

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

Results: AMWA-DVC New Medical Writers Survey

Prepared by Lori De Milto (December 2004)

13 respondents

Type of Medical Writer		Years as a Medical Writer	
Scientific:	8	> 6 months:	2
Marketing/Non-scientific:	1	6 months-1 year:	2
Both:	4	1-3 years:	6
		3-5 years:	2
		5-10 years:	1

Highest Degree		Subject
Bachelor's:	3	Pre-med; pharmacy; communications
Master's:	4	Speech and hearing sciences; health policy and administration; computational biology; epidemiology and community health
PharmD:	1	
PhD:	3	Pharmacology/toxicology; biochemistry; pharmacology/physiology
MD:	2	

Position and Company

Freelance writer/editor: 8

Others:

Medical writer, Medical Education Services, Cardinal Health

Research instructor and grant writer, Department of Surgery, Drexel University College of Medicine

Associate Director, Scientific Staff, Medical Communications Department Merck & Co.

Coordinator of research/editorial assistant. Private practice in intraoperative neurophysiological monitoring

Clinical immunology group

Freelance writers/editors:

- Clients include pharmaceutical companies, medical education companies, and other medical writers
- Medium sized pharmaceutical and biotechnology company
- Slide sets, review articles, marketing materials, educational materials
- Regulatory documents and manuscripts for pharmaceutical companies and medical communications companies
- Variety of small medical education agencies (primarily on CME materials and programs, also sales training programs)

- Medical communication companies

How They Heard About their Present Job (or Freelance Work)

Advertising	2
Internet	2
AMWA	1
Networking	4
Former business associate	1
Spouse's contact	1
Referrals	1
Employment agency	1
Other	3
Former company employee but not as a medical writer	2
Contacts from earlier work for a major pharmaceutical company (but not as a medical writer)	1

First job in medical writing (if not currently in first job in medical writing)

Clinical scientist, GlaxoSmithKline

Scientific manager, DesignWrite, Inc.

Freelance proofreader, Next Decade, Inc.

Most Important Skills or Previous Experience in Securing Present Job

Medical/scientific knowledge/understanding	9
Writing skills/experience	8
Ability to meet deadlines	3

Comments:

- Networking with industry and accurate, dependable, timely delivery of documents
- Being proactive, with a positive approach. Getting a job done in a timely fashion. Basic knowledge of the area.
- Writing and editing.
- Experience in research, knowledge of many therapeutic areas. "I believe showing initiative and completing successful tasks for the AMWA-DVC chapter was important in securing the work."
- Strong background in laboratory/biochemical techniques and strong background in writing
- Understanding of the company and its products
- Degrees, and having lots of clinical experience along with some ability to write
- Medical knowledge and good writing and speaking skills
- Previous pharmaceutical industry experience, flexibility, and ability to meet deadlines
- Medical research that involved writing manuscripts, abstracts, and posters
- Previous experience writing and extensive experience with medical research (+7 years) and working in an academic medical center

- Extensive background in basic research and writing for peer-reviewed scientific journals; (2) Evidence of collaborations with a broad variety of scientists; (3) Teaching in a medical school; (4) Classes in journalism/magazine writing plus “clips” of published articles; (5) Membership in professional organizations (AMWA and CSE); The latter helped demonstrate my commitment to medical writing.

Advice to New and Aspiring Medical Writers

Network 5

Join AMWA 5

Comments:

- Networking, I believe, may be the most important thing. There is a great need for medical writers (I am constantly being approached by people in other departments) in the academic medical community. Most institutions, however, don't have the financial means to support such (I am fortunate). I think that making contacts and using resources, such as those offered by AMWA, is a great way to start.
- Get to know other medical writers. One way to do this is to get involved in AMWA on the local level. Volunteer to complete projects for the chapter, and show the skills you would bring to a job in doing the project. Treat the project like you would an assignment from a client and deliver good work. Get known by others. At the same time, use the AMWA National resources (like job listings), and network on your own. Prepare professional marketing materials, including a website that includes your UP-TO-DATE resume and samples of your work (because you never know who is looking for a medical writer). And ALWAYS carry business cards with you where ever you go.
- If the situation permits, temporary positions with pharmaceutical companies are a good way to obtain experience necessary to progress to freelancing and sometimes easier than securing a permanent position.
- Very helpful to have some sort of degree/certificate in medical writing under your belt. Talk around and meet other medical writers to see if this is what you really want to be doing and making it your career.
- Join AMWA: volunteer, network, take courses.
- JOIN AMWA.
- Be persistent and build a wide professional network.
- Try to get to know people who would have work, or people (companies) who know people who have work. This would mean to network, contact peers, start telling people that you do this. It is amazing the casual conversations that have resulted in a contact. Market yourself. Get some writing experience anyway you can.
- Make contacts.
- Get initial experience with a pharmaceutical company or a medical education agency.
- Be knowledgeable and gain experience in a broad range of therapeutic areas.
- Be confident in your understanding of the topic you will be concentrating on. Also, be confident in your writing skills. I think it's amazing how many technical writers I have encountered who do not have basic grammar skills. I am responsible for editing so many documents, and I am constantly surprised by the basic mistakes people make grammatically that can make a significant impact on the content of their statement. An understanding of the topic you will be writing about will help you to edit for these types of mistakes. Also, understand that upper management responsible for editing your work will have different styles of writing that they expect, and you need to learn how to cater to each individual style. Always save copies to your work and feedback you receive so you can learn and track what styles people prefer.
- The answer depends on the background of the person who's getting started and on the type of position they hope to have. For those like me with a background in science, I recommend reading some primary medical literature (e.g., *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Lancet*, *JAMA*), taking writing classes (of any sort), join a professional organization like AMWA or CSE, and beat the bushes for opportunities to do some medical or medically-related writing.

In my case, I pitched some ideas for pieces to the medical alumni magazine for the school in which I was teaching. I had fun writing a long profile piece that included both personalities and medical science. The editor was pleased to have a scientist doing the writing while I was able to learn a lot from the editor. All of this was preceded by a one-semester magazine writing class that provided me with some very useful basics.

(Survey Results Writers; 01/02/04)