

Winners of the Geoff Hall Scholarship Essay Competition

Dear all,

When I wrote the editorial for this issue last year, I never dreamed that a year later we would still be dealing with global lockdowns and quarantines. I hope and pray that you and your loved ones are staying safe (and sane!).

The Geoff Hall Scholarships (GHSs) are given in honour of a former President of EMWA. Geoff was a very special person, an extremely valued member of EMWA, and a very good friend to many EMWA members. He firmly believed that the future of EMWA lies in our new and potential members, and so it's a very fitting legacy that we have the scholarship awards in his memory. The scholarships are awarded annually on the basis of an essay competition, and the title of this year's essay was "Do you have what it takes to be a medical writer? Discuss three

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attributes or skills that best qualify one to be a medical writer". This year's scholarship winners were Johanna Svanberg Larsson and Alexandra Smith.

Johanna has a DPhil in physical chemistry and has worked as a scientific editor. She was inspired by her editing work related to improving human health to transition to medical materials and pharmaceuticals. She is now a freelance medical writer specialising in the medical communications area.

Having completed her undergraduate in biochemistry in 2015, Alexandra stayed in academia and gained her PhD in molecular

biology from the University of Manchester, UK, in 2019. Knowing it was time to leave the lab behind, she then moved into med comms and started a new career as a trainee medical writer at Mudskipper, an AMICULUM agency.

Johanna's and Alexandra's winning essays are presented here, and we wish them the very best at the start of their very promising medical writing careers.

For those of you inspired to pick up your laptop, and looking for something to fill your time during quarantine, this year's essay title is "The ethics of medical writing".

Hope to read your essays soon, and stay safe all, until we see each other at the next EMWA conference.

Bestest,
Lisa

Curiosity, creativity and tenacity: The core attributes of a medical writer

Medical writing involves drafting and reviewing a multitude of documents as diverse as clinical trial protocols to be submitted to health authorities, research manuscripts for peer review, and patient information leaflets. Other activities include creating conference presentations as well as educational and promotional materials.¹ In order to perform these tasks, medical writers must be able to convert complex information into a clear, concise, audience-appropriate format.² So, what three attributes best qualify someone to be a medical writer?

Curiosity

When starting a project, a medical writer needs to understand the data to be presented and know what the take-home message should be. This implies that the medical writer must know of

current advances in interventions or diagnostic tools in the particular therapeutic area, grasp the relevance of the project to the field, and be able to determine the main features to be presented. If a medical writer is to enjoy learning and staying up to date in relevant therapeutic areas, they must be curious. A "desire to know, an interest leading to inquiry"³ is paramount if a medical writer is to be effective in their background research and consideration of the information to be presented.

The information itself is only half the message – to be effective, the message needs to be comprehensible to the audience. A patient is not necessarily interested in the same study features as an ethics committee; the general public does not have the same level of scientific knowledge as a medical journal peer reviewer. A medical writer must be cognisant of who the audience is

and enquire into the audience's needs and ability to understand in order to be able to present the information appropriately. Again, interest leading to enquiry: a medical writer must be curious.

A curious medical writer will have a genuine interest in and look into all aspects of the project, including any background information, the specific audience needs as well as the regulatory, ethical and publishing guidelines, that a person lacking in curiosity may overlook.

Creativity

In order to convert medical data into a suitably pitched message, a medical writer needs to be creative. Journals often limit the number of figures and tables that can be included, and it can be difficult to fit all the relevant data into shorter formats such as posters or patient leaflets.



Presenting information concisely, illustratively and accurately requires creativity. This type of creativity applies equally to the structure and wording of text as to the design of figures. Although a medical writer must take care that they do not distort data when the format is brief or when combining different data into one figure, creativity is fundamental to conveying data in graphical form, as exemplified by John Snow's 1854 map of cholera spread in London.⁴

Tenacity

Curiosity and creativity allow a medical writer to produce a first draft; one or more review rounds are often necessary before all team members and/or the client are happy with the final product. Given the nature of reviews, the outcome is often as much a question of taste as of fact, and a medical writer must be tenacious in ensuring that data is accurately presented and not degraded from partial changes by multiple reviewers. Furthermore, as a medical writer moves on to other projects, a tenacious memory enables them to build and maintain singular knowledge and expertise, making them more efficient in future projects.

Why does this list not include language skills, analytical thinking, or integrity?

Language skills, analytical thinking, and integrity are crucial to medical writing, but they are not

core attributes. Rather, language skills and analytical thinking are both attributes that can be obtained from, or are implied by, the core attributes discussed above. For example, a curious person would make an effort to fill any gaps in their knowledge, including gaps in language skills. Language is an inherent part of medical writing, and a curious medical writer would seek the requisite language skills. A tenacious medical writer would then keep working on their language skills until they become proficient. Language skills are therefore not a core attribute of medical writers as they can be derived from curiosity and tenacity.

Analytical thinking, a characteristic that all medical writers must also have in order to process data, is perhaps less easily gained than language skills. However, analytical thinking is still not a core attribute. A curious medical writer knows which questions to ask and therefore which areas to research when starting their project, and a creative medical writer can present information in an engaging and relevant manner. Taken together, a medical writer who is both curious and creative is capable of critically appraising data, lifting important aspects, and discerning any shortcomings. Analytical thinking is therefore implied by the pairing of curiosity with creativity.

Finally, lacking integrity should absolutely be grounds for disqualification as a medical writer, but integrity is not an attribute that qualifies

someone to be a medical writer; integrity does not enable a person to perform the tasks of a medical writer. A person with high integrity would not necessarily be capable of distilling multifaceted information into understandable, audience-appropriate communications, but a curious, creative and tenacious person would be able to do so.

References

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Collaboration, precision, and resilience:

So, you want to be a medical writer? Me too. Less than a year into my PhD, I was certain that academic research was not for me, and so the search for a rewarding alternative career began. Fast forward a few years and I find myself writing this essay from the perspective of being a trainee medical writer for just under a year. I by no means claim to be an expert, but I do believe that by being on the lower rungs of the medical writing career ladder, I'm in an optimal position to reach out a helping hand to those looking to start the same climb. Here, I offer my advice to aspiring medical writers on the three key skills I regard as essential to succeed as a medical writer: collaboration, precision, and resilience.

What are your thoughts?

Skill #1: Collaboration

Regardless of who it's with, a successful medical writer is comfortable with collaborating in a variety of different contexts. Medical communication is often referred to as the metaphorical bridge between those who are making new medicines and medical devices (pharma and biotech), and the end-users of those products (healthcare professionals and patients). To bridge that gap effectively, collaboration with

colleagues, clients and healthcare experts alike is vital.

Whilst there are many skills and attributes that define a strong collaborator (such as empathy, active-listening, time-management), there are some that can hinder effective teamwork. It is just as important to consider these as it is to hone and build the positive attributes required. In his TED^x talk, Jim Tamm elegantly explains how defensiveness is the greatest inhibitor of collaboration.¹ Appreciating this and managing your own defensiveness in response to feedback from your team is a desired attribute of a good medical writer (albeit one that is not typically highlighted). After all, the result will be better collaboration that benefits all.

So, ask yourself these questions: would you be comfortable receiving multiple rounds of feedback and criticism on your work? Are you happy not to take full ownership on a project, but instead support others' ideas, even when it's not how you would have done it? Would you actively flag any mistakes you have made, so the team can respond accordingly? If you answered an honest 'yes' to each of those questions, then maybe you do have the collaboration skills it takes to be a medical writer. Ultimately, a strong collaborator

has the confidence to ask 'What are your thoughts?' and the ability to listen and respond in a non-defensive, productive manner.

Be clear. Be concise. Be correct

Skill #2: Precision

Medical writing is not science journalism. It is not about providing perspectives or swaying opinion. Medical writing 'is about clearly communicating clinical and scientific data and information in written form.'² Communication is all about intended and received messages. Clear communication is achieved when the received message is the same as the intended message. Clear medical writing is no different. Often, clear communication is also concise; communicating only what needs to be said in as few words as possible. Furthermore, any medical writer needs the ability to understand and analyse scientific data and information accurately, and only communicate ideas that can be supported by the available data. The ability to be clear, concise and correct is an obvious necessity when communicating information about new medicines to the health care professionals and patients who will eventually prescribe and use such products.

As a medical writer, what does being precise



Do you have what it takes to be a medical writer?

mean in practice? The short answer is that you need to be a pedant. Would you know when to describe a result as 'significant' versus 'substantial'? Would you know when to use 'compared to' rather than 'compared with'? Do you know what hanging comparators and dangling participles are and how to avoid them? Precision allows for clear communication of complex clinical information and eliminates the possibility of misinterpretation. As such, precision is a key ingredient in producing medical writing of the highest quality.

Seriously, do you have what it takes?

Skill #3: Resilience

Medical writing is a rewarding career that combines your passion for science with an interest in communicating that science. But don't be fooled – it may be rewarding but it is definitely not easy! Cue the final skill I consider to be of most importance to make it as a medical writer: resilience.

In my opinion, the real reason a PhD is preferred on applications for new medical writers is because a PhD demonstrates resilience. Let's

face it, the specifics of your PhD project are unlikely to be of use as a medical writer. Nevertheless, by completing a PhD you have demonstrated your ability to stick at something despite things going wrong as well as your capacity to problem solve under time pressure. This resilience will definitely put you at an advantage as you move into medical writing.

As a trainee medical writer, most of the learning is done 'on the job'. After review, your work will be returned to you covered in comments and suggestions for improvements (all of which, rather annoyingly, make perfect sense). Don't be intimidated by this, instead use it as the opportunity to hone your craft and learn from others. Don't be disheartened when a client changes their mind on what they want, despite having invested so much of your time already on their original request. Be calm when relentlessly chasing authors who seem to have disappeared off the face of the earth. Despite all these challenges (and more) you've just got to keep going. Be resilient.

The inspiration for this essay has come not only from my own personal experience as a trainee medical writer, but also from all the many wonderfully supportive colleagues I have the

pleasure of working with. Just as I have learnt from them, this essay is my way of helping others at the very beginning of what I believe will be a very rewarding, life-long career. Just remember to collaborate, be precise and be resilient. Good luck and enjoy!

References

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