



## A week in the life of a medical writer

by Thomas Mondrup

At the end of May, I corresponded briefly with Alistair Reeves relating to a workshop run by him and Susanne Geercken that I attended at the EMWA conference in Barcelona. By the end of this correspondence, I had agreed to write a piece for *TWS* based on the following brief: ‘Who manages YOUR time’; a Monday-Friday diary of a typical working week describing problems with time management, objectives set for the week, whether objectives were achieved, pressures from e-mail, telephone conferences (TCs), colleagues, bosses, and strategies to ease stress and manage your time successfully—or do you feel ‘managed’ by other things beyond your control?

So why did I accept? Apart from networking with Alistair, I was driven by selfish reasons. In Barcelona, I had attended a time management course with a similar preworkshop assignment: filling out a time schedule for a three-day working period. Apart from returning the preworkshop assignment too late to be integrated into the workshop, I have to admit that it was done *post-hoc* with assistance from Outlook and very little actual time keeping. On top of this, I had scheduled 3 abbreviated first-draft results-independent clinical trial reports for review the day I left for Barcelona. Hence, before my one hour packing on the morning on the day of departure, I had a 14-hour working day which also included the night. Two reports were sent for review from my office 2 hours before the flight departure. 30 minutes later, including running to the subway, I was at the security check-in at Copenhagen airport. The third report was sent for review during the night after the EMWA banquet. Bringing work to Barcelona was, of course, not part of my original plan ...

My first workshop in Barcelona was the time management workshop with Debbie Jordan. Different techniques for efficient time management were taught, and though some seemed rather straightforward (e.g. don’t be late for meetings and skip the ones you can) I knew that there was room for improvement in my own working life with regard to time management. My selfish reason for writing this piece was therefore that it was a good opportunity to try out one of the techniques taught on the course, and I knew writing this piece would give adequate motivation for me to get the time tracking right this time.

I decided to use the ABC technique where you prioritize your working tasks into three groups. Your top priorities go into the A group, and for a medical writer this group should mainly comprise the products we write and closely related

processes. Work should be focused on A tasks in timeslots of two hours. Group C tasks such as reading e-mails and making short replies are dealt with in timeslots of 30 minutes. The B group contains everything in between, and can be labelled ‘maintenance’, e.g. attending meetings, training, reading SOPs, planning work, reviewing documents, writing minutes, preparing more demanding e-mail replies (if the importance is higher, any such tasks can be upgraded to an A task). A balanced working diet containing six timeslots, two of each category, is supposed to make up an efficient and healthy working day, with room for coffee breaks and social interactions. If every day could be like that, I would certainly improve my work-life balance.

Next, I planned to time-track the week that I received the first complete end-of-text (EOT) material for the three abbreviated interim reports of ongoing trials that currently constituted my A tasks. Hence, my A task for the entire week was to review the EOT material for the three reports and to start writing the data-dependent sections of the report first scheduled for Draft 1 review.

Knowing how much trouble can accumulate if you fail to identify errors, inconsistencies, and bad programming at an early stage in your EOT material, I was initially surprised how difficult it actually turned out to be to achieve two A slots on a daily basis. B tasks (e-mails, meetings, and training) stole more time than I thought was healthy and I had decided to report on a ‘healthy’ work-life balance!

I did actually succeed in keeping a record of my time and tasks. By the fifth day, I had managed to get in a decent amount of A slots and maintain a healthy work-life balance. The ABC diet was also fairly balanced, and the working week included social activities such as birthday celebrations, and an after-hours visit to the ‘Bodies’ exhibition. I did, however, encounter a few ‘pitfalls’ that gave me something to write about. But when was I going to write about it, I was caught up in a submission Gantt chart, so writing for *TWS* hadn’t made it into my ABC list, and with approaching deadlines, the healthy work-life balance vanished, making it impossible to use any of my scarce private time on semi-work related things like writing for *TWS*.

My last resort was to write this piece on the first Saturday of my summer holiday. But my A tasks got in the way. The three final draft 2 reports were supposed to be reviewed while I was away (one was being prepared by a new medical writer for whom I am the mentor), so I ended up in a

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2-week sprint before my vacation, including Saturdays and Sundays with a seemingly interminable series of A slots. I didn't find time to bring cake to work to celebrate my own birthday, and I ended up working on my reports until 30 minutes before leaving for a ferry on the first Sunday of my vacation. That was 8 days before, and I hadn't turned on my laptop again until that day, the day that Alistair provided as my extended deadline.

Hmm ... I guess there still is room for improvement in my time management abilities. My Monday–Friday diary notes are of course in the office, so once again I have to draw on *post-hoc* assumptions. Not to stress my memory too far; I'll focus on my latest Monday–Friday working week. The week I had scheduled to be the most hectic working week this year.

**Monday** (*16-hour working day*).

The first task was to sort comments from the draft 1 review (first full draft with data) for the third report. I had agreed to extend the deadline for comments until start of business on Monday, but comments were also sent after end of business on Monday, and contrary to agreements with our partner, I received comments from the individual reviewers rather than a combined log of comments (combined logs of comments from our partner were missing for all three reports). So, apart from incorporating the comments, I also had to spend time sorting the comments so that I could have a combined log of priority comments to go through on the 'web-ex' roundtable teleconference scheduled for Tuesday. Organising the web-ex conference was also 'fun': the IT service gave me a web-ex account with misspelled log-in details. When I finally got the correct log-in details, I could not get any assistance regarding how to set up meetings, only the reassurance that everything was straightforward and people usually have no problems. This was almost right. Setting up a meeting was indeed straightforward

**Tuesday** (*10-hour working day*)

Still preparing the combined log of priority comments and including suggested solutions. The combined log was distributed half an hour before the web-ex roundtable teleconference started. The meeting ended up as a teleconference, as the shared desktop facility would not work. This being the first web-ex conference where I was the host, I realize that I should have done a rehearsal. Having sent the combined log of priority comments to all attendees, we did however have something common to hold onto. After the 4-hour teleconference covering two reports, solutions to most issues were agreed upon. Now, I *only* had to implement the agreed solutions, get final Draft 2 EOT material, and replace all in-text EOT material with the final Draft 2 EOT material. The 4-hour TC was exhausting and I dropped dead in bed before my children went to bed.

**Wednesday** (*16-hour working day*)

Within normal working hours, the entire day was devoted to getting the final Draft 2 EOT material right.

Unfortunately, issues already identified from the review of table shells were still pending because the statistician and programmers had had to work on the pivotal study as a priority over our 3 abbreviated interim reports. Rather than showing understanding towards this prioritisation, I should have made more noise from the start. A timely solution could perhaps then have been reached. Instead the noise started the week before when the statisticians suddenly announced that they also would not have time to correct the titles in the EOT material that we were to send for final review. The number of inconsistencies was unacceptable and we had promised to fix it, so finally a programmer from another project was brought onboard our project for two days. As the programmer was new to the project, I had to invest a whole day providing very specific input on approximately 600 titles and reviewing the output from the programmer. Considering that I had plenty of more substantial issues related to the interpretation of the safety findings, this was bad timing. It should have been done before Draft 1 review as previously requested.

After normal working hours, it was finally possible to do some undisturbed writing, accompanied by a menu of frozen pizza and buckets of coffee.

**Thursday** (*8-hour working day when I actually managed to be at a barbecue with friends and family after work!*)

Statisticians and programmers are BANNED from my office. OK, they had to disturb me a few times, but basically I was able to get on with my work.

**Friday** (*14-hour day. Looking forward to the weekend. But I know that will be busy too.*)

The final EOT material was due Friday morning at the very latest for the two reports I was writing. It was only available for one, and when I was replacing the first in-text table, I noticed that numbers had changed. 4 hours later it was ready, and—luckily—the old numbers were valid, so I didn't have to change them after all. In the afternoon, the EOT material was finally available for the second report as well. However, I had enough going on with the first report to keep me busy Friday night.

It was indeed a busy weekend.

**Were the objectives for the week achieved?**

The reports did go into final review, but I could easily have spent a day more working on the discussions. I would like to have spent more time discussing things with the medical officer and less time with the programmer. I guess I will learn whether I managed to satisfy the reviewers when I get their comments back.

**Strategies to ease stress**

I recommend yoga and never to schedule document review cycles when you have holiday planned or are attending a conference, especially when your deadlines depend on reviewers, statisticians, and programmers meeting deadlines you have provided for them. However, even if every deadline is kept, you still need the review periods to get a

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healthy ABC balance. Lately, I have spent very little time on my B and C tasks, and this may get in the way of another colleague's A tasks. Shared deadlines help: if you can, make sure that you are always working towards deadlines that have been agreed in advance and are incorporated in whatever shared planning software you use.

### Who manages my time?

I do, in collaboration with my superior (pan-galaxy Genmab Medical Writing Director, Ulla Jessen). For the three reports, we looked for the *latest* date they could be finalised without interfering with the critical path of the pivotal trial and subtracted a bit. With this target I made an ambitious plan including scheduling of reviews during the EMWA conference, the Roskilde festival, and my current summer holiday. Bear in mind that submission plans are *not* made to ease stress.

However, even submission plans are not set in stone, and you should always remind yourself that very few people on their deathbed regret that they didn't spend more time in the office..

I think I'll adopt the balanced ABC working life once my holiday is over.

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## Can you edit? Yes, then why not run for the presidency of the United States?

"Mr. Obama arrived at the law school in 1991 thanks to Michael W. McConnell, a conservative scholar who is now a federal appellate judge. As president of *The Harvard Law Review*, Mr. Obama had impressed Mr. McConnell with editing suggestions on an article; on little more than that, the law school gave him a fellowship, which amounted to an office and a computer, which he used to write his memoir, *Dreams From My Father*."

From an article in *The New York Times* (30 July 2008) titled 'Teaching Law, Testing Ideas, Obama Stood Slightly Apart' which is about Obama's time at University of Chicago Law School: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/30/us/politics/30law.html?ref=education>.

Thanks to **Mary Ellen Kerans** (mekerans@telefonica.net) for this contribution.

## Gross! or Gerne!?

In a recent project, I had the 'pleasure' of doing a literature review on maggot therapy. I found these two descriptions of the therapy particularly entertaining.

"It very often happens that a certain part of a wound offers more delicious food than any other part ... hence with only a few maggots they all seek the green pastures ... Maggots are like dogs—they seek the shade ... So voracious are they in their struggle for food that they will stand upright on their heads with their tails in the air, as puppies do to crowd around a basin of food where the basin is too small for the number of puppies. They apparently continue this process of sucking day and night and never seem to tire ..." [1].

"Nature has conferred on certain insect species an unsurpassed degree of biochemical expertise in exploiting down-market environments such as necrotic tissue. The principle *raison d'être* of the adult Greenbottle blowfly ... is to seek out such locations as a nursery for its super-numerous progeny. In circumstances of tissue infestation, termed myiasis, a typical wound can nurture hundreds of Greenbottle larvae, each secreting enzymes directed against devitalized host tissues in order to derive sustenance for growth and differentiation. In bio-surgery, otherwise referred to as larval therapy or maggot debridement therapy ... the *modus operandi* of non-parasitic larvae is hijacked in order to cleanse and debride wounds for the benefit of the host. Interestingly, these stowaways often compete with microbiological colonists but triumph nevertheless by virtue of their bactericidal secretions" [2].

The therapy has barely changed during the last 75 years, but the descriptions have. Can the words influence a patient's reaction from "yuck!" to "yes!?"

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### References:

1. Baer WS. The treatment of chronic osteomyelitis with the maggot (larva of the blow fly). *J Bone Joint Surg* 1931, 13:438-75
2. Smith AG, Powis RA, Pritchard DI, Britland ST. Greenbottle (*Lucilia sericata*) larval secretions delivered from a prototype hydrogel wound dressing accelerate the closure of model wounds. *Biotechnol Prog* 2006, 22:1690-1696.

## Deadlines

"I love deadlines. I like the whooshing sound they make as they fly by."

### Douglas Adams