



As a new feature—still evolving—Voices of Experience provides insights from veteran medical writers as well as medical writers early in their careers. The interviews presented here are designed to give students and beginning medical writers a variety of perspectives as they embark on their own medical writing careers.

Voices of Experience

By Heather Haley, MS

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Interviewee:

Marianne Mallia-Hughes, ELS

Manager and Senior Medical Editor,
Scientific Publications
Texas Heart Institute, Houston, Texas



AMWA: *What is your education and work background? How long have you worked in medical writing?*

Marianne: I have been a medical writer for nearly 30 years—I started in 1976. I have degrees in chemistry and English from the University of Iowa. I began my work career as an English and chemistry teacher in the Houston Independent School District. Even though I loved teaching, I hated the administrative hassle of a large school system, so I started looking for something that would combine my love of science and English.

AMWA: *How did you find your first medical writing position?*

Marianne: I was teaching at Baylor College of Medicine's High School for the Health Professions, which was located in the Texas Medical Center—the largest medical center in the world. This seemed a natural place to look, and I had a lead on a job as laboratory coordinator in the Cardiovascular Surgical Research Laboratories at the Texas Heart Institute (THI). The lab director liked me, and I got the job. It quickly became apparent that I was the best writer in the group, so I was assigned more and more writing and editing projects. When the lab director left, Dr. Denton Cooley, surgeon-in-chief of THI, asked me if I would become his medical writer, and that's how my full-time writing/editing career began. I have been at THI ever since.

AMWA: *Is there anything you wish you had known starting out that you know now?*

Marianne: I wish I had found AMWA my first year, and I wish it hadn't taken me 2 years to make it to an AMWA annual conference. I cannot stress enough how important it is to learn to do medical writing correctly.

AMWA: *What is your definition of doing medical writing "correctly"?*

Marianne: Medical writers and editors should understand the elements of style, including grammar, punctuation, and usage. They should also know how to properly format any document they are writing or editing. For example, writers and editors in an academic institution will likely need to know the format for organizing a biomedical paper, a case

report, or a review paper. But writing in the appropriate format without errors in grammar, punctuation, and usage still may not make the paper readable. The finished paper needs to use language effectively so that the message is clear for the reader.

AMWA: *What is your current position?*

Marianne: I am now manager and senior medical writer in the Department of Scientific Publications at THI. As more and more physician and research staff at THI learned of my work, they asked for help, too. I couldn't keep up with the demand, so I asked THI administration to form a department of Scientific Publications. They agreed, and I became the manager. We have grown to 6 editor/writers, 2 interns, and a grant writer.

AMWA: *How does your current job differ from your first job?*

Marianne: In the research lab, I started by editing and then writing grant and contract proposals. With Dr. Cooley, I began writing and editing more articles for medical journals. Now I write, edit, and manage.

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

Marianne: I always work 8 hours per day, but as a "working" manager (ie, one who also writes and edits), I often put in much longer days. I spend about 50% of my day either writing or editing—everything from abstracts and posters to manuscripts, books chapters, or grant applications. The rest of my time as manager is spent troubleshooting problems or working to improve the publications process at THI.

My hours are flexible, and they change based on my goals for the day. I meet regularly in the early morning hours with groups of authors in different departments to discuss the status of manuscripts and projects in progress in their areas. After these meetings, I typically meet with my editors individually to discuss project status. The idea is to keep manuscripts from stalling or being “lost to follow-up” for any reason. We want manuscripts to be submitted and published, not just written.

AMWA: What surprised you most when you first started in the field?

Marianne: I was surprised to learn that brilliant researchers could not necessarily present their ideas well on paper (no computers then). I quickly learned that writing wasn't a talent everyone possessed.

AMWA: Is there anything that surprises you now?

Marianne: Today I am surprised that many writers and editors I interview cannot pass tests of what I consider to be basic microediting and macroediting skills.

AMWA: What do you find most rewarding in your current position?

Marianne: I like learning new things, stretching my comfort zone, being around smart people, and seeing results from my work, ie, publications. Medical writing affords me all of these opportunities.

AMWA: What is most challenging in your current position?

Marianne: As manager, I face the challenge of juggling manuscript projects and administrative tasks, so I have to be extremely focused at all times. Keeping the projects moving is also quite challenging, as I work with many clinician researchers.

AMWA: When you hire a beginning medical writer, what qualities and skills do you look for?

Marianne: I look for someone with excellent language skills and an aptitude for science. Some of my editors have science backgrounds; others have backgrounds in English or journalism. I hire people who are willing to challenge themselves and who love learning. And, I look for people who are AMWA members and who are enrolled in the certificate programs. I won't hire anyone who is not interested in professional education.

AMWA: What are the best ways for a newcomer to establish himself/herself as a medical writer?

Marianne: Newly hired editor/writers need to work extremely hard because they will likely be facing a steep learning curve: to become a medical writer and to communicate in a new field of study. Supervisors are looking for competence, drive, and dedication. For beginning writers,

competence comes only through extremely hard work. If at all possible, newcomers should work in a group environment so that they can more readily receive the training they need. And, again, newcomers to the field should join AMWA and enroll in its educational curricula.

Beginning writers and editors should analyze their strengths and weaknesses and work to build their strengths and eliminate any weaknesses. For example, if you have always used a comma because you think it “sounds right,” you need to enroll in a punctuation course or read a style manual to learn when and why you use commas. Guessing doesn't work in professional writing. Understanding grammar is also important. Newcomers should buy AMWA's grammar module and practice it over and over until they know the principles. I am amazed at how many applicants for positions at THI miss the dangling modifiers on the copyediting test. Newcomers should also try to find a mentor or an established colleague who will critically critique their work, and they should not be offended at their suggestions.

AMWA: How do you suggest finding a mentor to critique work?

Marianne: Most managers will assign a mentor or will be the mentor. If no one is assigned, a newcomer to the field should ask for a mentor. As a “lone” editor in an organization or department, finding a mentor is more difficult, but not impossible. I recommend that newcomers go to a local AMWA meeting and get to know the officers. The officers will know more chapter members and may be able to recommend a freelance editor who would be willing to mentor (or teach) for an hourly fee or in exchange for work the newcomer could perform. One of the editors in my department mentors a scientist in this manner. I also recommend editor/writers who have completed the AMWA curricula and are BELS certified.

AMWA: What resources do you recommend for a writer in her/his first position?

Marianne: I would recommend the Resources/Links page on the AMWA website (www.amwa.org). I rely on the *American Medical Association Manual of Style*, *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary*, *The American Heritage Dictionary*, and *How to Report Statistics in Medicine*. *Statistics in Medicine* was coauthored by AMWA member Tom Lang and should be in its second edition soon. I used Mimi Zeiger's *Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers* in a course I taught at the University of Texas School of Public Health. And, of course, everyone should have copies of both volumes of *Essays for Biomedical Communicators (Selected AMWA Workshops)*.

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

Marianne: Breaking into the field can be difficult, but it can be done. The best method is to join AMWA and meet other medical writers and editors in the local chapters. I also recommend that new editors and writers work in the chapter in some capacity. That's the best way to get to know people and to be recognized. Newcomers should always attend the AMWA annual conference—to learn and to network. AMWA's educational program has been extremely important in helping me establish my credibility as a medical writer/editor.

An entry-level editor/writer can also "volunteer" to edit/write a piece or ask to freelance a piece—especially in situations where manuscript tests are not given. Those interested in transitioning to medical writing also need to be realistic about their skill levels. Liking to write, having taught English, or having experience in a research lab will not necessarily qualify someone to be medical writer. The package counts.

If you are an experienced medical writer (more than 5 years' experience) who would like to share your career thoughts and experiences with students, please contact Heather Haley at cove0033@umn.edu

STUDENT SCHOLARSHIPS

AMWA CONFERENCE

Lisa Lines and **Kristie Magee** are the recipients of the third annual AMWA Conference Student Scholarships, sponsored this year by Cubist Pharmaceuticals. Lisa is pursuing a BS in technical communications at Northeastern University, with a focus on health services and literacy. Kristie is working on a doctorate in biology at Howard University, where she currently is fulfilling her research requirements.

Lisa and Kristie will be honored at the 2005 Annual Conference, and more information about them will be included in the December issue of the *AMWA Journal*.

GUIDEBOOK TO BETTER MEDICAL WRITING by Robert L. Iles

"The best basic manual on medical writing. . . everything you need to know about developing a clear persuasive paper that stands a good chance of publication by a peer-reviewed journal." Barbara G. Cox, MedEdit Associates, Gainesville, FL. (amazon.com book review)

"Iles has succeeded in boiling down the essentials of medical writing into a cogent handbook." Linda M. Bonnell, PharmD, *AMWA Journal*.

"A concise, no-nonsense approach. . . provides readers with a series of excellent tips. . . helpful in my own medical writing and consulting service." Thomas Buckingham, MD, Bratislava, Slovak Republic. (amazon.com book review)

"Although the focus is on clinical articles, what Iles has to say applies to most scientific writing. . ." Jude Richard, *CBE Views*.

"I've been a medical writer over 20 years. The book will help me do even better for my clients. Lots of terrific tips and insights." Michele Grygotis, MG Medical Writing.

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