

# Hand-out from the AMWA-DVC 2005 Getting Started in Medical Writing Workshop

## Results: AMWA-DVC Employers of Medical Writers Survey

*Prepared by Lori De Milto (December 2004)*

5 respondents: 3 pharmaceutical companies and 2 healthcare/medical communications companies

### **Brief Description of Each Company**

Company 1: Multinational pharma: basic science through final drug development and marketing (Rahway, NJ)

Company 2: Healthcare communications company which creates promotional materials (e.g., patient brochures, sales detail aids, posters, journal ads, etc.), medical education pieces (e.g., CME symposia for physicians and nurses, educational slide kits), and peer-reviewed journal articles (Lawrenceville, NJ)

Company 3: Discovery, development, and (eventual) commercialization of therapeutic small molecules and recombinant proteins (Parsippany, NJ)

Company 4: A pharmaceutical company that manufactures and markets products for treating diabetes, menopausal symptoms, blood coagulation disorders, and growth hormone deficiency (Princeton, NJ)

Company 5: Medical communications (Hackensack, NJ)

### **Type of Medical Writers Hired**

New and established medical writers	3
New medical writers	1
Established medical writers	1

#### *Tasks performed by new medical writers:*

Company 1: Some medical writers are scientific writers in a department that specializes in creating journal publications and meeting abstracts. Other people with medical writing responsibilities are attached to clinical departments; they may be MDs, RNs, or have other scientific degrees and they are involved in the conduct of clinical studies first, and writers second. We also have regulatory writers who create and update product labeling and communicate with subsidiary medical directors worldwide. Less experienced writers may work on parts of clinical protocols or amendments, case report forms, etc.

Company 2 (with supervision):

- Write promotional materials (e.g., patient brochures, sales detail aids, posters, journal ads, etc.), medical education pieces (e.g., CME symposia for physicians and nurses, educational slide kits), and peer-reviewed journal articles (includes initiating manuscripts, or editing draft manuscripts initiated by copywriters).
- Assume responsibility for medical/scientific accuracy (fact-checking, detailed referencing) of all jobs (includes compliance with FDA and client medical/legal requirements).

Company 3: Lower-level medical writers write clinical study protocols, clinical study reports, regulatory submission documents, and edit documents for grammar, spelling, usage, consistency in style and format.

Company 4: Work under a more senior writer and develop sections of reports or update existing monographs, slide kits, and programs. These tasks tend to be general rather than specific. As they gain more experience, the new writer will work on more specific and demanding tasks. A development plan is established for each new hire.

Company 5: All writing: Journal articles, slide kits, monographs, literature analyses, scientific posters

*Tasks performed by established medical writers:*

Company 1: Clinical study reports, high-level regulatory summaries of safety and efficacy.

Company 2: Same as new medical writers but without supervision

Company 3: Same as lower-level medical writers but also manuscript preparation.

Company 4: Medical writers work on regulatory submissions, primary and secondary publications, continuing education programs (not CME), clinical overviews, slide kits, and other materials that support medical, marketing, and sales objectives. Depending on the nature of the project, established writers work very closely with physicians, statisticians, and marketing personnel when developing reports and publications. Although we do most of our writing in-house, freelancers and vendors are being used for some projects; this is likely to increase.

Company 5: No difference between new and established writers.

**Skills Employers Look for in New Medical Writers:**

Understanding of/experience with scientific and medical data 2

Ability to learn new subjects quickly 2

Writing ability 2

*Comments*

Company 1: See tasks performed by new medical writers – the path to medical writer is not direct

Company 2:

- Ability to read, comprehend, synthesize, and restate a huge amount of written material—quickly
- Ability to multitask without complaint
- Ability to mesh well with other team members
- Ability to communicate effectively, quickly, tactfully

Company 3: Experience and familiarity with regulatory documents, understanding of the scientific and medical content therein, and, of course, writing ability.

Company 4: Primarily experience in the life sciences and evaluation of scientific data. Most have PhDs and some may have industry experience. We have hired writers with postdoctoral (but not industry) experience if they have published their own research or show promise. The person should also be proactive, ambitious, well-organized and attentive to detail, committed to further learning, and have a good attitude.

Company 5:

- Writing ability
- Ability to organize, synthesize, and match the output to the communications objectives
- Ability to learn new subjects quickly
- Willingness to follow directions

**Educational Requirements for New Medical Writers:**

Scientific degree 5\*

Advanced degree (PhD, MD, PharmD) 3

Master’s degree 2

Bachelor’s degree 2

Journalism, Communication, or English degree 0

\* Most respondents gave multiple responses about degrees.

## Outlook for New Medical Writers

Compared to the previous year, this year our company plans to hire:

- The same number of medical writers 1
- Fewer medical writers 2
- More medical writers 2

Compared to the previous five years, in the next five years, our company plans to hire:

- The same number of medical writers 2
- Fewer medical writers 1
- More medical writers 2

## Characteristics of Successful Medical Writers

Understanding of “the business”	3
Ability to write	2
Attention to detail	2
Ability to work well with others	2

### *Comments:*

Company 1: Deep knowledge of the pharmaceutical industry and how drugs are developed

Company 2:

- Super writing skills (a given)
- Ability to write at multiple comprehension levels between 5<sup>th</sup> grade and advanced degree (eg, for patients, sales reps, executives, community physicians, academic leaders)
- Obsessive attention to detail
- Ability to multitask to the extreme
- Lack of big ego, since most writing is anonymous (there are no “bylines”)
- Enjoyment of the job—implies at least a rudimentary understanding of this business

Company 3: Attention to detail; commitment to quality, accuracy, and consistency; work well with others; and good humor!

Company 4: Basic training in a health-related field or life sciences, knowledge in the therapeutic area, the ability to communicate and write concisely, capable of evaluating and interpreting data, good interaction with colleagues of various backgrounds, and the capability to work independently and add value to the team.

Company 5:

- Good comprehension of the big picture
- Fastidiousness, thoroughness
- Intellectual curiosity

## Ways in Which Requirements for New Medical Writers Have Changed Recently

Not sure	2
No change	1

### *Comments:*

Company 2:

- Not sure—I have only been doing this for 4 years—but I don't think they have changed much.
- Perhaps..... increased flexibility and willingness to comply with ever more stringent legal/ethical requirements mandated by the FDA or Office of the Inspector General in the Dept. of HHS
- Perhaps.....the bar has been raised vis-à-vis education. Because fewer recipients of advanced degrees (PhDs, in particular) are entering traditional academic career paths, more folks are competing for medical writing positions.

Company 4: Would expect that more PhDs are available and most applications for full-time positions require a proven track record either through their own research or other programs, and writing ability.

### **Advice to People Trying To Get Started In Medical Writing**

Company 1: Join AMWA or DIA. Read medical journals. If really 'new' try working first for a CRO or small medical writing company as a freelance or part-timer.

Company 2:

- Find a company you're interested in, call up the HR person, ask for an interview (you're likely to get it, even if no particular job openings exist), then go and talk with as many people as time allows.
- Be enthusiastic.
- Lose your preconceptions about the academia-vs.-industry schism

Company 3: Entering regulatory writing with no experience is near impossible. Perhaps breaking into pharmaceuticals via some other avenue (clinical research, for instance) would give someone the exposure to the documents being used and allow for a lateral move within an organization. This would, of course, take time. If regulatory writing isn't necessarily your game, then getting started in ad work or CME is probably a bit easier to get started in.

Company 4: Publish your own research and write reviews if completing a thesis. Seek freelance jobs and, if necessary, accept a reduced rate as employers cannot pay for coming up to speed. Develop relationships with more experienced writers who may give you a start. Start small, know what is required from any employer (i.e., project specs), produce great work, be well-organized and attentive to detail, establish a track record, and progress.

Company 4: Start as an editor

### **Other Comments**

Company 2:

- It pays very well, especially in comparison with more traditional career fields.
- It's a star system. Good writers go far.
- It offers unparalleled opportunity to interact with other creative people (eg, copywriters, artists)
- One needs to get over the psychological barrier of being in a service industry (ie, the client is "always" right—even though they rarely are!)

Company 3: If you enjoy reading and learning about science, this is a very rewarding field, although the enjoyment of a specific area of work would depend on your interest. If exposure to a broad spectrum of scientific research and discoveries is important, consider work in journalism or a related field. Regulatory writing is, by its nature, often repetitive and rigid, though it offers a far deeper understanding of a narrower field of study and gives you a firsthand look at unpublicized, cutting-edge research.

Company 4: It is an uncertain field that is facing threats from overseas outsourcing, increased regulatory constraints, company mergers, and a dwindling product pipeline.