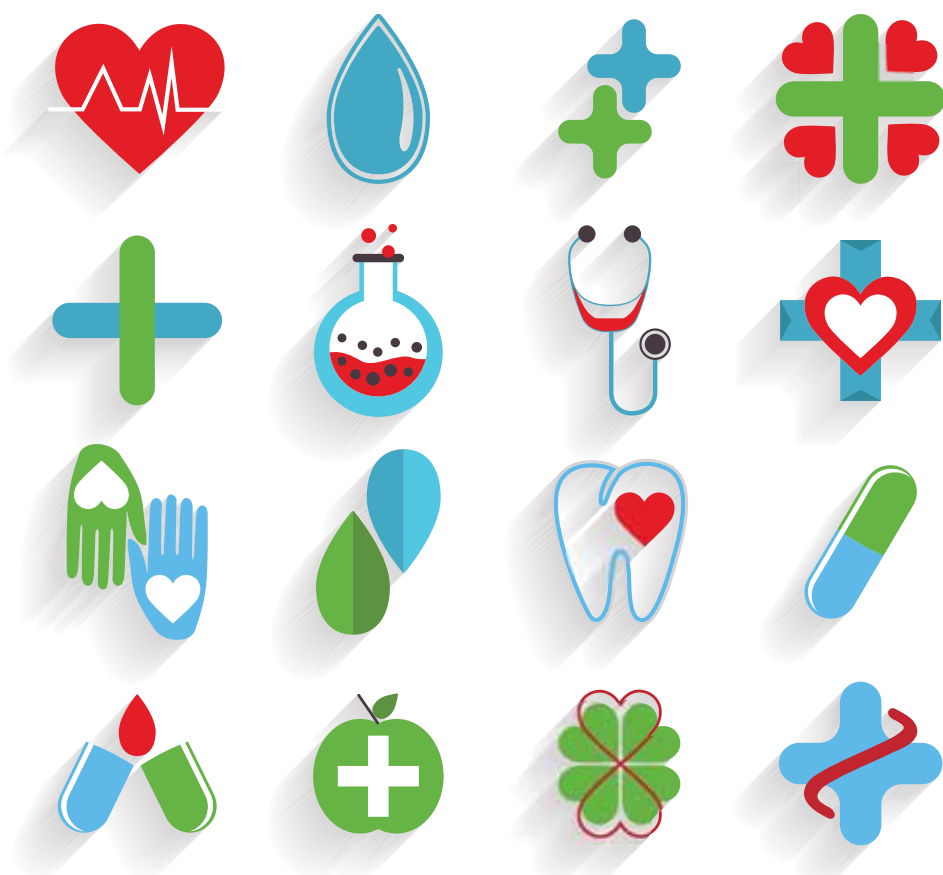


# Top ten questions about careers in MedComms



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## Abstract

NetworkPharma has been running a series of careers events and workshops aimed at entry-level jobs in MedComms, and publish a careers guide, *From Academic to Medical Writer*, which is updated annually in March. In this article, Peter Llewellyn from NetworkPharma, and Annick Moon, author of the careers guide, answer some of the most prevalent questions asked by entry-level candidates at the workshops they have attended over the past decade. The areas covered focus on jobs in MedComms, particularly medical writing in the UK.

## Introduction

For almost a decade, NetworkPharma has been running a series of careers events and workshops aimed at entry-level jobs in MedComms, with a focus on medical writing. Events held in Oxford, Manchester, and London, have provided scientists with the opportunity to learn more about writing and other careers in MedComms and to meet industry experts. Details of all events, past and future are freely accessible at [www.FirstMedCommsJob.com](http://www.FirstMedCommsJob.com)

## Careers events and the MedComms community

The portfolio of events in collaboration between NetworkPharma and the Oxford Medical Sciences Division of the University of Oxford are now an embedded feature of the careers calendar, and are open to Oxford University students and staff, as well as students from other universities, and people working in relevant industries. The annual Lunchtime MedComms session in January kicks off the year with presentations from industry experts and exhibitions from agencies. The careers guide, *From Academic to Medical Writer*, is updated annually in March, and in response to the success of the previous Careers Insights workshop, from May 2016, a new one-day event will be held to provide the opportunity for attendees to discuss MedComms face-to-face with prospective employers.

In this article, Peter and Annick answer some of the most prevalent questions asked by entry-level candidates at the workshops they have attended over the years.

## Ask Peter

### 1. What is MedComms and what do the agencies actually do?

This is where all the conversations start and it's more or less impossible to answer unambiguously! If you line up several MedComms specialists and ask that question you can get very different answers. This is one reason we prioritise the 'meet the

agencies' sessions at our careers events. Anyone wanting to pursue a career in MedComms should understand the wide range of services that are encompassed and that agencies can have very different approaches and cultures.

In essence, we say; 'Medical communications provides consultancy services to the pharmaceutical industry to help raise awareness of medicines.' We then go on to describe how, under this over-arching description, the MedComms agencies specifically have their roots in medical education, and traditionally produce the more highly technical scientific materials such as journal manuscripts for peer review, learning resources, slide kits, and posters and presentations for conferences. Much of this work, by definition, involves working closely with external experts. In principle it seems easy to draw a line between MedComms and the more marketing-led agencies such as branding and PR at one end and the more arms-length, accredited continuing medical education (CME) providers at the other. In practice, though, the edges are often blurred and many MedComms agencies are a part of broader communications groups that enable them to work beyond those edges anyway.

For many though, the absolute truism is that in MedComms the accuracy and robustness of the data is paramount and it is a business community that is heavily dominated these days by post-graduate level writers who are well equipped to understand, interpret and communicate the science appropriately to the intended audience. Increasingly the work is led within client companies by medical affairs teams rather than marketing teams, and it's a feature of the MedComms community that most individuals are working at an international level, usually commissioned by head offices of the global pharma companies.



## 2. So, what should I consider when looking for an entry-level writing job in MedComms?

It's unlikely, though not entirely unknown, that an entry-level writer will work from home from the start. Most agencies will expect their new staff to be based in the office initially at

least, learning their craft. So aside from practicalities like where those work opportunities are based, the key message is that a trainee writer's job descriptions may sound similar from different agencies but the day-to-day work experiences can be quite different. So, one way or another, gain insight into as many different agencies as possible, and try to identify what best suits you, before taking the first job.

You'll find agencies that are small, independent and privately owned, where the Directors sit across a desk from you and where it's case of all hands on deck when any deadlines are to be met, which is a lot of the time. Other agencies are bigger and more formally structured with cross-functional teams operating on long established programmes quite independently of each other. Some agencies have developed particular specialisms perhaps in therapy areas such as oncology, or in terms of their outputs, for instance publication planning, events management or digital type work. Some will pride themselves on being 'full service agencies'. In some agencies the writers do much more client-facing work than in others where account managers will take that role.

A good question to ask a prospective employer is, what training opportunities are on offer? In many cases most training will be done on-the-job led by your more experienced colleagues. In some agencies there are formal training programmes and induction periods, in others less so. Some will encourage you to attend external courses such as those offered by EMWA, others will be less

inclined. It is less a matter of size and age, and more of culture. No one approach is better than another overall, but certainly may be so for any one individual. So again, aim to find the best fit for you.

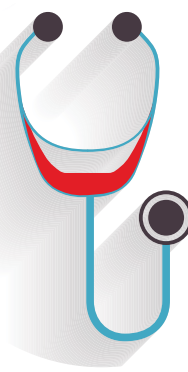
## 3. Do agencies offer paid internships, work experience or shadowing opportunities?

It's a personal soapbox of mine that more MedComms agencies could offer more such opportunities. In reality, though, most don't. Most will say the reality is that their employees are too busy with deadlines constantly looming and that it's not fair on either the existing staff or on the individuals looking for genuine work experience to subject them to that added pressure. Having said which, some agencies are now introducing more formalised paid internship programmes, which can then lead to a full-time job, and we do what we can to highlight these via the information service at [www.FirstMedCommsJob.com](http://www.FirstMedCommsJob.com)

There's no harm in approaching the agencies directly but it can be difficult to find the right person to contact and the right time to do so when they are so busy. Networking one way or another via careers events and your own contacts can be a valuable way to find those opportunities.

As a general point, I'd say this is a very competitive business to enter and any opportunities you can find to demonstrate your writing skills and aptitudes are worth grasping enthusiastically. So you might offer to help your colleagues with their presentations and papers, or volunteer to help with a specialist publication. These days there are plenty of opportunities to contribute to online resources and, for instance, to blog about your own interests.

The posts don't have to be directly related to medical science let alone your own fields of interest. Be aware, though, that even social media posts can and will be spotted and then scrutinised for grammatical errors and typos!



#### 4. What are the entry requirements for a medical writer in MedComms?

You'll meet many successful writers in MedComms who don't have a PhD or other post-graduate qualification, but they tend to be the ones who joined MedComms a while ago. Today it's fair to say there is an emphasis on employing entry-level writers with at least a PhD and maybe post-doc experience. It's even fair to say there is a drift overall towards employing that same level of staff in account management roles, though there the backgrounds are much more varied.

If you don't have the post-graduate qualifications, you will probably need some good experience, maybe in publishing or the pharmaceutical industry.

On the positive side, for those of you with a PhD, this is a business area that welcomes your experience. Above and beyond the scientific and technical expertise and analytical skills you bring, you will also have valuable transferable skills from your experience of writing, presentations, project management and team working.

One key message, though, is that MedComms, like any agency business thrives on people and their people skills and the chemistry between people. You'll never be working alone; you will be working in teams and for clients on a potentially wide range of varied projects. The skill of the interviewer is seeing beyond the obvious skills and qualifications on paper. Your aim is to get the interviewer to take notice of your unique offering.

#### 5. What are the longer-term career opportunities for a medical writer in MedComms?

It's not so long ago that MedComms was regarded as an invisible business and you'll meet many writers who say they simply stumbled into it. That has changed, much more information is available and people joining now can see quite formalised career pathways stretching ahead if they want them. It also offers lots of flexibility, though, once you have entered and, of course,

offers some people the opportunity to gain some very valuable skills they can then go on to offer as freelancers, for instance. But within the agency community now, typically a new medical writer will join in a trainee capacity, maybe as an associate medical writer, and continue and progress within writing departments to reach principal writer and editorial team leader positions. Others will move to roles that are less about writing and more about managing and directing accounts, for example. In many companies there is also opportunity to move within the bigger communications group to allied services or to move countries. It is, after all, a growing, global business.

A key message is to remember that once you get that entry-level role, the rest is down to you. There is no real barrier to what you want to do or what you can achieve. My advice is always aim to get as much experience as possible, and put the effort in, and you'll find this a great business to be in if you like science but maybe aren't so keen on the lab work. The opportunities are boundless and the rewards likewise, financial and intellectual.

### Ask Annick

#### 6. What can I expect in the writing test?

You need to impress the agency with your CV and covering email, and maybe in person at a careers event, before you'll be sent a writing test. Then to make it to interview for a writing job, whether as a trainee or a senior writer, usually, you need to do a writing test. If you're a newbie,

to get this far, you've probably done your research into MedComms agencies so you should be familiar with the types of writing you'll be expected to produce.

What agencies are usually looking for in the writing test is whether you can take scientific information

about an illness you probably know nothing about and communicate it to a specified audience. MedComms agencies usually want people with a strong scientific background, the ability to follow a brief, and excellent language skills. The aim of the writing test is to assess your analytical skills and your aptitude for writing.

The standard of writing among successful candidates is high so you need to check everything you send to the agency carefully. An initial writing test brief is often designed to take about 1–6 hours, although it varies widely, and as a general rule, add on a few hours to the time they suggest it should take you. If you get to interview, be honest about how long the test took. It won't be a negative if it was much longer than specified; they'll likely just be interested to know. Don't be tempted to ask a mate in the industry to proof-read your writing test because if you get the job, depending upon how bad your writing is, they'll uncover your scam.

#### 7. Can I get examples of writing tests?

Practicing your medical writing before applying for your first writer job is difficult, and for many newbies, the first time they do any proper medical writing is the writing test. This was my experience, so whenever I'm asked this question, I describe the two writing tests that I've done.

The first writing test I did was after I'd been working in my first medical communications job as an editorial project manager and I applied for an entry-level medical writer job at another agency. I was sent about fifteen abstracts about hypnotics in insomnia and asked to review them. The review took me twice as long as specified and I got an interview. They gave me feedback on the test at the interview, which was horrifying: spelling mistakes, random commas, and other crimes against writing, which ordinarily, so I was told, would have been an instant fail. However, instead of summarising one abstract after another as





apparently most of the other candidates had done (and what I would have done if I'd thought of it), I read the material and then presented the information by subcategory, added an introduction, discussion, conclusion, and title. They liked how I'd approached the brief, and I was given the job, with the caveat that I had a lot of training to do. This large MedComms agency then sent me on several training courses and I got lots of writing experience.

After nearly two years in the industry, I applied for my next medical writer job. For the writing test, I was sent information about administering parenteral antibiotics in a home-setting. They wanted a 1200-word article aimed at nurses. I bought a couple of nursing magazines and journals and read the articles in them. Then I wrote an article in the same style using the background materials they'd sent me. I gave it to a writer-mate to proof-read and she hardly found anything. I got the job.

To summarise:

1. Read the brief and list the items to be covered;
2. Go through the background materials provided and match up the info with each point in the brief;
3. Read other articles aimed at your audience and then pitch your article in the same way.

#### 8. Will I get feedback on my writing test?

If you get an interview, they'll probably give you feedback on your writing test and discuss areas they think you'll have to work at to improve your writing. If you don't get an interview, it's unlikely that the agency will be willing to comment on your test. It may be frustrating if you've spent ages writing an article and then you get rejected with no feedback, but keep trying. If you are asked to complete a writing test several times, yet never get offered an interview, you may want to consider applying for other entry-level agency jobs, and then once you're in, explore the options of becoming a writer.



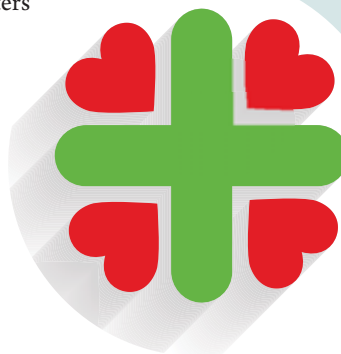
#### 9. Can I work from home as a medical writer?

It would be usual for a trainee writer to be office-based although the arrangements for home workers at MedComms agencies differ. If the home-working policy at the agency isn't mentioned in the job description, then it may be worth discussing at the interview. But remember that agency life is fast-paced and you'll be expected to attend client meetings and conferences, which involves a lot of travelling. As a new writer at a MedComms agency, it helps to be within reach of a major airport. If working from home is attractive to you, then medical writing is a good career option. In general, you need a few years' experience before becoming a principal writer and moving to your luxury garden office in an area with good schools.

#### 10. How do I get into freelance medical writing?

I get asked this by all sorts of people who are keen to jump into freelance writing. My reply is usually that medical writing is a profession, so ideally you need to have an extensive medical writing portfolio before embarking on a freelance enterprise. If freelancing is your long-term ambition, then keep it quiet to start with, i.e. don't mention at the interview. It costs a lot to train a writer, so agencies tend to try and hang on to them, meaning that the opportunities in MedComms may make you re-think your freelance plans once you get established. It's a tough choice:

1. Lead a team of writers from an office;
2. Sit alone in your pants writing fabulous articles.



### Acknowledgements

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### Conflicts of Interest and Disclaimers

Peter runs numerous events and publishes a range of information services for individuals working in and around the MedComms business, funded by the community of MedComms agencies. Annick provides freelance consultancy services to the MedComms industry.

#### Author information

Peter Llewellyn has a background that encompasses clinical research, sales and marketing within big Pharma and also time spent working within specialist MedComms agencies. As Director of NetworkPharma Ltd, Peter has spent nine years developing the MedComms Networking community, which is focused around the services provided at [www.MedCommsNetworking.com](http://www.MedCommsNetworking.com) and as Director of Burntsky Ltd he has developed specialist Jobs board services and has recently launched the unique FirstMedCommsJob information service for wannabe MedComms specialists.

Dr Annick Moon is Director of Moon Medical Communications Ltd and has provided communications consultancy and writing services to the pharmaceutical industry for over 15 years.

She has collaborated with Peter on a series of careers events and is author of the careers guide, *From Academic to Medical Writer*.