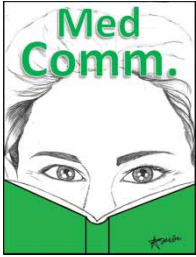


**Dear all,**



I received a very positive response to the article that Sarah Richardson wrote (published in this section a couple of issues ago) about writing meeting reports from audio recordings and slides. The article also triggered a response

from our latest contributor to the Medical Communications section.

Elisabeth Heseltine is an extremely experienced and well-published writer, who teaches globally and is also a freelance translator, editor, compiler, workshop leader, report-writer, précis-writer, and indexer for various organisations including the WHO, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, and Interpol.

Elisabeth contacted me after seeing Sarah's article, and I thought it would be really interesting for

EMWA members to understand a bit more about what she does. Elisabeth's article is a fascinating insight into the world of the précis-writer – a world that I admit I knew little of, but demands quick thinking, impeccable language skills, and creativity in its own right. Elisabeth describes the qualities needed and explains why she enjoys the work and the environment so much. For anyone lucky enough to have more than one language, I think this would be a very exciting area to work in, and I would encourage the many EMWA members with these skills to investigate this career path.

It only leaves me to wish you the very best of this season's greetings – I hope Santa is kind, and your mistletoe bountiful. Long may your wine be mulled and your stockings stuffed.

Have a great and well-earned Christmas break all, and see you in the New Year!

**Lisa Chamberlain James**  
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## More on meeting reports – writing reports for the United Nations system

Meeting reports are an aspect of 'medical' and other technical writing that has had little discussion. The following might be of interest to medical writers asked to provide rapid, reliable, objective reports of various types of meeting.

The United Nations, its agencies (including the World Health Organization, WHO) and other international bodies, have over the past 70 years developed a sophisticated system for recording the proceedings of working groups, meetings, assemblies, and conferences. Until recently, the records were written by people who were in the meeting room; now, with the financial restrictions affecting all organisations, they are being written more and more often at home from sound files. The details of the procedure are as follows.

First, two kinds of record are produced. One is what are known as 'summary records', which are written by 'précis-writers' (described below). These summarize the intervention of each speaker in a few lines, unless a series of speakers simply agreed with another one, in which case, the text would

read, 'The delegate of Germany, supported by those of Algeria, Bhutan and Cambodia, said....' For a 3-h meeting, a summary record might be 20 pages or more. The other kind of record is a report, in which the gist of the debate on each topic discussed is summarised, usually without mentioning the names of either delegates or countries, unless this is specifically requested. A report of a 3-h meeting would be no more than 7-10 pages.

A 'précis-writer' is someone who writes an abridged version of a statement. The term, from French, has been used in English since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Until recently, part of English language teaching in English schools involved learning how to write a representative summary of a piece of text.

The system has been perfected to ensure that the record can be published as soon as possible after the meeting. Originally, this meant the next day, so that the discussion from the previous day could be taken into consideration in the deliberations. In most organisations, this is no longer the case, as there are endless rounds of verification and rewriting by staff, who sometimes insert what they wish

they'd said! This often means that summary records become archives and not working documents. However, the original concept was to produce an immediate, clear record of the proceedings in a form that is understandable even by people whose first language is not English.

When précis-writers or report-writers attend a meeting in this system, they do so successively. Thus, a team of up to four writers will cover one meeting, with enough overlap to ensure equal coverage once the actual length of the meeting is known, i.e. if it finishes early or goes overtime. The number varies from organisation to organisation. Increasingly, however, one or two people are expected to cover an entire meeting. Having more than one person allows the others to write up immediately, which is an important consideration, as the technique of writing either précis or a report is to write up your notes as soon as possible, while you can still read your writing and remember what went on. Most people write their notes in their own brand of shorthand, while others use actual shorthand; some now take notes on a portable computer. In any case, to capture the essence of a debate, it is essential to work from one's notes.

When the system first began in the 1940s, précis-writers had no back-up. They had no recordings, no transcripts, and no notes from speakers (who actually *spoke*, without reading from a prepared text). The précis-writers listened to the speaker or, if they did not know the language, to the interpreter, took down the important points and turned them into a clear record. Now, sound files are available in both the original language and the English interpretation, and there are also transcripts in languages other than English. The speakers' prepared texts are made available as well. Précis-writers and report-writers are expected to know at least two of the official United Nations languages besides English (Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, and Spanish) so that they need to depend on the interpretation as little as possible.

One advantage of actually being at a meeting is that one can obtain every bit of paper being discussed, for example documents at the back of the room that people introduce into their intervention. Another is to see exactly how a person's talk goes

with their PowerPoint (whether they have a logical 'walk through', or whether they flip back and forth among their slides). The main advantage is being immersed in the general ambiance and, as at every meeting, seeing what goes on in the corridors. I was once absolutely illuminated by a conversation overheard during a coffee break, when the implications of a rather mysterious statement made during the meeting became clear.

This luxury is, however, becoming rare, and working from sound files is becoming the norm. I agree with Sarah Richardson that the techniques of 'live' précis-writing must be maintained: précis-writers or report-writers must read all the relevant documents, sit down and listen to the recording, with any slides and documents, and take notes, as if they were in the meeting room. Typing everything out and editing down the transcript can lose immediacy and result in a record that does not reflect what actually happened.

The qualifications needed to enter this profession are:

- A good command of English that is understandable to an international audience, as probably 90% of the readers of the report will have English as only their second, third, or fourth language;
- A working knowledge of at least three of the official United Nations languages;
- The ability to discern relevant parts of a statement and the assurance to leave out those that are irrelevant; and
- The ability to write clear text rapidly, with minimal revision required.

Almost all précis-writers and report-writers in the United Nations system are freelancers. Getting onto the circuit is not easy, as in any profession, but it would be worthwhile contacting an organisation such as WHO to see whether they need précis-writers for one of their large meetings, such as the annual World Health Assembly. Once one has a foot in the door, networking with colleagues is the best way to obtain further contracts.

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