

Books to support your medical writing journey

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Abstract

On your journey as a medical writer, you will need many types of books: style guides, dictionaries, thesauruses, books about language and grammar, and books about how to be a medical writer. This article is not about these books – it is about the books that motivated me, helped me emotionally, and provided support when I felt like an imposter and was struggling. These books helped me, I hope they will help you too.

Introduction

I didn't plan to be a medical writer. I was offered the job. I had been summoned to the director's office. It was a short meeting, he only had one question: Do you want to be a medical writer? I had written a few study protocols as project leader in oncology, and I was one of only two native English speakers in the company, although I knew little about medical writing. I was given a week or so to reflect. I already knew that I would say yes.

I scoured the internet for information about medical writing and I found EMWA. I also found books. This article is about the books I found and read over the following years, as I became a medical writer, and eventually opened my own company. This article is not about the numerous books on "How to become a medical writer" or the grammar and English language books that were required to convert myself into the medical writer I am today. This article is about the books that motivated me, helped me emotionally, and provided support when I felt like an imposter and was struggling. These books (summarised in Table 1) are like the friends I met at EMWA who helped me on the

way to becoming a medical writer: my fellow travellers.

So Good They Can't Ignore You:

Why skills trump passion in the quest for work you love

Initially, I did not have a passion for medical writing. Steve Jobs during his commencement speech delivered at Stanford in June 2005 said, "You have to find what you love... [T]he only way to do great work is to love what you do."¹ The so called "passion hypothesis" suggests that to do great work – and as an extension to be happy – requires that you first find your passion and then you will love the work you do. Cal Newport, in his book *So Good They Can't Ignore You*, dispels this, and suggests that for most people, passion and love are side effects of developing skills and competences.¹ The key is to develop the "Craft man's mindset". Do you want a passionate job? First, you need to focus on acquiring the skills required for the job and then passion will follow.

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Daring Greatly:

A call for courage

Medical writing is not an easy career. I think most writers, particularly early in their careers, suffer from imposter syndrome, a feeling that they lack the capacity to do the work, and a preoccupation that, eventually, everyone will find out that they are frauds. This is particularly problematic for medical writing, where a formal training system to validate the required competences is lacking. The sociologist, Brené Brown, in her book *Daring Greatly* explains the need to develop the courage to be vulnerable.² She also deals with perfectionism and the feeling of never being enough. Medical writers produce original work that will be criticised, and we will fall short of expectations, but if we want to be successful, we need to be brave, vulnerable, and willing to embrace uncertainty. I have referred to only a few aspects that may be

applicable to medical writers, but this book is so much more: if you want a happier, more successful life, *Daring Greatly* provides key insights on what is required from a psychological perspective.

The Motivation Myth:

How high achievers really set themselves up to win

For me, remaining motivated, especially as a freelancer, is a constant battle. A deep understanding of what motivates me is vital if my medical writing career and my company are to survive. Jeff Haden, in his book *The Motivation Myth*, indicates that motivation comes from success.³ Thus, to be motivated, you need to enjoy daily successes. Maybe you would enjoy writing 200 words or a 1-hour writing session instead of enjoying only completing the document. There are real rewards in observing daily progress towards a larger goal. Routine and planning are important. For goals that will take time to achieve, decide what needs to be done daily. The secret, then, is to focus and celebrate the daily achievements. If you accomplish these, you will eventually achieve your goal. This book is full of advice on how to increase motivation. The book even has sections on how to have your most productive day and week. This may be useful for medical writer with upcoming deadlines.

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Four Thousand Weeks:

Time and how to use it

Oliver Burkeman, in his book *Four Thousand Weeks*, explores how best to use and understand our limited time – the average life expectancy is about four thousand weeks.⁴ He challenges us to face and accept that our time is limited and that we are forced to choose what we want to do. He dispels the idea that we will find peace and calm when we are more productive. When we are more productive, we find more work. He also

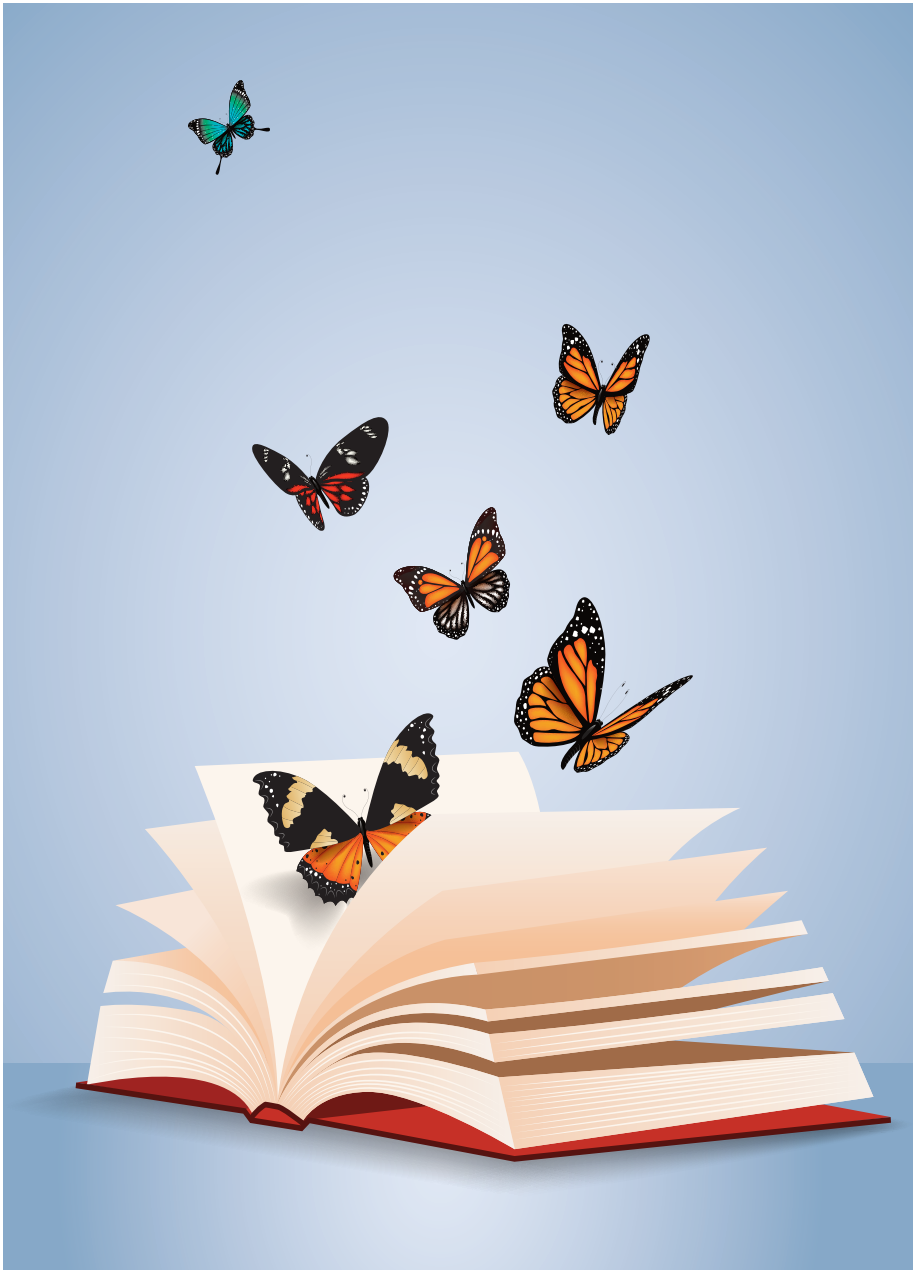


Table 1. Books to support your medical writing journey

Author	Book title
Brené Brown	Daring Greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead.
Oliver Burkeman	Four Thousand Weeks: Time and how to use it
Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi	Flow: The psychology of optimal experience
Jeff Haden	The Motivation Myth: How high achievers really set themselves up to win
Curtis Morley	The Entrepreneur’s Paradox: How to overcome the 16 pitfalls along the startup journey
Cal Newport	Deep Work: Rules for focused success in a distracted world
Cal Newport	So Good They Can’t Ignore You: Why skills trump passion in the quest for work you love

suggests that we become distracted because we feel emotionally uncomfortable about doing the things that are important. To overcome this feeling of discomfort, we find distractions. Oliver suggests working in blocks of time, developing patience, and learning to accept the uncomfortable feelings that arise when we care about our work. He also suggests doing activities that are intended mainly for enjoyment, like hiking and leisure reading. Everyone should read this book – it is well worth the time.

... we become distracted because we feel emotionally uncomfortable about doing the things that are important.⁴

Deep Work:

Rules for focused success in a distracted world

In his book *Deep Work*, Cal Newport postulates that the ability to focus or concentrate on a challenging cognitive task is valuable, rare, and meaningful.⁵ He proposes that this “deep work” can best be performed in blocks of time without distraction. If you want to produce meaningful and valuable work, “deep work” is critical. Today, this is not the norm – work is frequently organised according to emails and meetings (“shallow work”), with the essential and deeper work done in the intervening timeslots. However, as a freelancer, and these days, with remote working, you can control, to some extent, when, where, and how you work. To state the obvious, to be a successful medical writer you must write. To write well, you must allocate time periods where you will not be disturbed. Cal suggests not only scheduling periods of “deep work” but also distraction periods, developing a deep work ritual, and implementing a daily shutdown.

Flow:

The psychology of optimal experience

Once you have developed a “deep work” schedule, it may be worthwhile to further explore the benefits of states of deep focus. For this, I suggest the book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.⁶ In the “flow” state, a person is completely present and focused on a specific, doable task. This can be



observed when people sing, dance, and perform sports, but it can also be applied to work and other everyday activities.

The Entrepreneur's Paradox: How to overcome the 16 pitfalls along the startup journey

So, if you are a medical writer, and you want to become an entrepreneur, beware! Curtis J. Morley in *The Entrepreneur's Paradox: How to Avoid the 16 Pitfalls Along the Startup Journey* notes that the qualities that made you good at your job are not sufficient for you to build a successful business.⁷ Indeed, you will need to plan, build a team, delegate writing, and train other writers. He also explains the importance of looking after yourself, as well as overcoming fears and moving forward despite the ever-present imposter syndrome. Networking with other entrepreneurs is also critical, as the African proverb states, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." May I suggest that you attend an EMWA conference to network with other medical writers, so that you will travel far. *The Entrepreneur's Paradox* is not specifically written for medical writing companies, but it does provide important insight into the mindset required to build a successful business.

The journey continues...

To conclude, I would like to offer you not a book but a stanza of a poem written by C.P. Cavafy. This poem reminds me that life – and indeed medical writing – is a journey, so enjoy the ride. May your journey be filled with many books.⁸

*Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbours you're seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind –
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.*

Extract from the poem *Ithaka* by C.P. Cavafy
(translated by Edmund Keely)



Author information

Trevor Stanbury, PhD, started his own medical writing company, Pro-Pens, in 2020 and is based in Paris, France. He has more than 15 years of experience working in clinical trials and has been a medical writer since 2015, mainly as a regulatory and manuscript writer.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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