

Getting Your Foot in the Door

Editorial

Welcome to our first edition for 2020. Looking back to the year past, there were a lot of GYFD moments to acknowledge and be thankful for. The March 2019 issue on *Medical Writing Careers* was my first stint as MEW guest editor. The experience has proven to be so addictive that I volunteered for another guest editorship this year. Watch out for the June 2020 issue.

In 2019, I also got my foot in the door of big pharma medical writing. But most importantly, it was the year when several medical writing wannabes became medical writing newbies, landing their first industry jobs and/or gigs. Congratulations to Adriana, Archana, Cherry, Gauri, Namrata, and Sanjukta. Some of these ladies have shared their stories in previous MEW issues¹ and EMWA webinars.²

In this edition, I want to thank Cherry for sharing her incredible GYFD journey. It brings a sense of déjà vu as I started a similar journey 14 years ago, both professionally and geographically.^{3,4} Like Cherry, I will always be grateful for EMWA for showing me the way.

Finally, check out Brian Bass' (my co-guest editor for the *Medical Writing Careers* issue) valuable advice on breaking into the medical writing field. I especially love Brian's poultry metaphors. But much more, it's a privilege to get tips from such a seasoned writer. Thank you, Brian.

References

1. Rocha A, Dey-Irmeler S. Getting Your Foot in the Door. *Med Writ*. 2019;28(1):82–3.
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conference. 29 Aug 2019.

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Raquel Billiones

Finding balance: My path to medical writing

As plans go, or rather never did for me really, the path that led me to medical writing reflects the winding roads that litter my life. When I had originally planned to go to specialty training upon completion of my medical degree, I ended up moving to Switzerland to start a new life with my husband. When I planned to sign on full-time to a Basel-based CRO after completing my biomedical engineering master's degree, I found I was pregnant. At one point, it was clear that planning big was just a waste of time, seeing as every turn kept sending me on a side road to a destination completely off my map!

Though the first child was a surprise, the second wasn't. So after a few years of working part-time in research, the arrival of the second and our subsequent move to another region led me to take on family duties full-time (or better said, 24/7). Later, with the arrival of No.3, I had imagined that I would enjoy the house-wifing a few years more, focusing on the equally challenging science of child-rearing, while making the most of our Swiss countryside life.

But unexpectedly, 4 years into this domestic life, a growing unrest led me to late-night googling for possibilities to jump-start my sidelined career. That's when I found EMWA. And with its discovery, I read an abundance of member testimonials which left me compelled to meet these writers. So, I set my sights on the



Photo: Cherry Malonzo Marty

The author's town in the Swiss Alps

Vienna conference in the spring of 2019 to dive right in. It was to be my first big trip alone in years, so despite the uncertainty, I was excited to finally have 5 days of uninterrupted "me time" to saturate my head with science, for a change.

At the conference, it was a delight to strike up

conversations with scientific writers of different specialties and experiences. Though not one story was the same, writing was a shared passion in everyone's journey into this profession. Because of the hobby I had been cultivating during my years of staying home with the

children, I could easily relate (if not to the specialty, then at least to the writing).

Though a mere hopeful by the end of the week, I left Vienna quite fulfilled with a few leads to boot. Having rediscovered a part of myself I had unintentionally put away while focusing on the family, my confidence was renewed and I knew I was welcome in this community, regardless of the path I had taken to get here.

A month later, my hopes did pan out, and an acquaintance from Vienna signed me on to a regulatory consultancy he was leading. And with today's connectivity and productivity tools, I am able to work from any location, in a virtual office shared by colleagues across the globe.

A typical workday can sometimes mean having a call on my way to the morning's errands after dropping off the 2-year old. Later, I could set aside a few hours in the evening for documents without missing out on an afternoon bike ride with the 4-year old. On other days, the share-screen option connects me to other colleagues and clients, allowing me to hold a presentation as if we were all in the same room, then attend to a personal appointment afterwards. And on lazy mornings, I can take it slow and make a check-in call while preparing lunch, to gear up for writing when the toddler naps and the older boys spend their afternoon out playing with the neighbourhood children.

With the virtual office and flexible working hours, I may constantly be on the move, but with a growing family, this is inevitable. And though the reality of juggling family duties with a developing career is nothing short of challenging, working remotely is keeping me sane, without sacrificing my family.

After that fateful trip to Vienna, there isn't a day I don't feel blessed with this turn of events. Had I hesitated to go, I would not have met the people that believed in my potential and didn't discriminate against my unusual and interrupted career track or my already packed family situation.

Though clearly this is yet another one of those roads leading to an unknown destination, sharing this journey with my husband and three sons while working in a team that respects my personal obligations makes it possible and worthwhile each day.

Thank you EMWA for helping to open doors that I hadn't known existed.

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How committed are you to breaking in?

Breaking into the field of medical writing is a conundrum. Like most, if not all other worthy professions, you can't get experience without getting a job, and you can't get that first job without having experience. It's a chicken-and-egg sort of problem. But having broken into the medical writing profession many years ago without having any discernable medical writing experience – and harder yet, breaking into the field as a freelance, I can tell you with all confidence that it can be done. The question is, how committed are you to breaking in?

To paraphrase another poultry-related saying, when it comes to making a ham and egg breakfast, the chicken is involved but the pig is committed. Fortunately, breaking into medical writing doesn't require a life-or-death commitment. But you better be all in.

Medical writers come from many walks of life. I was a professional writer for almost a decade before I broke into medical writing, with absolutely no writing experience in health, medicine, or even science. While my learning curve over the years has been steep, I don't think it's any steeper than that of a scientist or health or medical professional who needs to prove they can write.

So here's my first tip for anyone wanting to break into medical writing: be honest with yourself about what you know and don't know, then do whatever it takes to learn it. For example, I knew that I didn't know everything about health, medicine, and science. I've worked very hard at that for my entire career as a medical writer. At the speed with which medical science advances, there's always more to learn.

In my opinion, one of the greatest challenges to overcome is the perception that we know how to write. Everyone knows how to write, right? I discovered that even after years as a professional writer I could still benefit from writing courses. Surely anyone whose career to this point has not exclusively involved writing can benefit as well. Fortunately, there are excellent workshops, webinars, and other resources available through EMWA and the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) to learn and reinforce what you already know (or think you know) about writing mechanics.

Then you need to write. A lot. Being good at the mechanics of writing does not make you a great writer. Being a great writer means being a great communicator. To achieve that kind of

greatness you need to know not just the mechanics of writing and the topic about which you're writing, both of which are expected. You need to be able to write for specific audiences, understanding and adapting to their unique and varied needs, desires, and learning styles. You need to be able to engage those audiences so they want to read what you've written. And you need to be able to communicate information clearly and accurately in a variety of media. These are all skills you learn by practice, over time.

This is my second tip: be patient. One of my undergraduate professors said you can't consider yourself a professional writer until you've written a million published words. That was a lot harder to do before the days of the internet, blogs, and self-publishing; but I suspect these days the goal post has also shifted further out. I think this is accurate because becoming a great writer doesn't happen overnight. You learn by doing, and especially by making mistakes.

This brings me to my third tip: don't be afraid to make mistakes. From very young, we're taught to be correct and admonished for making errors. But as another famous poultry-related saying goes, you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. One thing I've learned is that if you can't make a mistake you can't make anything. Fear of failure makes you afraid to try anything new. As William Shakespeare put it in *Measure for Measure*:

"Our doubts are traitors,
and make us lose the good
we oft might win
by fearing to attempt."

If you want to break into medical writing, this last tip is the single most important piece of advice I can give you. If you're not afraid to fail you never will because you'll see each step backward as a learning experience, each negative as a positive, and each obstacle as a challenge along the road to your success.

For more information, I invite you to check out my blog post "How To Become a Medical Writer". [<http://blog.amwa.org/how-to-become-a-medical-writer>]

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