

The freelance medical writer and the medical writing agency: A symbiotic relationship

Namrata Singh¹, Shruti Shah²

1 Turacoz Group, Utrecht, The Netherlands

2 Turacoz Healthcare Solutions Pvt Ltd,
New Delhi, India

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Correspondence to:

Namrata Singh

namrata@turacoz.com

Abstract

The medical writing industry is evolving. With a growing demand for competent and experienced medical writers in both the product industry (pharmaceutical, biotechnology-related, and medical technology-related) and service providers (clinical research organisations and medical writing agencies), there is an increased engagement with freelance medical writers. Freelance medical writers and medical writing agencies work in a symbiotic relationship. Here, we offer you the medical writing agency perspective by sharing some of the best practices and processes that are adopted by medical writing agencies to strengthen their engagement with freelance medical writers. We finish with some tips from the freelance medical writer's perspective about how to appropriately engage with an agency. It can work both ways, so getting the balance just right is key to a successful collaboration.

From a freelance medical writer to founder of a medical writing agency

My journey started as a freelance medical writer way back in 2008, when I was introduced to the field of medical writing. With very limited openings available at that time and most full-time roles only available as office-based jobs, it was a stroke of luck for me to get the opportunity to work as a freelance medical writer. It meant I could manage my family and be engaged professionally at the same time.

My experience and education from my time as a freelance medical writer have helped me to set up my own company, procure business, network with fellow professionals, and now, work with freelance medical writers. Freelance medical writers are referred to differently by different companies – consultant, part-time writer, self-employed medical writer, or medical writing specialist.

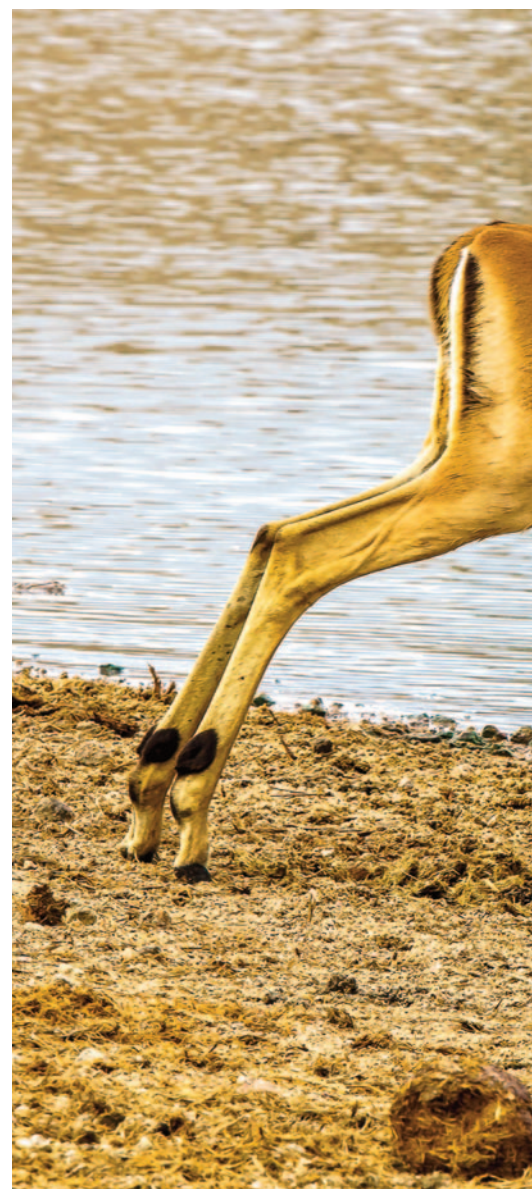
Namrata Singh

Introduction

With expanding research and development activities in the healthcare sector globally, the medical writing industry is forecast to grow from \$3.58 billion in 2021 to \$8.39 billion by 2030.¹ To meet these growing demands, competent and experienced medical writers are needed who can help the researchers to decipher their research findings to different stakeholders. While several pharmaceutical companies have their own medical writing departments, elsewhere about 70% of medical writing is outsourced to medical writing agencies and freelancers.² While there exists very little information on how much medical writing work is outsourced to agencies or freelancers, a report by Kolabtree in March 2021 suggests that there was a 50% increase in the market demand for freelance medical writers during the COVID-19 pandemic.³ On one hand, this may be attributed to an increased requirement for medical documentation due to ramping up of research and development programmes in the industry. On the other hand, there was a major shrinking of larger companies in terms of manpower to reduce costs and therefore, involve freelancers for ad hoc projects. The exact number of freelance medical writers across the globe is not known. As the medical writing industry is still evolving, a need for external support is becoming a more common practice than an exception.

Freelance medical writer and medical writing agency: A symbiotic relationship

Freelance medical writers and medical writing agencies have a symbiotic relationship – agencies help these writers obtain adequate work and the freelancer executes the work with the much-needed expertise and availability.



For most medical writing agencies, the freelancers are considered an extended resource pool who are engaged based on the following four Cs:

1. **Capability:** Agencies consider hiring freelance medical writers who are subject matter experts with decent relevant experience (at least 4–5 years of domain-specific writing experience) in medical writing. These consultants need little to no supervision with their work and can work independently. The recent 2021 EMWA survey suggested that about 70% of participating freelancers had more than 5 years of experience in the field of medical writing, and about half of them had project

management experience as well.⁴ The survey also suggested that the majority (86%) of the participating freelance medical writers had a degree in life sciences with about 73% having advanced degree (BBS, MD, PhD, PharmD, or equivalent).⁴ There were more regulatory freelance medical writers (63%) than medical communication writers (26%).⁴

2. **Capacity:** Sometimes medical writing agencies receive work when their clients' entire team is occupied, and there is a stringent deadline. In such cases, as a relationship value to the client who is dependent solely on the agency for the work to be completed, the medical writing agency may recruit a freelance medical writer to help

the internal writing team and support the project. A medical emergency in the internal writing team, a sudden exit or an unplanned absence of any writer are also some of the common reasons for medical writing agencies to engage a freelance medical writer.

3. **Cost:** One of the most important factors to consider while engaging with a freelance medical writer is the cost and profitability of the project along with client satisfaction. As per the 2021 EMWA salary survey results, the mean hourly rate for a freelance medical writer varies with experience from €90 (3–5 years of experience) to €110 (11–15 years of experience).⁴ For a freelance writer to be engaged, any medical writing agency should have a fair idea of the hourly rates from the specific country or region so that a fair market value can be considered. While considering the cost, it is also important to consider the detailed project scope, and any exceptions should be laid out at the beginning of the project itself and clearly communicated to all involved parties.
4. **Conflict of interests:** While engaging with a freelance medical writer, any conflict of interest between the freelancer and the agency should be discussed and made a part of the initial agreement. The working association should be transparent and honest for it to be beneficial. This is particularly important for part-time freelance medical writers. According to the seventh EMWA freelance business survey results of 2023, 79.3% of 194 freelance medical writers who participated in the survey were 100% freelancing and about 19.6% were hybrid working (freelancing and employed or contracted).⁵ Another important aspect to be considered here is all the ongoing agreements that the freelance medical writer may have with his/her other agencies/companies (Figure 1).

Engaging freelance medical writers – Best practices for medical writing agencies

Many medical writing agencies working with pharmaceutical companies have their own well-documented internal policies and processes. Many agencies also have discrete policies and processes in place for outsourcing to freelance medical writers. However, these may differ from one agency to another depending on the nature of engagement; an agency may have different



Photo: Freepik



Figure 1. Medical writing agency’s criteria for engaging freelance medical writers



processes involved for outsourcing to freelance medical writers on a retainership model versus those who are engaged on a per-project basis.

The following is a proposed general process that medical writing agencies may pursue when engaging with a freelance medical writer:

1. Robust selection criteria and thorough background checks

Medical writing agencies usually begin by using one or more freelance networking websites or through social media platforms such as LinkedIn for posting their adverts. Selecting a freelance medical writer is not just based on their

Table 1. Best practices for a freelance medical writer to develop a successful working relationship with any medical writing agency

Best practice	Explanation
Appropriate project selection	Try to select projects based on your experience and interests.
Evaluate your capacity	Learn to say “no” when you are unsure if you can complete an assignment on time.
Manage your time effectively	Discipline yourself to be on top of the project, and ensure timely completion of deliverables.
Use clear and crisp communication	The success to any relationship is always clear and transparent communications.
Give yourself performance reviews	Ask clients for feedback, and take it constructively to improve your performance.
Ask when in doubt	Never assume anything, and if in doubt, reach out to relevant people for answers.
Own your work (that includes mistakes!)	Ensure you deliver the best quality deliverable, own your mistakes, and rectify them.



Photo: Freepik

experience and referrals, but medical writing agencies may also have assignments for testing technical and writing skills followed by a personal one-on-one interview. These assessments may be paid assessments if the agency has plans to use the material developed by the freelance medical writer; in that case, these details are conveyed right in the beginning before sharing the assignment. Some medical writing agencies also ask the freelance medical writer to share samples of their work completed on previous projects to further qualify as a freelance medical writer for the job.

The next step involves a thorough background check (educational qualifications, past experiences along with relevant work samples, referrals for feedback on completed assignments in the past, current engagements, etc.) followed by a duly signed confidentiality agreement between the freelance medical writer and the agency. To maintain transpa-

The most important points for an agency to select the right freelance medical writer include capability and expertise of the freelance medical writer along with feedback or referral from independent sources that can validate the freelance medical writer's work. Both these points have equal weight and are considered of the utmost importance.

rency at all levels, both expectations from the freelance medical writer and payment details (project-based or milestone-based) are charted right in the beginning and shared by the medical writing agency with the freelance medical writer.

The freelance medical writer may be assigned a unique identification code and all vital administrative details such as a bank account, tax information, and freelance medical writer's address for correspondence, along with an alternative contact number in case of emergency, are documented.

2. Onboarding of the freelance medical writer for the project

Once a freelance medical writer is selected for a project, it is also necessary for the agency to adequately introduce the writer to the technical team and the client team, if essential for the project. Ideally, the most acceptable way is to introduce the writer to the client early

during the project initiation call and gain the client's confidence and trust in the writer's ability. If this is not feasible for some reason, the freelance medical writer is adequately briefed on the project and provided access to all source materials (including call recordings, if any), so that there is complete knowledge transfer of all project-related information to the freelance medical writer. Medical writing agencies use several technology features to ensure client data security while sharing these materials with the freelance medical writer. Most agencies have dedicated interfaces like a project collaboration system with restricted access provided to the freelance medical writer. Keeping open communications, setting the right expectations, and considering the freelance medical writer as an extension of the in-house team are some of the key features that can lead to a successful freelance engagement.

Another important aspect is to provide timely feedback for the work commissioned by the freelancer. Freelancer feedback involves both quality of deliverables and the timeliness of delivery. Many medical writing agencies have a five-star rating system in place that helps them to reward the freelance medical writer with newer projects and appropriate incentives. Many medical writing agencies also invest in develop-

ing an online, advanced real-time dashboard complete with all the freelance medical writers' details, including experience, hourly rates, availability, feedback received etc., that can help them to decide and select the right freelancer for the job.

3. Building relationships for continued collaborations

To ensure a medical writing agency secures and retains talented and competent writers, it is critical that the agency treats them well. Acknowledging the role of the freelance medical writer in the successful delivery of a project is as important as sharing client feedback. Some basic etiquette that every medical writing agency should follow while engaging with a trusted freelance medical writer include the following:

- a. Show respect and empathy for the freelance medical writer – check the freelancer's availability before assigning a project and appreciate that the freelancer may have to turn down a project if they have other commitments.
- b. Never delay payments to the freelance medical writer, or if a delay is likely, communicate it in advance and be transparent. Payments can be either per draft or per deliverable as agreed by both parties before initiation of the project.
- c. Keeping in touch with the freelance medical writer regularly – sending simple greetings, especially on holidays and their special days, can bring a smile to their face. Treating freelance medical writers as an extension of your internal team, and involving them in team gatherings and outings, may further strengthen the relationship between a medical writing agency and a freelance medical writer.

Tips for a successful freelance medical writing career

There are many benefits for a freelance medical writer to engage with medical writing and medical communication agencies; it can provide regular work, a reliable income, a means of being on a team, and a way to develop a work portfolio. Here, we provide some tips and ways to approach working with an agency from a freelancer's perspective (Table 1).

Conclusions

Working relationships between a freelance medical writer and medical writing agency are symbiotic. While a medical writing agency may engage a freelance medical writer due to capacity and capability constraints, a freelance medical writer can help complete the commissioned work with their expertise and experience in a timely manner. Medical writing agencies who outsource their work to freelance medical writers should have a robust policy and process in place to select the right freelance medical writer for each project. At the same time, medical writing agencies should also adopt best practices of empathy and active listening for the successful retention of their freelance medical writers.

Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the authors' own and not necessarily shared by their employees (as applicable) or EMWA.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

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Author information

Namrata Singh, MBBS, DNB (Paediatrics), has been a medical writer since 2008. She is the founder and director at Turacoz Group and conducts training for aspiring medical writers. She has been an active EMWA member since 2014 and is currently chair of the Entrepreneurship Special Interest Group.



Shruti Shah, PhD (Molecular Oncology), has been a medical writer since 2009. She leads the technical team at Turacoz Healthcare Solutions and conducts training for aspiring publication writers. She has been an active member of the ISMPP since 2014 and has presented at several ISMPP annual meetings. She has been a member of EMWA since 2022.