

How to get your first job as a medical writer

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Abstract

A successful medical writer needs to be an excellent time manager, communicator, and team player, and show great attention to detail and commercial awareness, in addition to possessing core writing skills and the ability to evaluate and contextualise data. Above all, there must be an enthusiasm to learn. Researching and networking within the medical communications industry will help build a picture of a medical writer's day-to-day activities. An online profile and error-free application closely tailored to the specific role and employer of interest, followed by illustrating relevant skills and potential with examples during interview, will supplement successful off- and on-site written tests and lead to the start of a career in medical writing.

I had barely even heard of medical writing as a career when I came across the advert for trainee medical writers in the back of *New Scientist* while writing my PhD nearly 18 years ago (job hunting in the olden days ...). But I knew I had found my home in medical communications from the outset, for the same reasons that I still love it today: for the opportunity it affords to marry scientific interpretation with creativity and to communicate engaging truths in a fast-paced and exciting commercial environment, and because I get to work with a team of such bright, inspiring, and dedicated people. Do you want to know more?

How to find out more about medical writing and if it's the career for you

Although we market careers in medical communications more effectively these days, many people will still first hear about the career by word of mouth from ex-colleagues or university alumni who have gone on to become medical writers. It's a good idea to meet and talk with as many people as you can in the industry. This will help you build a picture of what a medical writing role is really like day-to-day. You might start by attending university careers events about "What to do with your further science degree" and alternative careers in biomedical science, but the internet is also a rich source of further information.

The European Medical Writers Association (EMWA; www.EMWA.org) is a network of professionals that represents, supports, and trains medical communicators in Europe. (This journal, *Medical Writing*, is the official journal of EMWA). The EMWA website, which houses a plethora of resources, is an excellent place to get a feel for what a career in medical writing encompasses. The organisation hosts bi-annual conferences for networking, discussion, and professional training, and via the website, you can access archived webinars, a job board, a reading list, and a comprehensive *Resources for Medical Writers* section. The EMWA also publishes *A Career Guide to Medical Writing*,¹ which includes a useful overview of the different types of medical writing.

The American Medical Writers Association (AMWA; www.AMWA.org) is the equivalent organisation in the US, with a mission to promote excellence in medical communications and to provide educational resources in support of that goal. The services and resources offered are broadly similar to EMWA and the organisation curates a Medical Writer Certified (MWC®) credential in collaboration with the Medical Writing Certification Commission.

On the AMWA website you will find a New Medical Writer Toolkit of resources specifically aimed at people looking to start a career in medical communications.

MedComms Networking, which is available at www.medcommsnetworking.com, serves a global community of medical communications specialists, and now hosts a sister website, www.FirstMedCommsJob.com. This new site serves as a one-stop shop for an array of services for those wanting to know more about medical communications careers, with a particular focus on the UK marketplace. You will find advice there about researching the market and tips for preparing your CV and cover letter. There are profiles of people in the business, including some medical writers who are 18 months into their first role. Resources include career guides for client services and account management roles, as well as medical writing roles, in addition to a map of agency office locations and access to virtual meetings on a range of topics in the website's archive. Importantly, you will also be able to find out about future live meetings organised by

MedComms Networking. These regular events, which are free to attend and predominantly held at various locations across the UK, take the format of presentations on different aspects of medical writing careers, followed by the opportunity to ask questions of the large numbers of medical communications agencies in attendance. They are therefore an excellent opportunity to network directly within the industry and to learn more from the inside. Specialist recruitment and "Careers for scientists" websites may also be a useful source of information.

As you become more confident that a medical writing career could be for you, you might consider approaching companies for work experience. However, bear in mind that offering work experience is a significant investment for busy agencies; always be professional, appreciative, and mindful of confidentiality, and make the most of the opportunity to work amongst

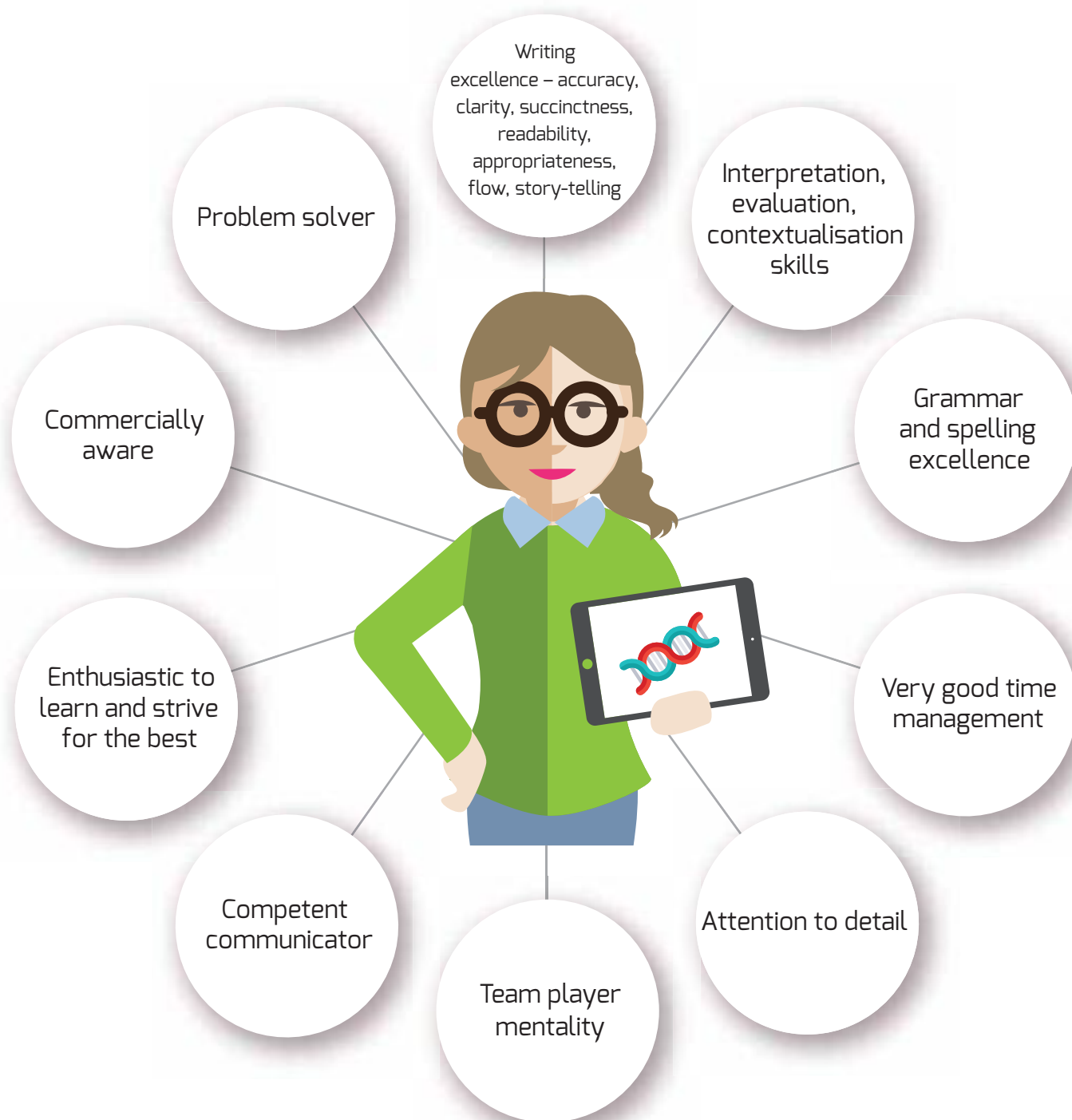


Figure 1. Attributes of the ideal medical writer

medical writers and their wider account teams. July and August are peak work and holiday periods, so try to be flexible with your availability; requests for work experience in Quarter 1 may be easier to accommodate.

A PhD or not?

More than 75% of scientific team members at my company have a PhD, and medical writing certainly requires the scientific interpretation,

critiquing, and contextualising skills honed during further degree study, but good medical writers also need skills beyond these, and I have many very successful medical communications colleagues who do not have a PhD. It is often less the *knowledge* that you gain from a PhD and more the *skills* developed, such as project management, problem solving, organisation, and the ability to communicate complex concepts, that are of interest to a potential medical communications

employer. So, if you think you have the right combination of attributes, don't let the lack of a PhD put you off finding out more, and be ready to convince an interviewer that you have gained the relevant skills via a different route (for example, through undergraduate projects, hobbies, and outside interests, or contributions to magazines, blogs, or websites). And don't forget, there are career pathways in medical communications outside of medical writing itself

(for example, account manager or medical editor).

What makes a good medical writer?

Excellence in all types of written scientific communication is the hallmark of a good medical writer. Content must be accurate, clear, succinct, readable, appropriate for the objectives and audience, flow intuitively, and form an engaging narrative. The ability to interpret, evaluate, and contextualise data is critical, as is complete competence in grammar and spelling. These are the core writing skills, but in addition, and to be successful and fully rounded, writers need a number of additional attributes (Figure 1). They need to be very good at time management, able to work accurately at speed, juggle multiple projects at once, manage their own workload, and constantly reprioritise as circumstances change. Medical writers must have outstanding attention to detail, demonstrate commercial awareness, and have a team player mentality. They should be highly competent in all forms of communication and presentation (via email, on the telephone, and face to face), and they must have an enthusiasm to learn, work hard, and always strive for the best. Medical writing is a passion and career, not a 9-to-5 job.

Where to look for roles and how to make a successful application

What to look for

If you are seeking an entry-level position, this will usually be advertised as an *Associate Medical Writer* role. Companies seeking *Medical Writers* will invariably be looking for previous experience. Roles are advertised on company websites, on virtual job boards of organisations such as the International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP; www.ISMPP.org), the EMWA, and MedComms Networking, as well as via recruiters and on LinkedIn.

Managing your online profile

Before initiating a formal application or approaching companies directly, ensure that you manage your digital footprint, and your online LinkedIn profile in particular. Think of yourself as a marketable commodity; consider how someone might feel viewing your profile for the first time and remember that first impressions



count both digitally as well as face to face. Choose a professional and personable profile photograph, which doesn't show you in an environment that would allow a potential employer to pass judgement. Include appropriate and well-expressed content in the *Summary*, *Experience*, and *Education* sections of your profile. As a graduate, your *Summary* should briefly describe your background and future goals. Include relevant work experience or positions of responsibility in the *Experience* section. In the *Education* section, detail your degree, further degree(s), and information about large projects completed and your subjects of expertise. You can add personality to your profile by talking about your interests, hobbies, and any volunteering you do. This can help "bring your profile to life" for potential employers, who will be interested in finding employees who are a good fit with their organisation's values, in addition to people with the right skills set. Then you can get "LinkedIn active". Become confident using LinkedIn as a networking tool, follow industry leaders and, if appropriate, offer opinions and comments. Share content with peer groups on LinkedIn and start to make connections with people who may be able to help you break into the industry. Many recruitment agencies can provide further advice and resources on managing your online profile.

Your CV and cover letter

A few of the largest medical communications agencies have regular (annual or biannual) intakes of associate medical writers, but you could also start your job search by submitting a speculative CV and cover letter to companies that interest you. In a career with written com-

munication excellence at its heart, your CV and cover letter are your first assessment and opportunity to show that you have the skills of a potential medical writer, and they should be tailored to the specific role and company you are applying to. They must be engaging, succinct, and intuitively presented. Detail your relevant experience (for example, academic papers you have authored, contributions to scientific blogs, examples of communicating science to different audiences) and explain why you have concluded that you have the desire and skills to train as a medical writer. Your CV and cover letter need to be grammatically correct and free of errors, so check them, get someone else to check them, and then check them again. With hundreds of applications crossing the desks of hiring managers each year, yours won't make the cut if it's not perfect.

The assessment process – what to expect and how to succeed

Figure 2 details a typical application and assessment pathway for an associate medical writer position.

Research the company

In order to tailor your application, you will need to thoroughly research the company to which you are applying. A company's website is a good place to start building a picture of the kinds of work that the company does, and what a job there might entail. With this information, you can make a compelling case for why you think you would like to work there. Google searches will help you find industry news, pharma websites, press releases, and awards news. It's a good idea



Figure 2. Associate medical writer: typical application pathway

to be familiar with hot topics in the broader healthcare environment. Recruitment sections are better on some company websites than others, but most websites will give names of people who work there, allowing you to research individuals further.

Assessment

For associate medical writer roles, if your initial application is of interest, the next phase is assessment, usually consisting of off-site test(s), on-site test(s), and interview(s). Successful applicants describe it as a rigorous process, but one that is realistic of the challenges you will face in the role, working accurately and to deadlines. Larger agencies employing groups of associate medical writers in regular intakes sometimes group the assessment activities in single-day events at assessment centres, where potential candidates are assessed both individually and in teams. Group exercises assess team-working and communication skills, and there are often opportunities to network with current medical writer employees as a part of the structured agenda.

Written tests

Written tests are set to uncover whether you have the basic writing and interpretation skills to succeed in a medical writing role, and marks will be assigned for accuracy, readability, inclusion of all the requested information, and appropriateness for the objectives and audience. You will also have the opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge of publication structure and what belongs where, as tests will often involve tasks such as writing a manuscript introduction based on an abstract, writing an abstract for a manuscript, or developing a set of PowerPoint slides. Always read the specific instructions provided carefully, but you will usually need to do some background research in addition to accurately representing the information provided to you. Completion of short error reading tests (spotting grammatical, spelling, and consistency errors in a paragraph of text) is frequently requested during on-site assessments, as accuracy and attention to detail are such critical skills for successful medical writing. If you already have medical writing experience, the written tests may also offer opportunities for you to demonstrate your knowledge of project and publication development processes.

Interviews

Once you have shown you can write, interviews are your opportunity to demonstrate your potential in all the other areas needed to be a successful medical writer, so be prepared to show your enthusiasm and communicate your skills, illustrating with examples as appropriate. Ask who will be interviewing you before the day, so you can research them ahead of time. “Why do you think you would make a successful medical writer?” is a typical opening question that you should be ready to answer. You may not have medical writing experience, but knowing the attributes sought will help you to draw relevant parallels with things you have done. Having researched the company to which you are applying, try to have a couple of questions ready to demonstrate your specific interest in working there. Pre-read Good Publication Practice 3,² the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors criteria for authorship,³ and the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry guidelines⁴ (or country equivalent). In addition, make sure you have a good overview and understanding of the pharmaceutical drug- and device-development process. The interview is also your chance to ask questions about the specific role for which you are applying and the company’s culture, to see if this opportunity is that right fit for you. In particular, you may want to ask how training is coordinated, the types of work and therapy areas you may work on, the development opportunities and typical career pathways available, the office environment, and the style of senior management. Ask if you can speak with someone currently working in a medical writing role (if not present at your interview) to understand the ‘day-to-day life’ at that company.

Employment success

The ability to write clearly and accurately, a passion for science and communicating it, and an obvious enthusiasm to learn are absolute requirements for securing employment as a medical writer. The more of these ideal medical writer attributes you can demonstrate, the greater

your chances of success. A good fit with the company’s values and approach will also be at the top of a hiring manager’s list of requirements. Medical writers have to follow a multitude of processes, procedures, and guidelines as part of their day-to-day work, but how to succeed at that can be taught, whereas most of the attributes sought are inherent. To succeed, more than anything else, you need to use every opportunity through the various parts of the assessment process to highlight your potential.

And finally – a view from the inside

In writing this article, I have spoken to many medical writers who joined the industry over the past 18 months. Here is a selection of their first impressions of the career.

My medical writing career satisfies my scientific mind in a commercial setting where what we do has a direct impact on improving patients’ lives. I work with fascinating people, the pace of change is intellectually stimulating, and the challenges constantly evolve, such that no two days are ever the same.

- “It’s a fascinating job, which enables you to see so many perspectives on communicating the latest data.”
- “I’ve been amazed at the diversity of work that medical writers can support and facilitate – I’ve learned so much in my first year – there’s never a dull day as a medical writer.”
- “I wish someone had told me earlier how interesting and varied it could be, as I would have got into this career sooner.”

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Conflicts of interest

Mary Gaskarth is an employee of CMC AFFINITY, a division of McCann Health Medical Communications.

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Donna Miceli's story

I was in my late '40s when I first began my career as a freelance medical writer. Back in 1962 when I graduated from college, with a dual degree in journalism and speech, becoming a medical writer was the farthest thing from my mind. In fact, I didn't know such a career existed – and perhaps it didn't at that time. Like so many in my generation, I got married soon after graduating and, before I knew it, I was the mother of four. Also, like many in my generation, I made the decision that, if I were going to have children, I was going to raise them myself. I managed to keep my writing skills sharp by volunteering to do publicity for community groups and, eventually, earning some money with a variety of freelance writing jobs, including writing copy for small advertising agencies.

When the company my husband worked for transferred us to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (US), I had to leave my job as Assistant Director of Public Relations at a large hospital in Buffalo, New York. It had been my first full-time job in years, and I had loved it. My children were grown and I was at a loss for something to do until a former colleague told me about the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA). I immediately made plans to attend one of their annual conferences, became a member, and launched a new career. It turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made. Thanks, in large part, to my association with AMWA, I enjoyed a successful career as a freelance medical writer, editor, and public relations consultant that lasted 27 years.

Now to the question at hand: What steps did I take to plan for retirement? The truth is none. I loved what I was doing, and I guess I thought I would just keep writing until no one wanted my services anymore – or my brain stopped functioning. I had the good fortune to be married to a man with a good job, with benefits, so I didn't have to worry about health insurance, mortgage payments, and all the other expenses of

owning a home and educating children. His job also provided him with an excellent 401(k)-based retirement programme, including supplemental health insurance for both of us. I had also invested some of my earnings in an Individual Retirement Account.

In 2000, at age 62, my husband accepted a generous early retirement package and we moved to Florida. I had no intention of retiring. Fortunately, my husband supported my wish to keep working. Just 7 years later, he received a diagnosis of advanced non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. He died 9 months later, and my life changed forever.

I continued to work on existing projects, as much as I could, while my husband was going through treatment. My regular clients were wonderfully supportive during that period and after my husband's death. I eventually began accepting work again, but became a bit more selective about the projects I was willing to tackle, avoiding those with unusually tight deadlines. After 5 years of widowhood, I decided it was time to downsize, so I sold my four-bedroom home and moved to an apartment at a continuing care retirement community. Shortly after I made that decision, I decided it was probably time to retire. Surprisingly, the decision was easier than I anticipated.

So what am I doing now? I'm still writing! The community I live in publishes a beautiful quarterly magazine and I am one of the staff writers – as a volunteer, of course. I am also on the Board of Directors and several committees. In addition, I have been actively involved in starting a staff scholarship programme for our young employees. I continue to be active in AMWA and still attend the organisation's annual conferences. There is life after retirement.

Donna L. Miceli
Freelance medical writer for
27 years and past AMWA
Executive Committee member



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