



A recipe for chaos: Medical writing, time management, and cooking for friends

by Wendy Kingdom

There is one area of my life in which I am so organised I amaze myself. Our meals at home are planned on a weekly basis and I shop just once a week. I check my diary to see when I will have time to cook and when I need to take something out of the freezer, or if I don't need to cook at all. I also have a little red book of what is in the freezer so that I can see if I need to use something up (or throw it away). This approach to shopping and cooking saves time because I don't have to rush out to the supermarket mid-week for a vital ingredient, it saves money because I only buy what I need, and our meals have variety and are healthy because I look at our menus for the week as a whole.

The rest of my life is a shambles.

Have you heard of Nigella Lawson? She published a book called *Nigella Express* [1] and presented a series of cookery programmes based on the recipes in the book. Watching Nigella is always a delight because she doesn't just cook food, she somehow seems to have a relationship with it. Anyway, the principle of the express part of the title is that, for example, instead of peeling, crushing and frying garlic in olive oil, you use olive oil infused with garlic. This means that Nigella's larder is about the size of my house, but that is not the point.

After watching a couple of these programmes, I came to the conclusion that the real time-saving comes from the fact that she doesn't do any washing up. We watch her waltz out of the kitchen leaving behind a sink full of used pots and pans, food spilled on the work surface, a jug of apple juice left out of the fridge (a jug?), and abandoned kitchen gadgets dripping with chocolate sauce. So, while we watch Nigella pouting at herself in the mirror and brushing out her luscious brown hair in preparation for the arrival of her guests, the rest of us would still be in the kitchen in our aprons and rubber gloves, desperately trying to clean up before people arrive.

What does any of this have to do with medical writing? Well, possibly nothing at all, but I believe that there are quite a few analogies between medical writing and cooking.

As medical writers it is important that we allow sufficient time for the stuff that is not project (chargeable) work—the washing-up. The amount of stuff that you have to do will vary according to your job, but my stuff includes dealing with what has been done (e.g. filling in timesheets, generating invoices, logging payments, banking cheques), deal-

ing with future work (e.g. responding to requests for proposals, reviewing contracts and negotiating changes), and the unexpected (e.g. writing an article on time management for *TWS*). It is easy to spend an hour replying to an e-mail from a client if you need to take care about your wording. In my experience, this stuff takes an average of two hours per day.

Since we are all knowledgeable about the principles of time management, we set aside two hours every day, or one day every week, and we deal with our stuff in this time. We allow the time for this stuff when we agree timelines and we make sure that the duration of elapsed time from starting materials received to first draft delivered takes account of a working day that includes only five to six hours of chargeable time. This is why we are calm, organised, and we work a set number of hours per week.

Does this sound like your life? I know that it isn't anything like mine.

The first problem that causes our time management to go horribly wrong is when timelines change. We all know about this problem, so there's no need to dwell on the point. They are just part of life, and we have to learn to work with them. However, I believe that our problems arise not because timelines change, but because so few of our clients think to tell us in advance and to discuss the new timelines with us.

If you invite someone to your home for a meal, you can be confident that they will turn up on the right day and at the agreed time, give or take half an hour. They will then get the food you planned, prepared in the way you intended, served hot (assuming this was the intention), and that you will enjoy it together. If your guests arrive an hour late, the food will be somewhat spoiled. If they arrive a day late, the food will be in the dog. However, in normal life, if your guests arrive late, they would apologise and would happily accept a compromise suggestion to get a take-away or go out to eat. I have not yet had the experience of anyone turning up on the wrong day, nor have I done this myself—yet.

In work life, our guests don't seem to think it matters whether they turn up on time, a bit late, a day late, or even a few weeks after the date and time that you agreed. Long after you have given up on them, they send you an e-mail announcing the date that they will arrive, and that date could be today. Not only that, but when they do turn up,

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they take it for granted that we will rustle up something tasty. If you're lucky, you are free on the new date but if not, you have to work out what you can prepare using the food that you already have, and how to fit everyone round the table because a different set of guests have also arrived. Not a sophisticated dinner party as planned; more of a Mad Hatter's tea party¹. If it were only the occasional client who behaved in this way, we could be firm with them and explain that they have missed their time slot. Unfortunately, most clients do not keep to their own timelines so if we want to stay in business, we just have to do the best that we can. There is, however, a limit to what doing our best can include.

I think that there is a window of opportunity of about two weeks during which clients can provide starting materials late without causing too many problems. When starting materials or comments are a day late, you can chase up the client and you might be given a new date. You can chase again after the new date is missed and maybe you'll get another new date or possibly just a vague response. However, eventually, there comes a point at which if the client hasn't sent you something by now, there's no way of guessing when it might turn up—or if it's going to turn up at all. By the time the materials or comments do arrive, you have moved on, and your timetable is full of other work. You then have to try and find a space for the work in a period of time that is already seriously overcrowded.

There is a trend for timelines to be shortened, which makes it all the more difficult when clients forget to tell us when the timelines change. Medical writing is hard work. If you are working on a document, then working is exactly what you are doing. Keeping the numbers simple, we can expect a 40-hour project to take 6 or 7 working days, allowing time for the other stuff. When timelines become compressed, you can't do the work in fewer hours, you just have to fit the same number of working hours into fewer days. There comes a point at which there are no more waking hours in the day. Working through the night won't help because you will start writing rubbish, and what will you do the next day when you haven't had enough sleep?

Can we do the work more efficiently? I don't think that we can because a document cannot be finished until it is complete, i.e. until you have incorporated information from every publication that came up in the literature search, you have described and discussed everything that was measured, you have ticked every statistical table, figure and listing off your list, you have summarised every study, etc. Most of the time we are working to regulatory or publication guidelines. If you haven't done something about everything in those guidelines, the document is not finished. If you want to make a cake, you have to include all

of the ingredients in the correct proportions and in the correct order, and you have to bake it in the oven until it is cooked, otherwise you will end up with something that cannot legally be described as a cake and is probably inedible.

Have you ever tried to prepare vegetables, grate cheese, stir a sauce and whip cream all at the same time? It's impossible—unless you can get someone to help. In the same way, medical writing is not something that can be multi-tasked. You can make a phone call and talk about more than one project, you can send an e-mail and contact several people at once, you can attend a meeting and, well, do nothing at all really. You can save time in all of these tasks by preparing in advance, not chatting on the phone, excusing yourself from parts of a meeting that are not relevant to you, or by surreptitiously sending e-mails during a meeting by using a discrete mobile device. But medical writing requires you to spend time at your computer, working on one thing at a time.

When you have too much to do, the next step in effective time management is prioritisation. If you can't do everything, then you must prioritise your work according to the relative urgency and importance of each task. This brings us to another major problem that medical writers have in managing our time: most of our chargeable work is both urgent and important. The work is urgent because there is a deadline for submission, or just because that's when our clients want it, and meeting our clients' needs is our core business. The work is important because regulations dictate that the work must be done, or the publicity is needed to sell the product. Essentially, although we occasionally have the luxury of doing some preparation in advance of a deadline, most of our project work has to be completed within a period that is usually challenging.

Therefore, the project work always takes priority and the other stuff goes onto a 'do later' pile. If we neglect the pile for too long, something starts smouldering, then a fire breaks out and a task that we had put to one side as not being urgent suddenly becomes urgent. You can't use the food processor again until you have washed, dried and reassembled it from the last time it was used. So, you have to stop what you were doing and get the now urgent task out of the way. Great! You can cross one thing off your list but you still have to finish the same amount of project work by the same deadline.

Is there any hope for us? Changing timelines can work in our favour. We can go from mad panic to nothing to do in the same week because of changing timelines. The interesting thing is that in those rare periods when there is no project work to do, my first reaction is to think that I have nothing to do. In fact, the time needed to accomplish everything on my to do list is longer than my life span, but once the

¹ The Hatter is a character from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice meets him at a tea party. He is popularly referred to as the 'Mad Hatter,' but is never called by this name in Carroll's book—although the Cheshire Cat does warn Alice that he is mad.

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time pressure is off, the need to go outside, breathe some fresh air, feel the sunshine on my face, and look at the real world rather than a computer image of it, takes over. In essence, I need to rest. In reality, the nothing to do period doesn't last long at all and before I'm halfway down the most recent 'do it later' pile, I'm back up to top speed with project work. I have tasks on my to-do list that have been there for more than a year.

Some stuff goes away by itself. By the time you get to it, it is no longer relevant. I do not recommend this as a method of clearing a to-do pile because you often find that you have forgotten about something important and there are consequences to not having done whatever it was. This is why it is necessary to control the project work, if at all possible. Sadly, every time I chat to other freelancers at EMWA and ask (if they haven't asked me first), 'How do you control your workload?' they all sigh wearily and say, "I don't".

I would like to finish this article by telling you the secret to successful time management. Perhaps I should finish by appealing to you to tell me how to manage my time successfully. I believe the answer for a freelancer is to take on less work and accept longer gaps with nothing to do. However, this takes courage, and that is another subject. All I can say for certain is that Nigella's recipe for chocolate pear pudding (see Box) is easy to prepare and scrumptious to eat—I substitute the coffee with brandy or rum.

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Reference:

1. Nigella Express. Publisher: Chatto and Windus (6 Sep 2007)
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Wendy Kingdom is treasurer of EMWA and quite a good cook.

A new website initiative for learning or teaching English for medical purposes

The International Medical Communications Center at Tokyo Medical University has created a free educational site for English for medical purposes at <http://www.emp-tmu.net>. This site is free and is great for anyone interested in learning or teaching English for medical purposes. To register you only need to supply your email address and a password of your own choosing. The site was created to help the move to globalisation in medical communications standards.

Chocolate pear pudding

Serves 6-8

2 x 415 g cans pear halves in juice
125 g plain flour
25 g cocoa powder
125 g sugar
150 g soft butter, plus extra for greasing
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda
2 eggs
2 teaspoons vanilla extract

1. Preheat the oven to 200°C and grease a 22 cm square ovenproof dish with butter.
2. Drain the pears and arrange them on the base of the dish.
3. Put all the remaining ingredients in a food processor and combine until you have a batter with a soft dropping consistency.
4. Spread the brown batter over the pears, and bake in the oven for 30 min.
5. Let it stand out of the oven for 5-10 min then cut into slabs.

Serve with the chocolate sauce.

Hot chocolate sauce

75 g dark chocolate, 70% cocoa solids
125 mL double cream
2 x 15 mL tablespoons coffee essence or 2 teaspoons instant espresso powder dissolved in 2 tablespoons water
1 x 15 mL tablespoon sugar syrup

1. Break up the chocolate and put into a heavy-based saucepan.
2. Add the remaining ingredients, then place the pan over a gentle heat and let everything melt together.
3. Once everything has melted, stir well, take off the heat and pour into a jug to serve.

Political interference in science is not funny

The 2008 winner of the US's Scientific Integrity Editorial Cartoon Contest can be found at http://www.ucsusa.org/scientific_integrity/science_idol/. The competition is run by the Union of Concerned Scientists which is "building a foundation to guide the next president in restoring scientific integrity to federal policy making." The website refers to reports of political interference in science.