

## Senior medical writer Dr David Buist



### What skills do you need to be a medical writer?

You obviously need to be good at writing, but you also need to have an eye for detail and to be able to pull out the most important bits of information from data that you receive. We often talk about the importance of “the editorial eye”. This is the ability to spot things that don’t look quite right that most people would not notice—misaligned text boxes on a PowerPoint slide, different fonts or font sizes being used within the same document, noticing the one number in a table that has two decimal places when every other number is reported to only one decimal place, etc. It really helps to be nerdy about the rules of language, and to be interested in learning about things like the difference between hyphens, en-dashes, em-dashes, and minus signs (– — —, in that order), and knowing how to use them correctly. This is one of the few careers where being pedantic is a real positive and won’t have you labelled as a bore!

### What are the challenges of medical writing in itself?

Med comms is a very fast-paced industry, and we are constantly working to very tight deadlines. For the most part, the clients we work with are great, but every so often you come across one who can be very difficult to deal with and doesn’t seem to like anything you do for them. It can be a bit disheartening to work with such people but fortunately they really are very rare!

### What is the most rewarding aspect of your job?

I am pretty nerdy about both science and language, so I really enjoy the challenge of trying to work out the clearest and most succinct way to convey a certain message. I also like working as part of a team, where we are all dependent on each other to do our best work. Pretty much all the projects we have involve writing about cutting-edge scientific research and clinical trial data, and it is exciting to work so closely with the people doing this work, some of whom are world-renowned experts.

### Would you say that medical writing would be suitable for a medical/dental/veterinary student interested in a non-clinical career?

Medical writing is definitely something that these people should consider. I know that we have writers who have come straight to us after finishing a medical degree. I don’t personally know of anyone who has come from a dental or veterinary background, but that doesn’t mean they don’t exist—I just haven’t met them yet! Most people who start as medical writers have a PhD, although I know of some people who “only” have a master’s degree. I think the key academic experiences that would qualify you for a medical writer position are having exposure to some level of research and writing that are beyond what you would expect from a typical three-year undergraduate degree.

I should also note that within med comms, there are not just writers, but also the client services team. These people do not do any writing but, as the name suggests, they are the main point of contact between the agency and the clients, and are mostly responsible for managing the timelines and financial aspects of projects. There is less requirement for people in client services roles to have a strong scientific background, although most have at least an undergraduate degree in some branch of science. Similarly, while it is important for members of a client services team to be able to put together a well-

### What led you to getting involved in medical writing?

After finishing my PhD, I stayed on in the lab for few months but it soon became clear to me that I needed to find something else. I greatly enjoyed writing my PhD thesis and helping to review the dissertation of a master’s student I was supervising, so I contacted a former colleague from the lab who had started working as a medical writer a couple of years previously. Until that point, he was the only person I knew who was working in medical communications (or “med comms”), despite it being a career that was often touted as a good alternative to lab work for those who enjoyed writing. He encouraged me to apply, and I haven’t looked back!

### Could you sum up what is medical writing? e.g. why might someone engage you on their project and what is your typical day like?

Med comms is a very broad field but the majority of the work we do at my company is writing manuscripts that are published in academic journals, as well as writing abstracts, posters, and oral presentations for congresses. Most of our clients are pharmaceutical companies, but we also work for non-pharma clients, such as companies who develop diagnostic assays. There is a variety of reasons that pharmaceutical companies work with medical writing agencies. Firstly (and most obviously), we are experts at communicating information clearly and concisely, whereas a lot of people generating data and/or treating patients are not. Secondly, most projects involve collating and implementing feedback received from multiple authors and other key stakeholders—in some cases this can be over 30 people across four or five drafts—so it is very logistically complex and excessively laborious for our clients to manage themselves.

It is difficult to give an idea of a typical day because there is normally quite a lot of variety. At the moment I am working on three manuscripts that are all at different stages of development. I am also working on a large PowerPoint slide deck, redrawing figures and making sure that all of the information is appropriately referenced. I normally have at least one meeting a day; this morning it was a meeting with our clients to discuss a manuscript that we will be starting to write soon. This is a very collaborative industry and most days I have quite a bit of back-and-forth with colleagues to discuss the status of various projects.

written email, there is less requirement for them to be very strong writers, so this could be a good option for people who want to stay close to science but not too close!

**What advice would you give to someone pursuing a career in medical writing?**

The number one piece of advice I can give is to use the resources available at [www.firstmedcommsjob.com](http://www.firstmedcommsjob.com) and [www.medcommsnetworking.com](http://www.medcommsnetworking.com). Med comms is a very secretive world and it is extremely hard to find out anything useful about it, a lot of which is due to the highly confidential nature of the scientific data we write about. When I was first investigating med comms as a career, I went to a networking day organised by MedComms Networking. It was a really useful way to get a much greater level of insight into the industry than what is available online.

When it comes to actually applying for a job, I would recommend making sure that your cover letter and/or CV focus on transferable skills that would be useful for med comms, for example, mention your dissertation/thesis and any other writing you've done, including blogs or writing for a student publication. Also, list any presentations you've done at university level, which can include posters and orals presented to either internal or external audiences. It doesn't matter how small or insignificant you think it is, it is all valid experience. And finally, it almost goes without saying, but you need to be extremely careful that your cover letter and CV do not contain any typos or formatting errors—if they do, you will almost certainly fall at the first hurdle!