

Out On Our Own

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Editorial

Our gathering in Budapest last month was, as always, fun and this time a little different. We welcomed you to a new-look Freelance Business Forum (FBF) after polling you in February on what you hoped to gain from FBF attendance and your preferred meeting environment. Refreshments fuelled an informal atmosphere and, with experienced freelance colleagues in circulation, we were able to inject some dynamism and creativity into our discussions on common issues that affect us all. Between us, we conjured the FBF that you wanted. How do we know that? You told us so in a straw poll at the end of the meeting. We will try this format again, so next time, be sure to come along and join us at the Florence FBF in November 2014.

In this June issue of Out On Our Own (OOOO), we continue Alistair Reeves' and Susanne Geercken's English language resources series. This

time the duo explore printed and Internet punctuation resources and, more generally, Internet language resources.

PCG, 'the voice of the freelancer' in the UK continues to inform us on a practical level, this time with tax-related issues, in the second article in the series. Michelle Storm Lane keeps us on the right side of the taxation tracks.

Alysia Battersby, a relative newcomer to freelancing, takes a light-hearted look at combating loneliness when working from home. Kathryn stands in for Raquel as Tool Box guru in her review of online document storage facilities, while Anne McDonough provides a touch of humour in 'Freelance Foraging'.

We hope you enjoy this issue's varied content; do keep your ideas and articles flowing in!

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A writer's 'best friends' – recommended language resources for (medical) writers (2)

Susanne's part of this article in this series is dedicated to punctuation:

Experience has told me that for many native and non-native speakers of English – and medical writers are no exception – punctuation feels like a tedious and confusing business. At least this was how I felt before I attended my very first EMWA workshop many years ago, which happened to be 'Punctuation' by Alistair Reeves. Does not this tell us something about the sustainability of EMWA workshops? For those of you who do not have the time or opportunity to attend a punctuation class, let me recommend some 'good friends' again.

Eats, Shoots & Leaves

Yes, this IS a book on punctuation,¹ despite the somewhat quizzical title (for an explanation, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eats,_Shoots_%26_Leaves). As you might guess, this book by Lynne Truss is not

an ordinary language resource. Ever since it was published in 2003, it has met with quite some public attention in the English-speaking world and has sparked discussion unusual for a book on the rather mundane subject of punctuation.² So what is so special about it? Her book gets you thinking about punctuation, your own attitude towards it, and the wonders and beauty of (the English) language. Lynne Truss takes a journalistic approach to punctuation. I particularly recommend the book to those of you who rather try to avoid dry language textbooks and stern grammar talk. Lynne Truss talks about the impact of (modern) life on punctuation and about the impact of punctuation on life: apart from an overwhelming array of everyday-life poor punctuation examples, she gives several intriguing historical stories on the impact (poor) punctuation can have on politics. She even reports about a comma that became a matter of life and death. I should not withhold the fact that, interspersed

among the anecdotal information, the book does feature punctuation rules, but dished up in a form that I think even those allergic to grammar will survive. Last but not least, I recommend this book because Lynne Truss, like many of us language lovers, has a passion for punctuation and good grammar, and I find her enthusiasm contagious.

The Penguin Guide to Punctuation

For those of you who want no journalistic fuss, I recommend this book³ as a down-to-earth alternative to Lynne Truss. I appreciate *The Penguin Guide to Punctuation* because it provides clear and practical guidance on each of the punctuation marks, focussing on the basic rules, and avoiding too much detail. The book even includes a brief section on abbreviations and on the most important rules for capitalisation. I particularly appreciate the fact that R. L. Trusk – who grew up in the United States and later studied and taught linguistics in England – refrains from taking sides when explaining the difference between British and US punctuation usage. *The Penguin Guide to Punctuation* is best suited for writers looking for an introduction to English punctuation.

Chicago Manual of Style

When I look for help with more sophisticated punctuation problems, I like to turn to *The Chicago Manual of Style*,⁴ a reference work that many of you (at least those who work with American English) may know of or have heard about. Among many other details on style, the book contains valuable guidance on trickier aspects of punctuation like the use of the comma with adverbial clauses and phrases, or the correct usage of different types of brackets and dashes in complex sentences. You will find a section on ‘hyphenated compounds’ and detailed advice on hyphenation with pre- and suffixes. My own volume is bookmarked in the sections on bulleted lists (capitalisation, punctuation within enumerations), quotations, and on the correct abbreviation of names, titles, and academic degrees. While the recommendations to be found in *The Chicago Manual of Style* should not and cannot be regarded as universal truth, I have often been glad to obtain guidance on controversial issues of style and punctuation in this widely recognised work.

AMA Manual of Style

The same is true for the *AMA* (American Medical Association) *Manual of Style*.⁵ Medical writers will find an abundance of guidance on issues of style

and punctuation relevant to our field: punctuation and capitalisation of the different table headings (column headings, row headings); hyphenation and capitalisation of words preceded by numerals, Greek letters or per cent signs; recommendations on the spelling of eponyms (e.g. whether ‘Graves disease’ should be spelt with or without the apostrophe), the correct spelling of expressions like ‘2.5-fold’ and suggestions for punctuation in enumerations and bulleted lists.

While both the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the *AMA Manual of Style* are relatively expensive (around 30–35 Euros) to buy new, both volumes can be easily obtained second hand at a lower price.

Let me close by reminding you that *The Write Stuff* (TWS)/*Medical Writing* itself has published a number of contributions on punctuation in previous issues, notably Stephen de Looze’s wonderfully creative, entertaining, clever, and educating article about the slash⁶ and Alistair’s numerous comments on controversial aspects of punctuation in the ‘Myths about English’ series (This series exploding 50 myths about English ran in *The Write Stuff* (TWS) from Vol. 15(1) in 2006 to 17(1) in 2008 and was followed up by three further articles that can all be found in the TWS and MEW Archive on the website.), and the ‘comma issue’ (Vol. 16(2) of TWS in 2007 was devoted to the use of the comma) of TWS.

In the last issue, Alistair restricted himself to paper resources. He has three Internet resources to recommend this time:

Once, in the days before the Internet, deciding whether to write ‘pleural space’ or ‘pleural cavity’ (as I had to recently), or making similar choices between terms, meant much laborious research in journals, dictionaries, textbooks, and glossaries. Of course, you could always ask a few experts, but in many cases this had unsatisfactory results because of personal, regional, and even institutional preferences. I was once emphatically told by a consultant in a London teaching hospital (X) that the correct term to use for ‘congestive heart failure’ was ‘a low-output state’ because ‘it is much more precise’. A few months later, I was editing an article on congestive heart failure for a fellow opinion-leader (Y) and suggested that we use ‘low-output state’ because X had said that this was a more precise term. ‘Oh! You don’t want to listen to what X says’, said Y, ‘He has all sorts of funny ideas’.

Writers, editors, and translators often kept card index collections that gradually grew as ‘correct’ or ‘most appropriate terms’ were found or decided upon, and they transferred these into electronic databases as soon as the Internet became available.

Many of these collections have been turned into useful – and sometimes very large – searchable glossaries dealing with specialist areas of science and medicine for which there were no other resources.

Let me start with *Springer Exemplar*.

A frequent approach to finding the right terminology nowadays is to use search engines – primarily, of course, Google – to search for terms and compare how many hits there are for similar terms. One of the problems with this is that the whole of the search engine is searched, including every URL and document that happens to contain the string being searched regardless of its source – and most websites have never seen anything like quality control (QC), so many are teeming with automatic translations, inconsistencies, and errors. Searches can be refined in certain ways, e.g. putting a minus sign before words that you *do not* want to search. Or, for English terminology, you can search only pages from the USA, UK, Ireland and Australia, and other English-speaking areas. But whatever you do, in Google at least, searching for ‘time-table’ also returns hits for ‘timetable’ and ‘time table’. So this sort of search is not suitable for deciding whether a term should be written as one word, with a hyphen, or without a hyphen. And decisions should be based on the number of hits only if there is a really clear difference – often you have to decide between a 60–40 or a 70–30 split, for example, which with small numbers is not wide enough to decide that you have found the right term. Also, a comma separating two words is disregarded, which means that the number of hits includes those where the words in your term happen to follow each other separated by a comma.

A more reliable database to search in is the Exemplar archive set up by Springer Science & Business Media and the Center for Biomedical and Health Linguistics called Springer Exemplar (<http://www.springer-exemplar.com>). Exemplar searches over 1900 journals and close to 4000 books from Springer’s collection to find published examples of how a word or phrase is used in the following areas: life sciences, medicine, engineering, mathematics, computer science, business, and law. It is continuously updated with new content.

They offer what they call a ‘snippet search’ which enables you to enter a string and see how many hits are returned. It still does not differentiate between ‘time-table’ and ‘time table’, for example, and also ignores commas, but is much better than Google for several reasons:

- Every hit is returned in context with the number of hits. You can click on any of the

hits to see the source it was retrieved from. This also brings up the option to obtain the entire content at a price or download it if you already have an account with Springer.

- You search only in the subject areas given above – mainly life sciences and medicine.
- Many of the documents are peer-reviewed, properly edited, and undergo QC, so the content you are searching in is much more reliable than that of general search engines.

The results for the pleural *cavity* or *space* search were 1943 hits for pleural cavity and 1702 for pleural space, so the outcome was pretty clear: I decided the terms are interchangeable and chose cavity to be consistent with other terminology used in my text.

The site also includes other information primarily of interest to writers and linguists – for example, the year the term was first found is also displayed, and a breakdown of the subject areas is also given, which is useful when deciding whether accepted terms or fixed phrases (which are actually medical and scientific collocations) are more frequently used in one speciality than another.

Exemplar is on offer as a free beta version at present, so I am encouraging as many people as possible to use it as frequently as possible so that it is not discontinued because of underuse. Let us also hope that it remains a free service. Anyone who worked as a writer or editor before the days of the Internet will realise what a fantastic resource this is.

Dictionaries and glossaries

As so often with the Internet, I recently came across the patient.co.uk site by accident while clicking around, as usual looking for a particular term. What caught my attention was that they have a section called dictionaries and glossaries under <http://www.patient.co.uk/directory/dictionaries-and-glossaries> which, it says ‘provides links to websites explaining medical terms, phrases and words’. No editor can resist the temptation to follow such links.

From its name, the aim of the site is obviously to provide information for patients, but it gives access to a large number of dictionaries (also in the USA) and glossaries which will certainly be of use to anyone working in the medical writing and communications business. The link above takes you to the dictionaries and glossaries landing page, and as an example, clicking on MediLexicon Medical Dictionaries takes you to the <http://www.medilexicon.com> site, where, amongst other things, you

find a dictionary of medical abbreviations, a medical dictionary based on Stedman's, and an enormous dictionary of medical equipment and surgical instruments which must cover every possible medical device, with an explanation of each.

The dictionaries and glossaries site also offers access to the Glossary of Health, Social Care and Information Technology compiled by the NHS Care Records Service, which in turn provides links to webpages and factsheets for keywords and will do a direct Google Search for each keyword.

I am still exploring what this site has to offer – so all I can say is visit it for yourself and see where it takes you!

In the next quiet moment you have, search Google for 'Dictionaries Glossaries Medical Scientific' and be amazed at what is retrieved: a vast amount of helpful resources awaiting discovery.

Oxford Dictionaries website

Apart from providing information on all the dictionaries and reference works that the Oxford University Press has to offer and a wealth of information and curios about the English language, the Oxford Dictionaries website has a whole area with writing advice under <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/words/better-writing>, covering grammar, spelling, punctuation, writing help, abbreviations, and much more. The explanations are simple and 'matter-of-fact' with plenty of good examples. The layout is such that you can either read through it

systematically like a book, search for specific items, or ask questions, either serious or fun ones, such as 'Apart from "angry" and "hungry", what other common English word ends in "gry"?' (you will have to go to the website to find the answer). Click to the 'Spelling' and 'Usage' sections for explanations and help with lists of 'grey areas' or common errors and questions, such as 'words ending in -ance and -ence', 'words ending in -able and -ible', 'shall or will', 'he or she versus they', 'double negatives', and 'may or might'.

Readers are encouraged to let us know about their favourite language resources for future issues.

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Getting savvy with tax: Five questions to ask yourself

You may be familiar with the words that Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1789: 'In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes'.

One could say that human discovery has made greater progress in delaying the former than solving the latter – 225 years on we are still certain to receive the dreaded tax bill!

However, what is less certain is, 'just how much tax must we pay?'.

Large companies have whole departments geared up to answer this question. Freelancers do not have that luxury, which means that it can become a tedious and confusing chore. The confusion is compounded by the fact that freelancers sit in a rather nebulous gap, neither employer nor employee, which can make tax planning all the more complex.

Nevertheless, it is critical to get it right. There have been cases of freelancers finding that they owed hundreds of thousands in retrospective tax,

interest and penalties, because they did not understand how the rules applied to them.

Conversely, when you hit upon legal and ethical ways to save a lot of money, tax suddenly becomes a great deal more interesting!

Here are five questions to help you reflect on your current tax situation:

1. Am I clear about my employment status?

Across EU member states the law is set up to police the border between employment and self-employment. The authorities seek to identify cases of 'sham self-employment', where someone who claims to be freelance works in such a way that they might as well be their client's employee.

These laws exist for two reasons. The first is to protect workers from being forced into self-

employment and losing their employment rights against their wishes. The second is to protect governments from reduced tax revenues; the tax for employees can be higher than for the self-employed and in some isolated cases people have gone into 'sham self-employment' purely as a tax-avoidance measure. The unfortunate consequence is that freelancers who are legitimately running their own businesses can still be treated with suspicion by the authorities.

All EU member states have legal tests to establish a worker's employment status. This decides whether you should be treated as employed or self-employed for tax purposes.

In the UK, for example, the tests focus on three areas:

- *Direction and control*: does your client supervise you in the way a boss would?
- *Personal service*: are you obliged to do the work yourself at all times, rather than appointing a substitute if you so wish?
- *Mutuality of obligation*: is the client obliged to keep offering you work and are you obliged to accept it?

If the answer to these is 'yes', then you could be 'deemed employed', which means that the UK tax authorities would seek to recover additional tax and national insurance. Who they choose to recover the tax from depends on your chosen business structure. If you are a sole trader, your client would be liable whereas if you invoice via your own limited company, your company would be liable under the terms of Britain's IR35 legislation (for details please see <http://www.pcg.org.uk/IR35>).

Most EU states use various ways to establish the degree of 'subordination', in other words, the ability of an employer to 'control' an employee. Other rules vary from state to state. For example, in Spain, freelancers who invoice more than 75% of their income to one client are required to draw up a contract with the client specifying that they are 'financially dependent' on that client.

It is therefore very important to understand the rules in the country (or countries) where you operate, so as not to land yourself, or your client, in an expensive mess!

2. Am I using the most effective legal form?

Most countries offer the choice between operating as a self-employed person (also known as a sole trader or autonomous worker), or incorporating as a

company. Other forms, such as partnerships, could also be appropriate.

The pros and cons of each choice vary from country to country. In the UK, for example, setting up a limited company can be a commercially sound, tax efficient decision, as long as you are not liable under IR35. A company is very quick to set up and there is no minimum capital requirement.

In Germany, on the other hand, it would not make sense for a freelance medical writer to form a capital company, such as a GmbH or UG. As a medical writer with an academic background it is usually possible to be accepted by the German fiscal authorities as a 'liberal professional'. Liberal professions or 'freie Berufe' do not pay trade tax and avoid a great deal of bureaucracy. As a liberal professional you can still achieve the 'limited liability' advantage of a limited company by taking out liability insurance and having the appropriate contractual provisions.

3. Which taxes am I liable for?

The basic principles apply across Europe. As a business you pay tax on your profits (total turnover minus allowable expenses). This can either be as an individual, a company, or a mixture of both, depending on your chosen legal form.

Some countries have additional levies. Germany, for example, has a particularly complicated tax system. Businesses that are not accepted as liberal professions have to pay trade tax, a communal tax that varies from town to town. A sole proprietor in Munich would pay 3.85% on all 'trade income' above 25 500 euros, along with the normal income tax.

On top of this there is the solidarity surcharge applicable since German unification, which is 5.5% of the income tax. Church members pay another surcharge of 8% or 9%, depending on the federal state they live in. German business owners have to pay a TV and radio levy, once as an individual, and once for each company they own. Every business owner who places orders with journalists or artists (including web designers) has to pay a levy of 5% on top of the payment made directly to the journalist or artist.

Most German businesses are also required to charge their clients 'Umsatzsteuer', or value added tax (VAT), which is passed on to the government. This is normally 19%, although writers can usually charge a reduced rate of 7%. This only makes your services more expensive to customers who cannot redeem the VAT paid. You can also redeem the VAT that you pay on services that you use.

In the UK, you are not obliged to charge VAT until your turnover crosses £79 000 (UK VAT registration threshold for tax year 2013–2014) in any 12-month period, although you can register voluntarily before that. If your turnover is less than £150 000 you can also join the Flat Rate Scheme, designed to simplify VAT accounting for small businesses. Many freelancers find this works in their favour.

4. How should I handle social security?

Across the EU, social security payments, or national insurance contributions as they are known in the UK, are used to build up your entitlement to key state benefits such as a pension and healthcare.

How much you pay depends on whether you are self-employed (a sole trader or autonomous worker) or if you are an employee of your own limited company. If the latter, you would pay the ‘employee’ rates, which can be as high as 40% in some tax jurisdictions.

If you are self-employed in the UK, you normally have to pay Class 2 national insurance contributions at a flat rate of £2.70 per week. You also pay Class 4 contributions of 9% on annual profits between £7755 and £41 450, plus 2% on any profit over that amount (UK Class 2 and Class 4 rates for tax year 2013–2014).

In Germany, it is obligatory to have health insurance, but self-employed persons can choose to switch to private cover if they wish. If you stay in the statutory system, your minimum monthly contribution is 350 euros. You also have the option of joining the statutory unemployment insurance scheme, which varies geographically between 68 and 81 euros.

Pension contributions are currently obligatory only for certain professions in Germany, although the government is in favour of extending obligatory cover to all self-employed professions.

5. Am I making the most of the professional support available?

Freelancer Steve Aspin recalls: ‘When I first went freelancing... I didn’t have any advice, I didn’t use an accountant, I did everything myself, and let’s face it, it was an absolute mess. I really recommend getting advice from day one’.

Taxation is a complex, ever-changing field, particularly if you are part of the growing number of freelancers who work across borders. Investing in qualified professional support can help you not only to stay on the right side of the law, but also to save time and money. Many accountancy and bookkeeping providers have innovative online or app-based solutions that can revolutionize the way you handle your finances.

Bear in mind that the type of professional support you need also varies by country. For example, in the UK it is usual to obtain tax-planning services from an accountant, whereas in Spain it would be a fiscal lawyer.

A good starting point for advice is the national representative body for freelancers in the country where you are based. For example, PCG in the UK has a register of accredited accountants who have been specifically trained in the complexities of tax for freelancers.

Other organisations that represent freelancers across Europe are provided in Table 1.

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Table 1: European associations representing freelancers

Association	Country	Website
FediPro: representing iPros from every discipline	Belgium	http://www.ipros.be
Aprotrad: representing translators and interpreters	France	http://www.aprotrad.org
FedAe: representing auto-entrepreneurs from every discipline	France	http://www.federation-auto-entrepreneur.fr
VGSD: representing self-employed persons, freelancers, and small businesses with typically less than ten employees	Germany	http://www.vgsd.de
ACTA: representing autonomous workers from every discipline	Italy	http://www.actainrete.it
ANITI: representing translators and interpreters	Italy	http://www.aniti.it
PZO: a representative body for freelancers, organised as a collective of networks focusing on specific professions	Netherlands	http://www.pzo-zzp.nl
PCG: representing independent professionals from every discipline	UK	http://www.pcg.org.uk

The Loneliness of a Freelance Writer

Pre-freelance naivety?

When I decided to be a professional freelance writer 2 years ago, I drew up a long list of the challenges that lay ahead. The list included setting up a limited company, a business bank account, a website, and a social media profile. It never occurred to me that loneliness was a challenge that should feature on my list. In fact, I was looking forward to working on my own. The thought of having nine uninterrupted working hours a day filled me with eager anticipation. I had been sharing an office with other people and unless I worked outside office hours, there was never really a moment's peace. Inevitably one of us would be talking with a visitor and we often chatted amongst ourselves. As jovial as this was, I could not help feeling that I was not focused enough because of the background noises and distractions. Another attraction of working alone was not having to sit through lengthy group meetings or get involved in office politics. Looking back I do not think anyone could have embraced the singleton working life more emphatically than I did when I started freelancing.

The reality

The solitude was wonderful at first. For over a year I rarely thought about my secluded working life. However, a couple of months ago, I noticed that I was getting quite chatty on emails with clients. I would sometimes end business emails with discussions about whimsical matters such as good places to go on holiday. Of course, I would delete the whole lot and condense it into a short concluding sentence such as, 'I hope the weather is nice where you are', and send the email off. This is when I realised that the isolation of freelancing had started to affect me. Was I missing the office chit-chat after all? Maybe the team meetings and politics were not as tedious as I had made them out to be?

Strategies to combat loneliness

I then considered various strategies for re-connecting with people. While I keep in touch with freelance writers around Europe through EMWA, and I also belong to an informal network for freelancers residing in the South West of the UK, I felt I needed to meet more local people. I had heard of freelancers going to the local café or pub just to be around other people and I tried this a couple of times. Although I enjoyed it, I could not resist the uplifting café lattes and enticing chocolate caramel shortbreads. My

expanding waistline, therefore, put a halt to that venture! Besides, cafés are not the easiest place to meet like-minded people. So, I turned to the internet to locate an existing freelance writing community in Cardiff. This is when I stumbled upon Meetup (<http://www.meetup.com>), a website dedicated to organising local face-to-face meetings. I became a member and searched for writers' groups in my vicinity but found none. However, since any member can start a Meetup group, this is my next task. I'm hopeful that the Meetup group will ultimately bring together other freelance medical writers and it would be great to build such a community in South Wales.

Although I was certain that meeting local freelance writers would help to combat loneliness, I also found myself wanting to be part of an organisation. For this I had to look beyond cafés and online forums and decided to join the parent-teacher association at my daughter's school. This is not something I would have volunteered for a few years ago. Who wants to sit through another long meeting after a full day in the office? Well actually, someone like myself, who has not interacted with a soul the whole day. In fact, I find the meetings quite stimulating. I also volunteered to collect tickets for Santa's Grotto during the Christmas Fair and delighted in the bustle and activity behind the scenes. I cannot say I enjoyed the stress of facing long queues of irate parents waiting for their children to see Santa after their appointed time. However, I did like the challenge of improving the ticket system next year so that we could get more people into Santa's Grotto, raise more money, and reduce the waiting times.

Rekindled team spirit

Back at my desk I am still working on stand-alone projects but what has changed is that I feel part of a working community again. I have not established a local writer's group yet, but by joining the school association I have become part of a community with a common goal and regular face-to-face team work. Why was I suddenly enjoying committee meetings and team interaction? I now realise that my 'freelancer loneliness' was not about knowing too few people, but about missing the spirit of team effort. It goes without saying that the pub visits after the association's meeting are an added bonus!

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Tool Box

Document storage in the cloud

File storage

As medical writers we amass a lot of documentation – not only do we produce it but we also review, edit, and need it for reference purposes. Although I must confess to a propensity for printing off material to review and edit, I think it is safe to state that the large majority of the information we work with is produced and filed electronically. Not only do we have to consider where we store our documents and how we access them, we also need to think about having back-up copies in case we experience computer issues. Back-up copies may be stored on mobile hard drives and USB sticks, but we have to be able to keep these items secure plus it is another item to remember to take with us when we travel.

So in this electronic age of document production, how can we store our ‘paperwork’ securely yet ensure we have easy access?

What about online storage?

Online or ‘cloud’ storage is certainly an option to consider when having to store the large capacity of electronic data we now accumulate. Cloud storage can be defined as the ‘storage of data on remote servers’ and may be used for storing original material as well as back-up files. Some online storage providers also provide file sharing options to enhance collaboration within teams thus avoiding the need to send large, zipped files via email which can be slow and laborious.¹

What are the pros and cons of online storage?

As with all document filing systems, there are advantages and disadvantages. Online storage providers will argue that storing data in this way minimises the need to carry important data around with you on a USB stick, portable hard-drive, or CD thus reducing the risk of your data being stolen or misplaced while you are travelling. This means of virtual storage may also reduce a loss of data due to damage to your computer or to portable ‘physical’ filing systems and if your computer does malfunction, your data should still be accessible via another device. Furthermore, traditional on-site storage devices may be more susceptible to corruption from viruses compared with online filing systems.¹

Dropbox

Being new to Dropbox.com (<http://www.dropbox.com>) – one of the many online storage providers available – I have found it useful for storing copies of reference materials such as regulatory guidelines, disease area guidance, and literature references. I would also use it as a back-up solution to store photos and training materials. With Dropbox, you open an account and download the software onto your computer.

However, since your files are saved on a remote Dropbox server, you can still access these files from another computer on which the software is not downloaded because you can log-in to your account via the Dropbox website and access your

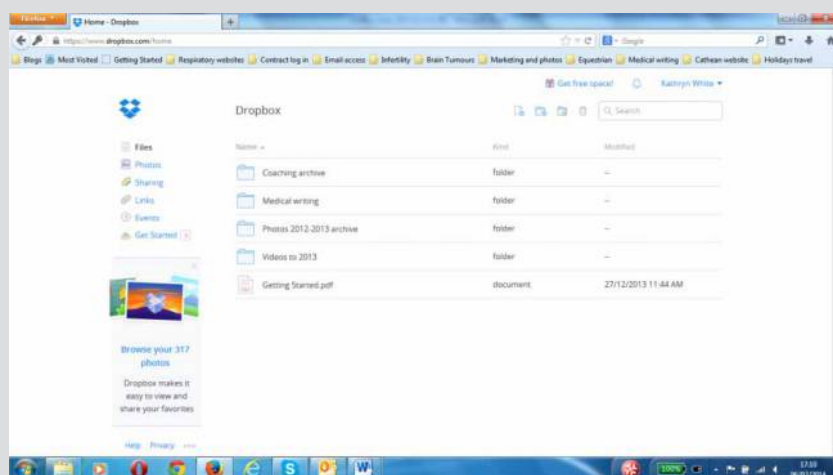


Figure 1: Dropbox.

folders that way. This is really useful if you are travelling or working from a client's office and want to access files that would otherwise be stored on your computer at home. Depending on your provider, you may also be able to access your files via your phone or tablet and synchronise your data across multiple devices.²

Security is, of course, a priority especially given the confidential nature of our work. Most companies encrypt the filed data using a system that is equivalent to the security used by your online banking service.³ Despite this level of security, I, personally, would be reluctant to use 'the cloud' to store confidential client documents although one may argue that it may be more secure than carrying such data on a USB stick in my hand luggage when travelling.

Which online service to use

This is largely dependent on what service capabilities you are looking for and whether you use a PC or MAC. Some applications are primarily for syncing and sharing documents, while others are excellent as a back-up facility, enabling your computer to automatically copy your documents to your online folders. I chose Dropbox because it was reviewed in Writing Magazine, which I subscribe to, so I knew it was being used by writers, and I like its simplicity. However in the recent issue of Freelancing Matters⁴ it was noted that Dropbox has experienced breaches of security. Generally, online storage providers offer a free package which gives you a certain amount of memory space (Dropbox for example provides up to 2 GB free of charge). Additional space may be purchased or you can upgrade to a service that provides a greater storage capacity and for these there is usually a monthly charge. Often, with the charge, comes increased security.

There are many online storage providers out there to consider and it is probably best to chat with colleagues about their experiences with such applications. Here are a couple of weblinks to articles that compare different online storage solutions to get you started:

PC Magazine: <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2413556,00.asp>

Online file storage: <http://www.onlinefilestorage.com/what-is-online-file-storage>

Disclaimer

The information contained within this article represents the opinion of the author based on limited experience of cloud storage. The information should not be used as the only resource for choosing an online storage provider and readers are recommended to seek advice and other information available. The author has no affiliation to Dropbox.com and does not recommend this product above any others.

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Freelance foraging

Anne McDonough sent in this poorly worded public health notice in the office of one of her clients. Anne says: 'Do I have to? I've heard smoking is bad for me!'.

