

Is cheap outsourcing a threat to your career?*

Michelle Guillemard

Health Writer Hub, Sydney, Australia

Correspondence to:

Michelle Guillemard
Sydney, Australia
editor@healthwriterhub.com

Abstract

Many writers are concerned that the rise of cheap freelance medical content outsourcing will be a threat to their careers. Yet while outsourcing may be a cheaper option, there is no guarantee that the quality will be superior. There are also numerous ethical considerations associated with the practice of outsourcing content.

Keywords: Freelance medical writing, Outsourcing, Writing rates

As a freelance medical writer who has clients all around the world, I think about my writing rates most days. Whether I'm quoting for new jobs, competing for ongoing work or bookkeeping, my rates help to give me drive, focus, and a competitive edge. And I'm not alone in this.

Setting rates, as I just discovered after running my freelance medical writing webinar with the Australasian Medical Writer Association, is a topic of interest to most writers. Knowing what to charge and how to charge it and how to get clients to pay is something all freelancers are all concerned with.

There are many tactics I advise writers to use when trying to convince their clients that their rates, while on the more expensive side, are of good value. Yet getting clients to pay a reasonable rate is becoming an increasing concern for many writers amidst the rising climate of medical content outsourcing.

Perception versus reality in freelancing rates

As any freelancer or solo business owner knows, we don't fully pocket our hourly rate. Rates are a complex formula incorporating allowances for tax,

superannuation, expenses, holiday pay, sick pay, and many other bits and pieces. But obviously, our clients don't care about any of this – they only care about the dollar figure we quote.

My quotes are formulated from a combination of factors, including industry benchmarking. Hourly rates for general writers can be anywhere from AUD\$50-\$250. Medical content writers tend to be at the higher end of this scale – particularly if they are also qualified health professionals (namely medical doctors or PhD holders).

Also, the more years of relevant health writing experience you have and the higher the quality of your previous client work, the more you can charge.

Ultimately, when you're working out your rates, you need to be comfortable that the quality of the work you deliver is reflected in your prices.

So what happens when other writers claim that they can deliver the same quality of work as you, for significantly less than your quote?

Medical content writing – The battle has begun

This is a very real scenario that many medical content writers are facing as outsourcing websites continue to grow in popularity. These websites enable clients to find very cheap medical writers. Local businesses that might ordinarily have found a local skilled writer to complete a project can easily outsource work online at one tenth of the price you or I charge.

Outsourcing websites are transparent, in the sense that a writer's skill, previous work and client reviews are all publicly available. This setup helps to make clients feel comfortable in a writer's abilities – regardless of where writers may be based in the world. On these websites, writers can bid on medical content projects advertised by individuals and organisations. On the surface it seems great – yet when you take a look at the projects advertised, you may think otherwise.

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Write 3000 word article on anticoagulation guidelines. Must have perfect English. Must be able to design 4 creative images. A medical background is an advantage. No plagiarism. Maximum 50 pounds.

50 pounds for 3,000 words? I'd be charging 6 times that fee for the article alone and more for the image design.

What is possibly more disturbing is that individuals commonly request medical writers to ghost-write PhD dissertations, as well as theses and student papers. And there are plenty of writers bidding for these jobs. This means outsourcing websites are playing a serious role in allowing people to gain doctorate degrees and university qualifications by paying writers to do the writing.

The million-dollar question

Does the competitive outsourcing market mean all freelancers will go out of business if we don't start charging 50 pounds for one week's work?

No.

Good clients are willing to pay going rates. So my advice is to find these clients, and if you can't convince the others who are just looking for the cheapest option otherwise, then you're better off without them – because they clearly *only* care about saving money, and their businesses won't survive in the long run with this mantra.

Good clients do exist

Good clients tend to have the mind-set that cheap offshore outsourcing is good for a one-off task, or a more menial task, like data entry. But it is not so great for projects that, if not completed well, would result in serious consequences.

In the health industry, medical content writers operate their businesses on the proviso that they have specialty skills, experience, knowledge, and understanding that comes from years of training and experience in health and medicine.

This ensures that, among other things, we are less likely to make an error which would have dire consequences – for example, accidentally influence a decision a reader made about their health in a fatal way.

Author information

Michelle Guillemard is an Australian health writer and the editor of Health Writer Hub, a resource helping writers to hone their health writing skills (<http://www.healthwriterhub.com>).

Clients who think the same quality of work can be sourced by writers charging cheap hourly rates and churning out projects should consider why we charge what we do. It is not for the hell of it – our rates are based on our skill level. Yet unfortunately, we humans are conditioned to look for the best offer, the cheapest deal.

Who has the skills?

It is not that writers who bid for projects on outsourcing websites aren't as skilled as the rest of us. I am sure some are just as skilled. But I question why a writer would work for \$10 per hour if he or she could charge \$100 per hour.

Also, writers who charge less are often under pressure to complete projects in a hurry so they can start the next project, because completing a high volume of work could be the only way they will generate income in the cheap outsourcing model. Quality inevitably suffers in such circumstances.

Ethical medical content freelancing

There are many ethical issues that taint the practice of medical content outsourcing.

When you come across medical writers with five-star ratings who have 30 projects on the go at once, it's pretty clear that these writers are outsourcing their work to others. What are those poor souls getting paid if the chief project rate is \$10 per hour?

It is a vicious cycle, and clients need to take responsibility for it. These fundamental issues are no different to those experienced in any other industry rife with cheap offshore labour.

We are all probably losing out on some work to outsourcing websites – and we will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

But I do believe that if we shouldn't feel threatened by the outsourcing movement – that is, medical writers who offer to do the same work as us for a substantially reduced rate via freelance marketplaces – if we continue to work on developing our skills and experience, care deeply about the quality of our medical content and find the best types of clients who don't rely on outsourcing models.