

# How to get started in medical writing-thinking outside the box

## Alison McIntosh

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I have been a medical writer for the pharmaceutical industry since obtaining my first medical writing job with Wellcome in 1995. I was a postdoctoral scientist with no previous experience of writing for the pharmaceutical industry and during the interview my scientific knowledge and problem solving abilities were examined in more depth than my medical writing. Nowadays, people hoping to begin a career in medical writing with no previous “relevant experience” encounter many more challenges trying to obtain their first medical writing post.

I receive numerous enquiries from graduates hoping to start out in medical writing and asking for advice. They find themselves in a “Catch 22” situation because more and more advertised positions are asking for candidates with medical writing and/or pharmaceutical industry experience. The age-old conundrum is how to deal with this prerequisite when you cannot access a relevant job? My advice to anyone in this position is to try “thinking outside the box” either by capitalising on the strengths you already have, or by approaching the challenge from an altogether new angle.

For example, if the prospective employer requires up to one year of medical writing experience do not be disheartened. They may be quite willing to consider someone with suitable or related therapeutic area knowledge as this can also be an important aspect for some projects.

Some adverts may not specify a therapeutic area. Nowadays most companies advertise therapeutic area expertise on their websites and if your hoped-to-be employer has one always

check it out. You never know, their expertise might match your own! Don't be afraid to call the employer to discuss the merits of your application and sell your therapeutic area knowledge to them. If you are a bench scientist, can you provide copies of your own scientific publications to support your writing abilities?

If the potential employer is asking for pharmaceutical industry as well as medical writing experience, can you gain this in another way?

The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) is the trade association for around a hundred companies in the UK producing prescription medicines. Their website (see [www.abpi.org.uk](http://www.abpi.org.uk)) provides contact details for pharmaceutical companies and clinical research organisations, many of whom offer placements allowing suitably qualified candidates to gain that much needed pharmaceutical industry experience. If you are an undergraduate toying with the idea of becoming a medical writer try to arrange for a placement during your long summer break.

Think about other, perhaps temporary, writing-related jobs. By accessing writing support jobs like quality control of document content, you can be exposed to an element of proofreading and editing as well as familiarising yourself with the content of pharmaceutical industry documents. If you do manage to obtain one of these jobs take advantage of any training opportunities that may arise and keep any certificates, or a list of the courses you attended. Be sure to add them to your CV to impress the next employer.

Consider short courses that can demonstrate your commitment to

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following this career path. Often run as one-day training courses or workshops they can offer an insight into the pharmaceutical industry and medical writing in general.

For those interested in becoming a medical writer in the pharmaceutical, healthcare, and biotech industries "Introduction to Medical Writing" is a one day course providing a general overview of medical writing, together with a description of different medical writing environments and introduces participants to good medical writing styles.

(see: [www.aagmedicalwriting.co.uk](http://www.aagmedicalwriting.co.uk)).

The European Medical Writers Association (EMWA) runs a large number of training workshops at their regular Spring and Autumn conferences. These workshops cover many aspects of medical writing in more detail, including writing both manuscripts for publication and regulatory documents. More information can be obtained from their website (see: [www.emwa.org](http://www.emwa.org)) where you can also download a leaflet on medical writing as a career (see: [www.emwa.org/Mum/Career.pdf](http://www.emwa.org/Mum/Career.pdf)) containing helpful advice for those considering this option. Medical writing vacancies submitted from companies based in the UK and the rest of Europe are also regularly posted on the EMWA website.

Attention to detail is often one of the necessary skills cited by an employer. The accuracy of document content is an important aspect of medical writing and the Society for Editors and Proofreaders (see: [www.sfep.org.uk](http://www.sfep.org.uk)) runs a one day "Introduction to Proofreading" course in London which is held at regular intervals throughout the year.

Attendance will provide you with a flavour of editing and proofreading and could help impress your would-be employer.

If you are in the process of applying for your first medical writing post please do not be discouraged by the requirement of "suitable experience." From my own understanding there are not enough people to fill all the posts being advertised and like most chosen career paths, to make your aspiration a reality some forward planning and extra effort will pay enormous dividends.

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### Other Useful web links

EMWA:

A career in medical writing  
[www.emwa.org/A-career-in-medical-writing.html](http://www.emwa.org/A-career-in-medical-writing.html)

ACRP

Association of Clinical Research Professionals  
[www.acrpnnet.org](http://www.acrpnnet.org)

BARQA

British Association of Research Quality Assurance  
[www.barqa.com](http://www.barqa.com)

The Organisation for Professionals in Regulatory Affairs (TOPRA)  
[www.topra.org](http://www.topra.org)

DIA

Drug Information Association  
[www.diahome.org](http://www.diahome.org)

Institute of Clinical Research  
[www.icr-global.org/home/](http://www.icr-global.org/home/)

PIPA

The Pharmaceutical Information and Pharmacovigilance Association  
[www.pipaonline.org/](http://www.pipaonline.org/)