



The Job Market

Working as a Medical Writer

By Sarah Webb
June 22, 2007

When Kara Nyberg was about halfway through her Ph.D. in molecular and cellular biology at the University of Arizona, she had a revelation. "As much as I love thinking about science," she realized, "I don't actually like doing it." So she set out to find a way to use her science Ph.D. outside research. As she inventoried her skills, she realized that she really enjoyed writing.

"I would say that there's definitely enough work to go around." --Emma Hitt

As she finished her degree, she made contact with professional organizations like the [National Association of Science Writers](#) (NASW) and the [American Medical Writers Association](#) (AMWA). She took a science-writing course at the University of Arizona and attended the Santa Fe Science-Writing Workshop. To gain writing experience, she wrote press releases for the University of Arizona's news office. She defended her Ph.D. in 2003, moved to Boulder, Colorado, and began working as a freelance medical writer.

Writing about medicine

The term "medical writing" encompasses different kinds of work for clients in media, government, and industry. Pharmaceutical companies, medical-device manufacturers, and clinical-research organizations (CROs) all employ writers to prepare regulatory documents used to seek U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval for drugs and devices. Medical writers help doctors write research articles, monographs, and reviews on medical topics. Continuing medical education (CME) companies employ medical writers to produce educational materials and slide kits that doctors and nurses use to prepare for license renewals. Medical writers produce sales training materials, press releases for industry, and fact sheets or Web site materials for government organizations. Medical writers also write about research discoveries for medical journals, Web sites, newsletters, magazines, newspapers, and any other medium that includes coverage of health and medical issues.

Solid writing skills and clear understanding

Scientists interested in a medical-writing career should seek projects outside the circles they normally move in. Academic papers and conference proceedings make lousy writing samples because they are dense and jargon-laden, whereas the emphasis in medical writing is on clarity. Employers (and potential clients of freelancers) seek writers who can translate medical studies into accurate but approachable language and tailor the information to audiences that include regulators, health professionals, investors, or the general public--but usually not all at once. Medical writers need solid writing skills, attention to factual detail and accuracy, and the ability to see relationships between ideas and organize complex information.

"You need to get your writing to where you're confident in your abilities," says Emma Hitt, an Atlanta-based freelance medical writer. For some people, this might mean taking a degree in journalism or technical writing, but a

Email Article

Email Editor

Discuss in Forum

Related Articles

Print this page

Free Newsletter

BOOKMARK

ADVERTISEMENT

Structural Genomics
Life Science Technology Feature

ADVERTISEMENT



**NETWORKING
WEBINAR**

**Building
Solid
Career
Connections**

**View
NOW**

Produced by the Science/AAAS Business Office

Science Careers
From the journal Science AAAS

"couple of writing courses can show people that you're serious about writing," she says. "And you can learn a lot on the job." AMWA provides several certificate programs that educate medical writers about the fundamentals of editing and writing, freelance writing, and writing for specific markets.

Two ways in

Because she wanted to be near her future husband, Nyberg launched her career from Colorado. She spent the first few post-Ph.D. months networking and applying for jobs. "It was initially extremely difficult getting that first job because I didn't really have clips, and I didn't have any contacts," she says. "But once I had some samples that I could show people, things gradually started to snowball from there."

Now a medical writer in Longmont, Colorado, Maggie Merchant was applying her Ph.D. in biochemistry and molecular and cellular biology at a small biotech when the company decided to build up its marketing department. She wrote the company's customer newsletter and compiled the first consumer manual for its product, exercising her editing and writing skills to explain the technology and the product's use. That experience allowed her to cross over to a full-time writing career.



Kara Nyberg



Emma Hitt



Deanna Heier

Working on a team

Deanna Heier, a managing director for Clinical Care Options, a CME company based in Reston, Virginia, went straight into freelancing after receiving her Ph.D in biochemistry from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. After a year and a half of freelancing, she joined one of her client companies, working with doctors and writers to develop a package of medical-education materials. "I enjoy the fact that it's a team effort," Heier says. "I felt like that was missing for me in my freelance career."

Heier now works in management, hiring writers and editors and managing projects, staff, and workflow. "Critical-thinking skills, project-management skills, independence, and the ability to clearly communicate complex topics are key assets for succeeding in this type of position as well as in research," she says. And all those skills are nurtured, if not always systematically and intentionally, by graduate science training. Companies often look for writers with an expertise in a particular medical area. So although an advanced degree in a relevant field isn't required for work as a medical writer, it's a distinct advantage.

Getting drugs and devices to market

Medical writers produce the documents that help companies push a drug or device from clinical trials through FDA approval, including literature summaries, applications to FDA to investigate a new device or drug, and documents intended for review by institutional review boards (IRBs).

The trick, says Andrea Friedman, a writer who works on a contract for Symbion Research International, a CRO in Agoura Hills, California, is "being able to very concisely summarize large bodies of information in as short a way as possible."

The responsibilities of regulatory medical writers vary depending on the structure of the company they work for. As a frequent consultant to small start-up companies, Friedman works alongside clinical researchers to develop the research protocols in clinical studies. At a larger company, she says, she would most likely focus more on the writing end of things, using information provided by clinical researchers.

All medical writers have to know something about medical science and be able to write. In addition, regulatory writers in clinical settings need to understand the regulatory process and its required documentation. Friedman recommends learning about Good Clinical Practice, which encompasses the scientific and ethical standards that researchers and companies follow in any study involving human subjects. These skills can be gained on the job, but formal training programs are also available. "There are certification programs in regulatory affairs and certification

programs in clinical research," Friedman says. Some master's degree programs have a regulatory component, and medical organizations, such as the Drug Information Association, offer medical-writing sessions at meetings. One of the certificate programs offered by AMWA covers writing specifically for pharmaceutical companies.



Andrea Friedman



Amy Stone

Good salaries and flexible opportunities

Some medical writers have journalism degrees, whereas others have M.D.s and Ph.D.s. in science fields. Thirty percent of the respondents in AMWA's 2004 salary survey had advanced degrees, up from 21% in 1989. About a third of all medical writers freelance, the rest work on staff for pharmaceutical companies, medical communications companies, and other organizations.

Medical writers get paid more than many other writers because their skills are more specialized and much of the work is supported by the pharmaceutical industry. The average annual salary for medical writers exceeded \$74,000 per year in 2004, according to the survey. Medical writers with advanced degrees averaged between \$83,000 (for women) and \$94,000 (for men).

"I would say that there's definitely enough work to go around," says Hitt, who runs a free e-mail jobs list on [her Web site](#). On-site staff jobs are plentiful in areas like New Jersey with a high concentration of pharmaceutical companies. Freelancers, of course, can work anywhere once they are established.

Intangible rewards

Some medical writers find a particular reward in the fact that their work might have a direct impact on the public's medical literacy. "I believe in the power of communication, and I believe medical writers can make a difference," says Amy Stone, a subcontractor for the CDC who writes fact sheets, congressional testimony, and other documents about HIV.

Other medical writers enjoy talking with scientists and learning about a wide variety of topics as they work on projects and assignments. "I don't have the need to be an expert in science," Hitt says, "but I do love to learn." Friedman, too, enjoys learning details about diseases and new indications for drugs or medical devices. "I'm constantly learning new things," she says. "For me, that's really fun."

Sarah Webb has a Ph.D. in bioorganic chemistry. She writes from Brooklyn, New York.

Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback [to our editor](#).

Photos. Top: Photodisc Professional Science. Middle and bottom: courtesy of the subjects.

DOI: 10.1126/science.caredit.a0700088

SEARCH JOBS

REGISTER

Search for Jobs

Enter Keywords

U.S. Regions

Select

Or

Continent

Related Articles

2001-05-04 Careers in Medical Writing: Opening Doors *Feature Index*

2005-05-20 Starting a Career in Science Writing

Select

[Advanced Search](#)

RSS

BOOKMARK 

Quick Links

For Jobseekers

[My Science Career](#)
[Find a Job](#)
[Meetings & Events](#)
[Tools & Tips](#)
[Job Seekers' FAQ](#)

For Employers

[Search Resumes](#)
[Post a Job](#)
[Contact](#)

Career Magazine

[Previous Issues](#)

Grants & Funding

[Funding News](#)

About Our Company

[Our Staff](#)
[Partners & Alliances](#)
[Testimonials & Awards](#)

About Our Site

[Terms of Use](#)
[Press Room](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)

Advertise with *Science* Careers



HighWire Press

[News](#) | [Science Journals](#) | [Careers](#) | [Blogs and Communities](#) | [Multimedia](#) | [Collections](#) | [Help](#) | [Site Map](#) | [RSS](#)

[Subscribe](#) | [Feedback](#) | [Privacy / Legal](#) | [About Us](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [Contact Us](#)

© 2010 American Association for the Advancement of Science. All Rights Reserved.

AAAS is a partner of HINARI, AGORA, OARE, eIFL, PatientInform, CrossRef, and COUNTER.