My life as a medical writer

Karen Wilson Smith PhD
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 60th 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