

Charting your way to the top: The 12 major milestones of freelance medical writing

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doi: 10.56012/wmnm8666

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Abstract

As a freelance medical writer, it's tough to know how well you're doing – conventional career metrics don't apply and you don't have a boss keeping tabs on you. Yet, for your medical writing business to stand the test of time, with you at the helm, you need to be able to measure your success and know what's next in terms of personal and professional growth. The good news is that countless freelancers have gone before you, leaving a trail of breadcrumbs to help you find your way. Learn how to identify and interpret these breadcrumbs and use them to your advantage by following the guided trail of important milestones outlined in this article to help you take your business to the next level at a pace you feel comfortable with.

Introduction

Embarking on entrepreneurship for the first time is daunting – not only because it's likely your first time being self-employed and the steps to take may be murky, but also because there are no obvious measures of success that you can use to determine progress.

One way to assess your growth is to study the following twelve major milestones of freelance medical writing. These stages of growth have been identified and honed through years of hands-on research and personalised coaching to determine what makes one freelancer thrive and another return to full-time employment feeling defeated. As you explore each milestone, pay attention to those that resonate. See if you can

pinpoint how far you've come, as well as where you want to be. Not everyone reaches every stage and that's ok. But if you want to get “to the top” of the totem pole, tune in now.

#1—Getting your first freelance medical writing client

The first major milestone you'll reach as a freelance medical writer is the day you can say “I have a client”. Self-promotion doesn't always come naturally, and marketing efforts can seem like a waste of time. So, when things actually start to work out and you can legitimately call yourself a small business owner, it's a pretty big deal!

A clear sign that you've reached this milestone will be seeing a signed contract and/or scope of work from a client who wants to start a professional relationship with your company.

#2—When your business becomes profitable

Not long after getting your first client, you'll have delivered one or two writing projects before reaching another important milestone: monetisation, followed by profitability. This is usually the point at which “I get paid to be a writer!” washes over you in a radiant wave of satisfaction.

At this stage, you'll likely be staring in disbelief at an email notification that says “Your invoice has been paid”, or refreshing your digital bank statement, repeatedly, to see if the credit magically disappears.

#3—Letting go of your full-time job to freelance

The next turning point in your entrepreneurial journey will likely be letting go of another job you've been hanging on to. When you first became a writer, you probably didn't expect your business to support you financially as well as it has. But when you notice your self-employed income exceeds your salary, it's time to quit the day job.

This typically looks like handing in your notice and telling everyone close to you – colleagues, friends, and family – the big (and scary) news.

#4—Shifting from an employee to an entrepreneur mindset

After doing your own thing for some time, your perception of and approach to work will have begun to evolve – a shift from an “employee” to an “entrepreneur” mindset. Think of it as a change of paradigm or worldview in which you begin to realise you have all the power.

At this milestone, your behaviour will align more with that of a business owner than a writer. For example, you may take a spontaneous vacation, travel more “just because”, reject unnecessary meeting requests, or increase your rate in line with the value you provide.

#5—Being fully booked as a freelancer

The first time you have a full workload for a handful of clients, you know you've reached the next milestone in your business. Whether it happens expeditiously or takes its sweet time is up to you. But one thing's for sure: it brings a lot into question. At this stage, you're turning down work because your schedule is full and you're burning out, leaving you wondering “who has all the control?”. (Hint: It's probably your clients).

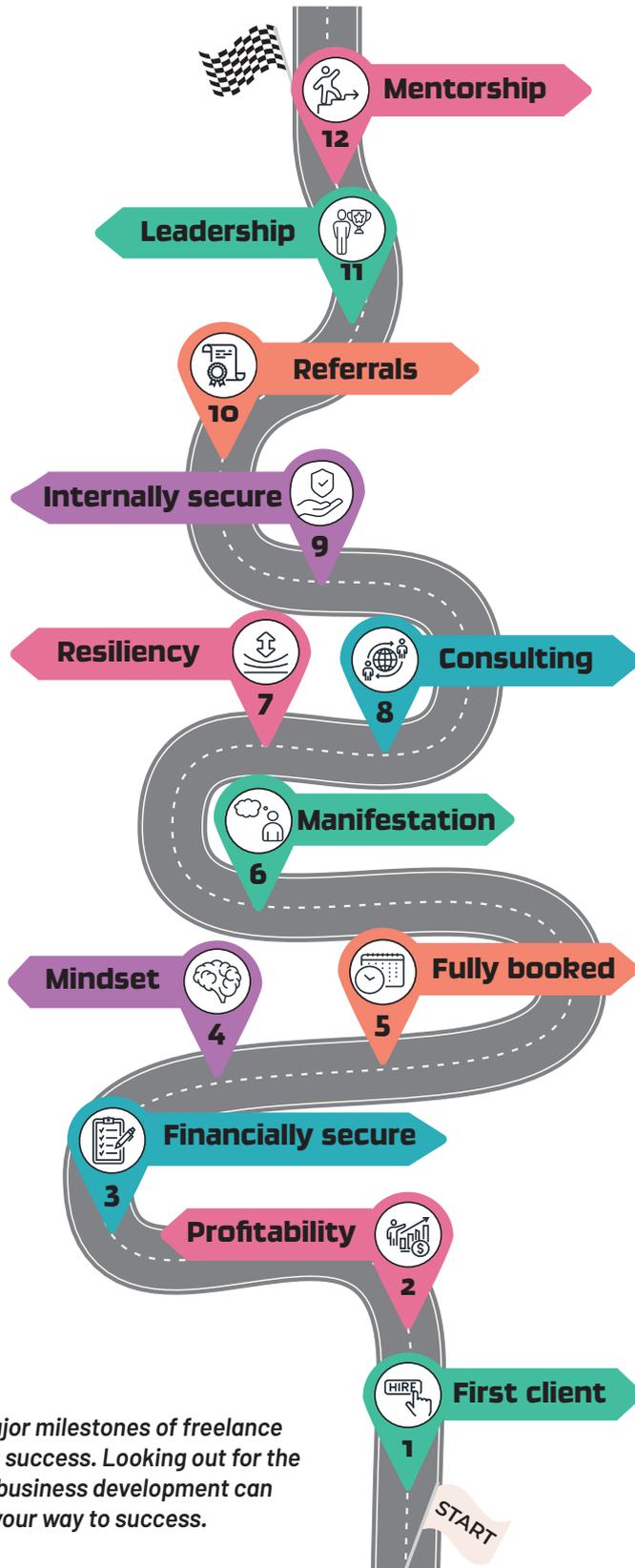
This looks like saying “no” to a new client or project that you'd usually take on but can't because you're unquestionably overloaded.

#6—Leaning 100% into your brand

As your business continues to evolve, you'll start wondering why you're doing so well. Which of your marketing efforts directly contribute to your success? Then, it hits you: it's your personal brand. You show up authentically and passionately in your business every day, which magnetises your ideal clients seemingly effortlessly.

A sign that you're at the manifestation stage is being able to clearly define your brand and make business decisions based on it. A great example is when pharmacist and new freelance medical writer Lindsay decided she's a specialist in novel drugs. Her messaging was instantly stronger and more original, and she became inundated with companies needing help bringing their products to market.

Illustration by Sofia Polcownik: sophiepo8@gmail.com



There are 12 major milestones of freelance medical writing success. Looking out for the subtle signs of business development can help you chart your way to success.

#7—Building resilience as a business owner

By the time you reach the seventh milestone of freelance medical writing, you no longer identify as being synonymous with your business. You can

easily distinguish your business decisions from your own personal growth and self-worth. As a result, it's easier to stay grounded and recognise the need for investing in continued professional development, as well as ongoing self-care practices.

A classic indicator that you've crossed the resiliency milestone in your business is when a project proposal gets rejected and you don't feel anything. In other words, you continue on with your daily tasks and it doesn't have any sort of emotional impact on you. Then, it registers that it's been this way for a while and you hadn't even noticed.

#8—Realising you're a consultant now, too

As you and your business continue to evolve, you'll step into authority more than ever before. You'll question briefs because you'll know a better way for clients to achieve communication and sales objectives. You'll confidently make impromptu suggestions with little-to-no hesitation. Your business operations will flow with ease.

One moment to look out for when crossing this milestone is when a client asks you for content ideas or strategy input, instead of briefing you on what they want, and you take it in your stride.

#9—No longer being attracted to full-time positions

The next crucial juncture as a freelance medical writer is when you commit to working only for yourself. While you let go of any "stable income" sources many moons ago, up until now, you couldn't escape the pull to snap up a 9–5 when a "perfect opportunity" presented itself. That ends now. You know, with every fibre of your being, that no full-time opportunity could ever give you the freedom and flexibility that freelancing does and that you can't put a price on that.

You're at this stage when you choose not to investigate a full-time role that you would have before. A listing pops up in your feed or inbox; you think "no thanks" and keep living your best life.

#10—When your reputation precedes you

Further in your evolutionary timeline, you feel at the top of your game. You're so focused on pleasing your clients, delivering great work, and making sure your business continues running smoothly that you haven't had to market your services for months. You're showing up every day, doing great work, and owning your greatness. You can't remember when you last felt the need to prove yourself professionally.

You know you've reached this milestone when you start getting referrals from strangers because your reputation precedes you. Companies just can't get enough of you!

#11—Being a leader in the field

As you continue to push boundaries in your business development, you'll find medical writing isn't the challenge it used to be. People will often approach you for advice on entering the field, and your brain will be primed for picking. Now a subject matter expert, you may decide to step up as a leader to support and educate others.

This looks slightly different for everyone, but it could be getting your first public speaking gig, developing your own training course, or becoming a coach or mentor in a specialty area.

#12—Building your own agency

At the height of your career, you're already a master of your craft; a trailblazer in your business; a true success story. As you perch on the medcomms equivalent of the Hollywood sign, admiring what you've built, there aren't too many places to go from here. You're facing burnout often, with far more incoming work than you can handle on your own. If slowing down isn't a desirable option for you, the only way forward is expansion.

This looks like hiring subcontractors and/or employees to support you in delivering medical writing projects so you can focus on marketing, sales, and client relationship management. It's not for everyone, but it *will* help you push through that glass ceiling you've been staring at for the past few months.

A tool for celebration and success

There's plenty of room to grow in freelance medical writing, so it helps to be able to take stock of where you are and determine where you're heading.

The next time you're feeling stuck or getting bored in your business, refer back to these twelve milestones and use them to inspire next steps. Or simply use them as a trigger to congratulate

yourself on how far you've come!

There's no "end game" in entrepreneurship – it takes you wherever you choose to go. Some reach a comfortable stage, with a great work-life balance, where they happily remain until retirement. Others strive to reach as many milestones as possible before hanging up their hat.

One thing's for sure – you hold all the cards.

Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by EMWA.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

Sophie's company, Prospology, offers business and marketing coaching services to individuals who are new to freelance medical writing.



Author information

Sophie Ash is a former dietitian who emigrated from the UK to Canada, where she built a six-figure freelance medical writing business with no PhD, formal training, or direct industry experience. Now, she coaches individuals internationally on the business and marketing aspects of freelance medical writing to help them thrive, too. <https://linkedin.com/in/sophieash>

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