

# Medical Writing

Ever thought about medical writing as a career? If you want to get away from scientific research, but still use your scientific knowledge and skills, it might be worth considering. This leaflet will tell you a bit more about this varied career and where to find further information.



## *What is medical writing?*

In general, medical writing is about communicating clinical and scientific data and information to a range of audiences in a wide variety of different formats. Medical writers combine their knowledge of science and their research skills with an understanding of how to present information and pitch it at the right level for the intended audience.



## *What qualifications and skills do I need?*

Companies may expect you to have a first degree in a life science (e.g. biology, biochemistry, physiology, or chemistry) and some may require a PhD. However, there are many medical writers who have entered the profession with backgrounds in language rather than science (see the section headed *What is it really like?*). You don't necessarily need a medical qualification, although a good understanding of basic human anatomy and physiology is important. Knowledge of diseases and their treatment is an advantage, but in most jobs you can learn about specific disease areas as you get involved with different projects.

You'll need very good writing and word processing skills. Most employers will ask you to do a writing test before, or as part of, your interview so that they can judge your writing skills. The format of this test will vary depending on the type of medical writing the company is involved with.

You'll also need to have good inter-personal skills. Medical writers work as part of inter-disciplinary teams and, in some cases, with people outside of their company. You need to be comfortable communicating with people from a range of backgrounds.

Most advertisements that you'll see will also ask for good attention to detail. This is important for reviewing and editing documents, and also for spotting the important points in pages of clinical data.



## *Where do medical writers work and what do they do?*

You'll find medical writers in pharmaceutical companies, contract research organisations (CROs), and communications agencies.

CROs conduct clinical studies and help pharmaceutical companies to get their products registered with international regulatory authorities. In general, medical writers in CROs are involved with preparing a range of documents for these regulatory submissions, including protocols and final reports for clinical trials, and clinical expert reports. They may also be involved in the preparation of manuscripts for publication in medical journals.

The situation is generally similar in a pharmaceutical company with medical writers preparing documents for submission to the regulatory authorities and manuscripts for publication. However, depending on the company, they may also be involved in other writing projects such as training manuals, promotional material for marketing purposes, and websites.

Writers in communications agencies generally prepare manuscripts for publication, items for conferences (e.g. posters, abstracts, and slide presentations), promotional items for pharmaceutical marketing, training material, and multimedia (e.g. websites). The work in this environment is likely to be more creative.

Many writers also work on a freelance basis, which is an attractive option for some people. If you're new to medical writing, it's better to start off as an employee working for a company. This will allow you to develop the skills that you need, and gain some contacts and experience.



## *Which type of company will suit me?*

Each type of company has advantages and disadvantages. Working for a pharmaceutical company usually means that you get experience in a small number of therapeutic areas, which may suit you if you like to get to understand a topic thoroughly. Alternatively, if you like more variety, you might prefer to work for a CRO or a communications agency where you are likely to get to work on projects that cover a wider range of diseases and treatments. However, the pressure to work to deadlines is often greater at communications agencies and CROs and this might not appeal to you. It's a question of personal taste and, as with all careers, you can always change jobs if your current position doesn't suit you.



## *How much can I expect to get paid?*

The salary for medical writers depends on your experience. As a recent graduate with no medical writing experience, you might expect a starting salary of €29 000 to 33 000 (in 2002), which compares favourably with research positions at the same level. Postgraduates might get a little more than this. However, there are no figures available for an ‘industry average’ and the levels of pay can vary between companies.



## *Can I work abroad?*

Yes. Medical writing isn’t restricted to any one particular country. There are job opportunities throughout Europe and beyond. It is often an advantage to have English as your first language; companies often advertise for native English speakers because many of the documents must be written in English. However, there are many medical writers from other European countries who have very successful careers.



## *What are the career prospects for medical writers?*

Many medical writers eventually move into management, taking care of teams of medical writers and managing projects at local and international level. However, if the thought of managing other people doesn’t appeal, this is by no means the only option. Working in medical writing gives you an overview of the entire clinical development process, so it’s an ideal starting point for other careers in the pharmaceutical industry, such as regulatory affairs, clinical research, document management, and even marketing. Some medical writers set up their own companies, others move into editorial roles at publishing companies.

You can find out more about career development by reading the final section of this leaflet in which people who really do the job write about their own experiences.



## *How do I find a suitable job?*

As well as the popular scientific journals, there are websites that specialise in advertising jobs in the pharmaceutical industry. These sites usually allow you to search specifically for medical writing jobs and some allow you to submit your curriculum vitae (CV). The European Medical Writers Association (EMWA) website (see below) also has a jobs page.



## Where can I get further information?

EMWA is an organisation that links together medical writers from around Europe. EMWA holds a major conference once a year as well as other meetings. It is run *by* medical writers *for* medical writers, and is committed to training and development. EMWA has its own journal (*The Write Stuff*) and a training programme (the *EMWA Professional Development Programme*).

You can visit the EMWA website at **[www.emwa.org](http://www.emwa.org)**. The site is full of useful information and, if you have any specific questions, there's a dialogue section where you can add your comments.



## What is it really like?

Okay, it's all very well reading this leaflet. The job sounds like something you'd be interested in, but you want to know what it's **really** like. In this section, a few people give an overview of their background and their current jobs.

*Alison McIntosh* (Freelance Medical Writer, AAG Medical Writing)

Before becoming a freelance medical writer working from home, I completed two post-doctoral contracts then obtained my first medical writing job with GlaxoWellcome. Employed there for nearly six years, I learned first hand about the clinical process and gained invaluable medical writing experience.

As a freelancer, you undertake a range of writing tasks: one week I can be reviewing a slide kit, the next writing the first draft of a manuscript or study report for a new drug coming to market, then a regulatory summary document. Variety comes in all forms and every client works differently, so you call on your inter-personal skills quite frequently and must be adaptable to change on an almost weekly basis. In addition to being the medical writer, you are solely responsible for developing clients and new business, as well as working out budgets and keeping the accounts up to date. Along with understanding a client's requirements, you must be able to gauge accurate timelines and cost estimates. To achieve all this you have to be disciplined, self-motivated, and not afraid of working alone. If you see freelancing as a long-term commitment you must also keep your medical writing skills relevant to the changing needs and working environment of your clients, usually through continuous professional development. Since becoming freelance in 2000, I have enjoyed determining my own professional development, free from the ties of an employer or line manager.

*Jo Whelan* (Freelance medical writer, textpharm ltd)

I did a first degree in biology but in fact I was both a frustrated medic and a frustrated writer (I am endlessly fascinated by medical science and once harboured fantasies about writing the great English novel). I worked as an editor in scientific publishing for several years before getting a job as a writer in a small medical communications agency. I went freelance about 12 years ago.

My workload is extremely varied and I am almost never bored. One week I might be writing a scientific paper for a pharmaceutical company, the next an online guide to a disease for a medical charity, and the next a training manual for drug sales reps. I also travel to medical congresses around the world to produce conference reports. It is often necessary to pick up the essentials of a new therapeutic area very quickly, but it's also rewarding to build up more in-depth knowledge of a few areas through repeated exposure to them. Another interesting aspect of medical communications is getting to listen to and sometimes interview leading experts in a particular field. But however fascinating (or not) the science, medical communications is a commercial service and writers must have a strong awareness of the client's business objectives.

Deadlines are usually tight, and managing workflow is a constant challenge. I sometimes miss the day-to-day interaction with other people that comes with office life, but I do have close working relationships with a small group of regular clients. And freelance life is blissfully free of office politics and corporate gobbledegook.

*Virginia Watson* (Director of Global Clinical Operations and Medical Writing, Catalent Pharma Solutions)

I became a medical writer 13 years ago when I joined a contract research organisation (CRO) after working for many years as a community pharmacist. It sounds a dramatic change, but in fact I have been writing for most of my working life.

After qualifying and a short spell working in hospital pharmacy, I entered the pharmaceutical industry where I worked firstly in medical information and later in marketing and product management. Much of the work I undertook in these posts involved writing, including writing abstracts or data sheets (now called Summaries of Product Characteristics), retrieving, assimilating, and disseminating complex information in a user-friendly form to colleagues within the company or to clinicians, researchers, and hospital laboratory staff using our products, producing training material for sales representatives, or working on technical brochures, summaries, and audio-visual scripts for promotional purposes. Later, whilst working as a community pharmacist, I continued to write from time to time, although it was now tidying up translated promotional booklets, reviewing books for a nursing journal, and writing articles for pharmaceutical publications.

When I embarked on my career as a medical writer, instead of writing on marketed products, I found myself writing about drugs in development. Working in a CRO provides variety: a writer needs to be able to write any one of a range of documents, on any product, in any therapeutic area, and often at very short notice. During the nine years I spent in the company, I progressed into management, spending the last four years at international Vice President level. We had to sell medical writing as a service to clients so I became involved in project pricing and negotiation, writing proposals, and meetings with potential and existing clients. There were also financial responsibilities such as predicting sales, meeting targets, and measuring productivity. As a senior manager as well as project management, I also had staffing and corporate responsibilities.

My current role still involves medical writing and managing medical writers, but my responsibilities have widened to encompass many aspects of clinical trial management,

The work can be hard and the pressures intense, but over the years medical writing has given me much job satisfaction, a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, and has provided a career opportunity in later life which I had never anticipated.

*Alistair Reeves* (Ascribe Medical Writing and Translation, Wiesbaden, Germany)

How did I become a medical writer and editor? Well, from primary school onwards, I knew that I wanted to write, and did (editor of the school magazine, etc.). Then came the question: “Arts or sciences?” Arts won, although sciences only just lost. I took a degree in modern languages (German, French, and Spanish) and, by a stroke of luck, immediately found a job after university in medical market research. Three years of in-depth interviewing of physicians on prescribing habits all over Western Europe then followed – the perfect grounding (and not only in terminology) to become a medical translator at what was then Hoechst AG in Germany. Translation gradually turned into medical writing after a few years. I was lucky enough to be one of the pioneers of our business in Europe. The job is incredibly varied, brings you into contact with a huge range of people and specialist areas, needs creativity and commitment, and is fun and fulfilling. It has the added advantage that it is a perfect job for the home as a freelancer. Towards the end of my 24-year career at what was by then Aventis Pharma, I moved more into managerial roles in dossier production and publishing, but always ensured that I did not lose contact with writing and editing. This meant that after taking voluntary redundancy from Aventis, the transition to becoming a freelance editor, writer and trainer was fairly straightforward—especially because there is no shortage of work. The range of possibilities is enormous: from basic research and regulatory writing to medical communications, publications and websites. EMWA provides a great opportunity to meet other medical writers from all over Europe, pass on experience, and create the feeling of community that so many other professions already take for granted. It has also made an enthusiastic workshop leader and trainer out of me, which I never thought would happen!

*Karin Gewert* (MSc, PhD, Freelance medical/regulatory writer, Writewise)

Already when working at the pharmacology department at Astra I realised that I loved science and the best part was to summarise data. I went back to the university for a PhD within inflammatory research at the Medical Faculty. From the moment I heard that medical writing is a profession I knew what I wanted to do. However, in the late 90's when I was finalising my PhD thesis there were very few medical writing positions in Sweden. But after a year as a post-doc I got a medical writer position at a contract research organisation (CRO). A colleague recommended EMWA and as soon as I started to take their courses I really felt that I gained the knowledge I needed to meet all the challenges at a CRO. Working in a CRO is an ideal start for someone who wants to become a freelance medical writer because you work within a wide range of indications, meet clients from both small and big companies and write many different kinds of documents. The tasks are very varied and may include anything from translation of patient diaries to giving courses. Project management takes a lot of time but working together with colleagues from different departments (e.g. the statistical department, drug safety and regulatory affairs) makes it great fun and long-lasting networks are created.

Three years ago I decided that it was time to take the step and start my own business. As a freelance I really appreciate the freedom to set my own priorities, both with regard to time planning, what projects to accept and what documents to write (my favourite documents are those telling the complete story, e.g. clinical overviews and IBs). This freedom by far outweighs the nights I spend in front of the computer. Clients coming back again and again have now become my new "colleagues".

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