DELAWRITER

The quarterly newsletter of AMWA-DVC

Summer 2023

Early Summer Bash a Success

by Jacquie Mahon

How fun it was to connect with colleagues and meet new ones on June 21 at our chapter's Annual Business, Professional Development, and Networking Dinner Meeting. In a spacious, bright space with panoramic views of the landscape, AMWA-DVC members and guests socialized, enjoyed a delicious buffet dinner, and learned from three esteemed panelists.

After chatting and networking, the meeting began with our annual chapter-business discussion led by President Helen Fosam. She recognized the work of our volunteers and acknowledged all Board members. In particular, Don Harting, MA, MS, received the President's Award for his role as Program Chair. Helen encouraged a continued focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) by the DVC chapter, as she steps down from her current role at the end of July. DEI was the topic of a popular roundtable at the 21st Annual Freelance Workshop in March.

The evening's panel discussion featured Helen, Jennie Jacobson, PhD, and Art Gertel, PhD, who contributed their thoughts on the topic "Developing the Next Generation of Medical Writers." Helen represented continuing medical education writers; Jennie represented publications writers; and Art represented regulatory writers. We had plenty of time at the end for questions from attendees.

Random prizes at this event (taped to the bottom of 6 chairs) included three $30 gift cards to Longwood Gardens and three $40 gift cards to Triumph Brewery. Raffle prizes include a free registration to the 2024 Freelance Workshop, a free registration to the 2024 Princeton Forum, and another surprise prize.

Incoming President Deborah Anderson concluded the evening with an invitation to join our fun volunteer crew. In addition, all are welcome to contribute ideas for future educational programs.

Contact us here: https://www.amwa-dvc.org/contact
Volunteer opportunities are here: https://www.amwa-dvc.org/getinvolved

Our AMWA chapter's Annual Business, Professional Development, and Networking Dinner Meeting June 21 at Sandy Run Country Club in Oreland, PA.

Panelists Helen Fosam, PhD, Jennie Jacobson, PhD, and Art Gertel, PhD.

Program co-chairs Laura Sheppard, MBA, MA, and Don Harting, MA, MS.

Jacquie Mahon, MA, is owner of Acorn Freelance in Philadelphia and has been a writer of medical-education and pharmaceutical, biotech, and medical-device communications for 26 years.

Becoming a Medical Writer: What You Need to Know About Scientific Writing

by Maria Dalagnol

The AMWA-DVC 21st Annual Freelance Workshop (virtual) on Saturday, March 11, 2023 was a great opportunity for current medical writers and editors to grow their skills, but also for those planning on becoming writers and editors. Besides the full sessions with the entire group, roundtables enabled even more learning, discussions, and knowledge exchange among participants. Specifically, for those who are planning on writing, the roundtable "Your Scientific Writing and Medical Communication Toolbox: A Guide for Scientists and Nonscientists" led by Darryl Z. L'Heureux, PhD, summarized the skills that a medical writer must have to succeed.

Every step of science is documented, and medical writing is about documentatio n
Darryl started the roundtable with this information and, although it may seem obvious, it opens a range of possibilities for those who, like me, are passionate about science communication. If every step of science is documented, then from the academic environment to the pharmaceutical industry there will be countless possibilities to work as a medical writer. However, possibilities are not enough — the aspiring medical writer must master specific skills that are the backbone of the essential task: *communicate science with clarity and precision.*

What are the foundational writing skills for a successful medical writer?
- **Use correct grammar:** Mastering written English is essential, especially if English is not your mother language. Correct grammar allows you to articulate your ideas effectively in the first draft. Remember that your writing may go through several revision cycles.
- **Say more with fewer words:** Scientific writing is about being concise. Read science to understand science writing: knowing the terminology will help you say more with fewer words. Being succinct enables readers who do not read the entire document to understand the most important messages, because they will stand out.
- **Use lead sentences, paragraphs, and passages:** A lead sentence in each paragraph will help you structure, direct, and give meaning to the story.
- **Make your writing readily comprehensible:** Sequencing your ideas is fundamental to make your writing understandable. Transitions, topic sentences, and other signposting devices help you tell your story.

Where can you find the resources to develop the essential writing skills?
AMWA has a variety of resources and educational programs such as the *AMWA Essential Skills Workbooks* series, which comprises 7 digital workbooks with examples, exercises, and quizzes that will help you develop the skills needed.

There also is plenty of free online content about how to improve your medical writing. For example, see:

- SciTechEdit International, https://scitechedit.com/en-gb/18-tips-to-improve-your-science-writing
- Nature Tips, https://www.nature.com/scitable/topicpage/effective-writing-13815989/
- Writing Science: What Makes Scientific Writing Hard and How to Make It Easier, https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/bes2.1800
- PLOS Writing Center, https://plos.org/resources/writing-center/
- Coursera: Writing in the Sciences, https://www.coursera.org/learn/sciwrite

Master the foundational writing skills and, with your experience in the scientific and medical arenas, you will be able to write most types of deliverable, such as abstracts for medical journals and conferences, pharmaceutical marketing, medical-device content, grant proposals, health-education materials, manuscripts for journal or online publication, slide presentations, and more. Each type of deliverable has its particularities, and with experience you will know what they are.

Darryl encouraged attendees to choose the deliverables they are most interested in and go for it! Like most things in life, medical writing benefits from learning and practice.

Mariana Dalagnol, PharmD, PhD, is owner of LETTERA Medical Writing and has been a medical writer for 6 years in Brazil. She has experience in pharmaceutical communications, writing clear and concise content for clinicians, healthcare managers, and patients.

How to Fact Check and Annotate Like a Pro

by Carla Eisenstein

A group of eight writers convened in a Zoom breakout room at the AMWA Delaware Valley Freelance Workshop on March 11, 2023. Melissa L. Bogen, ELS, experienced medical editor and fact checker and long-time AMWA member, presented detailed slides about medical-legal review for branded and unbranded content, and she encouraged questions. This lively presentation offered specific, step-by-step instructions for annotating and fact checking various documents for medical accuracy and legal compliance. Melissa also covered best practices learned from her years of work in the regulatory writing space.

Annotate with the reviewer in mind

An annotation is a short callout that directs a reviewer to primary source material. Source refers to the highlighted portion of an article used for fact checking, and reference refers to the entire article. Because annotation and fact checking are two components of the same process, your work will go more smoothly if an annotation method is agreed upon in advance.

The following tips will make your annotation process more efficient.

- Locate and organize PDF sources. To avoid later interruptions, gather all sources before you start. Compare reference PDFs the client has sent you to those in the reference list of your document. Also check that you have reference PDFs for any existing annotations. Get missing documents from the client, and file unused references in a separate folder.
- Make page numbers easy to find. Use the published page number of the original PDF, not the numbers on your computer monitor. Differentiate supplemental materials by using "S1-S4" as page numbers.
- Make annotations easy to read. Bracket annotations in red or use a text box to make them stand out. If a sentence uses two or more sources from the same reference, separate them with a comma in your annotation. If a sentence uses different references, separate them with a semicolon and line break in your annotation, or put each in a separate set of square brackets.
- Make source information easy to find. Melissa recommended reporting annotations with page, column, paragraph, and line. (This differs from the ABC method, which organizes annotations by assigning letters A, B, C, etc. to each highlighted source in the reference PDF. The lettering restarts on each page of the reference PDF.)
- Show your calculations. If you see a numerical value not reported in the source document, such as a percentage, add a calculation to the annotation (if there is information to allow the calculation; the value could simply be an error). The reviewer can then check your work. Melissa also specified that calculations with red text and yellow background can be added as comments in Veeva Vault, a popular content-management platform.
- Be brief. Highlight only the necessary information in the PDF source; don't give the reviewer extra work.

Use annotation strategies that are specific to document type

Documents in various formats routinely require a medical-legal review process. Melissa addressed best practices for slide decks, PDFs, posters, websites, and spreadsheets.

- **PowerPoint slides.** Annotate slides in comments or text boxes. The best practice is to insert annotation boxes while in notes view.
- **PDF documents.** Use the markup tool for queries and comments. Also, make your additions searchable by using the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) feature.
- **PDF posters.** Enlarge the poster copy to make it easy for the fact checker to read your annotations. To do this, create snapshots of the parts you are annotating, paste the snapshots into a blank Word file, and then save that file as a PDF. Add the snapshot page(s) to the end of the poster PDF so the annotated copy is easier to enlarge and read. Note: "Snapshot" is an Adobe Acrobat term for taking a screenshot of a PDF section that you define, by clicking and dragging your mouse.
- **Websites.** You may be asked to annotate a website. Print the website into PDF form and report the printout date in your annotations. If a webpage indicates when the content was last updated, also provide that date. If the PDF printout is difficult to read, and you encounter these projects frequently, try a paid screen-capture program called Snagit.
- **Tables, charts, and figures.** Annotations are often missing for table footnotes and figure captions, so make sure all content has an annotation. Include row and column numbers in your annotation when applicable to the material. Additionally, arrows can clarify which bullet point on a slide each annotation refers to.
- **Excel spreadsheets.** Highlight column and row numbers in Excel: for example, [col 3 row 26]. Alternatively, save the Excel spreadsheet as a pdf and annotate with a text box.

Narcolepsy symptoms typically begin during childhood or adolescence; for more than half of people with narcolepsy, symptom onset occurs before 20 years of age.[1-4]

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3. Maski K, Steinhart E, Williams D, et al. Listening to the patient voice in narcolepsy: diagnostic delay, disease burden, and treatment efficacy. J Clin Sleep Med 2017;13:419e25.
4. Aran A, Einen M, Lin L, et al. Clinical and therapeutic aspects of childhood narcolepsy-cataplexy: a retrospective study of 51 children. Sleep 2010;33:1457e64.

Commented [MB1]: Ohayon 2005/p 402/col 1/para 2/ln 1-5, calculation: first symptom before age 12: 12.3%, age 13-20 years: 41.8%; 12.3+41.8=54.1%; Luca 2013/p 484/col 1/para 4/ln 1-9, p 485/col 2/para 3/ln 1-8; Maski 2017/p 420/col 1/para 3/ln 1-6, p 421/col 1/Table 1; Aran Sleep 2010/p 1459/col 2/Table 1/row 1

Annotation example. Articles in Microsoft Word can be annotated in comments. Here the annotation provides author, year, page, column, paragraph, and line.

Know the scope of your fact-checking role

Sometimes you will be fact checking instead of annotating. Like annotating, fact checking requires attention to detail and knowledge of your role. Melissa described the scope of work for a fact checker and presented best

practices.

- **Estimate your time.** A general estimate is 1 hour for either 3–4 slides or 1–3 pages, but you can refine your estimates with experience. Add 20% to your time estimate to account for problem solving along the way.
- **Proofread the annotation itself.** If you see a typo when fact checking annotations, fix it in track changes. When you make a more substantial edit, add a comment so the client can review.
- **Point out plagiarism—gently.** In your review, comment: "This passage is verbatim from the source. OK?" Avoid accusations, and do not use the word plagiarism. Additionally, double-check whether the reference is in the public domain, such as published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in which case the text can be borrowed verbatim.

Learn best practices from experienced mentors

When problems come up, experienced writers and editors are ready with solutions. Melissa lent us the benefit of her expertise with a few time-tested tips.

- Highlight pertinent text in a reference PDF if it is not yet highlighted.
- Draw an arrow if the annotations are inconveniently located far away from the text.
- If information is missing, find and add it—especially with charts and graphs.
- If a large block of text is from a single reference, divide and conquer: provide several separate annotations.
- If possible, always calculate numbers that are not directly provided in the source.
- If a secondary source is used as a reference, either note this to your client or find the primary source yourself.
- When fact checking, if an annotation references an article's abstract, change the annotation to reference the same information in the body of the article. (Note that abstracts submitted to congresses may be valid, although not ideal, references. Much of the field does use them as references.)
- Make your client's experience as seamless as possible by staying up-to-date on the software they use, such as Acrobat Pro, Microsoft Word, and Veeva Vault.

Even with expertise and effort on all sides, unexpected challenges may arise during an annotation and review process, so be prepared to troubleshoot. The most important message that Melissa imparted to the roundtable group was that good communication and spirit of collaboration can ensure the success of any project. I enjoyed this informative and interactive roundtable session.

Carla Eisenstein, PharmD, is a pharmacist and freelance medical writer committed to clear communication between patients and health professionals. She has experience in plain language, regulatory writing, and continuing medical education.

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