

# A Career Guide to Medical Writing

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Ever thought about being a medical writer?



If you are a strong communicator and want to use your scientific skills and knowledge, then this might be the career for you.

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## 1 Purpose of this guide <sup>1</sup>

At EMWA we welcome medical writers at all stages of their career. Many of our members are new to the medical writing profession and have a lot of questions. We will do our best to answer them in this guide.

This guide, written by EMWA members, aims to give a brief overview of the medical writing profession and to provide essential advice to newcomers.

As starters, you can check out the following YouTube clips by EMWA ex-president Dr. Helen Baldwin:

- What is medical writing? An interview conducted by EMWA, the European Medical Writers Association.
- Introduction to medical writing

Another useful resource is our EMWA journal *Medical Writing* (MEW), known as *The Write Stuff* (TWS) until 2012. Members receive a copy by standard mail, but can also read it online on our website. We have included links to some of these issues in this guide. However, please be aware that some links to the back issues of the journal may only be accessible to EMWA members. The good news is, since 2016, featured articles in MEW are open access and hence accessible also to non-EMWA members.

## 2 What is medical writing?

Medical writing is about clearly communicating clinical and scientific data and information in written form. The job draws on diverse skillsets and roles vary widely. For example:

- *By pitch*: Medical writers pitch information to a wide range of audiences, from clinical professionals, to drug regulators, to lay audiences.
- *By work format*: Roles range from taking notes in conferences, preparing presentations, producing and editing regulatory documents and manuscripts, marketing communications, and educational materials for different target groups, translations, and journalism.
- *By individual writers attributes*: For example, language skills will enable you to work as a translator or editor, statistical skills will enable you to analyse and interpret data. Specific skills in a certain therapeutic area might be beneficial in finding your niche. Writers come from diverse backgrounds and there are plenty of opportunities to find your area of expertise.

The scope of work is broad but the key thread through all roles is the combination of scientific and communication skills. To gain a better idea of the diversity of this profession, take a look at Section 3 for more details on different types of medical writing.



<sup>1</sup> Some parts of this guide were taken from the EMWA Medical Writing Career Leaflet written by Andrea Palluch in 2009.

### 3 What are the different types of medical writing?

As mentioned above, medical writing work is diverse but the different types of medical writing can be roughly classified into regulatory writing and medical communications ('med comms'), although the delineations are not always clearly defined. This diversity results in a wide range of documents that medical writers produce, as illustrated in an example of a medical writing spectrum in Figure 1.

#### 3.1 Regulatory medical writing

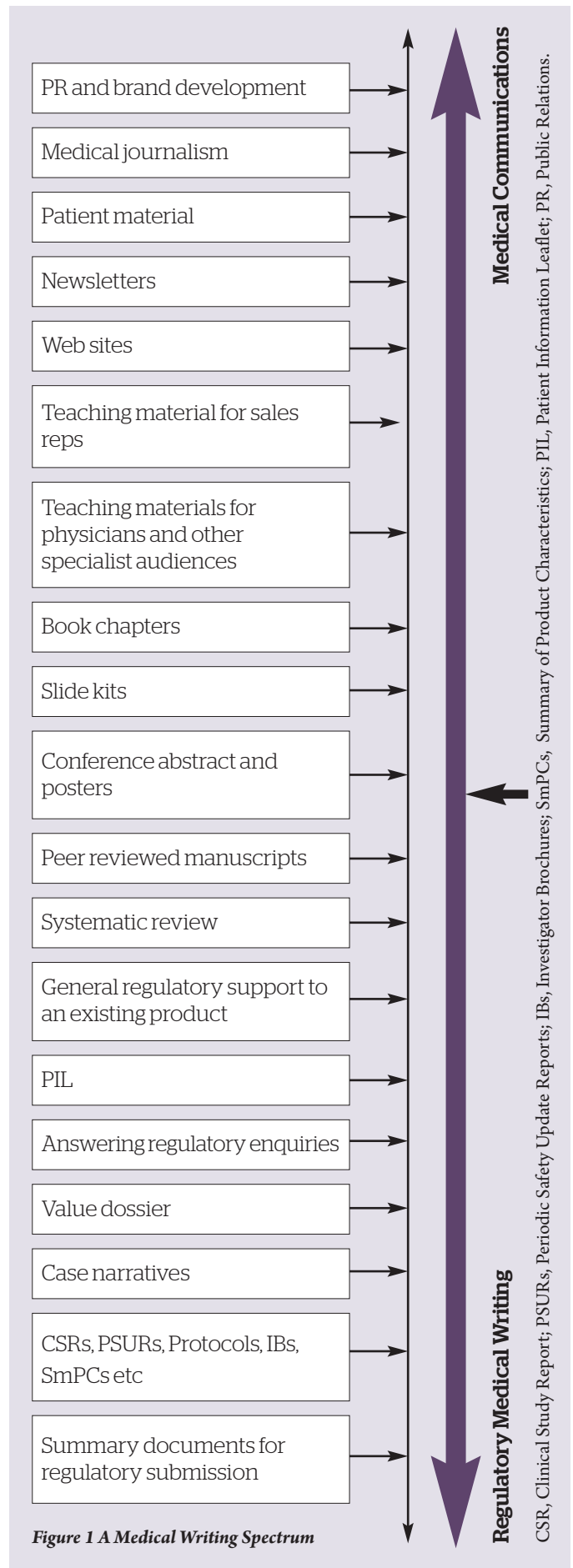
Regulatory writing generally covers the gamut of documents that are involved in the drug or medical device development process, ranging from clinical trial level documents (protocols, study reports, annual safety updates, etc.) to marketing application submission dossiers and on to post-marketing documentation. For regular updates on regulatory issues, check out the regular column on Regulatory Writing in the MEW. In addition, we had three journal issues dedicated to this topic:

- *Regulatory Writing* 2009, TWS vol. 18 no. 1
- *Regulatory Writing Basics* 2014, MEW vol. 23 issue 1
- *Post-approval Regulatory Writing* 2014, MEW vol. 23 issue 4

#### 3.2 Medical communications

Medical Communications ('med comms') is the generation of written, audiovisual, oral or online materials dealing with medicine and healthcare. Medical communications agencies provide consultancy services to the pharmaceutical industry to help raise awareness of medicines via education and promotion, (Moon, 2015). The deliverables of med comms may include manuscripts, posters and slide decks for conference presentations. To learn more about the med comms side of medical writing, read the regular column on med comms in MEW. Journal issues relevant to medical communications are:

- *Medical Communications* 2009, TWS vol. 18 no. 4
- *Healthcare Communications* 2011, TWS vol. 20 no. 3
- *Medical Communications* June 2016, MEW vol. 25 issue 2



Source: Broad-spectrum medical writer: Nature or nurture? (McIntosh, 2009)



### 3.3 Translation

In Europe, with its many countries and languages, the need for translation of clinical and scientific documents is huge and this presents opportunity for those with the gift of languages. Check out the TWS 2006 issue (vol. 15 no. 2) dedicated to Medical Translators. The column Gained in Translation regularly appears in MEW.

### 3.4 Other types of medical writing

Less known but nevertheless increasingly important segments of the medical writing field are writing non-clinical sections (toxicology and chemistry, manufacturing, and controls [the latter better known as CMC writing]) of submission dossiers, health economics documents including reimbursement dossiers, and documents for medical devices and in vitro diagnostics. To learn more about some of the non-mainstream types of medical writing, check out the 2014 MEW vol. 23 issue 3 dedicated to Non-Clinical Writing.

## 4 What skills and qualifications do I need?

Companies may expect you to have a first degree in a life science (e.g. biology, biochemistry, physiology, or chemistry) and some may require advanced degrees (i.e. MSc, PhD, MD). However, there are many medical writers who have entered the profession with backgrounds in language rather than science. You don't necessarily need a medical qualification, although a good understanding of basic human anatomy and physiology is important.

A knowledge of diseases and their treatment is an advantage, but in most jobs you can learn about specific therapeutic areas as you get involved with different projects. You will need very good writing and word processing skills. Most employers will ask you to do a writing test before, or as part of, your interview so that they can judge your writing skills. The format of this test will vary depending on the type of medical writing the company is involved with. You'll also need to have good inter-personal skills. Medical writers work as part of inter-disciplinary teams and, in some cases, with people outside of their company. You need to be comfortable communicating with people from a wide range of backgrounds.

English is the lingua franca of medical writing because most of the deliverables must be written in English. Hence, a very high level of English proficiency is required for this profession. However, despite this requirement, both native and non-native English speakers can become successful medical writers.

A medical writer also needs good analytical skills to understand and analyse scientific data and translate these into figures, tables and text befitting the audience. You may ask, are medical writers scientists? Medical writers new to the profession were awarded the Geoff Hall Scholarship in 2015 and 2016 for essays they wrote on this topic. These essays are published in MEW.

Most job advertisements that you will see will also ask for good attention to detail. This is important for reviewing and editing documents, and also for spotting the important points in hundreds of pages of clinical data.

An exciting aspect of medical writing is that, because the profession is diverse, there is always room for learning and career development. EMWA provides plenty of learning opportunities at the biannual conferences, in addition to year-round webinars on specialist topics.

To get some idea of the scope of areas that EMWA provides training in take a look at:

- **EMWA's Professional Development Programme** provides 'high-quality training for medical writers through workshops and homework assignments. Training is in the form of half-day workshops, which take place at EMWA's twice-yearly conferences'. For more details about the programme including an extensive list of available courses, check the **EPDP Programme**.

- **EMWA's Webinar Programme** is a 'series of webinars for medical writers to gain professional development skills and hear about the latest initiatives in the medical writing world'. Members can access the webinar archives going back to 2015.
- **EMWA's Expert Seminar Series (ESS)**, offered at EMWA's spring conferences, is targeted for experienced medical writers, heads of medical writing departments, and industry leaders from other disciplines who want to learn about the latest developments that affect the medical writing industry and play a role in shaping the world of medical writing. Download the details of the next ESS from the conferences page.
- **EMWA Symposia** are organised during the spring conferences. Each symposium is a one-day event with 360° presentations and discussions by experts on the latest regulations and industry trends. Download the brochure of the latest symposium from the conferences page.

## 5 Where do medical writers work and what do they do?

Medical writers work in a spectrum of different work-place environments ranging from office-based to home-based positions, from being employed to working as an independent freelancer.

Recently, with the availability of reliable internet access, some companies have adopted the strategy of allowing employees to work from home partially or permanently and the medical writing profession is in the forefront of this telecommuting trend.

Every work place and position has its upsides and downsides. Ultimately it is a question of personal taste and, as with all careers, you can always opt for change if your current work environment doesn't suit you.

### 5.1 Employment within an organisation

You'll find medical writers in pharmaceutical companies, contract research organisations (CROs), and communications agencies, as well as in regulatory agencies and non-profit organisations.

Working for a pharmaceutical company usually means that you get experience in a small number of therapeutic areas, which may suit you if you like to get to understand a topic thoroughly.

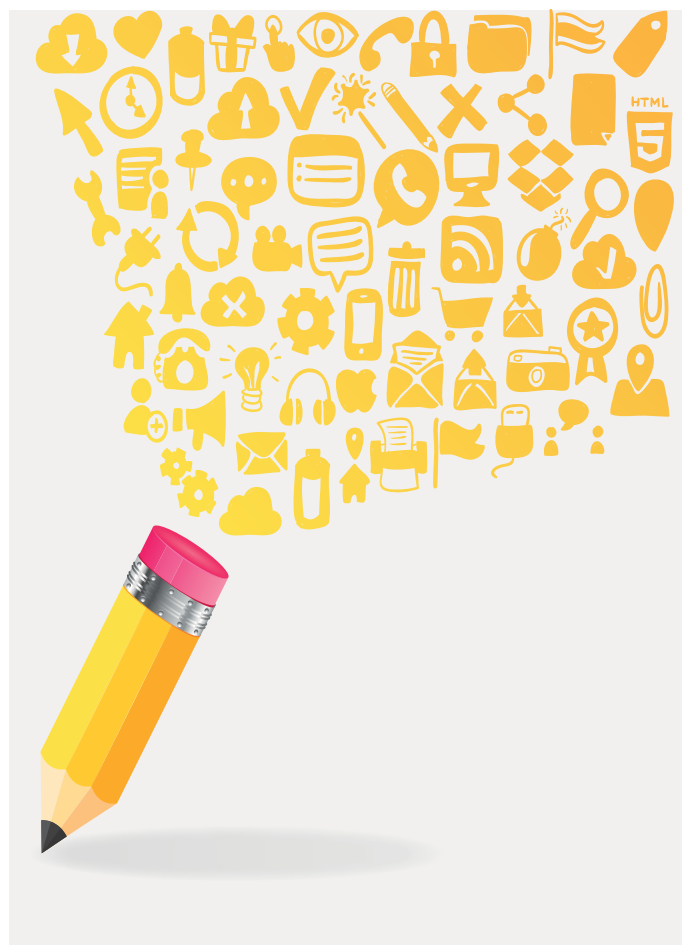
Alternatively, if you like more variety, you might prefer to work for a CRO where you are likely to get to work on projects that cover a wider range of diseases and treatments. CROs provide services to pharmaceutical companies, ranging from conducting clinical trials to getting products registered with regulatory authorities. In general, medical writers in pharma companies and CROs are involved with preparing a range of documents for these regulatory submissions, including protocols and final reports for clinical

trials, annual safety updates, and marketing authorisation application dossiers.

Writers in communications agencies generally prepare manuscripts for publication in medical journals, items for conferences (e.g. posters, abstracts, and slide presentations), promotional items for pharmaceutical marketing, training material, and multimedia (e.g. websites). Check out the careers guide on med comms '*From academic to medical writer*'.

We also have EMWA members who work as medical writers for regulatory and governmental agencies such as the European Medicines Agency (EMA), the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), and Germany's Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Healthcare (IQWiG). Increasingly, non-profit health organisations and research institutes also employ medical writers and translators in their communications departments.

When looking for employment, scientific journals and websites specialising in recruitment for the pharmaceutical industry are good places to start. Nowadays, many social media platforms also include job posting. Jobs are also regularly posted on the EMWA website.



## 5.2 Self-employment

Many writers also work on a freelance basis, which is an attractive option for some people. If you're new to medical writing, it can be better to start off as an employee working for a company. This will allow you to develop the skills that you need, and gain the necessary contacts and experience.

Many of our members are freelance medical writers, medical editors and translators. Some of them are listed in our freelance directory.

We also have a freelance resource center available to our members. This is continually updated and contains information including:

- Regulatory medical writing
- Advice on starting-up and running a freelance business
- Technical advice
- Personal experience of other freelancers
- Journalism and translation

A Freelance Business Forum is held at every EMWA conference and is open for all attendees. In addition, check out the Out on Our Own (OOO) column in MEW.

## 5.3 Internships

In May 2016, EMWA launched the Internship Forum (IF) at the Munich spring conference. The purpose of this event is to connect potential interns with companies offering medical writing internships. This will hopefully help overcome the 'Catch 22' of getting into the MW field without prior MW experience. The EMWA IF is planned to be held regularly at the spring conferences.

Phil Leventhal's short seminar entitled '**Getting Your Foot in the Door: How to Build Experience to Get a First Medical Writing Job**' was also launched in Munich. The seminar will be offered at EMWA conferences on a regular basis.

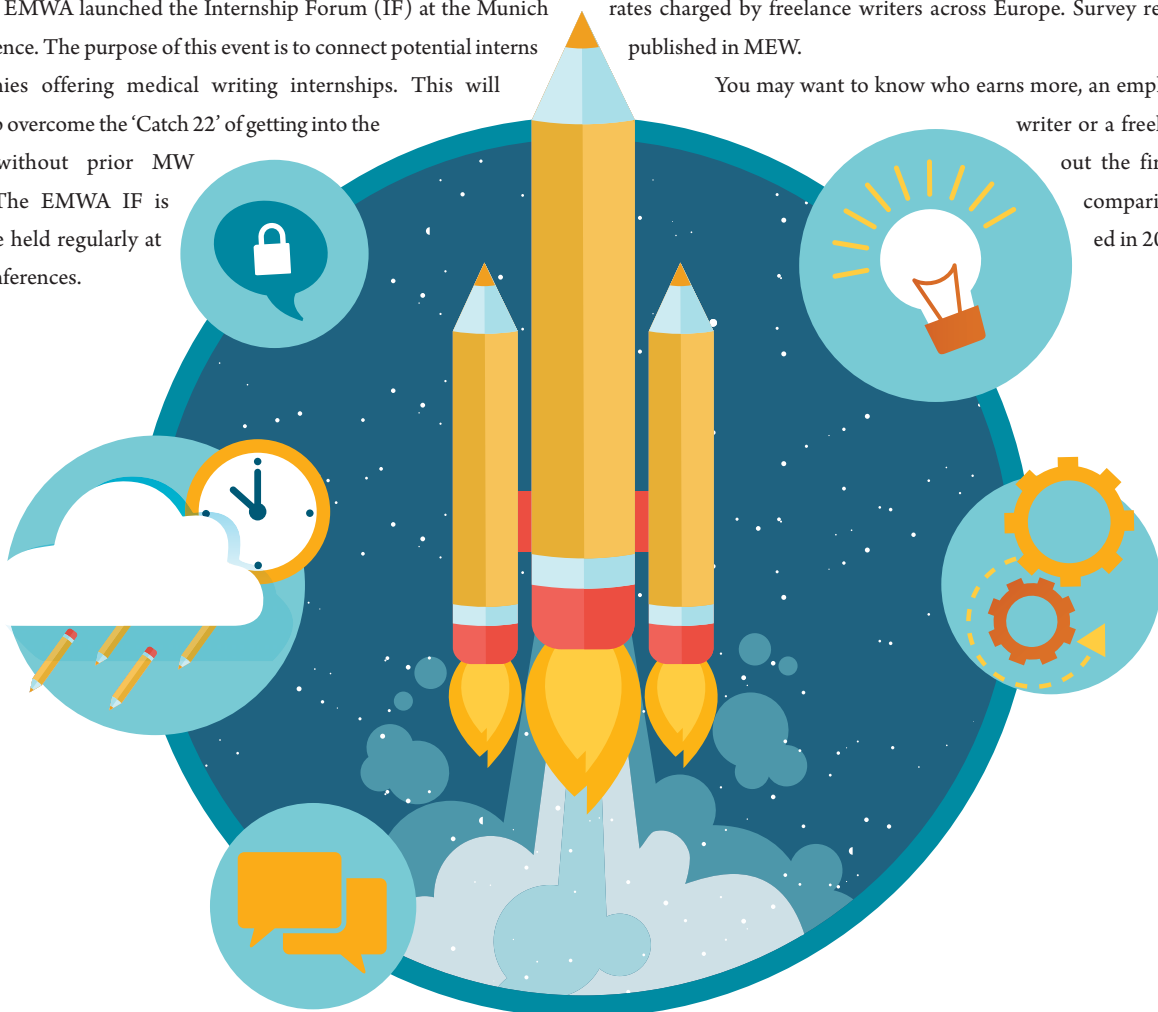
For more information about MW internships, see the regular section in MEW Getting Your Foot in the Door or GYFD for short.

## 6 How much can I expect to get paid?

The salary for medical writers depends on many factors including level of experience, geographic location and type of employer. As a recent graduate with no medical writing experience, you might expect a starting annual salary which compares favourably with research positions at the same level. Postgraduates might get a little more than this. Salaries tend rise with increasing number of years of experience. EMWA regularly conducts salary surveys among its members. The results are published in MEW.

Freelance medical writers normally charge per hour for their services. The going hourly rate varies depending on the type of task and the level of experience of the writer. EMWA also regularly conducts a survey of hourly rates charged by freelance writers across Europe. Survey results are also published in MEW.

You may want to know who earns more, an employee medical writer or a freelancer. Check out the first systematic comparison performed in 2014.



## 7 Can I work abroad?

Yes. Medical writing isn't restricted to any one particular country. There are job opportunities throughout Europe and beyond, including North America, Australia and the Asia Pacific region. Check out the MEW 2013 vol. 2 issue 2 on *Medical Writing Around the World*.

## 8 What are the career prospects for medical writers?

Career prospects for medical writers are good. With the current trends towards more disclosure and publication of biomedical research results, the demand for medical writers is increasing.

Many medical writers eventually move into management, taking care of teams of medical writers and managing projects at local and international levels. However, if the thought of managing other people doesn't appeal, this is by no means the only option.

Working in regulatory medical writing gives you an overview of the entire clinical development process, so it's an ideal starting point for other careers in the pharmaceutical industry, such as regulatory affairs, clinical research, document management, and even marketing. Those in medical communications may move into editorial roles at publishing companies. Some medical writers go into freelancing or set up their own companies.

Check out the career journeys of several EMWA members, as shared in different issues of TWS and MEW.

## 9 Further information

If you are keen to know more, we recommend attending one of our biannual conferences. These cater to the needs and interests of different members, from first-time attendees to more established writers. They are a great way to become involved in the medical writing community, receive training, and meet potential employers. They are also a lot of fun. More information about the conferences can be found here.

Finally, follow us on social media:

- LinkedIn
- Facebook
- Twitter



## 10 References

- McIntosh. A. Broad-spectrum medical writer: Nature or nurture? The Write Stuff, 2009.
- Moon A. From academic to medical writer: A guide to getting started in medical communications. Published by NetworkPharma.

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