



Writing for web-based media: Some pros and cons

by Raquel Billiones

I am a broad-spectrum medical writer and have Alison McIntosh to thank for this wonderfully apt term [1]. Although 75% of my revenues come from regulatory writing, I dabble in medical communications and write scientific and health articles for web media. Considering the size and scope of the Internet, it is not surprising that there is also room for medical writing. Countless websites provide health information and somebody has to write material for them. The question is, is web writing for everybody? Here I present the pros and cons of writing scientific and health articles for web media, based on 2 years' experience.

It doesn't pay well

Good pay is relative, I know, but medical writers used to regulatory writing hourly rates will find that web-based media writing does not pay very well. Unless you are copywriting for big pharmaceutical companies or reporting for the likes of *Nature News*, web media writing is unlikely to be your main income source. To give an idea of the pay scale, an 'About.com' guide is associated with a base payment of US\$ 675 per month for writing four articles, plus regularly updating a blog [2]. About.com (www.about.com), a New York Times company, offers 'about... guides' on many topics, including diseases and medical conditions. Many health guides are written by health professionals and medical students. In a good month, including incentives and revenue shares, a guide could earn \$1000. This is equivalent to what a regulatory writer makes in a day (on average) based on EMWA's 2007 Freelance Business Survey [3]. About.com guides, by the way, are among the best-paid bloggers in the blogosphere.

Word count counts

Regulatory writers keep it short and sweet. I was trained to write clearly and concisely and not to worry about word counts. However, every word counts when writing for the Internet. After all, there is a lot of web space to fill up. Depending on the project, writers are paid on a per-word basis or have a quota of words to deliver for a flat-rate fee. Either way, a writer may have to 'stretch' the piece a bit. I remember one assignment where I had to write a patient's guide to acne, broken down into three sections: pathology, diagnosis and treatment. Each section was supposed to be at least 300 words in length. I ran into problems when writing the diagnosis part and this is how far I got: *Acne is diagnosed visually by a doctor. No laboratory or diagnostic tests are needed to diagnose the condition.* Along the

way, I have learned the tricks of lengthening an article without jeopardizing the quality but the acne case was a constant reminder that this is not always possible.

Web articles are here today, gone tomorrow

A regulatory document can last for a very long time, filed away on a dusty shelf somewhere by regulators for posterity. In comparison, web articles seem ephemeral. Science news published on the web may occupy the headlines for a few hours—sometimes for just a few minutes—before being replaced by the next breaking news. In addition, websites and web-based companies seem to have short life spans and can disappear overnight: your project can go down the drain without warning. In regulatory writing, we have timelines in terms of weeks or months. In web writing, it would be in days if you are lucky. A fast turnaround is vital as you have to get the news out quickly. I got this email one very early morning in January: *Raquel, can you do a piece on the first breast-cancer-free baby? Delivery is supposedly today in London. The same specs and rates as usual. A bonus of xx\$ if you can have it ready within 2 hours, before the Americans wake up.*

I must say, I seldom have the time or the enthusiasm to do 'rush' jobs like this. But this demonstrates how 'time-sensitive' web articles can be.

Quality can be poor

When you have a low-budget, fast-turnaround project, you can't expect the results to be of the highest quality. That doesn't mean that all web writers do a sloppy job. However, not all health websites aim to have high-quality scientific content: there are health sites set up primarily to earn revenues through Google advertisements.

I believe in my accountability as a writer and really do my best to deliver something worthwhile, both on time and to budget. But financial and time constraints don't allow much room for proofreading or quality assurance, and the web editors/administrators may often not really care (or know) about grammar and punctuation. In other words, web writing is not for perfectionists!

Client interaction is very limited

If you think you have less interaction with your regulatory clients now that you are freelancing, think again. Currently, I am working for three web communications companies: one based in Canada, and two in the US. I've never spoken with

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anyone in these companies, face-to-face, or even on the phone. There are contracts and guidelines just like in regulatory writing but everything is done by email or by post. The closest thing I have to a conversation with a web-based client is a discussion using Google talk or updates via 'Twitter'. Even payments are done by email through PayPal.

This anonymity sometimes presents problems that would include scams (e.g. the client simply disappears from the web without paying) and good publication practice issues. As an example, I was contracted to write a review paper for an online, open-access journal. I only had contact with the medical communications company but not with the authors. During the three review cycles, I repeatedly emphasized the importance of acknowledging the role of the medical writer, or at least the communications company. In the publication, the authors acknowledged the graphic artist who prepared the figure but not the writer. I was a ghostwriter whether I wanted it or not.

You don't know where your work ends up

When writing science news, the writer usually does not retain the copyrights to his or her work, may not get a byline and also doesn't know where his or her articles end up. An example is a project in which I wrote medical article reviews for primary care clinicians but never saw the finished product because the website was for medical professionals only—I couldn't access it without an identification number! This loss of control after writing is also true for regulatory writing, but the catch for writing for the Internet is that the buyer of a web article can modify the piece and sell it a hundred-times over under another name under the so-called private label rights. Your article might even end up in some dubious site, altered and mangled almost beyond recognition, so that you are actually grateful for the lack of byline. Now, despite all of the aforementioned headaches of web writing, I still like doing it. The reasons why I still like it are...

They are great fillers for slack periods

This is how it all started. I wrote scientific web articles for the want of something to do. Unlike well-established medical writers who are usually working at full capacity, I experience slack times now and again. Those are the times when I ask myself whether becoming a freelance writer was such a good idea. That is when the small web-writing projects come in handy. They keep me sane until the next regulatory project comes.

They are fun

Regulatory work can be monotonous. Don't you ever feel a need for a break from the restrictions of scientific style guides, grammar rules and templates, and simply let the words flow? Maybe you are sick of writing about the same topic again and again? For example, I had one project which

involved writing almost a hundred patient-safety narratives. Another required an extensive literature review on the unappetizing topic of maggot therapy. At these times even a 300-word web article on acne can be a welcome break.

What I like about web writing is the variety. During the last two years of doing web writing I've researched and written a wide range of newsworthy topics that I would probably never have encountered in regulatory writing. Just to name a few: bisphenol A, e-cigarettes and medical spas.

It is important, of course, to vary your writing style depending on the audience. I have written medical article reviews for doctors, health guides for patients and science news for the general public. The guidelines, if there are any, are not as rigid as regulatory guidance. Sometimes I even allow myself to be creative and break a few scientific writing rules. And sometimes I end up doing something different, unexpected and fun. Last March, for example, I had the chance to have a phone conference with the actress Chandra Wilson who plays the small but tough surgeon Dr Miranda Bailey in the medical soap *Grey's Anatomy*. Wilson is currently the spokesperson for the *Treat with Care* campaign of the Consumer Healthcare Products Association (CHPA). CHPA is an American not-for-profit association representing the makers of over-the-counter (OTC) products, including medicines and nutritional supplements. *Treat with Care* is a public service to educate parents and caregivers on the safe and correct use of OTC cough and cold medicines in children [4].

You can learn a lot

Between motherhood and freelancing, I seldom have time to glance at a newspaper or watch the evening news, much less keep up with what is going on in the scientific world. When I started science writing for the web, however, reading and being informed of the most current events became part of the job. How else could I have known about medical marijuana, Google health and pink washers¹?

Aside from the variety of topics I've written about I've also learned to use web tools to keep me updated without wasting my time Googling (see Box). One trick, for example, is to subscribe to news updates from certain sites which are then automatically sent to your email. I've subscribed to automatic updates from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Academy of Sciences. Unfortunately, there is the risk that your inbox will get flooded when there is a major regulatory or health issue going on. (Last February I received, on average, 20 emails a day from the US FDA updating me about peanut butter recalls; currently it is CDC updates on the swine flu).

In due course, I have learned to discriminate and distinguish the scams from bona fide projects, the good sites

¹ companies that purport to care about breast cancer by promoting a pink ribbon campaign, but manufacture products that are linked to the disease [5].

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from dross, and to accept only the most interesting (and hopefully the best paying) projects.

Web writing isn't for everyone. It won't make you rich. Not everybody wants to put a fresh spin on old topics or chase tight deadlines on breaking news. However, for those aiming for a career in science or health journalism, the web is the best training ground. In my case, I simply view web writing as a hobby that pays some dividends. Regulatory writing gives structure and discipline to my writing and puts food on the table. Web writing gives me some degree of artistic license and pays for latte grandes. What more can one want from life?

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Recommended sites for getting the latest science and medical news

E! Science News	http://esciencenews.com/
Science Now Daily News	http://sciencenow.sciencemag.org/
Science Daily	http://www.sciencedaily.com/
Health Day	http://www.healthday.com/
Science Centric	http://www.sciencescentric.com/
EurekaAlert	http://www.eurekaalert.org/
Medwire News	http://www.medwire-news.md/



Perhaps 'Baboons in disguise' would have been more accurate. Photo taken in South Africa by Maria Wendt.

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery

A little while ago, I was browsing the internet looking at medical writing companies, just to see what sort of a presence my competitors have online. Imagine my surprise when I found 3 websites of medical writing companies that bore a striking resemblance to my own. In the worst cases, entire paragraphs of the text of my website had been copied verbatim on the other companies' websites.

I was a bit miffed by this. Particularly since 2 of the websites were run by fellow EMWA members. I'd always thought of EMWA members as a thoroughly decent bunch of people who wouldn't dream of doing anything as dishonest as plagiarising someone else's website, so this was a bit of a disappointment.

I e-mailed the owners of all 3 sites, and the responses were variable. One never replied at all. Another replied and apologised, saying that any similarity was purely unintentional, and that they would make some changes to their website, which they did. Their home page now no longer looks just like my home page, although elsewhere in their site the source of their 'inspiration' is still perfectly obvious. The third claimed, implausibly in my opinion, that they had never seen my website and that it was just pure coincidence that so much of their website was similar to mine.

Although I have found this episode disappointing, as I would have expected higher standards of behaviour from EMWA members (and I'd also expect that anyone advertising medical writing services really ought to have the skills to write their own website copy), I have also found a positive side. It is gratifying to know that my website is so greatly admired that not one, but 3 companies believe it to be worthy of imitating. I feel sincerely flattered.

Adam Jacobs

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