Moving into medical writing from academia: A soft skills perspective

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Abstract

As I made the transition into medical writing and started learning the ropes, I realised first-hand that in addition to writing skills, soft skills are indispensable in becoming an effective medical writer. Not only are they vital in helping you enjoy your work, mastering the necessary soft skills will also help others enjoy working with you. In this article, I talk about six key soft skills that have played a crucial role in helping me make a smooth transition into the world of regulatory medical writing.

It has been nearly two years since I made the leap from academic research into full time regulatory medical writing. Changing careers was a daunting task at the time, especially since my work involved a very niche area inside academic research and I had no idea what else I could be doing given my extremely specific skill set. I had become aware that academia was not my cup of tea very early into my time as a researcher. I also knew that I wanted to continue contributing to science but was not too keen on doing this by spending endless hours at the bench conducting experiments. The obvious first step was to scour the internet for alternative careers for life science researchers. Upon narrowing down the choices available, a career in medical writing really appealed to me as it gave me the chance to remain within the confines of science while playing to my strengths as an avid science communicator and technical writer.

After I made the transition into medical writing and started learning the ropes of my role, I quickly realised first-hand that in addition to writing skills, soft skills are indispensable in this line of work – so much more so than in academia. My time in research mostly involved working alone or in very small teams on projects for long durations of two to three years. Medical writing is much more dynamic in that you will most likely be working on multiple projects in parallel often involving vast and diverse teams with much shorter deadlines. This is when your soft skills truly come into play and can have a huge impact on how efficient and effective you are as a medical writer. Not only are they vital in helping you enjoy your work and deriving satisfaction from it, mastering the necessary soft skills can also play a critical role in helping others enjoy working with you. In this article, I talk about six key soft skills that were crucial in making a smooth transition from academia into the world of medical writing.

1. Communication

Communication is perhaps the cornerstone of medical writing. It encompasses every stage of your time as a medical writer – all the way from bagging your first medical writing role to your daily activities as a writer, as well as gaining experience and advancing your career. Medical writing is an umbrella term which brings together several different flavours of writing, such as medical communications, regulatory writing, medical publications, and medical journalism, etc. Communication skills played a significant role in helping me figure out the specific branch of medical writing I wanted to move into and even helped me land my first interview. This process involved an extensive amount of networking including: reaching out to writers working in each discipline of medical writing; setting up informational interviews; learning about the day-to-day work involved; getting an idea of the work culture and ethos; and understanding the challenges underlying each branch of medical writing. Attending an EMWA conference and networking in person helped me learn about several organisations that I would have never come across on my own. It helped me glean what companies are looking for in potential employees; this in turn helped me tailor my résumé and writing samples to suit the roles I wanted.

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Once I finally made my way into medical writing, I understood that both verbal and written communication skills were equally important. To start with, asking the right questions during your interactions with senior writers on the job can help you pick up things faster during your training period. As a medical writer, you also will be communicating with both colleagues and clients regularly. In addition to authoring, you will be writing emails, supporting other writers, attending and leading meetings, facilitating discussions among various team members, and ultimately driving documents through to approval. Communication plays a central role in all these activities and how effectively you communicate can directly impact how productive and efficient you are as a writer.

2. Attention to detail

Attention to detail is a key component that companies look for in potential candidates during the recruitment process. This is because your day-to-day as a medical writer involves processing vast amounts of data and writing lengthy documents comprising several hundred pages. Most often, these documents are prepared under tight timelines with a significant amount of back and forth among the various team members involved. The majority of these documents are critical in the drug development process and can play a decisive role in gaining approval for marketing authorisation from the regulatory authorities. They serve as a source of information for a diverse group of people including patients, clinicians, scientists, healthcare workers, ethics committees, and regulatory authorities. It is vital that the information presented in these documents is accurate and consistent. Documents also usually undergo a quality control stage during which they are checked thoroughly by other writers for errors. Medical writing companies can

assess your attention to detail in several ways. For instance, it could be as simple as the attention you pay to your emails when interacting with your potential employer during the recruitment stages. Writing assessments are also commonly used by most organisations during the initial stages where you could be provided with a variety of tasks including reading, writing, or editing depending on the company. These tasks will also need to be completed within a pre-specified time limit. Being pedantic and having gimlet eyes during these stages can actually give you an edge during the recruitment process and show you in a good light to your potential employer.

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3. Adaptability

No two days in the life of a medical writer are the same. It is very likely that you will be juggling multiple projects on a daily basis, each requiring a different approach, style, and format. For example, a document written for investigators is a very different ball game from one that is aimed at patients. This diversity in the nature and scope of medical writing projects requires you to be versatile and adapt your writing style to suit your purpose and target audience. Once you gain experience, you will also be working for several clients, which can add another layer of complexity to your projects. You might end up working on multiple client desktops with different document management systems, Sharepoints, email addresses, standard operating procedures, styles guides , etc., at the same time. Most regulatory and document guidelines are also constantly being updated and it is imperative that you keep abreast of these changes as a medical writer. Working on the same type of document could give you completely different experiences based on the client you are working for, the project you are working on, or the team you are working with. During busy periods, you may not always have the choice to work on a project you prefer or a document you like. Being flexible and developing the ability to tackle any task or project that comes your way can help you gain experience quickly, especially during the initial stages of your career when the focus should be to learn as much as you can on the job. Learning to cope with the unpredictable nature of drug development as a whole and adapting yourself to each project depending on its scale and complexity , can help you progress quickly in your career.

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4. Time management

As a medical writer you will need to dedicate chunks of your time to a range of activities including training, reading, responding to emails, entering timesheets, attending meetings, quality control, and project work . Bring proactive and planning can help you split your time effectively and can also have a direct influence on how smoothly your work days are. As a beginner, you are likely to spend most of your time training on various kinds of documents and reading numerous standard operating procedures. You may also be assigned work on specific sections of documents to give you a taste of what they entail and help you learn more without the added pressure of being responsible for the entire document. These experiences can help you get a rough gauge of the complexity of each section in the document and the approximate time required for the document as a whole. As you gain experience and begin to

lead projects, you will also be expected to plan and create timelines for the document development process upfront. A typical regulatory document will generally involve two to three drafts, two to three rounds of reviews, quality control, content endorsement, and approval. You will need to adhere to the timelines for each stage of the project unless there are unexpected changes including additional tasks requested by the client. One approach for tackling this would be to look at the big picture and then take a top-down approach to planning your work. For instance, you could prepare a list of the projects you are working on and then break them down by urgency and complexity. This can help you prioritise your projects and give you an idea of how many projects you can take on during a given period. Armed with this information, you can work out how to split your time between billable and non-billable activities and whether you might need to request additional resource to help you meet your project deadlines.

The sooner you learn to accept criticism positively and apply the feedback gained to your work, the quicker your learning curve is and the faster you can progress to leading your own projects.

5. Team player

To be an effective team player is a must-have skill for almost every organisation in today's corporate world. As a medical writer, you may be assigned projects in which you are given all the information upfront and left entirely to your own devices to see it through. This kind of autonomy given during authoring could be the case with projects of a smaller scale involving documents with lower complexity. However, this is unlikely when authoring complex and high-level documents requiring input from a wide range of stakeholders. For instance, the preparation of decisive regulatory documents like a clinical study protocol, which essentially describes how a clinical trial will be conducted, or a clinical study report, which describes the data and outcomes of a clinical trial, will need input from multiple functional areas. These can include clinicians, biostatisticians, regulators, clinical associates, programmers, scientists, project managers, data managers, trial managers, and other medical writers. These documents necessitate a lot of back and forth during authoring and go through multiple rounds of drafts and reviews before they are approved. They also involve sifting through enormous amounts of data including tables, figures, and listings making it an onerous task to tackle alone. In addition, the authoring of such documents will often entail collaborative authoring, which involves the simultaneous input of multiple team members representing varying functions. Sometimes, there can be conflicting opinions and disagreements among the team; as a medical writer, you may find yourself leading comment resolution meetings to resolve these differences and find common ground, and ultimately drive the document development process through to approval within the given deadlines. To be an effective team player involves the mastery of a combination of other soft skills including active listening, communication, and conflict management. Although it may not be a straightforward process, these are skills you can develop and hone over several years as you make your way from supporting senior colleagues with their projects to leading your own projects.

6. Accepting feedback

This is a skill you will become familiar with as soon as you break into medical writing and begin working on your very first document. As a beginner, your work will be vetted and checked for errors by senior writers and it is very likely that you will end up with a document riddled with track changes and comment bubbles giving you feedback. It can be a truly humbling experience for someone fresh out of academia, even if you have several years of experience with scientific writing and have multiple publications to your name. The sooner you learn to accept criticism positively and apply the feedback gained to your work, the quicker your learning curve is and the faster you can progress to leading your own projects. In contrast to academia, you will also soon realise that as a medical writer you are not the owner of the document you author, and you may not necessarily have the final say on how it is written. Medical writers are service providers and how the document is written is ultimately up to the client. Although you may advise the client on the writing, it is important to understand that you are providing a service to that client. This may require you to accept major changes in your work if requested by the client – even if you think you have written everything perfectly. In these situations, it is imperative that you learn to swallow your pride and accept the feedback on the work even if you do not fully agree with it.

These are some of the key skills I continue to learn and hone as I take baby steps into the vast and complex world of regulatory writing within drug development. They have helped me gain much needed confidence, as someone with little to no experience in this domain, and have also helped me grow both professionally and personally.

Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by his employer or EMWA.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Author information

Vivek Ranjan, PhD, has been a regulatory writer at Certara since September 2022. He has a background in tissue engineering and biofabrication. Before taking the plunge into medical writing, he worked as a postdoctoral research fellow at the Center for Research in Transplantation and Translational Immunology in Nantes, France.