



Ultimate Guide to Becoming a Medical Writer



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Medical writing is an esteemed profession. Every day, medical writers are detailing, documenting, and sharing news and research that is improving health outcomes and saving lives. Their roles and opportunities are always evolving, whether they're crafting peer-reviewed articles reporting on clinical trials, marketing cutting-edge devices, educating health care professionals or even the general public about new treatments, or writing grant proposals to fund innovative research.

This guide provides information and resources on what medical writers do, the companies they work for, and what you need to know to embark on this growing, rewarding—and lucrative—career.

What Is Medical Writing?

Medical writing involves the development and production of print or digital documents that deal specifically with medicine or health care. The profession of medical writing calls for knowledge in both writing and science, combining a writer's creative talent with the rigor and detail of research and the scientific process.

With the constant advancement and innovation in medicine and health care, the need to communicate about research findings, products, devices, and services is growing. Medical writers

are increasingly in demand to convey new information to health care professionals as well as the general public.



Depending on their position and the scope of their duties, medical writers are involved in communicating scientific and clinical data to many audiences, from doctors and nurses to insurance adjusters and patients. They work in a variety of formats, including traditional print publications to electronic publications, multimedia presentations, videos, podcasts, website content, and social media sites.

Medical writers often work with doctors, scientists, and other subject matter experts (SMEs) to create documents that describe research results, product use, and other medical information. They also ensure that documents comply with regulatory, publication, or other guidelines in terms of content, format, and structure.

Medical writers are also key players in developing applications for mobile devices that are used in multiple ways, such as

- Disease management
- Continuing education and training
- Medical reference and information-gathering
- Practice management and monitoring



What Is MEDICAL EDITING?

Medical editing—like medical writing—is also a diverse profession. Medical editors are crucial members of the medical communication team and are tasked with multiple quality-assurance roles, including

- Correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors
- Copyedit to make writing accurate, clear, and smoothly flowing
- Ensure correct and consistent data across texts and graphics
- Ensure that the content and its organization comply with the appropriate guidelines and standards

Medical communicators may be writers, [editors](#), health care journalists, supervisors, project managers, media relations specialists, educators, and more. At their core, they are exceptionally skilled at gathering, organizing, interpreting, evaluating, and presenting often complex information to health care professionals, a public audience, or industry professionals such as hospital purchasers, manufacturers and users of medical devices, pharmaceutical sales representatives, members of the insurance industry, and public policy officials. For each of these audiences, the language, documents, and deliverables are distinct.

What Are Examples of Medical Communication Jobs?

Medical communication positions in writing and editing vary greatly across industries, companies, organizations, and other entities.

In addition to the title of medical writer, medical communicators may be known as scientific writers, technical writers, [regulatory writers](#), promotional writers, health care marketers, health care journalists, or communication specialists. Both medical writers and medical editors may work for pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies, medical communication agencies, medical education companies, health care professionals associations, academic institutions, medical and health care book publishers, trade publications, and more.

What Do Medical Writers Write?

The expertise and contributions of medical writers and editors can be found throughout the medical community. Examples of their work include

- Abstracts for medical journals and medical conferences
- Advertisements for pharmaceuticals, devices, and other products
- Advisory board summaries
- Continuing medical education materials
- Decision aids for patients
- Grant proposals
- Health care policy documents
- Health education materials
- Magazine and newspaper articles
- Medical and health care books
- Medical and scientific journal articles
- Marketing materials
- Poster presentations for medical conferences
- Regulatory documents, including FDA submissions
- Sales training
- Slide presentations for medical conferences
- White papers

Who Hires Medical Writers?

Right now, there is tremendous growth in the medical industry. Pharmaceutical companies are developing drugs more quickly, and new medical devices and diagnostic tools are being released every day. With this comes the increased need to meet regulatory and insurance requirements and to relay medical and consumer information. All of this results in greater opportunities for medical writers and communicators.

Medical writers can find positions with a variety of employers, reaching a multitude of audiences with different communication needs and styles. These may include

- Associations and professional health care societies
- Authors or investigators
- [Biotechnology companies](#)
- [Clinical or contract research organizations](#) (CROs)
- Communications, marketing, or advertising agencies
- Government agencies
- Health care organizations or providers
- [Medical book publishers](#)
- [Medical device companies](#)
- [Medical education companies](#)
- [Medical schools or universities](#)
- [News outlets](#) for health/medical news
- [Peer-reviewed medical journals](#)
- [Pharmaceutical companies](#)
- [Trade journals](#) for health care professionals

AMWA members can access a current list of available openings on [AMWA Jobs Online](#).
(Not a member? [Join here.](#))

How Much Do Medical Writers Make?

Medical writer salaries vary from city to city and region to region. Compensation also depends on the writer's experience, the type of employer, and the type of work.

Sites such as [Salary.com](#), [PayScale.com](#), and [Glassdoor.com](#) indicate that a salary range for a junior-level or beginning medical writer is \$52,000 to \$80,000 annually and a salary range for a junior-level or beginning medical editor as \$57,000 to \$75,000 annually.

The [AMWA Medical Communication Compensation Report](#) provides an in-depth analysis of medical communication salary data by experience level, degree, industry categories, and much more.

Medical writers
are able to
present data and
its interpretation
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target audience
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What Does It Take to Be a Medical Writer?

While medical writers come from all educational and professional backgrounds, they do share some traits. Medical writers have an interest and flair for both science and writing. They also have a clear understanding of medical concepts and ideas and are able to present data and its interpretation in a way the target audience will understand.

Although it's not required, many medical communicators hold an advanced degree. Some have a medical or science degree (eg, PhD, PharmD, MD) or experience in academic settings or as bench scientists, pharmacists, physicians, or other health care professionals. Others have an MFA or a PhD in communications or English.

Certificates and certifications are additional credentials that demonstrate your knowledge and proficiency in the medical communication field. Many are described in this guide.

How Do I Become a Medical Writer?

Medical communication can be a flexible, rewarding, and well-paying career in a growing field of both full-time and freelance opportunities. To get started, follow these steps.

1. Determine a focus

Based on the wide range of companies and organizations that employ medical communicators, the field is generally divided into different writing settings and specializations, each requiring specific technical writing skills or knowledge of medical terminology and practices. In this step, it's important to focus on an area you're most interested in and that best matches your skill set.

- Continuing education for health care professionals
- Grant proposals
- Health communication
- Journalism
- Marketing/Advertising/PR
- Patient education
- Publications for professional audiences (non-peer reviewed)
- [Regulatory writing](#)
- Sales training (biotech or pharma industry)
- Scientific publications (peer-reviewed journals)

2. Assess your knowledge and skills

Medical communicators come to the field from a variety of different disciplines. Those with a medical or science background commonly need refreshers in writing and editing mechanics, whereas medical terminology and statistics are typically more difficult for those with a writing or communications background. No matter what your training has been, you should take an inventory of your [essential skills](#).

Basic Grammar and Usage

- Parts of speech and grammatical principles form the foundation of writing in every discipline. Can you identify a dangling modifier or notice the lack of a pronoun referent?

Sentence Structure

- Even if you know grammar, you may need a refresher on achieving emphasis and organizing your sentences for clarity. Do you know the difference between an independent and a dependent clause? Do you understand parallel structure?

Punctuation

- A single misplaced comma can create a very different meaning, which can have serious implications in medical writing. Are all your commas in the right places? What about your semicolons?

Medical Terminology

- It's not enough to know medical terms. You gain more insight into the medical vocabulary by learning about the prefixes, combining forms, and suffixes that make up all your favorite medical words. Do you know the rules for eponyms? Do you know the difference between an acronym and an initialism?

Professional Ethics

- Every profession has a code of ethics, and medical communication is no different. Make sure you know the steps to ethical decision-making and the [ethical principles](#) to uphold.

Statistics

- If you're working with medical research, it's essential to have a basic understanding of statistics. Can you describe the difference between mean, median, and mode? Can you define a hazard ratio?

Tables and Graphs

- Tables and graphs are essential tools for communicating complex information. Do you know what kind of graph to use for continuous data? Are your table column headings doing their job?

If you need to fill gaps in your knowledge, AMWA offers a variety of [educational activities](#), including the AMWA [Essential Skills Certificate Program](#), which addresses all of these topics.

3. Explore resources

As you explore the medical writing profession, the next step is to become aware of the resources available to you. AMWA offers many opportunities to support new medical communicators and a wealth of professional development resources to help throughout an evolving career. The following are some examples.

- AMWA Online Learning activity: [A Career in Medical Communication: Steps to Success](#)
- [Join AMWA](#)
- [AMWA Career Services: Jobs Online, Freelance Directory](#)
- [AMWA Online Learning](#)
- Live [webinars](#)
- [AMWA Essential Skills Certificate Program](#)
- [Regulatory Writer Training eBook](#)
- [Comprehensive Guide to Medical Editing](#)
- [Medical Editing Checklist](#)
- [How to Identify Predatory Publishers eBook](#)

Other resources include a number of recommended [books on medical writing](#), listed in the "Medical Writer Resources" section below.



4. Network

Although there are plenty of opportunities in medical communication, it is important to recognize that it can be a difficult field to break into. [Networking](#) is a crucial part of gaining success as a medical writer.

Throughout your career, but especially at the start, it's important to connect with other medical communicators in your [local area](#) as well as [across the country](#).

Networking is an excellent way to connect with other medical communicators. Not only does it provide informal learning opportunities, but some experts say that 70% to 80% of people found their current position through networking. [Others say it's closer to 85%](#). Whether you are using [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [community boards](#), or [conference attendance](#), it is important to seek out ways to stay connected.

Take the Leap!

New and experienced medical writers are finding ways to advance in a solid career and contribute to positive health outcomes through the power of communication. With a greater understanding of the role of the medical communicator and the available opportunities, people with a passion for writing and science can excel in this interesting and ever-changing field.

[Medical Writer Resources >>](#)

Medical Writer Resources

Books About Medical Writing

- [*The Accidental Medical Writer*](#). Brian G. Bass and Cynthia L. Kryder. Booklocker.com, Inc, 2008.
- [*Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers*](#). 2nd ed. Mimi Zeiger. McGraw-Hill, 2000.
- *Health Literacy from A to Z: Practical Ways to Communicate Your Health Message*. Helen Osborne. Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2005.
- [*How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*](#). 8th ed. Barbara Gastel and Robert A. Day. Greenwood, 2016.
- *Targeted Regulatory Writing Techniques: Clinical Documents for Drugs and Biologics*. Linda Fossati Wood and MaryAnn Foote, eds. Birkhauser, 2009.

Style Guides

- [*AMA Manual of Style*](#)
- [*Associated Press Stylebook*](#)
- [*Chicago Manual of Style*](#)
- [*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*](#)
- [*Scientific Style and Format: The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers*](#)

Publication Ethics

- [*Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors*](#) (Committee on Publication Ethics)
- [*White Paper on Publication Ethics*](#) (Council of Science Editors)
- [*Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals*](#) (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors)
- [*Good Publication Practice Guidelines - GPP3*](#) (International Society for Medical Publication Professionals)

Professional Associations & Societies

- [*American Medical Writers Association*](#)
- [*Association of Health Care Journalists*](#)
- [*Board of Editors in the Life Sciences*](#)
- [*Council of Science Editors*](#)
- [*DIA \(Drug Information Association\)*](#)
- [*Editorial Freelancers Association*](#)
- [*International Society for Medical Publication Professionals*](#)
- [*National Association of Science Writers*](#)
- [*Regulatory Affairs Professionals Society*](#)
- [*Society for Health Communication*](#)
- [*Society for Technical Communication*](#)

Medical Communication Programs: Universities, Colleges, Associations

This list is not comprehensive and was last updated on 11/23/2022.

Graduate Programs in Medical/Health Communication/Writing/ Journalism

Boston University	Master of Science in Health Communication (Online) Master of Science: Science & Medical Journalism
Carnegie Mellon University	Master of Arts: Professional Writing
Johns Hopkins University	Master of Arts: Science Writing
New York University	Master of Arts / Master of Science: Science, Health & Environmental Reporting
Texas A&M University	Master of Science: Science and Technology Journalism
Towson University	Master of Science: Professional Writing
University of Houston-Downtown	Master of Science: Technical Communication
University of Illinois	Master of Science: Health Communication
University of Minnesota	Professional Master of Arts: Health Communication
University of North Carolina	Master of Arts: Medical Science & Journalism

Undergraduate Programs in Medical/Health Communication/Writing/ Journalism

Juniata College	Degree in Health Communication
Missouri State University	Bachelor of Arts / Bachelor of Science: Science/Professional Writing
University of Minnesota	Bachelor of Arts: Technical Writing and Communication

Tracks or Minors in Medical Communication

Ferris State University	Bachelor of Science: Journalism and Technical Communication
University of Tennessee at Knoxville	Science Communication Program

Degree Programs in Regulatory Affairs

George Washington University	Dual Degree: BS/MS in Clinical Operations & Healthcare Management
University of Washington School of Pharmacy	Master of Science in Biomedical Regulatory Affairs

University Certificate Programs

UC San Diego Extension	Medical Writing Certificate
University of Chicago Graham School of General Studies	Medical Writing and Editing Certificate



AMWA acknowledges the contributions of Lori Alexander, MPTW, ELS, MWC, Lori De Milto, MJ, and Cyndy Kryder, MS, MWC in the development of this AMWA resource.