

Getting Your Foot in the Door

SECTION EDITOR



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Editorial

“Preparation is half of victory” – as 16th century Spanish novelist Miguale de Cervantes said so well; it is the key to success in any field, even when attending an EMWA conference!

Why, you ask? Anna Isermann and Louisa Ludwig-Begall can definitely answer that

question. They have written a short, inspiring guide based on their first hands-on experience. Here, they have summarised key points on how to prepare for EMWA’s conferences. The authors attended their first one in Prague last May, and have laid out a roadmap for first-time (and even second-time) attendees to get the most they can

from the conference. And by the way, the next virtual EMWA conference starts on November 9, 2023, while the next in-person-conference, in Valencia, Spain, takes place May 7-10, 2024. So start your preparation!

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The hitchhiker’s guide to the EMWA conference: Reflections and recommendations from first-time delegates

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Introduction

The story so far: In the beginning, the Universe was created. This has made a lot of people very angry and been widely regarded as a bad move.”¹

Douglas Adams, *The Ultimate Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*

In 1992, EMWA was created.² This has made a lot of people very happy and been widely regarded as a good move. In May 2023, two newbies, as yet unknown to one another, set out to join the five-day 55th EMWA conference in Prague, Czech Republic. Here, we share our impressions of this journey. This article is a personal reflection on the valuable insights gained, and the vibrant community spirit experienced, at our inaugural EMWA conference. It is also intended to serve as an informative guide for prospective, first-time delegates.

Before the conference

Every journey has a prelude: a time of planning, provisioning, and packing. Pre-conference prep certainly helped us get the most out of our first EMWA conference, so let’s share some to-dos:

Personalise your programme

EMWA conferences offer an array of seminars, plenary sessions, symposia, and EMWA Professional Development Programme (EPDP) workshops.³ They cover every aspect of medical writing and cater to both “old hands” and newcomers. When booking the conference, one is faced with the question of what and how much to select from this tantalising menu (the fact that there is an additional fee for each EPDP workshop may not be a negligible consideration).

To work towards gaining credits for an EMWA professional certificate (a valuable asset for your career!), we would recommend choosing at least one EPDP workshop to accompany the rest of your programme selection. However, do take care not to “overindulge” and remember to budget some time before and after the conference, as to gain EPDP credits, additional two- or three-hour pre- and post-workshop assignments must be completed. EMWA recommends registering for a maximum of four EPDP credit workshops per conference. Having spoken to slightly harried delegates who tried to attend four or more, this seems like a limit one should stick to!

Link and liaise

Apart from one’s personalised programme, another important aspect to focus on during the conference is networking with other medical writers and getting to know the EMWA community. Who is to say this has to wait until the conference commences? Reach out to fellow medical writers in your area on LinkedIn. Ask them if they are also attending the EMWA conference. We were actually on the same

outbound flight and did not know it. Had we but known, the wait at the airport would have been so much more fun and the pre-conference jitters (and taxi fees) would have been a lot less!

Ramp up the reading

Most aspiring medical writers have probably googled “How to become a medical writer”. Information-seekers need look no further than EMWA’s hot-off-the-press “Career Guide for New

Medical Writers”.⁴ The newest edition, created by EMWA’s aptly named “Getting into Medical Writing” Working Group, was released in May this year (available at <https://emwa.org/about-us/getting-into-medical-writing/career-guide-for-new-medical-writers/>). This free career guide is worth reading at any time but is to be particularly recommended before the conference. It gives great insights into the vast landscape of

“We’re a serious organisation with not-so-serious members.”
A fact that, to our delight, was proven time and again from that moment on.

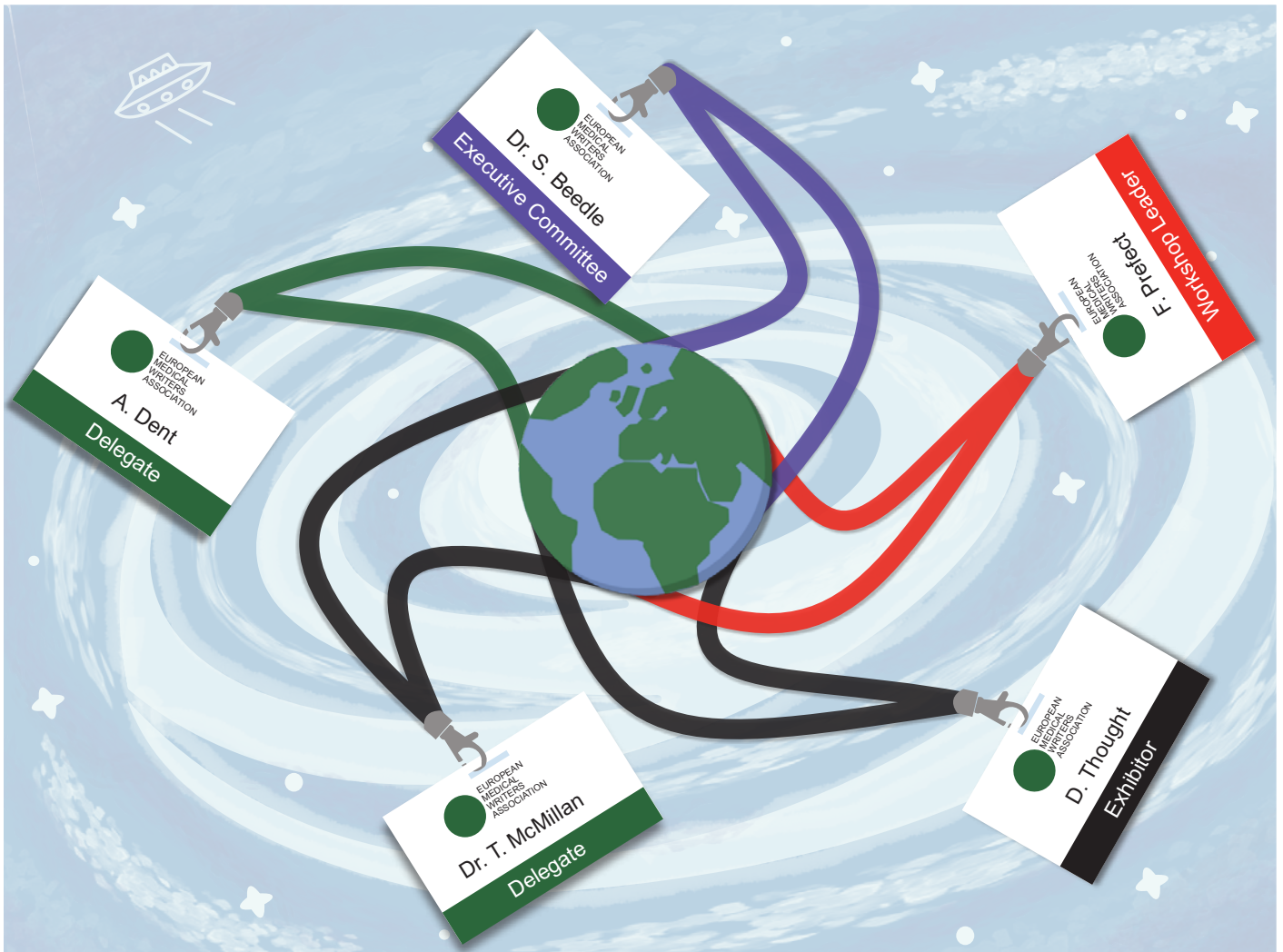


Illustration by Anna Isermann

Figure 1. Decoding the lanyard lingo

medical writing – useful knowledge indeed to help tailor your workshop choices to your preferred field. The guide will send you on an information-seeking mission across the entire conference. Countless unsuspecting EMWA members were accosted with “So, are you in regulatory writing or medical communications?” followed by an eager “And what is it you like so much about it?”. Each answer was delivered with infectious enthusiasm and drove us to delve even deeper!

Clear your calendar

EMWA conferences provide a wealth of knowledge, new impressions, and fascinating insights. Both of us had cleared our schedules for the conference and were glad we did so. While unexpected work still cropped up (doesn't it always?) in the form of prospective client calls and urgent project edits, we managed to stick to the plan overall. If feasible, we recommend

scheduling as little work as possible during conference days. Between studying and socialising, you will soak up so much information that you will have little time or inclination (or indeed energy) for anything else.

Grab your garb

Coming from academia (as is probably the case for many EMWA conference first-timers), we were well-versed in the world of conferences and knew that the dress codes for such occasions can vary widely indeed. What, we both wondered, would a bunch of medical writers be wearing? Our sartorial solution: Agonise for ages, pack every possible item in one's wardrobe (from track to pantsuit), and lug an enormous bag around the conference city (in our case, Prague). Not ideal. So, let's clear this up for future newbies: You can't go wrong with business casual (also, everyone will just be happy to meet you, whatever your go-to style may be).

Embrace the experience

Entering into a new association and a new environment can be daunting. For us, any pre-conference anxiety was immediately extinguished at the Opening Session: Conference Organiser Slavka Baronikova put us at our ease and perfectly captured the EMWA spirit when she said “We're a serious organisation with not-so-serious members.” It was a fact that, to our delight, was proven time and again from that moment on.

During the conference

Lanyard language

Waiting for the opening session to begin, we quickly clocked the different lanyard and name tag colours that everyone had received upon in-person registration. Each colour stands for a different type of delegate (see Figure 1) and first-time attendees are awarded a green lanyard. The

purpose of this colour code is not to exclude but to include; it is intended to act as a bi-directional conversational prompt, letting seasoned members know to involve newcomers in the community and signalling to newcomers whom to approach. So, wear your lanyard colour with pride and let it lead you into interesting discussions!

Programme points

Following on from early-morning yoga (we solemnly swear to join the ranks of the downward-facing writers next year!), the conference programme was packed each day. Determined not to miss a thing, we kicked off each full day (Wednesday to Friday) at 7:45 a.m. and attended as many of the (free) parallel sessions as possible. While we each customised our programme according to individual taste, the "Introduction to Medical Writing" and "Getting into Medical Writing" sessions were a must for us both!

Encountering exhibitors

The programme was generously interspersed with coffee and lunch breaks. These hitchhikers found, however, that indeed "Time is an illusion. Lunchtime doubly so."⁵ We dived into prandial patter with gusto and never noticed the time fly by! Never had either of us met such a welcoming crowd (perhaps unsurprisingly, professional communicators like to communicate!).

Coffee breaks or individual gaps in the programme were an excellent time to talk to the exhibitors at the company booths. We would both highly recommend engaging with the company representatives. They are a mine of information and can often give you invaluable insights and perspectives into the industry (as well as free pens, of course). You never know who you might meet; you could find yourself chatting with a medical writer, a recruiter, a manager, or even the CEO themselves. We found that having phones at the ready was particularly useful on these occasions, both to directly connect on LinkedIn and to scan displayed QR-codes (having a couple of business cards at hand was also a useful, if not essential, option).

Laughter and libations

EMWA conference evenings were enlivened by a networking reception, a conference dinner, and two guided walking tours through beautiful Prague. For many of us, these events ran rather late since we took some expert advice to heart: "Go drinking and close down the bar with other delegates!" said long-time EMWA member Lisa Chamberlain James (who also happens to be a section editor of this very journal).

Thus, social strolls seamlessly segued into drinks at the pub(s) and many happy hours were spent talking all things medical writing with fellow enthusiasts. This is a brief that is easy to follow and is to be heartily recommended to all future first-time delegates!

Conference chronicles

An EMWA conference is an extraordinarily intense and immersive experience. We attended so many programme sessions, gained such a plethora of insights into medical writing, and met so many new people, that both our heads were spinning at the end of each long day. Neither of us slept much because of the intense socialising. Even late at night, we both took the time to jot down some notes (delegates' names, salient information, sage advice). Now, caught up on sleep, but also back to "business as usual", we're both glad to have these conference logs to refer back to!

After the conference

Write, write, write

Since the conference, we have been ticking boxes on a new to-do list (Figure 2). We've been busy with post-workshop assignments, have each got involved with different EMWA SIGs, and have

One EMWA member told us "Go drinking and close down the bar with the other delegates!"

"Write, write, write!" There may soon be two new entries for next year's Geoff Hall Scholarship and, hopefully, our readers will be enjoying the fruits of another of our writing endeavours!

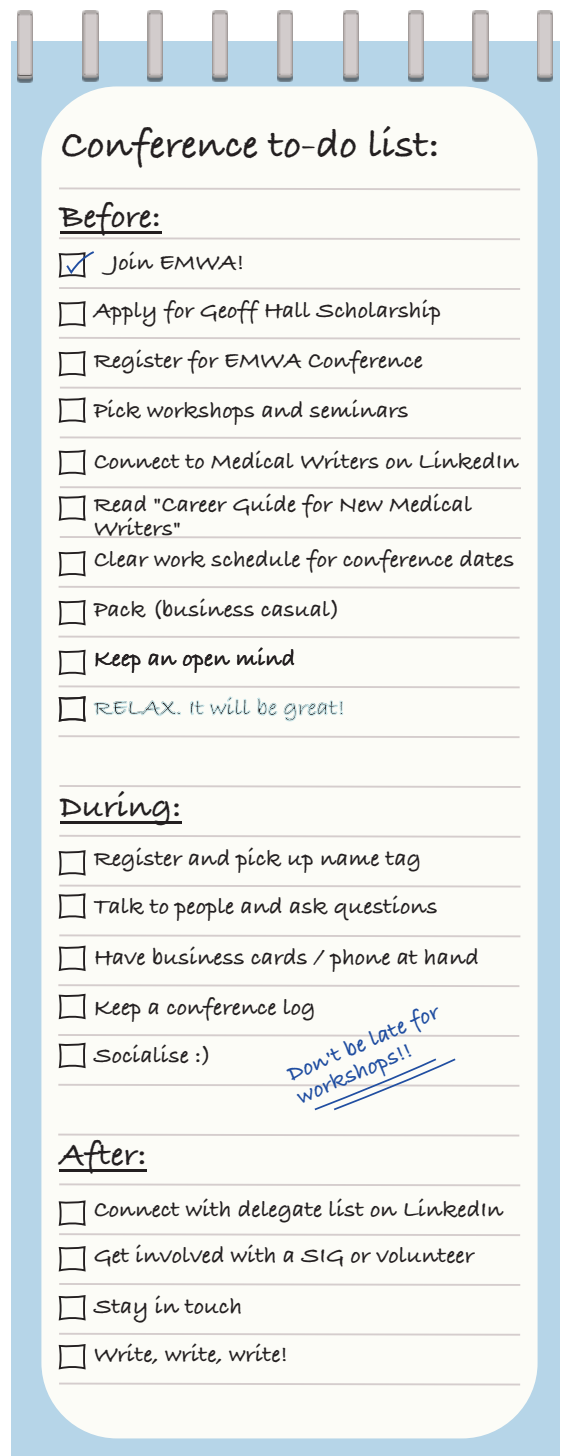


Figure 2. EMWA conference checklist

continued to connect on LinkedIn with other delegates – it's great to see our network grow! Staying in touch with the EMWA community has kept the conference momentum and motivation going. There is still so much to see and learn, so many seminars, webinars, lunchtime talks, and informative posts from and for medical writers!

We both also have been diligently following



EMWA member Diarmuid De Faoite’s excellent advice to “Write, write, write!” There may soon be two new entries for next year’s Geoff Hall Scholarship and, hopefully, the readers of this guide have enjoyed the fruits of this joint writing endeavour!

Conclusion

So, can we provide the answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything? No, but we can, without aeons of calculations, recommend that you visit an EMWA conference!

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Disclaimers

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Disclosures and conflicts of interest

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