#### Book reviews

Book reviews are an excellent way to start publishing for a broad professional audience. Journal editors often welcome offers to review books. Look at the journals you read regularly to ensure that these publications have “book review” sections, and then contact the editor with an offer to review books in your area of expertise. Or look in the “books received” section of the journal and identify specific books you would like to critique. Word lengths for book reviews vary from 400 to 1000 words, depending on the journal's guidelines. (Brooks, 2008).

#### Essays and personal reflections

Some within the social work profession advocate for greater use of personal reflections and essays (Witkin, 2000). These literary styles make the author “highly visible” and offer an opportunity for social workers to write openly “from their histories, social contexts and experience” (Witkin, 2000). There are many placement possibilities for these compositions, including social work websites, blogs and journals, as well as mainstream news outlets.

### Conference papers

Conference presentations can be a springboard to publication. Whether you are conducting a workshop or poster presentation, presenting at a conference provides the opportunity to get immediate feedback on your work. Also, the more successfully you can communicate your ideas to a conference audience, the greater the likelihood that you can present your ideas successfully through publication (Brooks, 2008). In some cases, conferences publish proceedings, either in print or on-line. This is an excellent and relatively effortless way to have your work reviewed by a larger audience.

### Peer-reviewed journal articles

Considered by many to be the gold standard of social work publishing, journal articles are often the culmination of a practitioner's work in a particular area. As discussed above, practitioners often use conference presentations to vet their work with professional peers—and make adjustments as necessary—prior to publication. There are numerous resources to guide you in the journal article submission process (see resource section). It's important to remember that patience and humility pay off in the quest for journal publication. It may take up to six months to receive a response to your submission. And acceptance is rare—especially for first-time submissions. Top journals have an acceptance rate of 1.5% or less (NASW, 2009). A rejected paper will be returned to you with comments, which should be received in the “spirit of constructive criticism” (SOPHE, 2010). Incorporating the reviewers' suggestions often strengthens your work and improves your chances of publication through re-submission or in another journal.

## No time to write? Consider collaborative writing: Tips from the Society for Public Health Education

Social workers in direct practice are among the busiest professionals, and finding time to write for publication can be challenging.

Collaborative writing can be helpful because **1)** multiple perspectives and ideas enrich the work, **2)** workload is shared, **3)** skills of one author can supplement deficits of other(s), and **4)** experienced writers can mentor new ones. Potential writing partners might be colleagues, professionals and volunteers from: your project team; institution or agency; local schools, colleges and universities; health and human service agencies and foundations; or other community-based organizations. Be sure to decide order of authorship, and roles and responsibilities of each author before you get started. (SOPHE, 2010)

### SOCIAL WORK PUBLISHING RESOURCES

- » **An Author's Guide to Social Work Journals; 2009; 5th Edition (NASW Press)**  
This reference guide describes over 200 journals, arranged by subject, and includes the journal descriptions and detailed information for each title.
- » **Professional Writing for the Human Services; 1993 (NASW Press).**  
This guide book reviews all components of professional human service writing, including:
  - basic writing techniques
  - the peer review process
  - literature searches
  - NASW style and reference guides
  - production techniques
  - ethical issues and copyright concerns
- » **NASW Media Toolkit (available to NASW members)**  
[www.socialworkers.org/pressroom/mediaToolkit/default.asp](http://www.socialworkers.org/pressroom/mediaToolkit/default.asp)  
This toolkit is an introduction to working with the media and includes detailed information on writing letters to the editor, op-eds, guest columns and blog posts.

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