

# Modern mentorship: Developing medical writing mentor-mentee relationships in the virtual world

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## Abstract

Mentorship is often viewed as a traditional personal relationship model, where the mentor meets face-to-face with a mentee within the same organisation or group. However, I have been mentoring medical writers successfully for many years using virtual technology to connect and advise, long before the COVID-19 pandemic forced many of us to work virtually from home. Virtual mentorships may take more time and effort to build, but they provide new medical writers with unprecedented global access to mentors. Creating a successful virtual mentorship starts by identifying the right mentor, followed by setting appropriate and achievable mentee goals. These goals and the strategies to attain them are documented in a virtual mentoring plan. The plan provides a roadmap for both the mentor and mentee to keep the virtual mentorship on track in a professional and transparent manner, no matter where in the world they may work and live.

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the way many of us now work and interact with our colleagues. Although medical writers were early adopters of the virtual office, given the nature of their work, the pandemic has created a “perfect storm,” forcing most office-based employees to work virtually from home. So many of us have had to adapt to this new way of working and somehow cope with the many unintended stressors of having to live and work 24/7 at home, often under less-than-ideal conditions. Despite the potential downsides of

working from home, recent surveys conducted during the pandemic predict that anywhere from 16% to 55% of employees would prefer to continue to work remotely once the pandemic situation improves.<sup>1,2</sup> Clearly, the virtual workplace is here to stay.

I have been fortunate in that the pandemic has had relatively little impact on my working life as a medical writer, as I have always worked remotely from home. However, so many people in the workforce have been on a steep learning curve adjusting to a workday filled with virtual meetings, lack of face-to-face contact with colleagues, and working in isolation.

Certainly, being mentored in a virtual environment has been an entirely new experience for so many during this past year, particularly as most of us have had to overcome the initial awkwardness of using online virtual meeting platforms. The need for virtual mentoring has become so critical that mentoring strategies for scientists and medical students are now emerging in the peer-reviewed biomedical literature as a result of the pandemic.<sup>3,4</sup>

New and inexperienced medical writers may find working remotely particularly challenging. Medical writing can be a lonely profession, and often high-pressure, with shifting timelines and short deadlines. Thus, supporting and assisting new medical writers with their professional and personal development can make all the difference to ensure they have a successful start.

Based on my 17 years of experience working remotely as a medical writer in an entirely virtual medical writing company and then in my own freelance medical writing business, I have acquired many successful strategies to mentor and support new medical writers. In this article, I will share some of those strategies that have been most effective when mentoring medical writers virtually.

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## Finding a virtual mentor

Mentees looking for the right mentor have many more options available to them in a virtual mentoring model, as the mentor and mentee can live anywhere in the world. Finding a medical writing mentor does require time and effort.

Mentees can join professional organisations such as EMWA (the European Medical Writers Association) or social media



networks like LinkedIn to facilitate virtual interactions with experienced medical writers who may be working in the mentee's area of interest.

Once a mentee has identified appropriate medical writers with expertise, the next step is to reach out and enquire if the medical writer is willing to be a mentor or has a colleague interested in mentoring a newbie medical writer. I realise this step takes a bit of courage, but it is well worth the effort. Think globally. Since many medical writers work entirely remotely, highly successful medical writers can live anywhere in the world as long as they have a stable internet connection – so don't limit your search to your immediate area. Most medical writers under-

stand how difficult it can be to break into our field, and the challenges involved, and are happy to provide advice.

### Creating a strong mentor-mentee relationship

Once you have found a willing virtual mentor, it is important that the mentor and mentee develop a strong and trusting relationship. A key step in developing such a relationship is getting to know each other. If you have a mentor in a different part of the world or another location in your country, this is a great conversation starter that provides opportunities for casual conversations and relationship building. Language is typically not a barrier either, as many medical writers who come

from non-English speaking backgrounds are very adept at speaking and writing in English.

Communicating well is an absolute necessity, and many different virtual meeting platforms are now available to help with these virtual interactions.<sup>3</sup> Where possible, try to use video conferencing to ensure direct eye contact and effective listening. The mentor and mentee should have some knowledge of each other's personal background – this helps with understanding each other's point of view and how they came to medical writing. Medical writing is a unique career with no standard career development pathway, so knowing the mentor's story can provide a lot of insight for a mentee. As a mentor, being open about your successes





and failures along your career pathway can be invaluable because the road to becoming a medical writer can be bumpy and filled with detours. One of the most frequently asked questions I get from those who want to pursue a career in medical writing is, “How did you become a medical writer”? Understanding the details of how to navigate this career path is often a major concern for newbies. Awareness that there are many roads to becoming a competent medical writer often encourages new writers to consider different strategies and help them work with their mentor to find an appropriate career pathway.

Being honest and open about your strengths and weaknesses is critical for mentees if they want to develop a strong and trusting virtual relationship with their mentor. Explain to your mentor why you want to be a medical writer, what attracts you to the profession, and where you see your career in five or ten years. If you are unsure whether medical writing is for you, be clear that you are exploring this career path and highlight other interests you might have. Sometimes the best advice you can get as a mentee is to know when a career consideration might not be a good fit.

## Developing a virtual mentoring plan

Setting specific goals and expectations for a virtual mentorship is fundamental for a successful alliance, so I suggest creating a virtual mentoring plan. To help identify and refine the mentoring goals, the mentor should have an in-depth virtual discussion with the mentee.

What specific support and advice is the mentee seeking? Do they want assistance to improve their writing skills, enhance their knowledge about writing specific documents, further their pharma industry or drug development knowledge, find employment with a certain company, or develop career networks? These discussions will inform the content of the mentoring plan.

Importantly, the role of the mentor is to review these goals with the mentee and determine if they are sufficiently specific and achievable, based on the experience and knowledge of the mentor and their preliminary assessment of the mentee.

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mentor and mentee should agree on how often to meet virtually, the aims of each meeting, and what sort of activities and discussions are planned (I suggest preparing a meeting agenda for every meeting). Preparation and forethought are critical to maintaining the professionalism of the mentorship. Further, it is also important that the mentor and mentee develop a timeline for the mentoring plan – is the aim of the virtual mentorship to be short-term or long-term?

## Ideas and strategies for a virtual mentoring plan

Developing a robust mentoring plan takes time and effort, but making this a priority early in the mentor-mentee relationship is an important step to success. Here, I've highlighted some strategies that, based on my practical experience, have worked well.

### Assessing and developing mentee core competencies

New medical writers often ask me about the core competencies they will need to be a successful medical writer. Hence, many of my mentoring plans for medical writers often include an assessment of these core competencies.<sup>5,6</sup> These competencies can be assessed via writing exercises, discussion, review, and critical analysis of documents that can be

shared, as well as assessment of the mentee's editing skills. An in-depth discussion with mentees regarding their knowledge and understanding of specific competencies such as data analytical skills, statistics, medical and scientific knowledge, as well as drug development knowledge, can help pinpoint knowledge gaps.

Mentors can provide new medical writers with advice regarding involvement in organisations like EMWA, the American Medical Writing Association (AMWA), and the Drug Information Association (DIA). These professional organisations provide wonderful opportunities to meet other medical writers and offer extensive education and training programmes for new writers. Annual meetings for these organisations are ideal places to find a mentor and speak with experts who have a wealth of experience. These are all resources mentees may use to help fill knowledge gaps.

Discussion of successful medical writers' behaviours is another aspect that I often spend extra time covering with budding medical writers. These include such behaviours as the ability to communicate effectively, manage time well, pay attention to detail, demonstrate learning agility, embrace change and shifting goalposts, integrate scientific and thinking skills, accept critical feedback, and act with the highest ethical standards.<sup>6</sup> Awareness of these important attributes is vital for potential medical writers. In this regard, mentors are well-positioned to provide mentees with concrete examples of how these behaviours will support the skills needed to work successfully as a regulatory or publications writer or in other areas of medical communications.

These assessments and discussions between mentor and mentee can easily take place virtually and often involve email correspondence, virtual meetings, or sometimes phone calls. Sharing articles and social media posts about medical writing issues is another way a mentor can support their mentee, including alerting them to webinars that might be of interest. If a mentor and mentee both attend a webinar, it can serve as an excellent discussion point at a later time, where the mentee might feel more comfortable asking questions or discussing specific points raised in the webinar.

Many virtual online meeting platforms also have the option to record the mentor-mentee meetings, including the information shared on screen such as documents or slides. This frees

attendees from worrying about taking copious notes during the meeting, and attendees can be fully present and meaningfully participate in the discussion. The recordings are also an excellent way to prepare for upcoming mentorship meetings and review how the mentee is progressing. If meetings are to be recorded, this can also be documented in the mentoring plan.

### Introducing the mentee to other experts

Other options to consider in a mentoring plan are strategies to help the mentee liaise with other subject-matter experts who can further assist with the mentorship. For example, is there a statistician, pharmacokinetics expert, or clinical investigator who can speak to the mentee? I have found that mentees benefit greatly from interacting with other people who may work with medical writing teams. Using virtual mentoring, it is much easier for mentees to gain valuable connections with experts from around the world. These early contacts with subject-matter experts often lead to long-term working relationships throughout a medical writer's career.

### Supporting the mentee in their job search

Getting your first job as a medical writer can be a challenging step. Companies usually look for writers with experience, so finding a medical writing role takes time and patience if you have no job experience. The virtual mentor can be very helpful in guiding mentees towards specific strategies to find their first medical writing job. Mentors who are experienced with the remote workplace often have a lot of connections globally. They are frequently aware of positions that might be available or companies who may consider taking on new medical writers, often under the recommendation by the mentor.

Further, mentors can suggest roles that might provide a bridge to a full-fledged medical writing job. For example, working in other areas such as clinical research, clinical data management, medical information, pharmacovigilance, or academic biomedical research projects can be ideal stepping stones to help medical writers move into full-time medical writing. Mentors can help their mentees think laterally about navigating their career path and providing introductions to potential employers worldwide.

### Providing guidelines for mentor-mentee communications

The mentor and mentee should be transparent about their expectations and limitations of the mentorship. Busy professional medical writers often may feel they don't have the time or inclination to mentor; however, with a structured mentoring plan, a mentor can be more confident and better understand the scope of their mentor role. Mentors also need to be clear about their availability to assist the mentee. Mentors should set up specific communication policies/plans and advise the mentee of any limits on the mentor's availability. This information should then be incorporated into the mentoring plan. By openly discussing these issues, both the mentor and mentee eliminate the potential for misunderstandings, minimise assumptions by either party, and maximise the potential for the success of the mentorship.

### Ensuring the success of the mentorship

Successful mentorships are based on mutual respect and trust. Mentees should always keep in mind that their mentors are volunteers, so acknowledging your gratitude often goes a long way to make your mentor feel valued and appreciated. Mentees should also recognise their mentor's limitations – mentors cannot ensure you get the exact job you want, answer all your questions, or resolve your career dilemmas. If they can't help you with a specific issue, ask if they can recommend someone who can and thank them for the advice. Mentors are also not substitutes for the hard work needed to develop your medical writing skills.

I believe it is important to acknowledge the feeling of accomplishment and pride mentors often have when we see our proteges develop their skills and then get their dream medical writing job. Mentoring can be an incredibly rewarding experience, as there are so many opportunities to learn and grow. If you love what you do, there is nothing more rewarding

than having a former mentee become a friend and esteemed colleague.

### Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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### Author information

**Julie Ely, PhD**, has worked virtually as a medical writer for 17 years in Australia. She began her career in the USA as a bench scientist, became a clinical research manager, and eventually a medical writer. She has had her own medical writing business for 6 years with clients worldwide.