



This new feature of the Student Section is designed to provide students and beginning medical writers with insights in embarking on a career in biomedical communication. Through interviews, medical writers early in their career will describe their experience with getting their first job and experienced medical writers will offer advice and guidance on preparing for a job as a biomedical communicator.

Voices of Experience

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➤ Interviewee: Alyssa Biorn, PhD

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AMWA: *How did you become interested in medical writing as a career?*

Alyssa: I always liked writing and editing, but I thought I wanted to be a professor. At a career development seminar in graduate school, a science editor came in to talk and I was really excited by what she was saying. I thought, "I could definitely do that." But it sort of stayed in the back of my mind. In about my second year of postdoctoral work, I went to another career development seminar, this time by a chemistry professor at a small university. As I listened to him, I had a revelation of "This is NOT what I want!" I never did love the lab work and actually was happiest when I was writing my dissertation. From then on, I totally changed my mind-set and decided that editing or writing was what I wanted to do.

AMWA: *What is your education and work background?*

Alyssa: I have a BA in biology from a liberal arts college—St. Olaf College in Minnesota—and a PhD in biochemistry from Iowa State University. After graduate school, I did 4 years of postdoctoral work before I came to Mayo.

AMWA: *How did you job search for your first position?*

Alyssa: I used Science Online—they have a great search and alert function. I set it to send me an e-mail me if a job ad came up with edit* or writ* in the text. I also read through the ads in *Science* directly on occasion, but that was about it. I also told almost everyone I knew about my

intentions for finding an editing job. It didn't directly result in me getting this job, but it helped me in lots of other ways. If I had been familiar with AMWA at that point, that would have been a great resource.

AMWA: *How long did it take you to find this position?*

Alyssa: About a year and a half, which included some "pre-search" time as well. Once I decided that I definitely wanted to make the career change from research to editing, I figured that no one would hire me without experience. While doing my postdoctoral work, I got some freelance editing jobs on the side in order to gain that experience. I got those *side* jobs by telling everyone I knew that I wanted to edit; eventually several opportunities came up, and those were the key to getting my permanent job. After I started "moonlighting," I probably waited about 6 months before I started actively job searching, and after that point it took about a year.

AMWA: *What surprised you most when you first started working at Mayo Clinic?*

Alyssa: How much I thought I knew that I actually didn't. I thought I was a pretty good editor, but I had had no formal training. I was, I guess, an instinctive editor. If it sounded wrong, I changed it. I didn't know that there were such specific rules for certain aspects of punctuation and usage. I was mostly going off what I remembered from high school. I hadn't really heard of a "style book," so I was surprised to hear that different institutions and organizations had their own ways of doing things and their own "rules." It was a steep learning curve at the beginning.

AMWA: *What is a typical workday like for you?*

Alyssa: We have a pretty unique workflow in our office, so I see things at different stages. I could be working on the first edit of a new paper, going over a copy that has been

proofread, seeing the author's revised copy and incorporating their answers to my queries, or reading proofs from the journal. I like it best when I work on several different papers during the day.

AMWA: What do you find most rewarding about your work?

Alyssa: I like that I'm helping the physicians get their work published. And it's a good feeling to hear that the journal reviewers said, "This is a well-written paper." I also learn something new every day, which is my favorite thing.

AMWA: What do you find most challenging?

Alyssa: At first, the change from the social lab environment where I was on my feet all day to sitting all day working at a computer by myself was an adjustment. Now when I'm editing, sometimes I wish the author was right there so I could just ask them what they are trying to say. Instead, it sometimes takes several rounds of my queries and their answers to finally get things sorted out.

AMWA: What resources do you recommend for someone in their first medical writing position?

Alyssa: I have a couple recommendations. 1) Get a style book! And use it. We use the *AMA Manual of Style*, 9th ed., but others are used in different places. You can choose the one that is most used in your field. 2) A good medical dictionary like *Dorland's* or *Stedman's*. I use *Dorland's* online every day. 3) I like Garner's *Modern American Usage*. 4) I use Google at least 10 times a day and wouldn't want to do my job without it anymore. 5) Take advantage of AMWA—classes, lectures, meeting people.

AMWA: Any final advice for people just starting out or looking to transition into medical writing?

Alyssa: If you think you can do it [be a writer or editor], you probably can. That was my feeling, even though I hadn't had any classes in science writing. If you do have an opportunity to take some of those classes or get a degree in it, that would obviously be helpful, but if you don't, don't let that stop you. Try to find other opportunities to gain that experience. And definitely make your intentions known to anybody who will listen—you never know who might pop out of the woodwork to help you.

If you're a newer medical writer (less than 3 years' experience) who would like to share your experiences starting out, please contact Heather Haley at cove0033@umn.edu



Students Attending the 2005 AMWA Annual Conference

If you're a student who is planning to attend this year's annual conference, you have an opportunity to be published in the *AMWA Journal*. We want to publish accounts of students' experiences at the conference in the Student Center section of upcoming issues of the *Journal*. Your reports will not only help us to provide a forum for our student members but will also help promote the value of the conference to other students. If you are interested in this opportunity, send an e-mail to the *AMWA Journal* editor at amwajournaleditor@hotmail.com.

Students: We Want to Hear From You!

The Student Center is designed to meet the needs of students interested in a career in biomedical communication. Tell us what you'd like to see in this section, volunteer to write an article, or let us know of your accomplishments. Send your ideas to Heather Haley, Student Center Editor, at cove0033@umn.edu.