

How medical writers help authors publish journal articles

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Abstract Although best known as writers of regulatory documents, medical writers also help craft journal articles, medical communication texts and medical education materials. Professional publication writers are medical writers who specialise in writing journal articles. Publication writers provide a valuable service by helping authors avoid the many pitfalls that can cause a manuscript to be rejected. Not only do they help authors write clear, concise and convincing text, they also provide a naïve, unbiased scientific perspective and, importantly, help successfully guide authors through the writing and peer-review processes.

Keywords Writing; publications; periodicals as topic; medicine.

Introduction

Medical writers are best known as writers of regulatory documents, for example clinical trial dossiers, submitted to regulatory agencies like the US Food & Drug Administration and the European Medicines Agency. However, medical writers also write journal articles, medical communication (ie marketing and advertising) texts and medical education materials. Some medical writers even cross over into medical journalism (writing for magazines and newspapers) and medical translation.

Medical writers are hired by pharmaceutical, biotechnology and medical device companies – and sometimes by individual medical researchers – because, simply put, they are better at writing than the people who performed the research. Medical writers (at least good ones) are experienced at writing documents that are clear, concise, complete, and convincing and that comply with regulatory, ethical, and content guidelines – documents that clearly transmit the intended findings or conclusions. For most cases, this also means writing in English, so most medical writers are either native English speakers or have excellent skills in writing English as a second language. Thus, working with an experienced medical writer greatly reduces the amount of time and money needed to produce medical documents. Importantly, working with a medical writer also shifts the time needed to produce medical documents to someone else, which is especially important for authors who are already overburdened with other work.

Most medical writers are not medical doctors but have an advanced degree (usually a PhD) in the life sciences, and in most cases, have worked as research scientists. An experienced medical writer will have the knowledge and ability to rapidly master any medical topic, with the goal of being able to translate someone else's findings and ideas into a well-written text.

How publication writers help publish journal articles

Publication writers are medical writers who specialise in

writing journal articles. Although this represents only a fraction of medical writing, it is an important part as publications are the main means by which researchers inform others about advances in medicine and influence clinical practice and prescribing.¹ Publications are therefore a key part of the communication plan for pharmaceutical, biotechnology and medical device companies,² and in many countries, peer-reviewed publications are the only information that can be cited in marketing materials.

For manuscripts to pass peer review successfully, they must be well-organised, well-written and of high quality.³ Professional writers improve the quality of writing, reduce the amount of time, cost and aggravation needed to deliver manuscripts, and reduce the risks and costs of unethical publication practices.¹

Publication writers do this in many ways. At the beginning of a manuscript writing project, a publication writer helps organise the project by creating specific milestones, such as insisting on the need for an outline, specified drafts and a defined internal review process. The publication writer then works with the authors to organize the information they want to publish by reviewing and considering the data from a naïve, unbiased perspective. A good publication writer may challenge or elaborate on the authors' interpretation and suggest alternative ways of presenting the data, thus adding to the quality of the writing. The publication writer will also delve into the details of the experiments and results to identify missing or incomplete information and places where the writing is not logical or may lead to questions or rejection. The publication writer should also help ensure that the article presents new and interesting information, which is the most important consideration for avoiding rejection.⁴

A key role of a publication writer is selecting an appropriate target journal for a manuscript,⁵ as an inappropriate journal is one of the main reasons that articles are rejected by journals.⁴ By doing this early in the writing process, the medical writer helps make sure that the article's messages are correct for the intended audience avoiding time lost in submitting to inappropriate journals.

Once the writing begins, one of the main roles of the publication writer is to help the authors write well. This includes making sure that language problems, a common reason for rejection, are avoided.⁴ The goal is to help the authors to transmit their main ideas in clear, concise and convincing language, which usually involves a combination of writing original text and reworking text provided by the authors. Moreover, a good medical writer can write a text that attracts and holds the attention of the reader.

Sadly, many articles are rejected because they do not follow the journal's instructions for authors.⁴ Part of the publication writer's job is making sure that the article is in full compliance with these instructions. Furthermore, publication writers should ensure that reporting and ethics

guidelines are followed, especially CONSORT, ICMJE and Good Publication Practice.⁶ Articles that follow these guidelines attain a uniform level of quality and contain the full set of information needed for readers to understand and interpret the results. Furthermore, in following guidelines, articles are more likely to be cited and included in systematic reviews, a main tool used by policy makers.

Although there may be a publication or project manager officially charged with managing the manuscript writing team, a publication writer often ends up filling this role. This can include communicating with contributors, collating their comments and chasing those who have not provided their comments. Publication writers can also save the authors substantial time by organising and guiding the manuscript writing process.⁷

Publication writers also make themselves valuable by guiding the authors through the review process.⁸ This can include helping the authors craft a well-written cover letter and abstract that capture the editor's attention; calming authors when their article is rejected; responding appropriately and effectively to reviewers' comments; editing the article according to reviewers' comments; communicating with the journal editorial office; and, for rejected articles, finding a new target journal and correctly revising the article according to a new set of instructions for authors.

Conclusion

Professional publication writers provide a valuable service by helping authors avoid the many pitfalls that can lead to rejection. Not only do they help authors write a clear, concise and convincing manuscript, they also provide a naïve, unbiased scientific perspective and help guide authors through the writing and peer-review processes.

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