

Out on Our Own

SECTION EDITORS



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Editorial

Greetings, readers.

For freelancers, receiving feedback is an important process for building a mutually productive relationship with a client. Positive feedback serves to encourage and helps develop core strengths, while constructive criticism is educational and facilitates identifying weaknesses and areas to work on. Hence, in absence of a 'boss' or "annual appraisals", it is the client's feedback that is crucial for the professional development of a freelancer. But perhaps you will agree with me when I state that accepting negative feedback with equanimity is indeed difficult. In her article, Michelle Guillemard, the President of the

Australasian Medical Writers Association and an avid blogger on freelancing issues, presents a few tips on preparing well to avoid unfavourable feedback from the client and handling it effectively if it does happen.

While medical writing is considered an established profession in Europe and the USA, there still are many countries in the world where this is not the case, resulting in a dearth of qualified medical writers to assist the pharmaceutical and healthcare industry, regulatory bodies, and academic and research institutions. It certainly is the case in Evguenia Alechine's homeland, Argentina. From finishing her PhD and leaving academia a few years ago to currently being a successful freelancer, Evguenia has come

a long way. In all this, she has also found time to volunteer for EMWA's Internship Forum to help newbies in a career in medical writing. In this issue of the OOOO, Evguenia tells us her story on how her interest in scientific communication developed into a career in medical writing, why she decided to become a freelancer, and how she plans to soon develop medical writing as a profession in South America.

I hope you enjoy these articles. As always, I invite you to send in your contributions to and suggestions for the OOOO section. Last, but not least, my personal thanks to Michelle and Evguenia for sharing their articles with us.

Satyen Shenoy

Preventing negative feedback and learning from complaints

Bill Gates once said, "Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning".

It's not easy to digest, is it? Think about a time when you were given negative feedback, someone complained about your work, or a project didn't go as well as it should have.

It's much easier – and you'll often feel better – to simply dismiss negative feedback as someone else's problem that has nothing to do with you. But this approach could be doing you more harm than good. In the business magazine *Fast Company*, Denis Wilson wrote:

Research shows people that are better at handling negative feedback tend to be more successful – and those that can't are less so. ... "Being able to accept feedback requires a modicum of critical self-awareness", says Mark Murphy, founder of Leadership IQ and author of Hiring for Attitude. "If you are of the belief that you never make mistakes, you probably have a narcissistic personality disorder, and it's going to be really hard to give you feedback. Somebody who has enough self-awareness to recognise they might need feedback, that's the person that's going to say 'Even when I'm on my best game, there's always something I could have done to be better'".¹

Learning from complaints and negative feedback

When you're a freelance writer, it's unlikely a client is going to write you a letter of complaint as such. Still, you may need to deal with negative feedback from time to time. Or, a client may complain about the way a job was managed if a project didn't run as smoothly as you would have hoped.

Sure, we could get defensive and grumpy every time someone doesn't like our work. But, a better approach would be for us to learn from negative feedback and complaints. We can, and should, listen and react – meaning we should aim to understand the complainant's point of view and put steps in place to ensure the same sort of negative feedback doesn't happen again. Like many things in life, a big part of dealing with complaints and negative feedback comes down to mindset. The outcome of any complaint can be influenced by our attitudes and how we choose to handle a situation. Only we can control how a situation or a person makes us feel. And, accepting we have the power to turn a negative into a positive can be a very poignant realisation.

Preventing negative feedback

Obviously, the best way to deal with complaints is to ensure they never happen in the first place. That's clearly easier said than done, but, there are

several very good strategies for preventing negative feedback which will help reduce the risk of client and customer complaints. Being extremely thorough in the pre-planning stages of every project is key.

Here's what I suggest:

- **Spend a lot of time pre-planning and gathering requirements.**² I need to know exactly what I'm doing, how I'm helping the client, and what elements are mandatory to the project.
- **Send samples of your work**³ **before you agree to go ahead on a project.** I want my clients to know my writing style, what I'm capable of, and what they're in for.
- **Ensure all terms of working together are clearly defined.** Have systems in place for delays, late payments, and emergencies.
- **Refuse work that is too far outside of your comfort zone.** I know my strengths and weaknesses, and if I don't feel I can do a good job, I won't take on a project.
- **Keep in touch during the project.** Recently, I was rewriting an entire website dedicated to radiation therapy. It was 60,000 words – which is pretty much an entire book! Do you think I wanted to send that to my client without showing at least a bit of it to them first? We agreed I would send them a few



pages so they could see how I was progressing. They gave me feedback, which I then applied to the rest of the project. The result? When I sent the first draft of the 60,000-page booklet, I only needed to spend about an hour tidying up some very minor points during the revision process.

- **Document absolutely everything in writing.** Everything you agree to do should be documented via email – and, even if you chat on the phone, summarise the key points in writing so there's no confusion later.
- **Spell everything out.** Leave no stone unturned when it comes to defining requirements, mandatory inclusions, costs, processes, your writing style, and deadlines.

The benefit of doing all these things is not just preventing complaints. These processes also provide a smooth working relationship, ensure you're delivering what the client or customer wants, and give you a good chance of securing ongoing work with the client.

If you do get a complaint or negative feedback

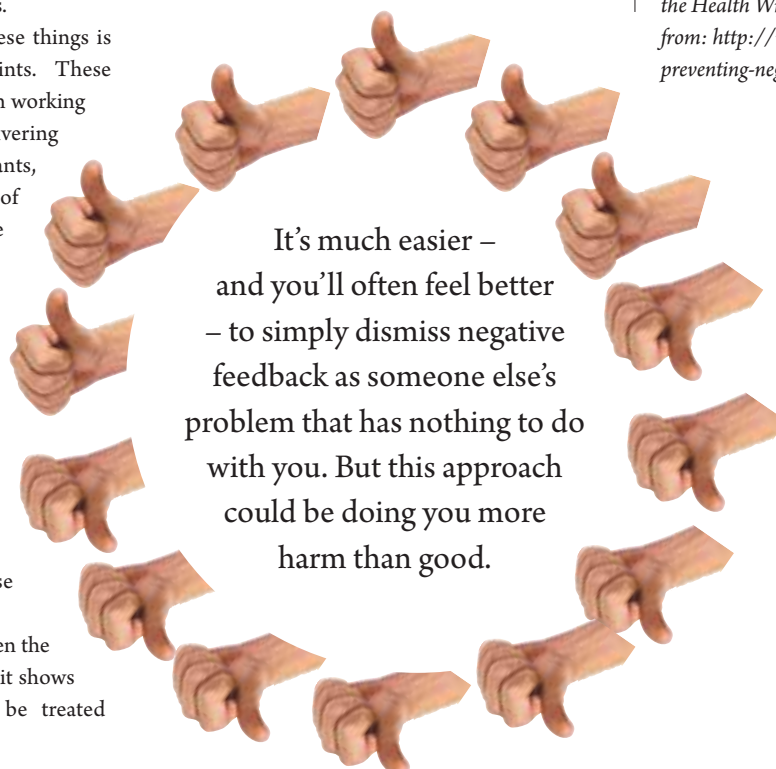
You can still do all those things I mentioned above and get complaints or negative feedback. Unfortunately, this is a part of running a business and even working in general. We can't please everyone all the time.

Remember, if someone has taken the time to tell you they're not happy, it shows they care. All feedback should be treated

seriously and graciously, with clear acknowledgement and a response. After all, if someone is critical of your work and never mentions it, you'll never know there's a problem – and this can be worse.

The other thing is, you're not always in the wrong if someone criticises your writing.⁴ So how do you know if feedback is justified or not? Assuming everything is your fault can be just as damaging as assuming nothing is your fault.

Perhaps the answer lies in another powerful quote from Wilson of *Fast Company*: "You do need a degree of resiliency and the ability to filter the junk data from the good data in order to improve."¹



References

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2. Guillemard M. Gathering requirements before you start writing. *Health Writer Hub* [Internet]. 2015 Nov 03 [cited 2017 Jun 29]. Available from: <http://www.healthwriterhub.com/gathering-requirements-before-you-start-writing/>.
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Note: A version of this article was previously published as a blog post by Michelle Guillemard on the Health Writer Hub website and is available from: <http://www.healthwriterhub.com/preventing-negative-feedback/>

Somewhere on my own, but never alone: My career path from Argentina to science communication



Since I joined EMWA almost 2 years ago, I have always wanted to tell my story, and after reading the article by Ricardo Wilches,¹ published in the last issue of *Oooo*, I was inspired to share my own career path as being “Oooo” in South America.

Only after I finished my PhD and left academia, I realised how much I enjoy writing (and editing others’ writing), especially about science, health, and medicine. But, it was not before I met Jackie Johnson that I knew medical writing is the career path I want to pursue.

The possibilities of me becoming a medical writer in Argentina were not that much. Most of the people do not know medical writing, while those who do, outsource this task to professionals abroad. Despite having a significant pharma industry and several CROs based in the country, medical writing is quite an unknown field in Argentina.

Therefore, when I started, I had to face some challenges. First, I had to acquire medical writing and scientific editing skills. Since there are no such courses in Argentina, especially not in English, I decided to take two parallel paths: attending the workshops held at EMWA conferences and enrolling in AMWA’s self-study Essential Skills certificate.

Moreover, since I aimed to pursue a career in scientific communications, specifically as a scientific editor, I started looking for training opportunities; albeit without much success. At this point I decided to make an investment in attending my first EMWA conference, in Munich. What happened at and after the conference is hard to describe – from networking with medical writers from all over the world and attending amazing workshops, to joining EMWA’s social media team. Without much awareness, my relationship with EMWA grew into invitations to become a table leader for the Show IT, Share IT session, the Freelance Business Forum, becoming

a section editor for *Medical Writing*, and running a career coaching at the Internship Forum, among other projects.²

In the past two years, I have already attended three conferences and taken at least a dozen workshops, and this allowed me not only to gain new skills, but also to build confidence in my abilities as a science communicator. I consider myself an eternal learner, so taking courses and attending workshops is what I love doing; but, of course, this is not the only way to become proficient in scientific communication.

To be honest, the learning part was quite easy, the difficult part was finding my first clients. At this point, I made the decision to freelance for several international companies before reaching out to individual clients in Argentina. This experience had its pros and cons. On one hand, I received a tough training and gained experience. On the other hand, I started working on an extremely low rate to “compensate” for my lack of experience. However, this experience taught me the kind of work I wanted to do as a freelancer while also allowing me to gain credibility in the eyes of prospective clients. Now, after freelancing for several companies and individual clients, I landed a full-time position as a scientific editor and writer for a company that not only acknowledges my scientific value but is also in line with my personal beliefs.

One of the most amazing things that I experienced in this path was being able to share my knowledge. While I was in academia, I really enjoyed teaching. Now, as a science communicator, I offer training to those who do not have the possibility to travel abroad and attend high-quality workshops. Science communication in Argentina is often hindered by two shortcomings: a lack of proficiency in English and absence of appropriate communication training in the curriculum of science and healthcare professionals. In the light of this reality, I started

offering scientific communication training at private centres, biomedical organisations, and universities – one of my current responsibilities that gives me the utmost joy.

In line with my calling to pursue teaching, I found myself offering career development coaching to PhDs in and outside Argentina. Many current and former scientists are not aware of their value to the scientific communication industry and the career options out there. I feel that it is both my duty and my reward to inform and inspire these highly qualified prospective scientific communicators.

It seems like time has flown since I started on this path. Recently, I also earned my ELS certification from the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS) after taking the exam in Birmingham right before the last EMWA conference. Not only was I the first Argentinean to join EMWA, but now I’m also the first certified ELS in South America. With all this and my own experience in mind, my next challenge is bringing medical writing to South America, in collaboration with Ricardo Wilches from Colombia.

My goal behind writing this article is to inspire those who might also be “out on their own” in countries outside Europe to explore the medical writing career path, even if this path is a bit bumpy and it takes more time to reach the finish line.

References

1. Wilches R. Becoming a science communicator – in my own words. *Med Writ* 2017;26:78–9.
2. Alechine E. The black tag. *Med Writ* 2017;26:64–5.

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Upcoming issues of **Medical Writing**



December 2017: **Preclinical studies**

This will include articles on designing, analysing, and reporting preclinical studies.

The deadline for feature articles is September 11, 2017.



March 2018: **Vaccines and immunotherapies**

This issue will be about regulations, study design, outcomes, analysis, and other issues specific to vaccines and immunotherapies.

The deadline for feature articles is December 11, 2017.



June 2018: **Public disclosure before editing**

This issue will cover public disclosure and publication of clinical trial results, especially including recommendations and requirements from the European Medicines Agency.

The deadline for feature articles is March 15, 2018.



September 2018: **Editing**

This issue will cover micro- and macro-editing, quality control, software for editing, and how to manage collaborative editing.

The deadline for feature articles is June 11, 2018.

CONTACT US



If you have ideas for themes or would like to discuss any other issues, please write to **mew@emwa.org**.



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