



An interview with Phil Leventhal Editor-in-Chief of *Medical Writing*

How and why EMWA members should contribute to the journal

At the beginning of this year, *Medical Writing* (MEW) changed from Maney Publishing to Hastings Printing Company. This has allowed the journal to dispense with the need for copyright transfer and to consider open access. The idea of open access was brought up several times, and a LinkedIn discussion last spring, coupled with the pending change in publishers, encouraged EMWA to launch a member survey about it. The results of the survey led to EMWA's new policy of open access for feature articles.

In the light of these changes and considering the theme of this issue (Authors and Authorship), we thought that we should ask Phil Leventhal, Editor-in-Chief of MEW, to discuss what authors need to publish in MEW and why they should do it.

Phil has been a medical writer since 2003, when he transitioned from pharmaceutical research. Phil is originally from the US and has a PhD in Bio-molecular Chemistry from the University of Wisconsin. In addition to serving as the Editor-in-Chief of MEW since 2012, he has been an instructor at the Medical University of Innsbruck and is an Adjunct Associate Professor at New York University. Phil has also led workshops on medical writing for EMWA and various institutions in Europe since 2011.

MEW: Many medical writers may ask themselves if their level of experience is good enough to submit an article to MEW. Who can submit an article? Is there a specific level of experience contributors need?

Phil Leventhal (PL): Of course, we love receiving contributions from experts, but

any medical writer, irrespective of experience level, can publish an article in MEW. Your personal experiences will be relevant to someone, no matter what your experience level. Even if you are inexperienced, the information you collect as you learn and the process you go through as you master new subjects will be helpful to someone. You can write about something you know about or even something you don't know yet but want, or need, to learn. For example, you might be asked by your employer or client to prepare a kind of document you know nothing about, and your research about the topic could end up as an article.

MEW: So if junior writers can submit articles, how do you ensure that the quality is sufficient?

PL: When we receive an article, I or another member of the Editorial Board will critically review the content and writing and then work with the author to make sure that the quality is sufficient for publication. This can include several rounds of revision by the editor and the contributors. We only ask that contributors remain open to having their writing edited and, if necessary, reworked.

MEW: What about non-native speakers who might not be confident about their English?

PL: All of our editors have excellent English skills, and they are asked to work with the contributors to perfect the English as part of the standard review and revision process.

MEW: What is the process of preparing and submitting a paper, and where can I find the author's instructions?

PL: The best way to start is to contact the Editorial Assistant (mew@emwa.org) and propose an idea for an article. Assuming that we agree on the overall theme, I will ask the Editorial Assistant to send you the feature article template and the instructions for authors. The feature article template is a Microsoft Word file that contains all of the formatting needed to prepare the article. The specifics are also given in the instructions for authors, but the template simplifies the process and makes the Editorial Board's job easier. You can download the feature article template and instructions for authors from the journal website (<http://journal.emwa.org>) or request them from our Editorial Assistant (mew@emwa.org).

MEW: A frequent cause of frustration in medical writing is the rejection of an article. Could you explain how articles for MEW are selected?

PL: Most of the time, articles are solicited by me or a member of the Editorial Board, but more and more articles are coming in unsolicited. Except for the rare original research article, articles do not go through a formal peer-review process. The decision to accept the article is up to me and the Editorial Board member assigned to the article. Honestly, it's rare for us to reject an article. I think that I have rejected about three articles in the last 3 years. Even in the worst cases, we would rather work with the contributor to develop an article so that everyone is satisfied with and that will be of practical use to our readers. The rare

cases of rejection happen when the subject is not appropriate for our readers, it is clearly advertising for a company, or the contributor refuses to make changes we consider essential.

MEW: What other advice can you provide to authors who would like to submit an article?

PL: The most important thing to remember when writing for MEW is to think about your target audience – professional medical writers of varying experience levels. The article should be practically useful and include examples, and it should be written in a professional but conversational tone. We are not looking for a boring, academic style but rather a more dynamic magazine or newsletter style. We strongly encourage that you include tables, figures, and pull-quotes (key bits of text that appear in large, highlighted text) to help maintain interest and emphasise key points.

MEW: Why should I write an article for MEW?

PL: Writing an article for MEW is an excellent way to advance your career and to improve your visibility within the medical writing field. It establishes that you are an expert in your area, someone to turn to when other medical writers have questions. This is even the case for junior writers, and it is especially true now that feature articles will appear on Google and Google Scholar and will be available open access. Because of open access, you will be able to post your articles on any website and share them with potential employers or clients. For companies and freelancers, this means improved visibility, so it's essentially free advertising.

Another benefit of writing an article for MEW is that it is a great way to learn and add to your professional expertise. Every time you prepare an article, you will need to do some research, even if you are already an expert. This will expand your

knowledge about medical writing. For example, when I started at my current company, I wondered "What are the most common reasons that articles are rejected?" The research I did answering this question not only became an article but also added to my understanding of the peer-review process, which has helped make me a better publications writer.

A third benefit of publishing in MEW is that the article is concrete evidence of your expertise that can be shared with a prospective client or employer. As with peer-reviewed articles that you may have published during graduate studies, your articles can (or should) be listed on your cv, and thanks to open access, they can be distributed freely, either in print or electronically.

MEW: Once I publish in MEW, don't I relinquish the rights to the writing?

PL: Since switching to the new printer, contributors no longer have to assign copyright to us or the publisher. Contributors retain full ownership of the material, although if you want to provide or re-use the full article or substantial portions of it, we ask that you state that it was originally published in MEW and give at least the volume, issue, and page numbers.

MEW: If someone wants to participate more or become a member of the Editorial Board, what experience do they need, and who should they contact? For that matter, how did you become Editor-in-Chief?

PL: We definitely welcome volunteers – there's always room for additional Associate or Section Editors. We need people with excellent English writing skills and an interest in writing and editing magazine-type articles, something that most medical writers don't get to do.

We definitely welcome volunteers – there's always room for additional Associate or Section Editors.

Usually, I ask people interested in joining our board to write or to edit an initial article or two so that I can judge their abilities. Anyone interested in volunteering for the board can simply send me an email.

How I became Editor-in-Chief is a good illustration of how volunteering for EMWA is an amazing opportunity. Back in 2007, I volunteered to write an article called "Freelance or employee: Which is better?" for MEW's precursor, *The Write Stuff*. I really liked this magazine-style of writing, so I pitched the idea of a regular column on my specialty, manuscript writing, which I ended up writing for two years. That, in turn, led to my guest editing two issues of *The Write Stuff* and agreeing to serve as an Associate Editor. When MEW's first Editor-in-Chief, Elise Langdon-Neuner stepped down in 2011, it was natural for me to take the reins. It's been challenging but fulfilling, and I am happy to continue during our transition to a new printer and new format.

MEW: Thank you for taking the time to share this important "insider" information with us. Publishing in MEW is obviously a great way for medical writers to advance their careers and increase their visibility within the medical writing field.

Phil Leventhal can be contacted at editor@emwa.org.