



Mentoring tomorrow's medical writers

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Abstract

Mentoring may be valuable to today's students who are considering their future career options in an increasingly competitive, demanding, and challenging world. This article outlines the author's experience of mentoring tomorrow's medical writers, provides examples of the topics discussed in mentoring sessions, and describes the skills required to provide effective support. A successful mentoring relationship can provide developmental benefits for both mentor and mentee.

In the December 2016 issue of *Medical Writing*, I described speaking at a local careers event, which resulted in an invitation to join the University of East Anglia student mentoring programme. Since then, I have started to mentor students who are considering their future career options.

What is the mentoring programme?

The objective of the programme is to provide career-focussed mentoring for current students and recent graduates. Establishing a graduate-level career is competitive, demanding, and challenging, and the programme recognises that professional experience and insight can be a considerable asset.

The university uses the following definition of mentoring according to Alred & Garvey:¹

A process in which a more skilled or more experienced person, serving as a role model, teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels and befriends a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and/or personal development. Mentoring functions are carried out within the context of an ongoing, supportive relationship between the mentor and mentee.

Students are matched with a suitable mentor for two types of support:

- **Insider Insight mentoring:** Information sessions designed to give a student a greater insight into a particular career sector or business area.
- **Six-month mentoring:** A student receives advice and guidance through one-to-one sessions over 6 months, with the aim of helping them to broaden their horizons and be guided to their first steps into employment.

Mentors are supported with various resources, e.g., a handbook, online training

modules, newsletters, and a LinkedIn group. Regular networking events take place with students, mentees, mentors, and the university careers staff. Face-to-face meetings on the university campus are encouraged, with other contact via telephone, email, Skype or LinkedIn, as appropriate.

Who do I mentor and what does it involve?

So far, I have been matched with several students for Insider Insight sessions. These have been with students in different years (first year to final year) and studying various subjects (including biological sciences, biochemistry, English literature, and creative writing). I've also spoken to members of research staff who are considering possible roles outside academia. Although every session has been different, each one included plenty of stimulating questions from the mentee.

To give an idea of the types of topics covered, I have been asked to:

- Explain the different types of medical writing activities
- Summarise a typical day as a medical writer (Is there one?)
- Talk about core competencies and skills, e.g. analytical, scientific, language, and writing
- Describe different work environments and motivations in the pharmaceutical industry
- Advise on speculative job applications and medical writing tests
- Provide input into making a curriculum vitae as attractive to an employer as possible
- Give tips on managing projects

- Help with networking techniques and becoming more assertive
- Discuss challenges and successes in my career
- Describe the differences, benefits, and challenges of being an employee versus a freelancer.

Each conversation required me to listen carefully, ask effective questions, and encourage the mentee to think about solutions and to take ownership of possible actions. These are all skills that medical writers often use when collaborating with document contributors and reviewers, but they apply to effective mentoring too. I also try to provide direction with regard to the mentee's particular questions and interests, pointing them towards other available resources if appropriate. We often discuss skills acquired during a degree course or academic research that could be transferred to a medical writing career and also consider new skills that may need to be developed.

What am I learning from the mentoring experience?

Mentoring provides a new challenge for me. It not only allows me to help a student recognise his or her skills, but it also means I can revive and develop skills I have acquired previously. As a freelance medical writer with a career background in managing clinical data, staff, and human resources, skills such as objective setting,

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providing feedback, and interviewing techniques are now proving useful in a different setting.

The opportunity to network with other mentors from diverse business areas is developing my confidence as a freelance professional, outside of the medical writing community. Although I am involved in the programme primarily to “give something back” by sharing knowledge and experience to

inspire and support others, it provides an opportunity to create a link with my local university.

Could a mentor be of benefit to you?

Mentoring can be of benefit to many people with different levels of knowledge and experience. If you think a mentor may be useful to you, it is not necessary to be part of an organised mentoring programme – you probably know at least one person who may be willing to mentor you.

So if you are an aspiring medical writer, why not consider finding a mentor who could provide insights into our rewarding profession and help you get your foot in the door?

Or if you already have medical writing experience, why not think about offering to mentor someone who might benefit from your knowledge? Or why not consider finding a

mentor to help you further your own professional or personal development?

In the short time that I have been part of the university programme, I have already seen that a mentee-mentor relationship can be a mutually rewarding experience, and I look forward to continuing to mentor students in the new academic year. As noted in *The Mentoring Pocketbook*,

“Mentoring is probably the most powerful developmental process people can experience. And when it works, it develops two for the price of one.”¹.

Conflicts of interest

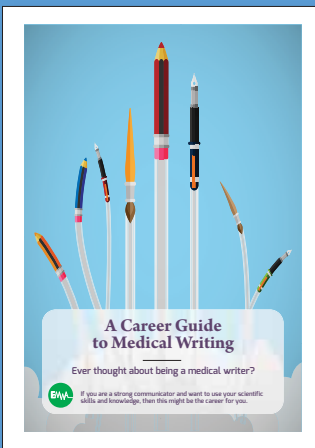
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Author information

Kathryn Lee is a freelance medical writer. She spent 10 years managing clinical trial data before taking a senior position in Human Resources. She subsequently provided medical communications expertise, specialising in regulatory writing. Kathryn set up her medical writing business in 2011 and now provides writing, training, and consultancy services.



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