

**THEME ARTICLE**

## The Call of the Open Road: Is Medical Writing Right for You?

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The questions I'm asked about medical writing are often "how do I become a medical writer?" or "what is the best background?" or "what kind of training is crucial to success?" I'd like to humbly suggest that these are the wrong questions. I think a better question might be, "how do I know I'll be happy as a medical writer?"

### THE WHY

I began my career as a medical writer after almost 10 years in clinical development where medical writing responsibilities overlapped with my other job expectations. Conversely, one talented medical writer I know found this career following a prestigious postdoctoral fellowship. And still another gifted medical writer's first industry role was as a study coordinator at a clinical research site (and she had previously worked at two different nuclear power plants). There is very little overlap between our academic or career backgrounds. The one attribute we share is that we were attracted to medical writing by the very real opportunity to have an impact in the lives of patients.

In my experience, medical writers are often driven by a strong why, a sense of purpose that creates an ethical foundation for our work. When we think about the (nonfiction) stories we are telling, we know that, ultimately, our words impact other humans. Reflecting on our own individual why allows us to have a deeper well of patience and empathy for the challenges of our role.

For me, the two greatest gifts of being a medical writer are the relationships I have found within the industry (including the medical writing community) and the knowledge that my work has helped patients, especially those I call family and friends. Once you have clarity around your why, there are additional characteristics worthy of reflection.

### ABILITY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

If you don't enjoy complexity, medical writing may frustrate you. For medical writers, there is always something to learn and a problem to solve. Medical writers routinely face new ideas, new therapeutic areas, new technologies/systems, and new team dynamics. Each of these challenges becomes a puzzle to unpack, unwind, and understand. A level head

and tenacity are needed because it is common for a solution that worked in one situation to be less useful in a different situation, or a tactic that worked for one team to be less useful for a different team or even a different encounter with the same team. Hence, a critical trait for medical writing is a solutionist mindset—the new problem is a puzzle, not a roadblock, and solving each problem is intrinsically rewarding.

### CURIOSITY

Between the ever-evolving science and the health authorities' efforts to drive innovation, intellectual laziness doesn't work for medical writers. In a 2023 survey of 800 C-Suite executives conducted by a for-profit education platform (EdX),<sup>1,2</sup> 49% of the responding leaders questioned how relevant their workforces' current skills would be with the rise of artificial intelligence. Although an education platform would have a good reason to identify and report these results, the findings feel reasonable to me. Even very experienced medical writers face learning curves. With some of my company's recent clients, the science driving their innovations would have been relegated to science fiction when I was in college. We have to interrogate ideas with curiosity and openness. Job satisfaction as a medical writer means enjoying and thriving as a life-long learner.

### WILLINGNESS TO LEAD WITHOUT ORGANIZATIONAL AUTHORITY

Though, arguably, everything would be better if teams did things exactly as advised by their medical writers, it is exceptionally rare (maybe nonexistent) for the medical writer to carry organizational authority over a team. Not surprisingly, according to Randstad's 2024 Workmonitor report,<sup>3</sup> management and leadership skills were the highest training priority among workers in the United States. This is well-aligned with medical writing.

Our role requires time and timeline management, written and oral communication skills, and the ability to direct a team of document contributors. Most successful medical writers carry a deep sense of responsibility for their documents, their teams, and the patients they want

to help. Embracing document ownership, coupled with the skills of nonprosecutory levels of stalking, allows medical writers to extract the relevant contributions from team members, navigate team dynamics, and deliver high-quality documents. The balancing act of this leadership relies on tact, steadfastness, and leaning on communication and rapport soft skills.

## COMFORT WITH DISCOMFORT

In a 2023 LinkedIn survey<sup>4</sup> looking at desirable worker skills, the skill with the sharpest rise in demand over the study period was adaptability. Although the survey authors did not release a list of the specific roles they assessed, satisfaction as a medical writer is closely tied to this skill.

Like many industries, medical writers are impacted by technology, including the exploration of artificial intelligence—even as our value proposition might be questioned. What may be nonobvious is, despite how we feel about these changes, medical writers have to be ahead of each new advancement. We continually stare down learning curves to lead and support our teams as they navigate emerging technologies from regulatory information management systems to specific document requirements and workflows. Commonly, the medical writer is mapping out the best way to interact with the newest system deployed by our employers, even if that experience is frustrating for us. Medical writers might be the change agents of their teams.

Medical writers also have to exercise mental and emotional agility. They have to find ways to work with challenging circumstances and personalities. It's common for team members to feel a need to be seen as right and smart. Rather than being right, we have to embrace getting the document right. This can feel uncomfortable, especially when a document we have worked on is being critiqued less on its merit and more on how it aligns to the story a team member wants to tell or the way that the team member(s) want to tell it. Sometimes medical writers have to lead complex and difficult conversations and provide feedback to support delivering documents that will pass health authority muster. In a room full of very smart people, a medical writer has to remain unflappable and composed in order to build consensus without ruffling egos or compromising data integrity.

## YOUR OPEN ROAD

In the *You're Wrong About* podcast,<sup>5</sup> sled dog musher and author Blair Braverman corrected a misconception about the lead dog of a sled dog team and detailed how it parallels with leadership in the human world. She described how, contrary to the societal idea of the alpha dog, the dog leading a team was not necessarily stronger, more

vicious, or more dominant. Dogs, as pack animals, are more comfortable chasing another dog. Finding a dog who sees an open trail and experiences excitement is rare.

*They could be shy, and they could be quiet... They're good at finding the trail, breaking the trail in deep snow, navigating, setting a pace, listening to cues from the musher, pushing through storms, (and they) like using their own instincts. And it's energizing for them in a way that other dogs on the team might find it exhausting to be making those decisions.<sup>5</sup>*

Her explanation felt very much like being a medical writer. If you are passionate about your potential to help people, enjoy solving problems, embrace curiosity and the opportunity to continuously learn, are undeterred by leading without organizational authority, and facing challenges energizes rather than exhausts you, congratulations! You have found a career that can deliver these adventures. Medical writing is for you.

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