

Getting Your Foot in the Door

SECTION EDITOR



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“Do your homework, knowledge is power!” my teachers used to say. Yes, we learn a lot during our education, respect the rules of the system, and we rely on that knowledge. However, once that stage is over, we are overwhelmed with possibilities and stare at job ads. Different

perspectives, experiences, and ideas can help a lot. In this section, Peter Morgan, Jean-Régis Humbert, and Elodie Pauwels share their stories on how they embarked on their medical writing careers. Stijn Staes gives us the insight that we are not limited by our degrees or experiences.

These stories are just a reminder to follow your passion and your path will unfold when you least expect it.

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From a survivor to a creator and a freelancer in just 10 lessons

It took me more than 25 years and a lot of different professional roles in all parts of the world to arrive at a stage of inner freedom where I wanted to be since I was born. In this article, I'll write about my personal quest in 10 lessons. Lean back and get ready for a bumpy ride! These lessons and experiences ultimately changed my life and personality in a way that I never could have imagined. The least I can do now is to share my life experience, inspiration, and energy, which you can use for your own personal development.

Freedom has been my deepest aspiration since I was a child. I was raised in a small town in Belgium which I perceived as some kind of imprisonment, and I always wanted to break out. One day, I decided to explore the world outside of my small town. There, I discovered the vibrant and foreign city of Maastricht at the age of 12 without my parent's permission. Every week I used to risk my life riding a bicycle in heavy traffic and on unsafe roads just to be in Maastricht.

There I had a sense of freedom and would listen to strangers talking in an unusual Dutch accent. I enjoyed the city vibes and found the most extraordinary gadgets in shops that had only been existing in my dreams.

Lesson #1 was I learned to go out and explore. Take risks if you want to have adventure in life and encounter new opportunities. That's the recipe for an exciting and fulfilling life.

Following rules and society's expectations were never my cup of tea. During my whole life I've balanced between the attraction of a safe golden cage and my unstoppable hunger for adventure and freedom.

Looking back, it all started with the choice of my studies. I truly liked to perform and to be on stage. I had a vision to become a famous actor which did not suit my parents' expectations, as these kinds of jobs were socially not acceptable and would not provide a stable financial income according to their perspective. Additionally, on a personal level I was struggling with my sexual orientation. When I saw a gay man in a famous TV hospital soap opera for the first time, it brought me hope and relief. Not being out yet was a valid reason for me to go into nursing school in the belief that I will get the confidence needed to break the silence. My two major challenges were seemingly solved.

However, I discovered that hospitals were a classic example of strict hierarchy and obedience such as of a nurse to a doctor in those days. Moreover, I didn't find a suitable match and my hunger for knowledge was not yet fulfilled. Getting a master's degree was a logical choice as it would open doors, so I was told. I enrolled in master's studies in hospital management and graduated with distinction through my perseverance and belief that I can succeed, even when it did not match my dreams.

Lesson #2: Never regret a single choice in your life. It will bring you to your next, unknown destination. Remember to look back at what you have achieved and give yourself credit.

Still, I was not ready to settle down for a 9 to 5 job. So, I decided to undertake a pilgrimage of one year backpacking to South and Central

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America. This journey unlocked my passion for travelling and interest for other cultures. Furthermore, I learned to be independent and make a network of friends all over the world. Many times I felt lonely there but it could not compete with the beauty of the travel. **Lesson #3:**

Being alone gives you the opportunity to get to know yourself in the deepest ways possible!

Back home I decided to get an education in Tropical Medicine in Antwerp to work for Doctors without Borders. It was the perfect combination of my passion for people and travel. At the same time, it was a great solution for “my wrong

choice of study”. I was kidnapped, shot at, and survived heavy bombings. During that time, I had discovered the most isolated areas of Africa to cure diseases and help thousands of people in the most dire circumstances. I learned about living in poverty among the poorest and starving cultures/places of this planet. I still vividly remember how I appreciated a small, salty potato as a full meal. **This experience changed me forever, showed me to be humble, and made me grateful for all that I have, which would be Lesson # 4.**

The poppy fields of Afghanistan and the

religious battles of Indonesia taught me that everyone has his own truth. It is just a matter of being respectful and being able to truly listen. That's the recipe for building a peaceful society. **Therein lay Lesson #5: to always face people and situations with an open mind and to see it as an opportunity.** It is the only way to help others, experience joy and make true friendships and relationships.

When I came back home, I felt like an outcast in Western society. I needed some sort of structure and found a fixed term position in Belgium. I discovered all the advantages of a fixed income, long term-working relationships, and stability. **Sometimes it is good to settle down for a while, and just go with the flow of life (Lesson # 6).**

Downside... I had to start back at the bottom as an HR-consultant before reaching the top again as my foreign experience was not fully validated. Ten years and three promotions later, I found myself in the role of general manager of the biggest juvenile detention centre in Belgium. **Lesson #7: sometimes you have to start from scratch in order to climb the ladder again.**

At the age of 45, I was a successful manager with a nice salary and a great pension forecast. These are the perfect circumstances that 95% of people long for. Lifetime job security! Yet I was to be faced with hunger for my freedom again.

One day sitting at my laptop, I couldn't stop asking myself why I was actually doing this job. I opened a new campus, and employed 100 very passionate and engaged personalities. Together we made the biggest reorganisation in the history of the detention centre. We turned it from an old prison into a holistic, youngster-oriented institution. Yet, after three successful years, I found myself completely bored and in a golden cage!

My struggles intensified and time brought changes; a new boss did not bring the solution or quell my discontent. Major quarrels and discussions were part of the daily routine which tore me up completely. It was crystal clear that I had to leave the job. Yet I didn't have the courage to do so, and as a consequence, I was fired unexpectedly. **Therefore, Lesson #8, if you don't make your own decisions, someone else will make it for you and be assured it won't be to your benefit.**

A turbulent period in my life started. The



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union organised a strike, my case was on the national news and even the Minister of Health got involved. In parallel, my father was diagnosed with final stage cancer. I felt my life was taken over by others and negativity.

I found myself at a crossroads and had to choose between prosecuting the government and taking care of my father. I followed the choice of my heart and took care of my father. Those moments I will never forget as they are the most important in life. Remember, moments in life are transient, as well the people we love. **They will never come back once they are gone (Lesson #9).**

I was so devastated when my father passed away that I decided to take a sabbatical. The remote areas of South Africa and Norway gave me new perspectives and the inspiring idea to become a consultant in the private sector. A small voice inside me whispered that this was not the right job to apply for. Despite my struggles I accepted a very tempting offer as I needed the money. When I was at the beginning of my new role my boss announced to me that the company was broke. This moment was the confirmation of my inner voice. **At that stage I realised that**

money won't make you happy and you should always follow your intuition. That was my most valuable lesson, Lesson #10.

I considered this unforeseen dismissal as a fresh start. Strangely I felt blessed. I could finally create my own company, my coaching and HR business. In my coaching sessions, which I often organise outside in nature, I see people turning around their lives, and performing at their best. It is a true blessing that I can be a part of their transformation process.

Furthermore, I've been discovering a beautiful talent of mine, interviewing Belgian top leaders in my podcast, *Studio Stijn, Inspirational Leadership*. I've started yoga classes, horseback riding, singing, and recently, I finished my first painting! It makes me happy to encounter so many inspirational human beings every day and it is a fulfilling, daily life.

To wrap up my life lessons for you: Speaking out in an authentic way has always, in my experience, brought me love and joy. Hiding my true self, accepting or living up to other people's standards and norms have never given me satisfaction or fulfilment.

I still have many dreams to pursue; I want to write a book about my podcast, have an exhibition of my paintings, and a house in nature. But there is no more urge, no more need to prove myself. I just feel and look at life, take it as it comes. Looking back, I realise that life is full of opportunities, you only have to see and seize them. Enjoy your ride!

Disclaimers

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

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Stijn Staes, Executive Coach and Podcaster, worked as a manager for Doctors Without Borders all over the world and in different executive positions in HR and management in Belgium. Today he works with leaders and organisations to optimise their performance and wellbeing. He is the host of the podcast *Studio Stijn: Inspirational Leadership* where he interviews Belgian and international leaders.

Perseverance is the key to success

Finding your way can take time

J EAN-RÉGIS: When I completed my master's degree in therapeutic research in 2016 at the University of Picardie Jules Verne, Amiens, France, I had no idea that one day, I would embark on a career in medical writing. At that time, I was passionate about biomedical research, and I really had the ambition to pursue a PhD. Unfortunately, I quickly understood how difficult it is to get funding for a project and to get a steady job at the university. I even had become disillusioned with the profession when I had a discussion with post-docs struggling to get a permanent position in my research unit, despite their skills and their level of experience.

After pondering my career, I decided to embark on a professional reorientation. My goal was to become a teacher in Life and Earth Sciences in public high schools. At first I applied to teach as a contractual teacher but the French Department for Education could not offer me a position. Instead, I accepted a position as a contractual laboratory assistant, which was the opportunity to prepare for the competitive examination to become a teacher, while working directly with adolescents and supporting teachers in different schools. I successfully passed the written test but not the oral exam. I had held my position of a lab assistant for three years in several high schools, but I was discouraged both by the pupils' behaviour and the difficulty of passing the very selective examination. In addition, my contractual position was precarious employment, and was not sustainable. In the end, I felt too far from my real motivation, which is working in the health sector. However, my professional reorientation allowed me to finance a new career change: I wanted to leave the public sector, without undertaking another long period of university studies. In January 2020, I applied to the Catholic University of Lyon (UCLy), France, which offers holders of a master's degree or a PhD a one-year professional training course (Biotechnologies Manager IPROB5) with the aim to work in the pharmaceutical industry. While searching on the internet for a profession that could match my scientific knowledge, my skills and my personality, the position of regulatory medical writer piqued my interest. I thought that this may

Good organisation is paramount because these reports are long and you have to manage a lot of data and files.

be the job that suits my criteria. I understood what the job could be about as I had the opportunity to be trained on guidelines and regulations of clinical trials during my master's degree. Besides, my master's project was a translational study of patients admitted for vascular and cardiothoracic surgery. These experiences encouraged me further to become a medical writer, which seemed to be the best compromise between my passion for the clinical field and my fondness for writing and languages.

One day, whilst I was browsing the website of the Bernard Gregory Association¹ I came across the interview of Elodie, a medical writer since 2013. The way she described her profession was very engaging to me,² but I didn't know that our paths would cross one day.

A providential encounter in a partly confined world

In January 2021, I started to look for an internship when teleworking was strongly advised in this period of restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As I was the very first student in UCLy's course to specialise in scientific writing, I had difficulties finding a company that would accept my application, despite UCLy's extensive professional network. Constantly on the lookout for internship offers on LinkedIn, I finally contacted Elodie at 4Clinics. She was kind enough to forward my application to the Director of Medical Writing and Regulatory Affairs and, if successful, would train me in the profession, even remotely. After I had a call in English with the director, 4Clinics eventually agreed to welcome me in late April for an entirely home-based 6-month internship. The distance did not hinder my learning or my motivation, and this internship confirmed my professional choice.

I mainly worked on adapting international documents to French regulations (summary protocols, informed consent forms, etc.). These are certainly the projects I enjoyed the most – as I said before, I am passionate about languages and medicine. I like the possibility of switching between English and French, and to constantly acquire new knowledge in a wide range of therapeutic areas. The documents may be the same, but their content is always different. Doing quality control had a major influence in my work

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and my training, as I saw the documents from a different perspective. It is a great way to learn from more experienced writers.

I didn't have the opportunity to write a clinical study report for a client, but I wrote one as a training. This was the most challenging part of my internship. Good organisation is paramount because these reports are long and you have to manage a lot of data and files. I also had to familiarise myself with the very specific style of regulatory writing: neutral, accurate, and concise. It was somewhat baffling to analyse my draft after Elodie's review, but this is all part of the learning process.

I also understood the importance of being a team player and communication between team members. I would not have progressed as much without the support of my colleagues and without Elodie's investment. Her advice, comments, corrections, working methods, and her support have contributed to my development.

I am extremely grateful to 4Clinics for allowing me to gain this first experience in medical writing. At the end of my internship, I was offered a permanent contract at 4Clinics. In addition to rewarding my efforts and my personal investment in my professional integration process, this offer has shown me that perseverance is the key to success, and is the beginning of my career in a fascinating field.

If others are still hesitating to embark on this career, I can only advise them to undertake a professional training course to allow them to do an internship. It is the best way to test their own motivation and to gain initial experience before applying for a job. Applying directly as a junior medical writer can be tricky because recruiters often demand a certain level of experience. This kind of training course is a good way to create a professional network and acquire experience to add to your CV.

E LODIE: When Jean-Régis contacted me in February 2021, we discussed the feasibility of a remote internship. We knew it would be a challenge for both of us. I had a transparent approach, telling him I had never mentored a trainee in medical writing (approximately 8 years had passed since I last mentored a trainee, in a lab, and supervising is



Elodie Pauwels and Jean-Régis Humbert, after Jean-Régis' internship defense in Lyon, France

quite easy when you share a bench!). Luckily, information technology tools are now well developed, and we could mimic being in a shared office whenever needed so that I could answer orally any question, and even see whether Jean-Régis was struggling with a task or happily focused on it. Communication is the key, even more when you are far away. I briefed Jean-Régis on several types of regulatory documents and we had regular meetings during his assigned tasks

(quality control or writing) to discuss different topics, such as writing style, localisation of source

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data, interpretation, or the way of presenting things. I reviewed and made comments on all documents he wrote as exercises and was available to discuss my findings. Supervising Jean-Régis has been rewarding for me (as well) as I saw his competence grow month after month. Jean-Régis had been attentive to comments and tips and implemented them in a timely manner. He became an integral part of our team prior to the end of his internship and we are now lucky to have him on board. May your career as a medical writer be successful, Jean-Régis!

References

1. Founded in 1980, the Association Bernard Gregory (ABG) works for the professional development of PhDs, the capacity of companies to innovate and the improvement of skills resulting from education through research.
2. Association Bernard Gregory. The ABG perspective; Career paths and professions. Medical writing according to Elodie Pauwels, PhD in genetics [published 2018 Nov]. Available from: <https://www.abg.asso.fr/en/vue/career-paths-and-professions>

Finding my path from academia to medical writing

Looking back now, I can trace the origins of my medical writing career to the final year of my master's degree: a year-long research project that had turned into a disaster. My experiments had failed, I had virtually no data, and in my attempts to salvage something, I had left writing my thesis to the very last minute. Then, when I sat down to write, I had the sinking realisation that I didn't really know how. Not that I couldn't write per se, it was only that faced with a blank page I had no idea how to go about it. What should I say, how should I organise it, what was good and what was bad writing? I felt completely overwhelmed and paralyzed by my indecision, constantly second guessing myself. Panicked and under pressure, I threw what I

could together, and submitted it at the last moment. The result was, as you might expect, disappointing.

It is perhaps somewhat paradoxical, then, or maybe masochistic, that after taking time to reflect on this experience my conclusions were: 1) that I wanted to do a PhD, and 2) that I kind of liked writing, and wanted to learn to do it well. I took some confidence from a few positive comments on my thesis, which aligned with areas where I felt things had actually clicked, and seeing my own view confirmed gave me the belief that I had the ability to write, even if my last attempt had gone down in flames.

After some searching, I eventually found a PhD position in Germany, which I followed with

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post-docs in the Netherlands and France. I enjoyed research. I did experiments (some of which worked!), I supervised students, I wrote research papers. Being a student and post-doc was fun and an adventure, living and working in different countries and cultures. But now I had to decide the next phase of my career, and life as an academic held little appeal for me. I liked science, but I didn't feel any particular need to be the one making discoveries, and a career in one little

niche felt too claustrophobic.

Medical writing had been lingering at the back of my mind ever since I'd heard about it as a PhD student, and the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like the ideal career for me. I had thought a lot about writing since my master's thesis disaster, and writing papers had been one of my favourite parts of the job. Going into medical writing seemed the natural direction, one where I could continue to use my scientific knowledge and further develop as a writer. And so, when my last post-doc came to an end, with my work published and my research career neatly wrapped up, I took the plunge and left academia.

Entering the job market

To start with, I took a little time to decompress and get my bearings. It was liberating, but at the same time, daunting. I had no network outside of academia and no real understanding of how the job market works. Naturally, therefore, I set about searching the easiest and least effective way possible – job adverts.

I applied to many job postings with little success. Responses, when they came, were typically of the thanks-but-no-thanks variety. There were many reasons why this might have been the case, and setting out I had been prepared for a trial and error approach, but without feedback I was left guessing. Translating my academic experience to an industry CV was not straightforward. Many of the relevant skills I had developed were not easily quantifiable, and it was difficult to convey the value I gained from my research experience in short, neat bullet points. Deciphering job adverts was also new to me, and I was unsure how to tailor my applications in a meaningful way. But the most obvious problem was my lack of industry experience, as even for 'entry-level' positions almost all employers were asking for 2 to 3 years of experience (sometimes going so far as to mark this out in bold font as *mandatory*). On top of this, my years as a post-doc were also a worry, as I'd read several interviews with hiring managers commenting how they were the death of candidates, how post-docs were too old, over-educated, and under-experienced. All told, it was

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clear I needed a different approach, and to get anywhere I would need to heed the advice given in big, flashing lights to all jobseekers – network, network, network.

Networking

I was a hesitant networker. Being more of an introverted type, networking sounded intimidating. How do I approach total strangers without any context, other than needing a job? What did I have to offer in return? And there was also the slight problem of being in the midst of the COVID pandemic, and with the world having effectively ground to a halt, formal networking opportunities seemed pretty limited.

I needed help. I searched around and reached out to Sarah Tilly, of Azur Health Science and Sarah Tilly Mentoring, to ask for advice. On her



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invitation, I joined a Zoom get together of medical writers in France. Although I didn't have much to contribute, it was interesting and informative to listen in, and I also saw that I was not the only one trying to break into medical writing (yes, perhaps this should have been obvious given the competition for entry-level positions, but it was a lightbulb moment for me). This got me thinking that, as others were presumably looking for advice just like me, it might be good to organise a Q&A where jobseekers could pose questions to experienced medical writers on exactly this problem. It was just the type of event I would like to attend, so why not make it happen?

I proposed the idea to Sarah, and she agreed and asked me to help organise it. A few months later, we did the Q&A as a livestream over Zoom, where we posed questions to a panel of experts. The panellists were helpful and full of insight, and from their answers I gained a better understanding of how employers approach hiring, what they are looking for, and what I could do to improve my chances of success (read: correct all the mistakes I had been making). However, by this point I had gone through the interview process with Sarah and was poised to join Azur Health Science, so I never needed to put my newfound knowledge to use.

Still, the recording is available on the Sarah Tilly Mentoring website for others to hopefully benefit from!

Reflections

With hindsight, I can see there were many things I could have done to make the process smoother. But, through perseverance and a willingness to learn from my mistakes, I eventually found the perfect job for me, and can now look forward to an exciting new career as a medical writer. My advice to you would be to be proactive, and to keep looking forward. Getting your first industry job can be hard, with repeated knockbacks and rejection, but by getting to know people and finding ways to demonstrate your abilities, you'll have every chance to find your ideal job.

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