

Lingua Franca and Beyond

Our mentors

It is my great pleasure to introduce this article written by Julia Bates from Australia, who in a very personal way describes her journey to becoming a very professional and experienced medical writer – a journey that often went across oceans and continents. What I particularly like in Julia’s article is the breadth of her experience of mentorship. In other words, she found mentors all over the place; she did not limit herself to looking for guidance only in typical professional settings. She just had her eyes wide open and was prepared to grasp lessons wherever she could.

Yes, indeed – the moment we are born, we start learning, and we never know when a particular skill gained deliberately or by chance turns out to be life-saving.

A typical mentorship implies professional, friendly, long-lasting, and personal guidance towards a successful career for a young and inexperienced person. On the other hand, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the term *mentor* is “anyone who is a positive, guiding influence in another (usually younger) person’s life.”¹

Looking back at my life, I can easily name quite a few people who made a remarkable impact on my life and helped me grow and develop personally and professionally. Maybe not all fall under the strict definition of mentorship, but all definitely had a guiding influence on my life. I will mention just one of them – my friend’s mother. Around 50 years ago, during an extremely tough time for my family, she said: “Maria, as long as one is alive, there is still

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hope.” I still hear her voice, even though she passed away many years ago, and this sentence still sits in my head. I just want to share its simple, supportive power with you. We all need it nowadays.

References

1. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mentor> from Merriam-Webster [accessed 2021 March 13].

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Finding mentors: A freelancer’s search

“... good medical writing is more than just a particular skill set, it is a craft, which means that it takes time to learn and hone.”

Julia Forjanic Klapproth and
Lisa Chamberlain James¹

As I embarked on my freelance career 5 years ago, I was faced with a dilemma: where could I get support on a daily basis? If I was working on my own, who would help me hone my writing skills?

Besides medical writing, I also needed guidance on accounting, quoting, website development, marketing, and navigating legal requirements. How could I become proficient in all these areas? I soon realised that the guidance I was looking for could not be provided by a single *mentor*; instead, I would have to draw on the expertise of many. And so, I began my search.

Family members as mentors

Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the biggest mentors in my career have been my parents. They taught me my core values: the importance of education, self-motivation, hard work, and maintaining a work-life balance. I remember one important piece of advice they gave me: “Do what you love, and the money will follow.” This lesson gave me the confidence I needed to

risk leaving my academic research career to pursue a career as a freelance writer.

My parents have always run their own business. And so, from a young age, I was well aware of the perks (e.g., flexibility in working hours) and drawbacks (e.g., irregular income) of self-employment. As a bonus, they were able to provide me with practical advice on setting up a

business. My parents also taught me valuable lessons that they had learned over decades of self-employment, including the importance of written contracts or agreements.

My older brother and my husband (both contractors who established their own companies) were also invaluable when setting up my business. They provided me with knowledge



and guidance on business plans, tax matters, writing contracts, and client interactions. Even now, I often go to them for advice on how to run my freelance business. It is definitely handy having a husband who is also my mentor, as I can meet with him whenever I need to, and he is always invested in me and my success!

Looking back to move forward

In my former academic career, I had two remarkable mentors who were instrumental in my success as a researcher. And when I first began freelancing, these people remained some of my biggest champions. Not only did they provide me with paid work (in the form of editing journal articles or grants), but they also offered glowing recommendations to pass on to new clients (as they were already aware of my skills and abilities in the workplace). Even though they are on very different career paths to me, to this day, they provide me with valuable psychosocial support and advice.

Support from professional societies

Early on in my freelance career, I joined EMWA and the Australasian Medical Writers Association (AMWA). At first, I was a bit apprehensive about getting involved in these professional associations, as I felt I was not a true *medical writer* but more of a *science writer*. However, I eventually built up the courage to join the organising committee for the annual AMWA conference. After seeing first-hand how inclusive and friendly the members were, I decided to start organising

local networking events in my city. These events were a great way to meet more senior medical writers and learn about the diverse careers people have under the umbrella of *medical writing*. These local mentors have since helped me to expand my skill set and find new clients.

On a side note, AMWA has a Mentoring Programme² that runs for approximately 3 months; it involves nine experienced medical writers and editors who volunteer their time to offer general writing, editing, and career advice

to those who want to enter the profession or would like to be freelancers.

“With a little help from my friends”

The final place I found mentors was through my colleagues and friends. I was fortuitously introduced to an experienced and highly regarded medical writer through an academic colleague. We were at a party, and I told her that I was about to start my writing and editing business. She exclaimed,

“Oh, my mother runs a company like that based in Europe!” and immediately set up an introduction. My friend’s mother took a chance on me as a writer with only limited medical writing experience. Not only did she provide me with regular paid work, but she guided me in areas that were new to me (e.g., regulatory writing), gave me opportunities (like writing articles for this journal!), and helped develop my writing skills. Whenever she made the long-haul flight to Australia to visit her daughter, she always took the time to meet with me and provide me

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with further advice and knowledge. This mentoring relationship has been vital to my success as a freelance writer.

I also found a great peer mentor through another friend from academia. She gave me the name of someone who had left the bench and was now working as a freelance medical writer in my city. We connected over LinkedIn and met up for a coffee (sort of like a blind date). This peer-to-peer mentoring relationship was key in the early stages of our freelance careers, as we could bounce ideas off each other without feeling intimidated.

In summary, there are many benefits to having multiple mentors, especially as a freelancer, and they can be found in many places and forms. All of my mentors, past and present, have helped me “hone my craft”, build my confidence, and shaped me into the medical writer I am today. I sincerely thank each and every one of them.

References

1. Forjanic Klapproth JF, Chamberlain James L. How to build a medical writer: medical writing apprenticeships – new training for a new breed. *AMWA J.* 2019;34(2):76–8.
2. Australasian Medical Writers Association Mentor Programme. <https://www.medicalwriters.org/mentoring/need-a-medical-writing-mentor/>.

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Don't miss! Medical Decision Making

The September 2021 edition

This issue will focus on medical decision-making and will address issues at both the population level (e.g., health policy, resource allocation) and the individual level (e.g., individualised patient treatment decisions, involvement of caregivers).

Guest Editors: Claire Gudex and Maria Kołtowska-Hägström