

## Teaming Up With a Medical Writer: Tips for Finding Well-Qualified Candidates

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Medical writers and editors can help clinician authors effectively leverage their time in preparing a clear, concise, correct, complete, and effective manuscript for publication. When searching for a skilled candidate, authors should be aware of the varied qualifications and services available. Professional associations and development programs can be good resources for well-qualified candidates.

### Qualifications

Medical writers and editors have widely varying backgrounds, with professional experience in academic, industrial and journalistic settings, and a college or graduate degree in science, pharmacy, medicine, journalism, or English. Some experienced writers and editors may be Board certified Editors in the Life Sciences (“BELS”). The most common characteristics among skilled medical writers and editors, however, are a keen ability to understand science and medicine, and a strong ability to analyze and synthesize complex information into effective communications for different audiences. The particular qualifications required may be narrowed down through focusing on the level of services needed.

### Services

While writing services tend to be straight-forward, e.g. researching the literature and writing a manuscript draft based on author guidance, editorial services range along a spectrum that can match varying author styles, interests, and time available. The basic level of editing (proofreading or copy editing) is helpful to authors who enjoy writing but do not want to spend their time on “Elements of Style”, i.e. mechanics such as spelling and grammar. A moderate level of support (data checking or author’s editing) is helpful to authors who enjoy putting their thoughts in writing, but prefer not to spend their time either checking the specific details of references cited, or clarifying, tightening, and polishing the prose. A comprehensive level of service (substantive editing, writing or developmental editing) is helpful to authors who have publishable ideas and wish to leverage their time more significantly by delegating more of the content development to a communication specialist. Table 1 further describes the editor’s focus and actions taken at these levels. Authors who understand these distinctions will be more effective in using website search engines at the professional associations listed below, and understand what to expect during the manuscript development process.

**Table 1. Common editorial service levels in manuscript development**

	<b>BASIC</b>		<b>MODERATE</b>		<b>COMPREHENSIVE</b>	
<b>Service description keywords</b>	Proofreading	Copy Editing	Data Checking	Author's Editing	Substantive Editing	Developmental Editing
<b>Editorial focus</b>	Mechanical		<blend>		Technical	
	Indisputable errors (e.g. misspellings, incorrect grammar)	Proofreading + Style, internal consistency (e.g. formatting, cross-checking citations with reference list, compliance with publisher's preferred style guide)	Data verification, a.k.a. fact-checking (e.g. comparing manuscript statements to cited sources)	Readability (e.g. clear, concise, complete information)  May include copyediting if desired	Substantial rewriting, integration of reviewer comments	Creative development from the idea, raw material or early draft stage
<b>Editorial actions taken</b>	Make corrections to eliminate errors	Make corrections, suggest improvements in syntax without substantively changing content (query author as needed)	Make suggestions or query author about inconsistencies or contradictions in information, without substantively changing content	Make revisions without substantively changing content (query author as needed about apparent gaps or contradictions in information, or issues inadvertently raised but not addressed by the author)	Make revisions that may substantively change content	Advise on content organization; may propose supplemental material such as appendices, graphics, photos, tables, charts or figures; make revisions, rewrite or rearrange sections

## Professional Associations and Educational Programs

Medical writers and editors are continuous learners, and can often be found through organizations dedicated to their professional development, such as the American Medical Writers Association (in Europe: the European Medical Writers Association), the Council of Science Editors, and the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences. Professional development degree and certificate programs may be another helpful resource.

### **American Medical Writers Association – AMWA ([www.amwa.org](http://www.amwa.org))**

This professional association is dedicated to promoting standards of excellence in medical communication. To find medical writers or editors, consider contacting chapter leaders or award winners listed on the website; they may be able to help, or offer referrals.

- Chapters > Chapter Information (leadership contact info included)
- About AMWA > Awards > Honorary Awards (or) Competitive Awards

To find medical writers to help on a regular basis, consider posting a job announcement:

- Job Market > Posting an Ad (tiered fee schedule)

To find freelancers for occasional projects, search the Freelance Directory

- Freelance Directory > Nonmember Subscription Form (free)  
Search by keyword (e.g. dental, periodont), location, services (e.g. editing, research, review & criticism, writing), &/or media (e.g. journal manuscripts)

### **European Medical Writers Association – EMWA ([www.emwa.org](http://www.emwa.org))**

This European group is similar to AMWA: professional biomedical communicators -- with academic, industrial and journalistic affiliations -- dedicated to promoting standards of excellence in medical writing through professional development. To find medical writers in Europe, consider searching the

- Freelance List

or looking through these links to find EMWA workshop leaders or EMWA journal article authors who might be able to help or offer recommendations

- Conference
- Journal

### **Council of Science Editors – CSE ([www.councilscienceeditors.org](http://www.councilscienceeditors.org))**

This association is dedicated to promoting excellence in the communication of scientific information. To find Council leadership who may be able to recommend colleagues:

- About the Council > Board Members (links to contact info)

To find freelance professionals, consider posting a job, or searching the Job Bank for freelancers:

- Job Bank > Submit a Job Posting (for FT or PT positions; \$125 to post)
- Job Bank > Manuscript Services (lists freelancers with services and contact info)

### **Board of Editors in the Life Sciences – BELS ([www.bels.org](http://www.bels.org))**

This organization evaluates the proficiency of manuscript editors in the life sciences and awards credentials (similar to those obtainable in other professions) to those who demonstrate proficiency in editorial skills & understanding of principles & ethics of scientific inquiry, writing and publishing. To find ELS-certified professionals, consider searching the BELS roster, or searching the database.

## Professional Development Programs

These organizations offer degrees or professional development certificate programs. To find medical writers, consider contacting program leadership for referrals to students/graduates, or (at University level) post a freelance opportunity.

### *AMWA Education/Certificates*

- [www.amwa.org](http://www.amwa.org)
- Core Curriculum Certificate in Writing/Editing
- Advanced Certificate
- Professional Development Certificate

### *EMWA Professional Development Programme (EPDP)*

- [www.emwa.org](http://www.emwa.org)
- Foundation Certificate
- Advanced Certificate

### *University of the Sciences in Philadelphia*

- <http://www.usip.edu/graduate/biomedwriting/index.shtml>
- M.S. in Biomedical Writing

### *Graham School of General Studies – University of Chicago*

- <http://www.grahamschool.uchicago.edu/business/subprogram.cfm?subprogramid=141&forcredit=2>
- Medical Writing and Editing Certificate

### *Emerson College Department of Marketing Communication in collaboration with Tufts University School of Medicine*

- [http://www.emerson.edu/marketing\\_communication/graduate/health-communication.cfm](http://www.emerson.edu/marketing_communication/graduate/health-communication.cfm)
- M.A. in Health Communication

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