

# Medical Journalism

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## From science writing to journalism: How 'The Ghost Writer' changed my life

How can a medical writer become a science journalist? That is the question I was asked to answer in an article inaugurating the Medical Journalism column of *Medical Writing*. If you expect me to write about the classical way to achieve this shift, you may be a little disappointed to learn that I don't really know how I became a journalist. Actually, the course of my career has been more driven by my taste for words than by anything else. I love using words to reveal the pictures emerging from the fog of my sensations, and I don't feel satisfied until I find the exact words which give shape to those pictures. And the more I am able to create a whole picture reflecting the complexity of reality, the happier I feel.

When I read the exercises that participants send me after my workshop 'Health communication: how to achieve your objectives?', which is part of the EMWA education programme, I notice that a significant proportion of medical writers truly care about using the right words to shape their writing exercises with accuracy, while taking into consideration the reader's point of view. I cannot but encourage these people to let themselves be driven by their love of words, and to trust themselves enough to find a way to write stories. Although there are several ways to achieve such career evolution, mine may be instructive. Thus, I will try to highlight the lessons I learnt.

As I mentioned above, the evolution of my career has been driven by my love of writing. But there is also another factor that influenced it: the issue of authorship. Like the central character in Polanski's movie 'The Ghost Writer', I used to write texts without putting my name to them. Being an author and writing as a journalist or as a writer means more than writing well. It also means assuming a point of view that may be challenged by others. I did not feel strong enough to do this, and it was thus 'easier' for me to give up my author's rights than to put my name to what I wrote.

Although I never practiced ghostwriting as it is defined in the medical literature (bringing a hidden intellectual contribution to a published article), I used to give up my copyright to my clients, and my writing was published for communication or medico-marketing purposes. However, it was genuine writing that should have been credited to an author and corresponded more to review articles dealing with science markets and policy than to writing formatted for communication, marketing, or medical writing. Later, as I sharpened my writing, I felt increasingly frustrated. There was a growing gap between my fear and my will to be identified as an author. This conflict was still unconscious until the day I watched Polanski's movie. I fully identified with the main character in this movie, and I suddenly understood that I needed to write on my own.

Thus, I began to look for ways to return to journalism, an activity that I had experienced just after my Ph.D. I could rely on my writing skills. Besides my work, I had attended a writing course dealing with short stories and two of the stories I wrote, 'Le Gros' and 'Le bow-window', were appreciated by several French editors. 'Le Gros' was published in 2011 and was well-liked by people who came to me to talk about my story. Meanwhile, I also wrote several opinion columns that were accepted for publication in *Liberation* and *Le Monde*. Collectively, this experience gave me the impulse to assume authorship and this is how I began to write as a science journalist.

Some medical writers, like me, may be attracted to writing. For them, communication and journalism may be an interesting option for career evolution. If so, they could look for more straightforward ways than mine to achieve this. They could, for example, seek education programmes for journalism and communication. Another option would be attending workshops dedicated to communication and writing skills within the EMWA education programme. Based on my experience as a workshop leader, such workshops are particularly useful for medical writers who have never written for communication purposes. They make them aware of

the need to target an audience and how to do so, notably by mastering writing techniques.

The World Federation of Science Journalists (<http://www.wfsj.org/>) offers an online course in journalism that provides an overview of the different aspects of science journalism and training in writing techniques. Medical writers could also seek opportunities within their professional environment that could gradually help them to improve their communication skills. Writing for patients, for example, is a good exercise, as it requires the writer to take into account the reader's point of view.

Ultimately, people who are attracted to writing should wonder whether they feel the need to be an author or not. If not, communication and corporate journalism could provide good opportunities for narrative writing. But those who want to write as named authors should be aware that such career evolution involves a cultural shift. Writing as a journalist requires being neutral, and not having conflicts of interest.

In my case, I achieved this by writing about topics far removed from medical writing. In the beginning, it felt a little frustrating. But now I really appreciate writing about topics that are entirely new to me. I have to trust the journalistic approach of seeking the truth, a different approach from the one I learnt during my studies in science. This fits well with my open mind and with my desire to always move forwards.

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### Author information

Catherine Mary is a science/medical writer and a journalist. She is a contributor to *Science & Techno* (a weekly magazine that comes with *Le Monde*), and has also written for *Science*.

# Medical Writing Jumble # 6

1. Rearrange the jumbled letters to get a meaningful word related to medical writing.
2. Next, take the circled letters from each word and make two new words that will answer the riddle in the cartoon. Hint: The answer is probably a pun.
3. Use British English.

GATES	□ □ ○ □ □ □
SUNMI	□ □ □ ○ □
DIBNL	□ □ □ ○ □
SHAPE	○ □ □ □ □

He was quite "punny", and called himself a "\_\_\_\_\_".

**Answer:** □ □ □ □ □ □