



How to write for health websites

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Abstract

Medical writing for the internet is unique because of the way people find and consume online content. Unlike with a medical brochure handed to someone by their doctor or a hard copy of the latest health book that they've purchased, individuals are not invested in reading online content word-for-word in a distraction-free environment. There are many strategies medical writers can employ to create excellent content for health websites that makes it more likely to get readers' attention, keep it, and get them to interact or engage with the content. One of the main things to keep in mind is that each website has a unique goal and target audience that is often much more specific than simply the general public.

Writing for health websites

Finding and reading information published on a health website is quite a different experience from reading a printed patient information brochure or health book, which is why writing for websites needs different considerations. The main reason for this difference is that computer or smartphone screens offer a distraction-prone experience. The many health websites and accessible articles available online for free can distract the reader from finding and engaging with your medical content.

This article outlines some strategies that a medical writer can consider when creating content specifically intended for health websites so they have a better chance of getting their content found by the target audience and engaging the readers' attention.

A different reading experience

By keeping in mind how internet users find and consume content, medical writing can be tailored for websites. When faced with the vast amount of information available online for free in under a second, internet users are not usually invested in, nor are they motivated to, consume any particular posts that they come across. This is opposed to, for example, a patient with a new diagnosis who receives a handout from their physician or purchases a best-selling book who may be willing to carve out time in their day to be distraction-free and read their new health information. This means, for that website's content to be consumed it must be very easy to find, scan, and be both informative and engaging.

Different websites have different goals

Large companies, governments, universities, hospitals, and major health organisations often have large websites with hundreds, if not thousands, of web pages and blog posts. The goals of these websites is

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usually to make conventionally accepted information easily accessible and consumable for the general public. For example, they might use general messaging around the topics of healthy eating, physical activity, or how to reduce the risk of disease. Alternatively, a website for a medical clinic, physician, or other health professional may use more targeted messaging as a marketing tool for the products, programmes, and services that they offer. These websites often aim to reach and engage with a particular audience with specific pains and goals. The content should be created to attract new potential clients and “convert” them into being loyal readers, email subscribers, and paying clients or patients. To do this, they use specific – and not general – health messages. For example, a midwife may target pregnant women in the surrounding metropolitan area, whereas a physiotherapist may target people interested in a particular sport. Unlike the website for a large health organisation, the main goal of a website for a clinic, physician, or health professional is *not* to

educate the general public, but rather to present themselves as thought leaders, educate their targeted audience, and encourage readers to take specified actions as they consume the content. Examples of these actions may be to share the post on social media, book an appointment, provide their email address, and permission to continue to email them (e.g., by offering something downloadable for free in exchange for permission to send emails – following all legal requirements including General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)). Sometimes these health websites may offer readers the opportunity to make a purchase or investment right there online. All of these actions are encouraged by using “calls-to-action” which can look like pop-up windows, buttons, or specific requests made to readers (e.g., “leave a comment below”).

Getting attention amongst 1.88 billion websites

As of August 6, 2021, there were an estimated 1.88 billion websites online.¹ Each of these websites can have anywhere between one and several thousand web pages and blog posts. Anyone with an internet connection can



haphazardly – or intentionally – come across your medical content online. So, how can you write a piece of content to attract the attention of your client's target audience? While there are strategies to increase views (known as *traffic*) it is important to ensure that your content attracts the right people. This is where knowing your client's target audience is key. Health internet users are presented with many distractions that entice them to click and view alternative content. So, to encourage them to click on your link, internet users need to know why they should, and when they do, they need to feel as though they're in the right spot to get the right information for them or they will leave right away.

To ensure that your reader or internet user feels as though they are in the right place when they see your web page, the medical writer needs to take into consideration the target audience socioeconomic status, demographics, psychographics, trust in science and government, altruism, risk perception, etc.² One way to get this insight is to ask your client to describe their target audience in detail or even to share anonymised quotes or intake forms so you can more deeply understand who the website is trying to attract.

Once you understand the target audience for the health website, the next step is to set the post up to get found online. To get your website content found, consider two factors: getting as many of the target audience as possible to notice the content and enticing them to click through to see the content you've written.

Four ways to get in front of as many of the target audience as possible

The old adage that "if you build it, they will come" is long gone on the internet now. It is no longer sufficient to simply publish content online, so additional strategies that pull the internet users to your site are also needed. Some pull strategies that help content get noticed include optimising it to be found via search engines, sharing the link on social media and incentivising readers to do the same, investing in paid advertising to promote the content online, and getting other sites to link to your content (giving your content a "backlink").

To make this strategy of being found via search engines easier, an entire field called search engine optimisation (SEO) has emerged. To do this well the writer would:

- Conduct "keyword research" to find a candidate keyword (the word or phrase that is typed into the search bar) that has an acceptable volume of monthly searches (e.g., over 1,000 or even 10,000) and is not too difficult to rank for.
- Review the top 10 or 20 posts currently ranking for that keyword to analyze the competition and see the content that search engines are putting upfront so that your health content is at least as comprehensive and high quality as those posts.
- Optimise your post for that keyword.

There are many pieces of software designed to help with each one of these steps in the SEO process.

In addition to search engines, a second avenue to get your post in front of as many of your target audience as possible is through social media. Different social media platforms appeal to (or are appropriate

for) different audiences, so ensure that your client provides direction on where they have the largest and most engaged following. Social media posts should be crafted with an image or video, enticing headline and "hook", as well as the direct link to read your content on the health website. If the content is "evergreen" (will still be relevant 6 to 12 months later, or more), then creating multiple unique social media posts and scheduling them to go out on your client's feed over the next 6 to 12 months is recommended.

The third way to get your website posts in front of your client's target audience is with paid advertising. This may include boosting posts that have garnered some engagement or creating advertisements for them. I recommend testing a few options before investing significant amounts of money to boost social media posts or turn them into advertisements.

Finally, getting other websites to link to your content is the fourth way to get in front of the target audience. This is often done by directly emailing owners of high-volume websites who

also cater to the same target audience and requesting that they add your link to one of their related posts. There is software that can help find these websites for you, although I recommend that your outreach be very personalised.

Three considerations to entice your target audience to click through to your content

Now that a search engine, a social media post, advertisement, or a direct link from another site has brought your content in front of many people in your target audience, why should they click the link to see it in its entirety? The "clickthrough rate" depends largely on the headline, description, and image. A successful headline and description, and an eye-catching image should appeal to the target audience's pain points or health goals, making it more likely to get clicked instead of being overlooked as readers are scrolling through their search engine results page or social media feeds.

For example, I recently wrote an article weighing the pros and cons of a certain type of health content and tried two different headlines: "...health content: pros and cons (the truth)" versus "...health content: pros and cons (an honest look)." The first example using the word "truth" got 18 percent more engagement than the one with the "honest look." This example reiterates the importance of knowing the terminology that resonates with the target market and the difference an excellent headline can make.

Note that none of these strategies outright guarantees a specific result, but the more of these you as the medical writer can do, the higher the chance of getting your health posts found and clicked on.

How to keep readers' attention on the post itself

People are now used to being entertained online, so once you have a reader's attention – they've clicked through from a search engine, social media post, advertisement, or other website and have opened your post on their screens – you need to keep it. Readers quickly scan through a post before (if) diving into the content itself. Readers look for instant clues on how important and relevant the information on that post is to them. Did they find what they were looking for or expecting? Because if not, they don't hesitate to hit the "back" button and look for another website. There are several strategies to use when writing medical content for the internet including

writing for “scanners”, using plain language, putting the most important points upfront, using headings and subheadings, using other formats, and linking to other relevant pages and posts.

Write for “scanners”

People rarely read long-form content word-for-word online, without first scanning it.³ Eye tracking studies show that people start scanning a page in the top left-hand corner, move to the right, then drop to the next line or header and continue their quick evaluation before deciding whether to consume the content.

Use plain language

Your terminology should be at the ideal reading level for your client’s target audience. While the “reading score” may not directly affect how well your post will rank in search engines, it does impact the readability, which is very important for your site audience’s user experience.⁴

Put the most important points upfront

While many other forms of content take a reader through a story or otherwise lead up to a conclusion, websites use the opposite structure. Because people are not invested in word-for-word reading unless their initial search and scan of your post looks promising for them, your message is more likely to come through if your main points are front and centre. Consider using a “hook” in your introduction and putting the key message upfront. Remember, people haven’t invested in a hard copy of your content to consume in a distraction-free environment. They often want to know the main points right away.

Use headings and subheadings

Headings and subheadings allow readers to easily scan to see an overview of the contents of a post. Use descriptive headers and subheaders to break the text into the main topical sections. Also, consider summarising the content under each

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subheading in either the very first or very last paragraph. If you are optimising the post for SEO, then ensure your keyword is included in at least some of the headings and subheadings whenever you can naturally fit it in.

Use bullets, boxes, graphs, and other formats to clearly communicate

Well-designed sites cater to electronic screens because they can be difficult for people to see, so wherever possible, try to avoid creating a “wall of text.” The more skimmable we make the important content, the more easily it will be seen and remembered. This is why many popular sites include abundant “whitespace,” bullets, boxes, graphs, and several images to break up the text and keep the reader engaged.

Link to other relevant pages and posts

Websites are meant to create a web of content, not unlike a spider’s web. The idea is for the site to have enough relevant content to become a trusted information hub for its ideal target audience. Instead of a regular, linear flow of content similar to print magazines, most of the pages and posts on a given website should include links to other related pages and posts within that same site (called “internal” links). This encourages readers to spend as much time on that website as possible. The longer people stay on a website (called the “session duration”),⁵ the more valuable that website is deemed to be, so search engines may start to show it to more people when that topic or keyword is being searched for. This has a positive effect to possibly get it in front of more potential readers. To do this, consider looking through previously published pages and posts to find ones that are relevant to the current one you are working on and include topic-specific hyperlinks, avoiding linking through generic terms such as “click here.” When readers see the words that are linked (often they are eye-catching underlined blue text), if they are interested in reading about that topic, they can click through to find the additional related content. It is usually acceptable to include internal links right in the body of the content. Alternatively, the internal links can be used as references at the bottom.

A word of caution when you want to include external links (links to other websites, including PubMed). Linking to external sites may be discouraged as it can invite readers to leave that website. While this may be acceptable to do in

the references at the bottom of the post, keep this in mind for the main body of text. Confirm with your client how they prefer internal and external links to be handled.

How medical writers can find clients who need health website content

Rest assured, you do not need to become an expert in every single one of the elements described here to run a successful business writing for health websites. For example, you can specialise in creating engaging blog content and social media posts. Or you can copyedit website content and help clients get backlinks. Or you can focus on SEO-optimising posts to rank higher in search engines. All of these are valuable standalone skills.

When it comes to finding clients who need health website content, in my experience, this can be done by combining networking and referrals, as well as being found online when a potential new client is searching for health writers or copywriters (by having your website content SEO-optimised). Having a portfolio page on your website with examples of your work and compelling testimonials from happy clients are also encouraged.

When you have a potential new client inquiry, first investigate their site and look for clues as to the goal and target audience of their current website. When discussing the potential project with them, ask them to describe the challenges and pain points they’re experiencing, what their short- and long-term website goals are, and get some deeper insight into their target audience.

Knowing and understanding what your potential new client wants is key to negotiating a contract and delivering exceptional medical content for their health website.

Disclaimers

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

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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