

April 2022

Making it my own business

A guide to
*being a
freelance writer
in MedComms*

Written by Dr Kathryn White

For more information about careers in MedComms see
www.FirstMedCommsJob.com

Did you know?

MedComms professionals

MedComms professionals receive a **20% discount** on their Professional Indemnity and other business insurance policies

To discuss your requirements please contact us



+44 (0)121 694 6897



info@piacommercial.com



www.piacommercial.com



Specialist Insurance – for the lifescience, biotechnology and healthcare industries

PIA Commercial @PIACommercial

The Pharmacy Insurance Agency Limited is registered in England and Wales under company number 2591975. It is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (Register No 307063)

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the freelance subscribers to the MedComms Workbook service (www.MedCommsWorkbook.com) for their support in the development of this publication. If you have any feedback please let us know.

Further copies are available to download directly if you visit www.FirstMedCommsJob.com

Printed copies of this guide are also available if you contact the publishers – support@networkpharma.com

Making it my own business: a guide to being a freelance writer in MedComms

New edition published April 2022 by NetworkPharma Ltd

First published April 2020

The Magdalen Centre, Oxford Science Park, Oxford, OX4 4GA, UK

Tel: +44 (0) 1865 784390

©2022 NetworkPharma Ltd

Production/editorial: Gill Gummer, Proactive Editorial Services Ltd – proactive@cusbuster.co.uk;

Designed by: Julie Stevenson – julie.creative@btinternet.com; Printed by: Holywell Press Ltd – www.holywellpress.com

The opinions/views expressed in this publication are those of the author. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of the sponsor or advertisers. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronically, mechanically, recorded or otherwise, without written permission from the publisher. The publisher and author have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of this publication but cannot accept responsibility for any errors or omissions. Registered names, trademarks etc. used in this publication, even when not marked as such, are not to be considered unprotected by law.

White K. *Making it my own business*. April 2022.
For more information about careers in MedComms, see www.FirstMedCommsJob.com

Foreword to 2022 edition



I have been running the MedComms Networking activities for many years now and in that time I have seen the numbers of freelancers, of all sorts, working in MedComms grow significantly. Medical writing is at the core of the business. Technology that allows remote working – and the increasingly agile working practices adopted by companies – mean there have never been more opportunities for experienced medical writers to ‘go it alone’. However, working as a freelancer means running a business. It’s not enough to simply be a good writer. You’ll also be responsible for sales, marketing, IT support,

training, finance and more. I hope this guide will help you better understand the challenges, but also the benefits, of life as a freelance medical writer working in MedComms. We welcome your feedback.

Peter Llewellyn

For more information see: www.linkedin.com/in/networkpharma

About the author



Kathryn is a freelance medical writer, equestrian journalist and author. A postgraduate in organic chemistry from the University of Nottingham, Kathryn didn’t have the typical background for medical writing. However, through a series of perfectly timed secondments within the pharmaceutical industry, she transitioned from lab scientist to medical writer via clinical research. After working for 15 years for global healthcare and pharmaceutical companies, Kathryn wanted more time at home and to learn business management. In 2010 she became a freelance medical writer and business owner of Cathean

Ltd. Since then she has not only written regulatory and medical communications documents for a wide range of clients across the world, but has also enlisted the help of business coaches to learn how to manage a successful freelance company. As an active member of the European Medical Writers Association (EMWA), Kathryn co-hosted their Freelance Business Forum and co-edited the freelance section of their journal, *Medical Writing*. In 2011, she launched her own annual freelance gathering during which fellow medical writers discuss and share their business challenges. In addition, she presents seminars and webinars, and has written published articles¹⁻³ on how to run an effective freelance business. Kathryn has now adapted some of the content of these articles to write this guide, with the aim of sharing further what she’s learned from her own experience and from her business coaching colleagues.

Kathryn White

For more information see: www.linkedin.com/in/kathrynwhite

Contents

● Introduction	4
● Why do you want to freelance?	5
● The reality	6
● Practicalities to consider	7
● Which business structure?	7
● How do you find clients?	8
● Increasing your visibility	10
● Marketing your business	11
● Efficiency: make it your business	12
● In summary	14
● Further information	15
● People in the job – in their own words	16

Introduction

Freelancing in MedComms offers a great way of making a living for medical writers. Reasons for becoming a freelancer are many and varied: redundancy, a long daily commute to the office or changing family commitments. Some people leave employment because of bad experiences with their employers. Others feel they're moving further away from the work they love as their careers progress and line management responsibilities take precedence. Within organisations, a medical writer's role may be quite narrow, focusing on one specific type of writing or document or a particular therapeutic area.

However, freelancing is not for everyone. Some people can find it difficult to work from home without colleagues around to spur them on. Becoming a business owner requires a mindset shift from employee to employer and a significant degree of self-confidence. You may not employ staff, but you are responsible for your own success and for leading business decisions. In short, 'the buck stops with you'! Success is never guaranteed, nor is the level of income you'll generate.

Despite the challenges, there are a lot of plus points to freelancing, including the opportunity to work on a wide variety of projects, the autonomy of being your own boss and without line-management responsibilities, and the possibility of flexible working hours to fit around your chosen lifestyle. The more experience you gain as a freelancer, the more your comfort zone expands. Furthermore, the skills you gain from being a business owner are transferable should you decide to go back into employment.

Freelancing in MedComms offers a great way of making a living for medical writers

About this guide

This guide focuses on freelance medical writing in medical communications, in particular MedComms. The MedComms industry provides consultancy services to pharmaceutical companies and offers great opportunities for freelance medical writers.

The aim of this guide is to give you the information you need to decide if you are suited to the role of freelance medical writer, and to provide the insider knowledge you need to run a successful business.

Please see the profiles provided by freelance medical writers working in MedComms later in this booklet for more insights into working in the industry.

For more information about starting out in MedComms and details of careers events, past and future, visit:

www.FirstMedCommsJob.com

Why do you want to freelance?

Besides ensuring that you have sufficient and relevant medical writing experience from working in companies or agencies before you embark on freelancing, it would be wise to assess if you have the personality for self-employment (**Box 1**). Write down the pros and cons of working for yourself and be brutally honest about your personal strengths and weaknesses. Ask close friends and family, with no vested interest in your decision, to give you feedback and discuss your decision with those who are impacted, e.g. partners/spouses and other family members.

*Do you have the personality
for self-employment?*

Box 1: Top questions to ask yourself before you take the leap into freelancing

Emotional

1. Am I self-reliant, self-motivated, self-disciplined and self-confident?
2. Do I have the temperament to work on my own – to be my own manager and right-hand (wo)man?
3. Will I be able to cope with 'feast or famine' – both in terms of workload and income?
4. Can I separate myself from domestic/social interests (e.g. crying baby, neighbours dropping round for a chat)?
5. Can I remain positive and maintain a 'can do' attitude under pressure or in the face of difficulties?

Practical

6. Can I cope without the resources/back-up provided by an employer, such as computer software, IT help, secretarial assistance, pension and sick pay?
7. Do I have plenty of industry contacts/sources of contract work?
8. Am I comfortable negotiating my own contracts/rates and have I got a good grip on the range of rates my industry pays?
9. Do I have a clear idea on which of my skills/experience/interests I wish to focus?
10. Do I have the relevant experience and self-belief to go solo?

Financial

11. Have I sought advice from a qualified accountant who knows my industry?
12. Is a fluctuating income acceptable, relative to my ongoing financial commitments (e.g. rent, bills, mortgage repayments, etc.)?
13. What is the minimum I need to earn in a month/year for freelancing to be a viable option?
14. Am I the sole income generator in the household? Can my partner or other party support me (or are they willing to support me) during quiet times?
15. Would becoming self-employed involve a significant initial outlay or bank loan (e.g. new computer, office equipment) or do I have the essentials already in place?

Adapted from Glenny & Mullinger⁴

White K. *Making it my own business*. April 2022.

For more information about careers in MedComms, see www.FirstMedCommsJob.com

The reality

Talk to experienced freelancers to find out what working as a self-employed medical writer in MedComms is really like and the challenges you're likely to face. Freelancing is not for the faint-hearted – sometimes you may be inundated with work and have to manage multiple projects with ever-shifting timelines and client demands; other times you'll be unnervingly quiet! Occasionally you'll work for difficult clients who don't provide enough information or support and who expect a lot from you in an unreasonable timeframe. Invoice payments may be late and you may have to chase – or worst case – threaten/take legal action. When you first begin freelancing, you are likely to be asked to work in therapy areas you're not familiar with and you'll have a few sleepless nights wondering why the heck you said yes.

An interest in, and understanding of, business management is also key to success and longevity because like it or not, you are now a business owner, not just a writer.

These are the stark possibilities that come with owning and managing a business. Welcome to the rollercoaster life of freelancing – terrifying and exhilarating at times, but also extremely rewarding.

Freelancing is terrifying and exhilarating at times, but also extremely rewarding

More careers guides available from www.FirstMedCommsJob.com

See also...

Evidence generation and communication

A guide to getting started in HEOR/market access medical writing

A writer's role in drug development

A guide to getting started in regulatory medical writing

Ensuring timely dissemination of research

A guide to working as a medical publications professional

The business of medical communications

A guide to getting started in account management

From academic to medical writer

A guide to getting started in medical communications



White K. *Making it my own business*. April 2022.
For more information about careers in MedComms, see www.FirstMedCommsJob.com

Practicalities to consider

Ensure you have an appropriate space from which to work and conduct your business – ideally, a separate room or space with minimal distractions and interruptions from other household members. It's important that you can focus fully on your work when you're 'in the office'. You owe it to yourself and your clients to do this.

Make the space inviting so you look forward to working here. Buy an appropriate desk and chair, so you're not distracted by unnecessary discomfort. You also need to consider which office equipment you need, such as a computer (desktop or laptop – a laptop can be more useful if you are working away from your office a lot), software, printer, and consumables such as pens, paper and printer ink, not forgetting services such as IT support – all necessities that you took for granted when you were employed and which now have cost implications for you and your business. Some projects may need specific types of software (e.g. pdf editing or reference management tools) that you have to buy. The ability to back up your work, maintain client/project confidentiality, and ensure security against computer viruses, theft and fire are all critical considerations.

Keeping up-to-date with your training and personal development as a medical writer, including industry regulations and guidelines, is also paramount – attending conferences and training courses are all additional costs that are now your responsibility.

Don't forget to plan for the unexpected such as illness or injury affecting you or family members, or events that impact your ability to meet project deadlines or manage critical processes within your business. Have a backup strategy, such as someone you can substitute in your place who you trust – and check your contract to ensure your client agrees to this. Also consider loss of income or critical illness insurance if you don't have other income streams for your household. You have to finance your lifestyle and pay bills.

Which business structure?

You'll need to make decisions about how you wish to work and it's important to understand that these decisions may then affect, for instance, what rates you charge and how you are subsequently taxed. For example, in the UK you can set up your business either as a limited company or sole trader. You may need to register for VAT depending on your anticipated turnover. Also, research the insurance policies you may need to run your business. Some clients will insist you have certain insurance policies in place (e.g. indemnity insurance) before they will contract your services.

Setting your rates and whether, for instance, you charge based on time or on a project fee, should be clearly agreed along with invoicing terms, before accepting work. It's useful to talk to other experienced freelancers about the market rates for your services. Some membership organisations such as the European Medical Writers Association (EMWA) run occasional surveys that can serve as useful guides.

Consider having an accountant to help you manage your business finances as this can take a substantial amount of work and their expertise ensures compliance with tax legislation and the rules around self-employment. This allows you to concentrate on other aspects of your business, especially your client project work. Don't forget to budget for accountancy services as this too has cost implications.

How do you find clients?

How do I get my first client and where do I find them (**Box 2**)? For any fledgling contractor this is the critical first step on the freelancing ladder. Once you start building a client base, the question becomes: How do I keep my existing clients and attract new ones? Networking, building a contacts list, and keeping in touch plus marketing yourself and your business are key elements in creating and maintaining your client base.

Existing contacts

Ideally before you begin freelancing, or as soon as you have made the transition, write down the names of all the people you know, including former and current work colleagues. Also include friends, family and neighbours. Make sure you tell as many colleagues as possible of your intention to become self-employed. Ask if you can keep in touch with them in case there is a possibility of contracting work in the future. Your previous employers can be useful first clients when you embark on self-employment and your former work colleagues will move companies at some point, thus widening your potential client base.

Congratulations! You are already networking.

So, take 10 minutes and write down a list of 30 people you know. Contact them. Write to them via email or connect with them via social media, such as LinkedIn, and let them know that you are now freelancing.

Referrals

Remember, each of your contacts has their own list of contacts so there is the opportunity to expand your list by referrals and word of mouth. In addition, let everyone know that you are happy for them to pass your details onto their colleagues and other people they may know if they feel that they could use your services. Ultimately, you need to be in touch with the person responsible for hiring contractors and the associated budgets, but take it one step at a time.

Agencies and contracting

Some companies and writing agencies offer contracts to freelancers for defined periods – fixed-term contracts – or on a project-by-project basis. Recruitment agencies may also be a source of job opportunities for freelancers, but it is worth considering that such agencies may take a percentage of the original fee. However, this is another viable option to consider for widening your contacts and experience.

Consider that some contracts may require you to work from the client's office, and that while you are working for a client, particularly if it is long term, you may not be able to work for other clients due to possible conflicts of interest.

Box 2: Three places where you can find your clients

1. People you know
2. People other people know
3. People who gather at events

Networking

Attend relevant conferences, training courses and networking events for business owners and freelancers – they provide the perfect opportunity to meet potential clients and colleagues. This also shows you are committed to your professional development and improving your skills. The EMWA and the International Society of Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP) are examples of membership organisations that hold meetings, conferences and workshops specifically for medical writing professionals. Additionally, the MedComms networking community, MedCommsNetworking.com, offers a wide range of valuable activities and services that are freely accessible worldwide.

Look for networking opportunities in your area where local business people gather over lunch to meet fellow entrepreneurs. Find out if there are any freelancer groups where you live and go along. Some groups may be specifically for freelancers working in particular areas of business, but even if they are not, you never know who you may meet and what potential leads may be generated.

And if you can't find a suitable group, create your own! All you need to get the ball rolling is a venue – what about a pub or café? Book a table for lunch and invite people you know to come along. As a bonus, you can include this initiative on your CV/website/LinkedIn profile to demonstrate your resourcefulness.

Retaining clients for repeat business

The most critical factor in retaining clients is the quality of your work. It's also important to keep in touch with your clients. They are busy people and your name or business won't always be at the forefront of their mind. Consider writing a blog, or a newsletter that you distribute periodically. Alternatively, send an email containing a topic that would be of help or interest to your clients. Be mindful that we all suffer information overload these days due to the number of emails we receive daily. Think carefully about how frequently you publish newsletters or blogs and only send information to a client if it is sent with a genuine desire to help them – if this action generates more business for you in the future, that's a bonus.

Have a clear call to action

Ensure when you contact potential clients that you give them clear direction as to what you want them to do. Make it easy for them to contact you. Communicate clearly – it's what we are good at after all, and give them an instruction, for example: "If you need my services, contact me at XXXX" rather than "Get in touch, you know where to find me".

Increasing your visibility

Website, online presence and logo

Having a website for your business is highly recommended. Though you may obtain a large proportion of work through word of mouth and your personal contacts, your website is a useful place to provide potential clients with your background and the services you offer. Include details of your publications, documents and articles (be careful not to breach client confidentiality).

LinkedIn offers a fantastic online community for connecting with potential clients and other MedComms professionals. You can join discussion forums and relevant groups to widen your networking circle and to increase your visibility as a freelancer. You can use your LinkedIn profile to write posts on relevant topics to develop yourself as a 'thought leader' in your field. However, you need to ensure that your profile is up-to-date and describes what your business can provide.

Also develop a logo for your business – and include it and your website address on any document you send out to clients as another simple marketing opportunity.

Speaking at events

Look for opportunities to share your knowledge. Perhaps you can offer to give a seminar, webinar or a workshop? How about giving a presentation to students at a local school or college about medical writing or freelancing? You may get some reimbursement for these appearances, or you may volunteer to do them for free, depending on the type of event. Even if you aren't paid, your appearance may create leads for future contracts and therefore generate income indirectly. Furthermore, you are helping others by sharing your expertise.

Writing articles, blogs, newsletters

You want to establish yourself as the 'go-to person' for your field of expertise. Writing articles for publications, or posts on LinkedIn or as a guest writer for a popular blog about medical writing builds your reputation as well as showcasing your writing talents and style.

Freelance directories

Another way to increase your profile is by registering with specialist freelance business services and directories, such as the MedCommsWorkbook.com. Some organisations, such as EMWA, offer similar services to their freelance members for a small additional fee. Ask fellow freelancers for their recommendations. These are yet other ways for potential clients to 'find you'.

Feedback and testimonials

Ask former colleagues and clients to write recommendations/critiques of your performance at the end of each project and get their permission to share this feedback on your website or LinkedIn profile. This is not only invaluable for your personal and business development; it also generates testimonials to attract new clients.

Marketing your business

Like it or loathe it, if you're freelance, then you are a marketer. You are the face of your own company, so every meeting is an opportunity to market 'Brand You'. You'll be relieved to hear that effective marketing is not about a 'hard sell' or being pushy, because that suggests desperation. Customers are not stupid. They know when someone is being genuine. Think about the times you've been on the receiving end of a pushy sales pitch – do you buy from those companies? Probably not.

If you are yourself and relaxed, people are more likely to work with you because they feel a connection with you. In addition, be prepared – always have business cards or contact details ready – and be confident about telling people what you do in a succinct and engaging manner. Have an up-to-date CV, a brief summary of your experience and a list of articles you have written/edited or had published, ready to disseminate.

Who is your ideal client?

Knowing who your ideal clients are is a fundamental learning point as a business owner because this will help you to market your business more effectively and authentically. Some MedComms agencies offer a range of services such as medical education, public relations, market research and advertising, whereas others focus on a niche area. Other types of client are also open to freelance medical writers (**Box 3**).

Box 3: Typical sources of work

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| • Academia | • Other freelancers (subcontracting) |
| • Clinical research organisations | • Pharmaceutical/healthcare/biotech companies |
| • Healthcare charities | • Publishing houses/agencies |
| • MedComms agencies | • Recruitment agencies |

In the early days, you may be tempted to take any work at any rate from whomever just to get the ball rolling and the cash flowing. This is fine to begin with, but over time, your confidence grows – as hopefully does your cash reserve – and you begin to get clearer about who you enjoy working for. Now, look at the profile of these clients – what is it that you enjoy about working with them? When you are working with great clients, you feel more motivated, less stressed and you'll often find they pay you what you are worth – no quibble. In short, working for your ideal client means greater satisfaction because you are doing work that you love for a client who appreciates you.

Don't just look at who pays you the best rate – although of course this helps – what else do they provide? Look at the bigger picture – some clients may offer niche projects that widen your portfolio, or the opportunity to meet other freelancers who work for them, which may lead to future work with new clients.

Value isn't just about money. A client may offer you a project that's at a lower rate of pay than you would normally charge, but the assignment provides a training opportunity to broaden your experience. So, the difference in pay rate becomes an investment in your development as a writer.

Efficiency: make it your business

Working in and on your business

As freelancers we have to take on several roles in addition to medical writing, such as business development, administration, marketing and book-keeping, to name a few. To ensure you assign appropriate time for each of these roles, it is helpful to divide the associated tasks into two categories: those in which you're working 'ON your business' and those in which you're working 'IN your business' (**Box 4**).

Box 4: Working ON and IN your business		
Working ON your business	The 'strategy'	The activities necessary for the management of your business: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accounting • personal development • marketing/business development
Working IN your business	The 'doing'	The day-to-day work you do for your clients: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • medical writing • project management

How many of us are guilty of allocating all our time to client work and not having sufficient time for the actual development of our business? This makes us more reactive than proactive to client requests. Yet, we need to manage our businesses effectively in order to ensure we provide the best-quality service we can to our clients, whilst maintaining a good work-life balance for ourselves. How do we do this?

I recommend that you set up simple processes, systems and habits to work more efficiently both in and on your business. Some examples are provided below.

Spreadsheets: these can be used as timesheets not only so that we invoice accurately, but to enable us to ascertain, on average, how long certain documents take to write to help with future cost estimates. Training logs allow us to see where gaps are appearing in our experience and development.

Templates: use templates for standard emails (e.g. monthly emails sent out to clients with invoices) to prevent having to 'reinvent the wheel' every time.

Answering phones and emails: let clients know that unless they've pre-scheduled a call with you, you will let all calls go to voicemail. If you're busy creating a document for a client, you owe it to them to fully focus on the task, and not be distracted by unrelated phone calls (or emails). Furthermore, when you do speak to your client, you want to be fully committed to that phone conversation. Don't be tempted to respond to emails out of your normal working hours – and these may vary depending on where your client is in the world and what you've agreed with them. If you respond at all hours of the day or night, you're effectively training your clients that you are available 24/7. By all means draft your response, but hit 'send' during your working day.

Box 5: An example of a day's schedule

7.00–8.00	Wake-up, yoga, feed cat, breakfast, emails
8.00–9.30	Start first draft of report A
9.30–12.00	Continue second draft report B; emails
12.00–1.00	Lunch; go for walk
1.00–1.30	Mow the lawn
1.30–3.00	Prepare presentation for client X
3.00–4.30	Accounting
4.30–5.30	Pick up children from school; emails
5.30–on	RELAX!

Friday focus: every Friday, before you log off, plan your schedule for the following week. Write down what you're going to do each day (**Box 5**), and don't forget to schedule in time for working ON your business such as training, book-keeping, marketing. This is such a useful tool for visualising your time and seeing where you have gaps. Granted, your commitments may change as the week progresses, but this gives you a starting point.

Allow time for creativity

One important point to finish with – don't forget to take 'time out' and schedule this as part of your weekly routine. When do have your best ideas? For most people, it's when they are not thinking about a particular problem or issue (i.e. when they are walking the dog or gardening!). Taking regular breaks is something we all struggle with in our busy lives, and yet we owe it to ourselves to relax. Regular relaxation is key to creativity and avoiding burn-out, and therefore conducive to providing a high-quality, long-term, efficient service for our clients.

If you find yourself feeling guilty about taking time out, remember, your subconscious mind is still processing whatever it is you've been working on and you may just get a flash of inspiration the next day.

“Creativity, ingenuity, confidence, leadership, decision-making; all of these can be enhanced simply by sleeping more”

Arianna Huffington, *The Telegraph*, 26 January 2013

And, don't we owe it to our clients to give them the best service possible? Isn't that why we are in business? We can only do this if we look after our own well-being and give ourselves time for creativity and relaxation. Give yourself a break – the benefits will far outweigh the risks.

In summary

The skills you gain from managing a business are many and varied. They are also transferable if you decide to go back into employment in the future. Often, people refrain from going freelance because they are worried they may not have enough work to make a living. This is an important consideration and why it is so important to discuss your decision to go freelance with those affected by it. However, medical writing seems to be an area in which freelancers thrive.

If you don't panic about generating work and income you'll probably find that your business will flourish. A positive attitude means you come across differently to clients – it changes your personal energy or confidence, which means you're more likely to attract clients. In fact, once you've overcome this 'mental hurdle', you may find that a new issue holds you back – the fear of success: "What if I get too much work that I can't cope and I let my clients down?" A challenge few of us consider before we become freelancers.

Self-employment is not an easy way to make a living and mistakes are inevitable as we push the boundaries and expand our comfort zone. However, if you feel ready to widen your medical writing skills and gain business management experience, while enjoying the freedom to work from home and the autonomy of self-leadership, freelancing may just be for you.

Good luck!

The skills you gain from managing a business are many and varied

References

1. White K. Networking and securing that crucial first client. *Medical Writing* 2015;:175–77. Available from journal.emwa.org.
2. White K. Freelancing – are you ready to go solo? *Medical Writing* 2015;24(3):140–44. Available from journal.emwa.org.
3. White K. The secrets of longevity. Top tips for freelance durability. *Medical Writing* 2014;23(3):247–48. Available from journal.emwa.org.
4. Glenny H, Mullinger B. *The ICR Guide to Freelancing*. Fourth edition, 2013. Available from icr-global.org/publications/the-icr-guide-to-freelancing.

Conflicts of interest and disclaimers

The views given in this article are those of the author based on her own experience of running a freelance business. Following the advice given here does not guarantee business success.

Join the conversation...
#MedComms

Further information

Freelance medical writing

- De Milto L. *The Mighty Marketer. Your Guide to Making More Money as a Freelance Medical Writer*. BookLocker.com Inc., 2014. This is a useful book written by a freelancer.

General freelancing

- Association for Independent Professionals and Self-Employed (IPSE) – a UK-based organisation and “the voice of the UK’s self-employed population” that provides support services for its members, including freelance guides, National Freelancers Day, legal advice, contract templates, a review service and various discounts for insurance etc. – www.ipse.co.uk
- Kane C. The No-Brainer Strategy for Getting Clients. Available from christinekane.com/the-no-brainer-strategy-for-getting-clients/#sthash.qqdNvgvx.NHWjatSn.dpbs. Christine Kane is a successful business mentor based in the USA. Her website (www.christinekane.com) contains advice on how to be a successful ‘solopreneur’.

MedComms

- MedComms Networking, managed by NetworkPharma – www.MedCommsNetworking.com
- MedComms Workbook, managed by NetworkPharma – www.MedCommsWorkbook.com
- NetworkPharma.tv, managed by NetworkPharma – www.NetworkPharma.tv

Professional bodies

- American Medical Writers Association – www.amwa.org
- Australasian Medical Writers Association – www.medicalwriters.org
- European Medical Writers Association – www.emwa.org
- Healthcare Communications Association – www.hca-uk.org
- International Society of Medical Publication Professionals – www.ismpp.org

Pharmaceutical industry news, views and information

- PharmaFile – www.pharmafile.com
- pharmaphorum – www.pharmaphorum.com
- PharmaTimes – www.pharmatimes.com
- Pharmaceutical Executive – www.pharmexec.com
- PharmiWeb – www.pharmiweb.com
- PMLiVE – www.pmlive.com
- The Publication Plan – www.thepublicationplan.com

White K. *Making it my own business*. April 2022.
For more information about careers in MedComms, see www.FirstMedCommsJob.com



Sarah Birch

Freelance Medical Writer

I've been freelancing for 9 years now, and a medical writer for 21 years. When I did my PhD 25 years ago, I'd assumed that I'd have a research career, so moved into doing a couple of post-docs. I stumbled across medical writing by chance. I was fed up due to an experiment that was continually failing to give a decent answer and so went to the pub with a friend. I wasn't in a great place in some ways: my boss was moving, the work was being a pain and to add to the mix I'd just met my future husband who lived 140 miles away. That conversation was truly life changing,

and after the suggestion I consider medical writing, I secured my first agency job, staying there for almost 10 years and learning a huge amount.

Freelancing was always something I had at the back of my mind, particularly after we moved to rural North Wales. Eventually, due to the need for extra flexibility, I took the plunge. I always say it was like jumping out of an aeroplane, knowing you had a parachute and just hoping it would open before you hit the ground.

I've been extremely fortunate over the past 9 years to work with both friends and former colleagues, and to make new friends in the process. I've also been lucky that apart from one short

period I've always been able to find sufficient work and I've formed some very good working relationships, working with one agency over the whole of the time that I've been freelance.

It does have its stresses, and at times it can feel a bit feast or famine, but it usually balances out in the end

It does have its stresses, and at times it can feel a bit feast or famine, but it usually balances out in the end. Every

day is different, and I've gained experience of a range of interesting therapy areas and materials. Working on so many different diseases and materials really suits my butterfly brain, and there's never time to get bored. Plus, I can easily get out at lunchtime and walk across the fields with the dogs – what's not to love?

For anyone thinking of becoming a freelancer, I'd recommend finding yourself a really good accountant who can help to guide you through the minefield of things that you have to do and think about. You also need to be fairly sure that you can motivate yourself without the small interactions that you gain when you're in an office every day, and that you can cope if you have days where you may not speak to anyone that you're working with. Networking is also key, I've gained a lot of business from people I know, and don't be afraid to say no if you really don't want to do something, or you've already got enough work to occupy you.



Steph Carter

Freelance Medical Writer

I've been a freelance medical writer for almost 2 years now, having started my company, Lyrical Medical Writing Services, back in July 2020. When I left my agency role, I was seeking greater flexibility, an opportunity to work on a broader range of project types and therapy areas, and a chance to re-focus my career on writing rather than management. I have achieved all of these as a freelancer, so for me, the decision was entirely the right one.

Freelancing certainly affords me far greater flexibility than I could ever gain in employment. I still work largely full-time hours, but I now fit work in around my life rather than the other way round. I also took the opportunity to take a month off last summer to spend time with my children during the holidays. I didn't get paid of course, but it's great to have the option to do that. Although I initially enjoyed being 100% home-based, I eventually moved into a coworking space in order to bring a bit more structure to my week and to interact with other freelancers. I now work 2–3 days each week from my office with the remainder from home.

Since I became a freelance writer, I have worked for 15 clients across 20 different therapy areas. The projects that I've completed have been diverse and at times have pushed me out of my comfort zone. A large proportion of my work comes from MedComms agencies, but I also work directly for a couple of pharma companies and I've made some steps towards working with not-for-profit organisations. I also volunteer as a copywriter for a small medical charity for a few hours each week. The MedComms industry seems to be busier than ever and as an experienced medical writer, obtaining freelance work has been pretty straightforward. In fact, the biggest difficulty can be deciding which projects to turn down.

As a freelancer, the vast majority of my time is spent writing and this suits me perfectly. However, it's important to remember that you're running your own business and this can take up some (unpaid) time. For example, you need to be able to market yourself, send (and sometimes chase) invoices, and deal with contracts, lawyers and accountants. With some clients, particularly those outside traditional MedComms agencies, you may also need to develop cost proposals. All of this was a steep learning curve for me, but actually, I found that I quite enjoy this part of the role.

Overall, if you love writing and can live with the uncertainty that goes along with being self-employed, then going freelance can be a great option for an established medical writer. I can't imagine going back in-house any time soon.

Overall, if you love writing and can live with the uncertainty that goes along with being self-employed, then going freelance can be a great option for an established medical writer



Susie Chapman

Freelance Medical Writer

I fell by pure chance into freelancing about 3 years ago, after realising that as an employee I couldn't get the flexibility and work-life balance that I wanted. A friend who had gone freelance a few years before suggested I give it a try, so I did. My only regret is that I didn't do it sooner! As a sole trader, I found there was very little to sort out; I've not needed an accountant for my set-up so far. I've always said I would become a limited company if necessary, but haven't yet felt the need. There's plenty of work around where agencies are happy to connect with sole traders.

My route into medical writing has been slightly unconventional, in that I haven't come from a pure agency (or even writing) background. After finishing my DPhil, I worked for a large contract research organisation writing proposals and budgets for clinical trial delivery. Wanting a change, I worked in one MedComms agency and then another, in combined account management/writer roles for a couple of years. I then made the leap into pharma, working in medical affairs for nearly a decade, at both national and European levels. The travel for the latter was exciting at first but increasingly onerous, and after maternity leave I found it incompatible with looking after a wee one. I was nervous about entering the world of freelance medical writing – feeling some imposter syndrome from 'not being a real writer' – but have found my career experience very relevant and

Freelancing, to me, is simply – freedom.

Freedom to work the hours I want to work, when I want to work them...

indeed an asset, even picking up some strategy consulting work as well as the more classic medical writing tasks. In reality, many activities within medical affairs in pharma could be classed as medical writing – it's all about looking for commonalities when assessing your relevant skills.

My advice for anyone considering freelancing: first, know that you *can* do it. If you're reading this, you probably already have the right experience mix. However, I would say it helps to have financial back-up for 3–6 months when starting out, as you will likely have a few gaps whilst building up your network and reputation. Second, don't be too rigid in your approach – consider taking on one-off projects for clients at an hourly rate or fixed fee, as well as working with a client for a few months charging an hourly or daily rate. I've used a mix of these approaches, and they each have merits – I'm still experimenting! When you are your own boss, there are no fixed rules, so make them up and find an approach that works for you.

Freelancing, to me, is simply – freedom. Freedom to work the hours I want to work, when I want to work them; freedom to concentrate on the actual work instead of internal meetings and team politics; freedom to easily move to a different client and project if you fancy a change. The fact that it's also better paid *pro rata* than equivalent permanent work is just a bonus.



Gemma Hall

Freelance Medical Writer

If I'd heard of medical writing when I finished university, I think I would have made a beeline for it as a career. However, it was a few years before I encountered it, by which point I'd been working in science communication-oriented roles, which was thankfully all very relevant when I made the move to a medical writing agency role.

Over the years, several fellow medical writers talked about how great the opportunities for freelancing were. However, I didn't really think about this aspect too much because I always thought I would be happiest in a nice, secure permanent role. All of that changed, though, when I got talking to an engineer. Yes, an engineer and not a medical writer persuaded me round to freelancing because they were desperate for writers with all the attributes of a medical writer – someone who could get to grips quickly with complex subjects and write meticulously for a variety of audiences. They offered me a safe opportunity to dip my toe in the water of freelancing and I loved that all the skills I'd honed as a medical writer were very applicable across different sectors and were highly valued. And I realised I loved the freelance lifestyle.

The work–life balance was an obvious bonus, although I sometimes struggled to get that right! I was very attuned to 'being there' for my clients and so I wasn't making the most of the freelance lifestyle, until a wise person said to me, "This is your chance to make your life what you want it to be".

*Freelancing as a medical writer
has allowed me finally to get the
work–life balance right*

Also, I deeply missed medical writing. I missed the subject matter, the variety of the writing and the dynamism of the industry generally. By this point, many medical writer friends had started freelancing, and they were very persuasive and reassuring about the opportunities. They've been key to putting me in touch with new clients and providing a general support network, which has been invaluable.

Freelancing as a medical writer has allowed me finally to get the work–life balance right. Consequently, I'm far more productive than I ever have been in my working life and I'm also more motivated as I get to work on the things I love the most, with fantastic clients. That's an incredibly satisfying feeling!

Are there any downsides? There's always an awareness that it's not a secure job like a permanent role. But in the 10 years I've freelanced, I've never had to look too far to get work. Plus, if all else fails, I now know that us medical writers have skills that are highly desirable in other sectors.

My top tip is to establish good communication with your clients from the outset. This is reassuring for both sides and will help you mesh as part of their team quickly. Also, be amenable to mucking in with the less glamorous jobs. Your client will be grateful, and it always makes the better jobs seem even better!



Jen Lewis

Freelance Medical Writer

It was during my post-doc research post in the USA that I realised I was never going to find that one area of research that I felt I could dedicate my life to. I enjoyed the laboratory life, but I knew it wasn't for me. I did, however, enjoy writing up my work and soon found that my colleagues were coming to me to edit their research proposals and manuscripts. I returned to the UK to be closer to my family and decided to explore other career options.

Medical writing was not a well-known career choice at that time, and it was difficult to get an entry-level position. I eventually found a position as an account executive for a MedComms agency. The pace of life and the range of projects that I worked on were completely different to my experience of working in a laboratory, but I thrived in that environment and gained a good introduction to the industry. I knew I really wanted to be a medical writer, so when the right position came up at another agency, I jumped at it. I worked there for over 5 years, learning the trade and becoming part of a successful team.

I left when I was due to have my first child and decided that I would like to have a go at freelancing. I went to a freelancer meeting run by MedComms Networking and gained some

...take every opportunity for training and networking

valuable advice on how to go about setting up and running my business. I set up as a sole trader, got my LinkedIn profile up to date, connected with my previous colleagues and contacts, and let everyone know that I was starting freelancing. It wasn't long before I was working for my first client, who I was recommended to by an ex-colleague. In fact, most of my clients have been ex-colleagues or contacts of ex-colleagues. So, if you are in an agency

and thinking of going freelance at some point in the future, my advice would be to keep your colleagues on side!

After a couple of years of freelancing, I moved from the North-West of England to Norfolk. We found a property with a separate annex so I could have my office away from the main house and I set up a limited company. I feel exceptionally lucky to be able to close the door on work at the end of the day, a luxury that not many freelancers have, but one that I would highly recommend. I have been freelancing for around 10 years now and as the children have grown older, I have been able to add in more working days, while still retaining the flexibility to maintain a good balance between work and family life.

Another thing that I would highly recommend is to take every opportunity for training and networking. MedComms Networking, the European Medical Writers Association (EMWA) and the International Society for Medical Publications Professionals (ISMPP) all offer excellent training and networking opportunities that are definitely worth the investment of both time and money. You never know when you might bump into a potential client or glean a new piece of information that could transform the way you work.



Colleen Shannon

Freelance Medical Writer

Through my career, I've gone from magazine journalism, to old school PR, to writing websites, then video and animation, then e-learning, digital patient support programmes and apps. Over the past 20 years there have been so many changes in healthcare communications, and they are coming at us faster all the time. It's always felt like I'm just one minute ahead of a big wave – aiming to surf the trends, instead of being swept away. That makes freelancing exhilarating or terrifying, depending on your outlook.

Career pathway

For me, it's been exciting from the start. Before I got into journalism, I was a not-very-good lab tech. When I moved to London from Colorado, I decided to try a new line of work too, and have a go at writing about science.

Working on specialist magazines was a great way to break into writing. After a few years as a staff reporter and editor on science and medical titles, I worked in agencies for a while before going freelance. This was the right move, because I had time and flexibility for my kids as they grew up.

I started out freelancing for magazines and pharma clients, but I quickly decided to diversify. I pitched for work with patient groups, and then over time I added website publishers, the NHS, Royal Colleges, private clinics, big healthcare companies and start-ups. Today I have a varied portfolio and clients I love working with.

*Do a great job for your clients
and they will keep coming back*

Recently, I've been studying part-time for a postgraduate certificate in digital health. This is one of the best decisions I ever made – it's going to be worth every minute and every penny. This was a big move, because it meant re-locating back to the USA, at least for a while. I've started a new business here, to work for clients on both sides of the Atlantic. Doing the initial admin took a few months, and that was harder than I expected, but now it's all set.

Advice for aspiring freelancers

My advice to anyone who wants to go freelance? Work in a staff job first, so you learn how things are done. While you're there, build a network of contacts, including health professionals. Boost your savings account too. Start publishing work with your name on it, even if it's on your own website or guest blogging for little or no money at first, so you have a visible portfolio.

Once you're on your way, commit to your continued development. Keep on learning about your profession and medicine in general. Do a great job for your clients and they will keep coming back. They will tell their friends too. Referrals and repeat customers are the way to go.

And always keep your eye on that wave.

I work as a MedComms freelancer...

"I work as a MedComms freelancer because I love combining my science writing experience with medicine, I have to stay in tune with the publishing world and I am introduced to interesting areas in medicine in close collaboration with hands-on clinicians."

Jackie Butterworth, Freelance Medical Writer

"I work as a MedComms freelancer for half the week, and a busy mum of two tots for the other half. The balance and freedom to choose what I work, when I work and how I work are unparalleled by anything offered within an agency – and the money's not bad either!"

Kate Booth, Freelance Medical Writer

"I work as a MedComms freelancer because it allows me to integrate my love of writing with my love for science and health to create informative, engaging and meaningful communications. As an epidemiologist, I am fascinated by data and welcome opportunities to review, analyse and disseminate findings that can actually change lives. I enjoy research and writing projects that expose me to new information and allow me to strengthen my current skills as well as develop expertise in new areas."

Carole Chvala, Freelance Medical Writer

"I work as a MedComms freelancer because I like the flexibility, variety of work, interaction with many different people and to actually (or more like surprisingly!) be fairly paid for the hours I put in and the work I do."

Sonia Costa, Freelance Medical Writer

"I work as a MedComms freelancer because it gives me the flexibility to take on the type of work that I feel most suited to and more control over my workload. Freelancing has given me the opportunity to gain experience in a range of tasks, including writing, data/fact checking, layout checking, editing/re-formatting, literature searches and French translation work. I feel fortunate to have been able to develop my career as a freelancer – I believe it was the right choice and I wouldn't want to change."

Howard Donohue, Freelance Medical Writer

"I work as a MedComms freelancer to utilise my pharma and copywriting experience, and to empower myself to have a good work-life balance. The variety of projects keeps the work interesting and the responsibility of running your own business keeps you on your toes."

Ben Ellis, Freelance Medical Writer

"I work as a MedComms freelancer as there were no suitable job opportunities when we relocated. Eleven years on, I have not regretted taking the leap. It offers flexibility, variety, freedom to choose what I work on and when, fantastic opportunities to attend meetings and interact with experts in their field and, importantly, to be paid for the actual hours I work!"

Victoria Evans, Freelance Medical Writer

"I work as a MedComms freelancer because I enjoy merging creativity, diversity and scientific accuracy."

Ana Hutanu, Freelance Medical Writer

"I work as a MedComms freelancer because it gives me lots of flexibility – in the hours I work, how much holiday I take and who I work with. Having and maintaining a good professional network has ensured that I'm seldom without work. I really enjoy the variety of projects I work on; I'm always learning and I feel valued by my clients. I have been a MedComms freelancer for 15 years and I can't think of a better way to earn a living!"

Ezzie Hutchinson, Freelance Medical Writer

"I work as a MedComms freelancer as I thrive on the variety of work made available to me. No 2 days are the same. More than that, it's a privilege to work with such lovely and interesting people."

Tina Nightingale, Freelance Medical Writer

"I work as a MedComms freelancer because it is a fulfilling career with no office politics. I relish having the freedom to choose the project, the client, the therapy area and my hours of work. For 15 years my medical writing work has fitted effortlessly around raising a family and moving across continents."

Lisa O'Rourke, Freelance Medical Writer

"I work as a MedComms freelancer because I enjoy crafting diverse, creative, scientific campaigns."

Corinne Swainger, Freelance Medical Writer

"I work as a MedComms freelancer because I love the challenge of working across multiple therapy areas, on a wide variety of projects. I learn so much from the different agencies I work with, and I get to collaborate with lots of talented teams along the way."

Mina Varsani, Freelance Medical Writer

"I work as a MedComms freelancer because I hoped that it would help me to find a better work-life balance after becoming a parent – it did, and there are a lot of other perks too. I love the variety, being able to focus without lots of distractions, being paid for all of the time that I work and the drastic reduction in email traffic!"

Laura Ward, Freelance Medical Writer

The **MedComms **Workbook** helps MedComms freelancers work smarter and helps clients find specialist medical communications, education and publishing freelance support**

Freelancers are exclusively:

- included in the Workbook email list and will automatically receive all work opportunities that are sent to that list
- listed in the MedComms Workbook Directory and also the MedComms Networking listing of Independents with a link to their LinkedIn page or website, whichever they prefer
- invited to sign up to the members-only, MedComms Workbook LinkedIn Group
- encouraged to attend our regular workshops and online meetings

visit **www.MedCommsWorkbook.com**


Did you know?

MedComms professionals

MedComms professionals receive a **20% discount** on their Professional Indemnity and other business insurance policies

To discuss your requirements please contact us



-  +44 (0)121 694 6897
-  info@piacommercial.com
-  www.piacommercial.com

Specialist Insurance – for the lifescience, biotechnology and healthcare industries