

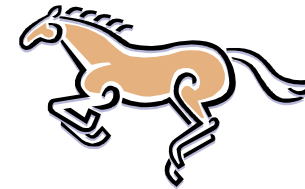


# **My life as a medical writer**

Karen Wilson Smith PhD

# Brief cv

BSc in Zoology followed by PhD on *The effect of exercise on blood gas transport in the thoroughbred horse*



Report writer at *Animal Pharm*: 2 years



Medical writer...senior medical writer...editorial manager at *FSP*: 3 years



Managing editor at start-up company....Editorial director at *Parexel MMS*: 9 years



Freelance writer: 5 years



# Types of writing

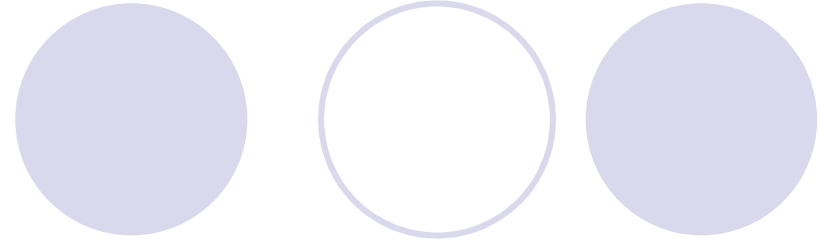


- Technical writing (scientific manuscripts, abstracts)
- Commercial writing (internal marketing documents)
- Specialist audience writing (e.g. lay audiences, websites)
- Letter / e-mail writing

# Types of projects



- Scientific writing
- Meetings
- Specialist writing
- Commercial writing





# Scientific writing

- Development of abstracts, posters and/or primary manuscripts from clinical study reports
- Pre-work
  - Suggesting content, authors and target journals/congresses; scheduling; budgeting, identifying source material; design and layout
- Writing first draft
  - Writing draft to style; checking numbers, figs and tables; keeping to hours and schedule
- Post first draft
  - Pro-active management of time; gaining permissions for figs and tables; collating comments on drafts; making amendments to drafts; putting together submission package; working with authors to respond to reviewers' comments
  - Posters: working with creative department to design and lay out posters; liaison with project managers about despatch of printed items



# Meetings

- Development of presentations for standalone or satellite symposia or exhibition stands
- Pre-work
  - Identifying relevant congresses and/or venues; developing agenda and suggesting speakers; liaison with speakers; design and layout; scheduling; budgeting
- Meeting materials
  - Writing invitations, signage, presentations, stand materials; keeping to hours and schedule; arranging slide reviews, dinners etc; development of hour-by-hour on-site schedule
- On-site
  - Carrying and/or retrieving materials; envelope stuffing and seat-laying; slide review; general fetching and carrying and liaising with congress staff



# Specialist writing

- Writing for specific audiences and/or vehicles
- Specific audiences
  - Specialist doctors, GPs, nurses, lay audience, payers, journalists
- Specialist vehicles
  - Slides, websites, scripts, advisory board reports



# Commercial / strategic writing

- Writing for internal pharmacy audiences
  - Proposals, message analysis, vocabulary development, publication planning
  - More about the thinking than the writing





# E-mail writing

- Remember the intended recipient
- Keep it formal and use standard letter writing rules
- Spell check and format
- Check “to” list and don’t just cc or bcc in the world and his wife
- If there’s a problem, pick up the phone

# Key differences between being a PhD /postdoc and a medical writer

- You will start as a “junior”
- You are unlikely to work in your chosen therapy area
- You are very unlikely to be given substantial “reading” time
- You will have more than one project on the go at any one time (and more like 5)
- You are writing to the client’s brief – it’s not your research / product, it’s theirs
- The industry is relatively robust and salaries are competitive



# **New skills that you may need to develop**

- Commercial awareness
- Multi-tasking
- Thick skin
- Asking for help

# What type of agency?



- Small, owner-led agency (Communigen, Atrium, Facilitate)
- Specialist agency (Therapeutic Intel, Phase IV, Abacus)
- Large integrated global agency (Ogilvy, Envision UBC, Medicus International)

# Questions to ask yourself (and that you may be asked)

- How much do I want to travel?
- What am I like under pressure?
- Do I want a structured learning environment or am I happy to dive in at the deep end?
- How do I take criticism?
- How well can I deal with “difficult” clients?
- How well can I organise my time?
- How well do I multi-task?
- How well can I get up to speed in new therapy areas?
- Do I feel comfortable promoting drugs and the pharma industry?

# Questions to ask a potential employer

- What kind of programme(s) am I likely to work on?
  - A large mixed account (i.e. publications and meetings)
  - A publication programme
  - A meetings-based programme
  - Several small accounts
- What is the structure – is it hierarchical / flat?
- How do the job titles and roles fit together?
- Do you have a training programme? How does it work?
- Is there much travelling (depends on how important this is to you)?
- Will I have regular appraisals?
- How long am I likely to stay in one team?
- What is the potential career path?
- Is there an opportunity for me to move into other areas of the business (such as client services or management OR into PR/consultancy if it is a large integrated agency) at a later point in my career?

# There will be lowpoints and strangepoints



- Working from until 3am to get an abstract completed and submitted
- Having your client walk up and down with his rosary beads saying “it will be ok won’t it Karen”
- Watching a speaker read directly from your notes that were meant as prompts not a script
- Seeing a typo on a slide that you’ve checked 100 times
- Having a rope bolted to your hotel room floor in Korea with instructions on how to break the window and lower yourself to safety in case of fire



# But the highpoints make up for them!

- Seeing the Lion King on Broadway
- Staying in the King David hotel in Jerusalem
- A private dinner and opera performance in Vienna
- A night-time tour of old Lisbon
- A room on the 60<sup>th</sup> floor in a 3-aspect room in New York
- Being told that your work is “excellent” or has “hit the spot”
- The opportunity to meet experts in different fields
- Working as part of a multi-functional, hard-working and supportive team