

# Journey From Veterinary Medicine to Medical Writing

JoAnna Pendergrass, DVM / Freelance Medical Writer, Sandy Springs, GA

Being a veterinarian and medical writer is a unique, if somewhat unexpected, combination of professional skills. I say *unexpected* because many people view veterinarians as being only in private practice, treating everything from dogs to pot-bellied pigs.

The overwhelming majority of veterinarians are in private practice,<sup>1</sup> so it's not surprising that "veterinarian" and "writer" uncommonly appear in the same sentence.

When I was veterinary school, nontraditional career paths for veterinarians beyond academia or the public sector were not widely discussed. I didn't learn about medical writing until several months after I earned my veterinary degree.

Fast forward to today, with 8 years of medical writing and 4 years of freelance medical writing under my belt. Although my path to and within medical writing has been circuitous, I am fortunate that I have been able to combine my veterinary training and love of writing into a rewarding career.

What I've learned about myself and the medical writing profession can help other veterinarians who are contemplating making the professional leap into medical writing.

## My Lessons Learned

### 1. Think Outside of the Clinical Box

My year of clinical rotations made it clear that the private practice world wasn't for me. I knew that I did not want to deal with the daily grind of constant client-facing and other rigors of clinical veterinary medicine.

If you know that private practice isn't for you, don't force it. Doing so could leave you feeling like a frustrated square peg in a round hole, increasing your risk of career resentment. Remember that your veterinary degree opens many more doors beyond those of private practice.

If you enjoy practicing but don't want to do it full-time, consider medical writing as a part-time pursuit. As veterinarians, we know that pet owners are hungry for credible

and accurate pet care information. Medical writing offers an excellent opportunity to translate our veterinary training into practical and beneficial information for pet owners.

### 2. Be Ready for Misunderstandings

When I explain to people what I do, I occasionally receive a response along the lines of, "So, why aren't you a *real* vet?"

That question used to sting a little bit. Why did people equate my realness as a veterinarian with whether I worked in private practice? Eventually, I learned that I didn't need to defend my veterinary degree or my decision to use it to pursue an alternative career path.

As you transition into medical writing, don't be surprised if you get questioned in the same way. Use the opportunity to educate people on the versatility of a veterinary degree beyond private practice.

### 3. Assess Your Transferrable Skills

At first glance, it might not seem like your years of veterinary training would prepare you for a medical writing career. Take a closer look.

Many skills can transfer from veterinary medicine to medical writing, including attention to detail, critical thinking, scientific and medical expertise, and strong written communication skills.

With some more introspection, you can probably come up with more skills. Write them down, and you'll realize that you're more prepared than you thought you were to become a medical writer.

### 4. Do Your Research on Medical Writing

During my clinical rotations, I enjoyed writing the patient discharge summaries and medical notes on patient cases. More than once, a clinician would compliment my writing.

After attending a career symposium that featured Emma Hitt Nichols, PhD, ELS, as a panelist, I decided that medical writing was the way to go for me. I joined AMWA and browsed through old editions of the *AMWA Journal* to learn more about the profession. I also attended local AMWA chapter meetings and conducted informational interviews with medical writers. If you decide that you want to become a medical writer, research the profession and determine which area of medical writing appeals most to you. The more research that you do, the more comfortable you'll feel about making the transition into medical writing.

### 5. Consider Human or Veterinary Medical Writing

My first medical writing positions were at medical communication agencies that focused on human oncology and hematology. Although I understood the science and medical terminology, writing for human academic and pharmaceutical audiences did not suit me well.

When I began freelancing, I realized that veterinary writing was the better fit. Over time, my freelance medical writing niche became clear: pet owner education. Although I do some human health journalism writing, my passion lies in educating pet owners.

As veterinarians, we recognize the many overlaps between human and veterinary medicine and can switch between the two with relative ease. Thus, human or veterinary medical writing are equally reasonable career options.

If you choose human medical writing, be prepared to explain why, as a veterinarian, you're qualified to write on human medical topics. A potential client or employer might need a little extra convincing that you can translate your veterinary knowledge to human health.

### 6. Talk to Other Veterinarians Who Are Medical Writers

Being the only veterinarian at medical communication agencies was a "fish out of water" experience for me.

Once I started connecting with other veterinary medical writers on LinkedIn and through AMWA, I realized that I wasn't the only veterinarian in the medical writing world.

Veterinary medical writers understand your professional background and can help you navigate your transition into medical writing.

### 7. Get Involved in AMWA

AMWA is the best organization for medical communicators at all experience levels. Being active in the organization pays dividends when it comes to learning about employment and freelancing opportunities and moving forward in the profession.

Get involved in your local chapter by serving on the chapter Board or assisting with other volunteer activities. Once

you've found your footing at the local level, consider being active on the national level as well.

In addition to being active, search the AMWA directory for members who are veterinarians and send an introductory email. We're more than happy to connect with you and help you along your medical writing journey.

### 8. Recognize the Uniqueness That You Bring to Medical Writing

Veterinarians bring a unique perspective to medical writing. Not only do we understand the interconnectedness of human and veterinary medicine, but we also recognize the need for collaboration between human and veterinary medical experts to address public health challenges and combat infectious disease.

This perspective adds a richness to medical writing by expanding the breadth and scope of medical communication. Veterinary medical writers are aptly positioned to apply their veterinary training and knowledge to their writing, whether it is in human or veterinary health.

### Final Thoughts

The journey from veterinary medicine to medical writing may not be straightforward, but it can certainly be rewarding. The medical writing profession offers an opportunity for veterinarians to use their veterinary expertise to benefit both human and veterinary medical communication.

Your veterinary degree opens up many professional possibilities outside of private practice. If medical writing interests you, explore and pursue the medical writing niche that suits you best and continue finding ways to hone your craft and grow as a writer. Connect with other veterinary medical writers and recognize the value and uniqueness that you bring to the medical writing table.

Even if you traded your stethoscope for a pen, you are still a real veterinarian.

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**Author contact:** *joanna@jpencmc.com*

### Reference

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