

One size doesn't fit all: Tailored medical writing mentoring and training

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Abstract

While there is ultimately no “secret sauce” to mentoring, in this article I outline my non-negotiables, which, although not rocket science, often take the mentor’s concerted effort to implement. Firstly, everyone is different. While hardly ground-breaking, it can be all too easy to wheel out the same experience for each mentee, because it makes *our* life easier. However, everyone’s needs are different, as are their personal circumstances; “know the person to better mentor”. Secondly, as a mentor, we have a parental-like responsibility to be consultant, counsellor, and cheerleader. If you are looking for a mentor to assist you with the transition to medical writing, I would prioritise this human side of the relationship more than looking for a list of what you will learn (important though that is, too).

“The Azur mentoring programme is an incredible platform for someone wishing a career in medical writing”...

“The programme helped me immensely as I received training about the ins and outs of medical writing. Particularly helpful are the writing tasks through which you gain an understanding of how clinical studies are reported”...

This is why I mentor. This is why I choose, some days, to help others on their journey into medical writing above doing the medical writing myself. Over the years, I have come to realise that each of us needs a mentor, each in our own way. And, that each of us can be a mentor to others. It is from this realisation that the basis of Sarah Tilly Mentoring took root. I am amazed to see how it has grown and flourished over the years, starting out as Azur Mentor Me with just two mentees and now as a fully-fledged online e-learning platform. I want to thank those first mentees for being part of the original idea and for trusting me to see them through their transition into medical writing careers of their own.

The ability to support, encourage, and teach in a nurturing environment is not something we encounter every day. Still, when we do stumble upon it, we generally don’t forget the experience. It may have been a piano teacher from childhood or a tutor from university – we remember great mentors. Outside of the workplace, mentoring relationships happen fairly naturally without us really thinking about it. But in the world of work, being a mentor is often a role that is thrust upon us. Some industries have more of a culture of mentorship, others less so. To me, one thing appears to be for sure: great mentors are not born but made.

In this article, I will tell my story of mentorship and the tailored, personal style of mentoring that I find to be the

key to success.

My story begins at the 2017 EMWA autumn conference in Cascais, Portugal. At this point, I had been medical writing (mostly regulatory) for 11 years at a variety of clinical research organisations and consultancies and I had, only 6 months earlier, taken the leap and set up Azur Health Science. I was asked if I would chair a roundtable discussion at the freelance business forum. I had been freelancing for only 6 months, and although hesitant, I was happy to contribute. My chosen topic for discussion was “Freelancers as Mentors to Newbies”. While training and mentoring was something that I enjoyed, I proposed the topic with a certain sense of trepidation, as I by no means considered myself an authority on mentoring. But I did know that it was something about which I had strong opinions. That trepidation only increased on the evening of the forum, where, like moths to a flame, it seemed like half the room gravitated to my table. Well, that is what it felt like at the time. We ended up having a useful discussion and the evening confirmed my instinct: that there are people out there who desperately need a mentor in the medical writing industry, but who perhaps know neither how to find one nor who to approach.

“I would recommend this programme to others 100%.”

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The art of mentoring

This mentoring instinct led me also to question how mentors in our industry receive appropriate training. Like everyone, I've had good and bad experiences being mentored. And naturally, I remember the good experiences. While some may be natural mentors, I firmly believe that being a mentor is something that can also be learnt. We can all read a "leadership" quote on LinkedIn and be inspired, but that inspiration is often only fleeting. So, soon after the Cascas conference in 2017, I designed a workshop for the mentors in the medical writing field, entitled "The Art of Mentoring".

My aim with the workshop was to offer training that is more than a quick dopamine fix, that is thought-provoking, and offers plenty of actionable, practical advice for mentors.

Mentoring is often so much more than the words we say, and our actions can speak far louder. Many of us are thrust into a mentorship role that is, by and large, an addition to our own

work. As mentors, can we subtly convey to the mentee our own sense of being inconvenienced? I'm sure that my face betrays my reluctance when my daughters ask me to join in a game of make-believe!

Furthermore, as mentors, do we consider how we impart advice? It's amazing how often we frame advice in a negative way: "Don't do this, or don't do that". "The Art of Mentoring" has been running at EMWA for 3 years now. We take inspiration and examples from all over the business world; we discuss learner personality types and how to deal with difficult situations, to turn an unsure mentor (and even an experienced mentor) into someone who embraces the experience. Perhaps even, at the same time, the mentor might learn a little something about themselves.

But what is a mentor without a mentee? This leads me to the next part of my mentorship journey.

Azur Mentor Me to Sarah Tilly Mentoring

After the freelance business forum in 2017, I was approached by two of the attendees who were at the round table to see if I would mentor them. While I had only mentored colleagues who were new starts within the companies where I had worked, I realised that, having been a medical writer for more than 10 years, perhaps I did have something to offer to those outside of my small work environment.

We set up a programme structure together that combined practical writing tasks with training on some of the basics of the healthcare industry, drug development, and the different types of writing roles available. Now I didn't want this to be a simple exercise in writing for which I provided a marked assessment. This didn't sit well with me. When I perform on-the-job medical writing tasks, I am not marked, and I would hate it if I were! No, I work collaboratively with a team, I speak to them at least several

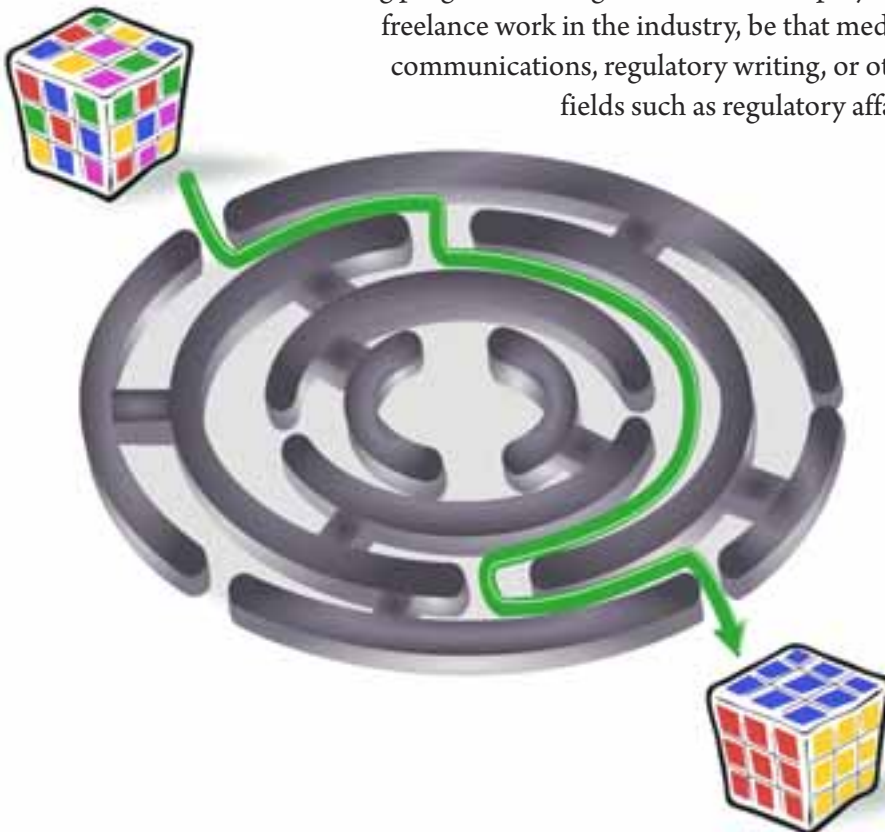


times a week during the drafting process, and I send a draft document for review so that together we can work to improve a document.

So why would I treat my mentees any differently? For the written mentoring assignments, this is just what we do: my mentees do some

writing and send it to me for feedback; I take time looking through their work, I send them written comments, and we have a meeting to discuss; the mentees then have the chance to update their work for final submission. Current and past mentees have found this incredibly valuable – it

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gives them far more confidence in their writing skills than can be achieved from a simple score with little advice on how to improve.

I can't quite believe I can still say this, but every mentee who has been through and completed this mentoring programme has gone on to find employed or freelance work in the industry, be that medical communications, regulatory writing, or other fields such as regulatory affairs.

I am proud that our programme does not produce "mini-mes". The programme offers mentees a fantastic insight into medical writing as a whole, but it does not limit them to the regulatory writing that I do every day, and it does not even limit them to medical writing. I am proud to be part of the development of the new generation of writers who are able to get off to a confident start, who are empathetic, encouraging, and open-minded.

It has been a long process from the ad hoc mentoring with Azur Mentor Me to the point where Sarah Tilly Mentoring is an online resource available to any who have the motivation and time to commit to self-training: mentees can sign up and learn at their own pace, in their own time.

But, of course, I keep in close contact with the mentees during their online learning journey, and we have regular catch-ups. Naturally, the real review and feedback sessions are maintained. Once the main writing assignment is completed, it is only natural that we accompany mentees as they begin their search for jobs in industry.

One of the many things that I have learned on my journey from the round table in 2017 to Sarah Tilly Mentoring today, is that medical writing is a career in demand. Medical writing is a challenging, but ultimately rewarding career for which we have many motivated and talented people who need an initial helping hand to bridge the gap into the industry.

From a mentee

One of the enquiring souls who flocked to Sarah's table at the EMWA freelance forum in 2017 was me, Somsuvro Basu. It was my first EMWA conference – I was itching to leave academia but still hesitant about the first moves. I believe Sarah sensed my apprehension and talked me through the possible transition paths to medical writing. The initial discussion opened up the opportunity to join her mentoring programme.



The programme started with a questionnaire and an initial call to plan a personalised programme. I provided my medical writing bucket list – helping Sarah to gauge my wishes

and streamline a programme that fit my goals and filled in the gaps.

I was unsure whether regulatory writing was my true calling and was inclined to medical and

science communications. Sarah used an approach where I studied a regulatory document and transformed it into an article, suiting my career intentions. I lived my fear (read: regulatory writing) and learned something new!

The task taught me two valuable lessons: first, I realised the demands and rigour required to be a regulatory writer; second, and the most crucial exercise, I learned knowledge extraction. It trained me to single out the most essential information from an astronomical clinical study report and distil it into a 3,000-word article. It provided me with a foundation to extract precise information, and to present it in a particular format for a specific audience.

In the last two years, I have been employed in a medical communications role, where I have extracted stories from the jungle of science literature out there on diverse topics, ranging from botany to nanotechnology. The training with Sarah gave me an edge to succeed in the job.

Now, it is time to give back! I am helping Sarah launch a polished mentoring programme aiming to help future medical writers. If I can do it, you can too!

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Conflicts of interest

Sarah and Adrian Tilly are co-founders of Azur Health Science, which provides the mentoring services discussed in this article.

Author information

Sarah Tilly

Sarah believes that everyone has their own, unique contribution to make to our industry and has been mentoring new medical writers since an early stage of her regulatory writing career, which began in 2006. Co-founder of Azur Health Science, she is actively involved in advising and mentoring other writers.

Adrian Tilly

Adrian is co-founder of Azur Health Science and a medical writer. He has been working in the industry since 2012 and brings a wealth of life experience that complements our values: respecting individuals, collaborative working, and inspiring those people looking to become future medical writers.

Somsuvro Basu

Somsuvro Basu, a freelance medical communicator, has been proudly associated with EMWA since 2017. Previously, Som acted as a science communication officer at the Central European Institute of Technology (CEITEC), a Czech research consortium. Before transitioning to medical communications, he worked in Czech Republic (PhD) and Germany (as a postdoc) as a molecular cell biologist.