

Creative medical writing: An oxymoron?

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, creativity is “the ability to create”, and to create means “to make or bring into existence something new”.¹ As it applies to writing, creativity is most often associated with imaginative, fictional accounts. Yet, creative nonfiction is a well-accepted literary genre, suggesting that a text can be both factual and creative. In this essay, I contend not only that medical writing can be creative, but that it should be.

Medical writing is about clearly communicating medical information. The message needs to be clear, complete, factual, and accurate. However, effective communication entails more than simply gathering and relaying information. If the writer were to present only the dry results of scientific research, the text would quickly become tiresome. Instead, for communication to be successful, it must engage the reader's attention, and this requires creativity. In fact, studies show that communicating scientific findings using storytelling, rather than dry, numerical results, improves the readers' attention and makes the information easier to process and remember.² This is particularly important in the context of medical writing, where the messages being communicated can have an important effect on the health of people.

Engaging, and keeping, the attention of the reader means the writer has to simplify the information being communicated. Results from scientific and medical research are complex and are often difficult to understand for the non-specialised reader. The medical writer not only needs to translate jargon, but also to explain the scientific findings in a way that conveys meaning to his particular audience. For example, numbers are an important component of medical research results, and yet studies show that many people lack the appropriate numeracy skills to understand and interpret these results.³ Research in the area of health care has shown that patients are more likely to understand the information and make correct choices when it requires less effort on their part to understand it.^{3,4}

Moreover, results from scientific research must often be considered in the context of other research findings or in light of what others have done. In her essay “What Medical Writing Means To Me,” Elizabeth Wager wrote, “It is a fallacy to believe that science can be reported completely dispassionately and without some form of interpretation.”⁵ Readers can easily become lost

in the wealth of information resulting from medical research. It is the task of the writer to point the reader to the most relevant results and to show the significance of those findings. Simplifying and interpreting the data, and adjusting the message to a particular audience entails creativity.

Thus far, it seems that creativity is indispensable in the broad field of medical communications. However, even in regulatory writing, where the writer is more tightly constrained by the need to conform to strict guidelines, creativity is still essential. This is because medical writers working on regulatory documents need to read and analyse a range of reports and then condense and synthesise the information for the readers. It is not just about simplifying jargon and reducing the complexity inherent to scientific results, but about combining different sources and finding connections between ideas to create something new.

Like gymnasts performing on the balance beam, medical writers dance on the narrow boundary between scientific accuracy and expressiveness. The purpose of medical writing is, above all, to communicate, and effective communication requires creativity. The medical writer needs to craft a tailored message that is not only factual and accurate, but also accessible. Precision and simplification must be balanced to reach a level that is “just right”, neither unnecessarily complicated nor vague. As the 20th century American jazz player and composer Charles Mingus said, “Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity.”⁶

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Marisa Granados
mgranados85@gmail.com