# SOCIAL WORK SKILLS

## Beginning

During the beginning phase, you introduce and identify yourself and seek introductions from prospective clients and involved others.  Following the exchange of introductions, you describe a tentative initial purpose for the meeting, possibly identify one of more professional roles that you might undertake, orient participants to the process, and identify relevant policy and ethical factors that might apply.  Throughout this beginning process, you regularly seek feedback concerning others' understanding of and reactions to your introductory comments.  By using the beginning skills, you help to clarify the nature and boundaries or ground rules of the helping process, lessen the initial ambivalence people often experience, and establish a tentative direction for work.

### Introducing Yourself

At the beginning of any first interview, you should identify yourself by name and profession and by agency or departmental affiliation.  You might also want to provide formal identification, such as a business card.

### Seeking Introductions

Encourage each new client to say her or his name, and then try to pronounce it correctly.  In a group, you might ask group members to introduce themselves and share a few of the thoughts that occurred to them as they anticipated coming to this first meeting.

### Describing Initial Purpose

Clearly but succinctly discuss your view of the purpose of the meeting.

### Orienting Clients

Describe how clients can join you as active, collaborative participants in the helping process.

### Discussing Policy and Ethical Factors

Discuss potentially relevant legal, policy and ethical factors. This constitutes part of the informed consent process and is an essential element of professional service to clients.

### Seeking Feedback

Encourage clients to comment about the proposed purpose, your role, their role, policy or ethical factors, or any other aspects of your introductory remarks.


## Exploring

During the exploration phase of social work practice, you encourage clients to share thoughts, feelings, and experiences about the issue or concerns that led to the contact.  Although the following exploring skills are especially useful for encouraging mutual consideration of information regarding the person, issue, situation, and strengths, they are also functional throughout the entire helping process.

### Asking Questions

Seek information about the concerns that led to this encounter.  Questions serve to elicit facts, ideas, and feelings concerning the person, the issue, the situation, and potential means for resolution. They often yield information necessary for mutual understanding, assessment, decision making, planning, working and evaluating, and ending.

Closed-ended questions: Phrased to elicit short responses, sometimes simply yes or no.  Closed-ended questions yield a great deal of information in a brief amount of time.

Open-ended questions: Encourages people to express themselves expansively and extensively.  They tend to further exploration on a deeper level or in a broader way.

### Seeking Clarification

Ask the client to elaborate about something he or she has just said or done.  This generates more complete and comprehensible information about particular aspects of the person-issue-situation.

### Reflecting Content

Communicate your understanding of the factual or informational part of a message, by paraphrasing or restating the client's words.

### Reflecting Feelings

A brief response that communicates your understanding of the feelings expressed by a client.

### Reflecting Feeling and Meaning

Paraphrase or mirror clients' emotions along with the facts or beliefs associated with them.

### Partializing

Help clients break down multiple or complex aspects and dimensions of the person-issue-situation into more manageable units so you can address them more easily.

### Going Beyond

Take a small leap beyond the expressed message to bring into greater awareness or clarity information that a client already knows.


## Assessing

During the assessment phase of social work practice, you and the client attempt to make sense of the data gathered during the exploration phase.  The assessment gives the parties involved a perspective from which to initiate the process of contracting.  Two skills are especially pertinent to the assessment phase: (1) organizing information and (2) preparing a tentative assessment and case formulation.

### Organizing Descriptive Information

This involves arranging data according to certain categories that you and agency professionals consider significant. Be sure to distinguish clearly between reported and observed information.

### *Preparing a Tentative Assessment and Case Formulation*

After recording the available information in an organized fashion, you – with the active participation of the client – begin to prepare a tentative assessment and case formulation. You do so through analysis and synthesis, the primary critical thinking skills involved in this process. Analysis involves examining in fine detail various pieces of information about the client system, issues, and circumstances. In synthesis, you take certain bits of data or certain aspects of the analysis and combine them into a coherent whole.

# Contracting

Based on the assessment an in conjunction with the client, during the contracting phase of social work practice you attempt to define clearly the issues and goals for work and develop plans likely to resolve the identified issues and achieve the final goals.

### *Reflecting an Issue*

You demonstrate to clients that you understand their view of an identified topic of concern.

### *Reflecting Hypotheses*

When you empathically and accurately communicate your understanding of clients' explanatory hypotheses.

### *Identifying an Issue*

You may identify an issue that the client did not mention during the exploration process. Based on the emerging assessment of the person-issue-situation, you may recognize an area of concern that related to the presenting problem but was not noticed or not acknowledged by the client.

### *Clarifying Issues for Work*

Typically, you use the skills of reflecting and identifying issues before you and clients jointly agree on the specific problems or issues to address. When you clarify issues, you make a commitment that your work together will focus primarily on these particular areas.

### *Establishing Goals*

Following clarification of problems or issues, encourage clients to participate in establishing goals designed to address and resolve them. Goals should be specific, measurable, action oriented, realistic and timely.

### *Developing an Action Plan*

Sometimes called "service plans," "treatment plans," or "intervention plans," action plans address the questions of who, what, where, when, and especially how you and the client will pursue the agreed-upon goals.

### *Identifying Action Steps*

When it is unrealistic and impractical to undertake simultaneously all the actions needed to accomplish a particular goal, engage the client in identifying small action steps or tasks that are consistent with the action plan and likely to contribute to goal accomplishment.

### *Planning for Evaluation*
Identify some means to measure progress towards goal attainment.

### *Summarizing the Contract*
Involves a concise review of the essential elements of the service agreement that you and the client approved.  The service contract covers issues for work, goals, an action plan, tasks or action steps, and the means by which you and the client intend to evaluate progress.

# Working and Evaluating
During the work and evaluation phase of social work practice, you and the client take action toward resolving the identified issues and achieving the established goals.  In this process, you use both empathic skills and work phase expressive skills.

### *Rehearsing Action Steps*
Prepare and encourage clients to carry out agreed-upon tasks.  Identify and confront those bio-psycho-social or environmental obstacles that interfere with task accomplishment.  Various rehearsal in-session activities such as role play, guided practice, and visualization constitute action step practice.

### *Reviewing Action Steps*
Help to increase the probability that further action steps will be attempted when you demonstrate your interest in the process and outcome of their action steps by asking about them.  By reviewing what happened following the attempt, you also gather information that contributes to the evaluation of progress toward goal achievement and the identification of subsequent action steps.

### *Evaluating*
Evaluation often occurs while you are reviewing action steps.  You and the client may identify progress through changes in such indicators as goal attainment scales, frequency counts, individualized or subjective rating scales, rapid assessment instruments, or other paper-and-pencil and online instruments.  You engage clients in examining data in accordance with the plans for evaluating progress.  You determine whether the evaluation data reflect progress toward goal attainment, no change, or a change in the wrong direction.

### *Focusing*
Direct or maintain attention to the work at hand.

### *Educating*
It may become apparent that clients lack useful or valid information or skills that could contribute to the achievement of the agreed-upon goals for work.  Often you share knowledge and hypotheses.  Convey the information in such a way that clients may freely consider its relevance for their particular situation and decide whether to accept it.

### Advising
Making a suggestion or recommendation.  You should almost always convey that the client may freely accept or reject your advice.

### Representing
Includes those actions you take on behalf of clients in pursuit of agreed-upon goals.  Instead of working directly with the client, you intervene with others on behalf of the client.

### Responding with Immediacy
You focus on clients' experience of what occurs here and now between you.  These thoughts and feelings become the subject for immediate exploration. Responding with immediacy makes things real.

### Reframing
Involves sharing a different perspective from that which clients had previously adopted.

### Confronting
You point out to clients – directly and without disapproval – discrepancies, inconsistencies, or contradictions in their words, feelings, and actions.  You challenge clients to examine themselves for congruence.

### Pointing out Endings
You remind the client that the working relationship will come to a close.  Periodically during the work phase, you refer to this time frame.

### Recording Progress
You must keep records throughout all phases of practice, such as revisions to the initial assessment and contract, action steps and progress toward goal achievement, results of evaluation procedures etc.


## Ending
The ending phase of social work practice provides an opportunity for you and your clients to look back on your relationship and the work you undertook together.  You have a chance to evaluate overall progress and to identify directions for future work.  However, concluding these working relationships can be both a joyful and a painful experience for you and your clients.  Each of you may experience satisfaction concerning the progress achieved, regret about actions that were not taken, and sadness at the departure of a person who has been important.  In optimal circumstances, you can explore these feelings as part of the ending process.

### Reviewing the Process
Involves a summary retrospection of what has occurred between you and your clients during the time you have worked together.

### Final Evaluating
Engage clients in a final evaluation of progress toward issue resolution and goal attainment.

### *Sharing Ending Feelings and Saying Goodbye*

Because ending is a significant event in the lives of most clients, you should give them an opportunity to express feelings related to the ending process. Like clients, you will probably experience some kind of emotional reaction during the ending phase.  It is often useful to share some of these feelings, while retaining, however, your professional responsibilities.

### *Recording the Closing Summary*

Following your final meeting with a client, you condense what occurred into a written closing summary.

**Taken from Barry Cournoyer's *The Social Work Skills Workbook***