



Confessions of a workshop leader: Teaching medical writing

by Alistair Reeves

Confession 1: I never wanted to be a teacher

“I suppose you’d like to teach, then?” A question I often heard after studying modern languages (German, French and Spanish) in the 1970s. “No, definitely not!” was always my answer. My passion is language, but still, 30 years on, I cannot entertain the thought of teaching a foreign language to a group of children or adults. I came late to ‘teaching’ medical writing after translating, writing and editing in the pharmaceutical industry for 20 years. Actually, I don’t like the word teaching to describe what I now do as part of my work. My only similarity with the passionate teacher, Miss Jean Brodie [1], is that for me, what I do now is best described by the word from which education is derived: ‘educere’, to lead out. ‘Educo’—‘I lead out’ was what she claimed to do (despite other questionable aims), and that is my only claim too.

After a few in-house events and being asked to give a workshop at a very early EMWA event in the mid-1990s, I discovered that this type of teaching is fun, and that passing on and exchanging experience with new and seasoned medical communicators was much appreciated—by me and by them. My first try was daunting, exhausting, and—for me—very instructive.

Now, a veteran of countless EMWA workshops, seminars for ‘Management Forum’¹ and training events of other organizations such as the British Institute for Regulatory Affairs, in-house courses, and one-on-one intensive training sessions, I suppose you could say that I teach medical and scientific writing to regulatory writers, medical writers, vets, physicians, research scientists, in fact, anyone involved in this branch of writing. But I still think that all I do for most people is to stimulate an interest that is already there. Most of my training is done with people who want to write (and some who have to). I try to highlight certain aspects of the use of English in our context that make text preparation easier and make texts more acceptable to the reader, all based on my own experience of writing and editing. The major focus of my training activities is therefore the language and not the content, although these two are, of course, inseparable. By this I mean that I don’t train on ‘How to write a clinical study report’ according to a guideline or a template, but rather, what language you can use to best get the message across depending on the type of document you are writing or the idea you wish to or need to convey.

Confession 2: I was badly prepared for my first few attempts

I was badly prepared in many ways. I had no idea what the participants were expecting—and I didn’t even know if they knew what they were expecting (this was before the days of the EMWA needs analysis, see box), and I had enough material for three three-hour EMWA workshops at my first event. The participants were as exhausted as I was afterwards, and not only because I ran over by 45 minutes and it was the ‘graveyard’ slot after lunch. I had a whole suitcase full of copies of handouts for the participants (again before the days when EMWA copied them for us). I now know that the volume of the handouts is not an indicator of the quality of the session. Susanne Geercken and I present the ‘Medical and Pharmaceutical English’ workshop for EMWA, and have honed down the content of our workshop from an original 10 or so subject areas (a breathless event) to about 5, and we critically discuss the content and number of subject areas every time we give the workshop, based on the needs analyses received. So I quickly learned how important it is to find out what participants are expecting, and introduced the needs analysis for myself after the first couple of events, before my EMWA days.

And what participants expect depends on the type of course. For in-house events, clients sometimes expect a ‘quick fix’. By this, I mean that there is sometimes some expectation, especially from management, that after your training sessions, the participants will magically be able to churn out perfect regulatory documents and publications, in terms of both content and language. I am always refreshed when I come across a manager or a training officer in a company who realizes several things: (i) there is no quick fix; (ii) he or she has to have spoken to the participants beforehand to establish what they want; (iii) not every participant actually *wants* to be there; (iv) you cannot teach medical writing in one day. A gratifying comment after in-house sessions is: “I actually didn’t expect this to be very interesting, but it was, and it really helped me!”

The needs analysis and preworkshop assignment is no problem at EMWA training events: the participants have to return them if they want credit. So they do, and participants have high expectations that they will go away from workshops having learned something. For in-house events, it is

¹ Management Forum is a commercial provider of training events and seminars. The German branch of the organisation (Forum – Institut für Management) is now owned by Springer Science and Business Media, Heidelberg, Germany and is commercially separate from the British branch (Management Forum) based in Woking, England.

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different, although just as important, and reminders often have to be sent out. I generally have to badger the training officer and say: “Look: if I don’t know what the participants want, I can’t tailor it to their needs, and they will not learn anything and will give bad evaluations, which is not in your interests or mine. This is their opportunity to ask specific questions and they should use it, because I will try to answer every question”. I generally get feedback from about 50% of the participants, some rather sparse, but at least it builds a bridge between you and the participants before you start.

Those who attend courses organized by training providers such as Management Forum also often say that they don’t know what to expect, and their expectations are not as high as EMWA workshop participants. After doing a regular event for administrative personal assistants in Germany and the UK (‘The Language of the Pharmaceutical Industry’), I suggested in 1999 to the organizer in the UK that Barry Drees, Stephen de Looze and I put together a three-day medical writing event, based on a similar two-day event we had been doing in Germany since 1996. These two seminars offer very much more than those I do by myself, covering the content of different documents, journal publications, data presentation, statistics for medical writers and language aspects in three sessions of 2–3 h each day for 2 or 3 days. They have no needs analysis, and inevitably the ground covered is not as extensive as at a 3 or 3-5-h workshop with a needs analysis, preworkshop assignment, exercises and postworkshop assignment, and does not have that ‘personally tailored’ touch. There is a lot of general discussion about the business of medical writing at these events, because at the outset, quite a few participants are not even sure if they are medical writers. The demand is obviously there, as we already have three such events in our schedules for 2007—and enquiries are streaming in, including, for the first time from India, where medical writing is evidently beginning to grow as a profession as it did in Europe 15 years ago, and in the USA long before that.

Most participants comment that these events have given them great encouragement, many go on to join EMWA, sign up for the EMWA Professional Development Programme, and quite a few organize in-house courses in their companies based on these events.

Confession 3: I am fussy about the room and the arrangement of the seating, and I think trainers should be

I don’t think I’ve reached the ‘prima donna’ league on this one, but I make sure the organizer knows what I expect as far as seating is concerned. I generally make sure that I arrive about an hour or so before the event (or even the day before) to familiarize myself with the room, and so that there is time to make any changes. If I can’t manage this, I prefer to delay the start a little to get things right. If this is necessary, I involve the participants in rearranging the

seats and tables, and it breaks the ice a little. If you want to do group exercises, you soon learn that U-shaped seating is no good, and that pillars in the room create unexpected problems. My first EMWA workshop was given in a hotel room with a huge mirror across the back wall, so the whole time I was distracted by my reflection waving a pointer, seeing all my slides in reverse, and a back view of all participants. Never again!

Confession 4: I don’t like introduction rounds

This is a difficult one. I will never like them, and always feel with a large group that they are a waste of precious time, especially if you have only half a day. If the event is not an in-house event, they can be useful because often nobody knows anyone, but at in-house events, the people usually know each other already. I never do introduction rounds at EMWA or in-house events. I usually just introduce myself, give a brief summary of the results of the needs analysis, and ask if there are any other points people would like to cover. For smaller, non-native speaking groups, introduction rounds can, however, be useful to assess the level of English. If I feel this is necessary, I make sure I get participants to say more than just ‘I am Sabine Schmidt from Quality Assurance’.

Confession 5: I have learned not to overextend myself

If you know the audience is enthusiastic, it fires you on. After a successful 2-day event in Hungary with an incredibly responsive audience, who even said: “What? Another break?!?”, I rashly agreed some time later to do a 3-day event, all on my own. I *just* managed to keep performing well until the end of the third day with a steadily weakening voice and waning concentration, but kept surreptitiously looking at the clock on the third afternoon, and was ready to be carried out on a stretcher by 17:00—not good for me, or for the participants. Two days on your own are enough.

Confession 6: I tried at first to lecture, and didn’t appreciate the importance of audience involvement

Your session lives from you, but also from your participants. Any possibility of involving them must be exploited. You should have asked at least 3 or 4 questions in the first few minutes. Even if you have to wait for an answer. Those 30 seconds feel like an eternity—but you can help them to answer! At in-house events, it is sometimes the first time that a participant has been expected to put a sentence together in English in front of colleagues, and this can be very daunting. Give the participant time and keep other people quiet! And the great thing when giving writing training for our sector is that these interactions also take place in English, so they are useful to the participants too.

Part of my needs analysis is that I expect clients or associations to send me samples of typical, but different types of

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texts formulated in English at least 2 weeks before the event so that I can edit them with ‘track changes’ in Word and go through these—projected on the screen—at the event. I expect the authors of the texts, as far as possible, to be present. This automatically raises interest and always leads to a livelier event. I don’t expect the authors to defend their texts, but there are reasons, often based on misconceptions (even going back to ‘rules’ learned at school, or other myths [2–5]) for choosing a particular word or formulation in English. This offers the participants the opportunity to explain why they wrote something in a particular way, and guarantees a high degree of audience involvement. I also explain that I am not in the business of pointing out embarrassing or humorous errors. It is just a learning experience for all.

If a potential client is unwilling to supply sample texts, I will not do a training event for them. I once did, and used a set of texts interesting to me, but quite clearly not interesting to the participants, as there were no questions, just rather tired looking nods for a couple of hours. I soon realized that in the absence of any discussion with the authors, all the pressure was on me, and that I was going to finish very much earlier than planned. So I called a break and asked the organizer if I could edit a company text on screen, ‘so the participants saw how the editing process worked’. Not ideal, as I had to sit down at the laptop and type everything there and then, but it saved the day—and led to some participant involvement, as I, of course, kept asking them what they would change, while typing furiously with my head down. This also taught me to always have a few modules in reserve (exercises and presentations) on the laptop, in case things go too quickly.

Confession 7: Sometimes you have to be a bit of an actor

I am not into games, gimmicks or jokes; I just can’t do them. It is great if you can get the audience rolling around in the aisles, and will probably make your point all the more memorable. But I have sometimes been surprised that the way I expressed something raised a laugh or caused some controversy—and I try to remember this, use it the next time, and try to make it sound as spontaneous as it was the first time. If you are not a naturally talented presenter, this needs practice. But like anything else, it can be learned to an acceptable extent.

A cultural comment: English cartoons can fall absolutely flat with non-native speaking audiences. Especially because I am concerned with language training, nothing is worse than having to explain why the ‘Dilbert’ that had you and your colleagues in hysterics, and typifies what you have been talking about, is actually *funny*. As enthusiastic and gratifying as my Eastern European audiences have been, I had to give up on explaining one cartoon to them. So I won’t be doing cartoons for them any more.

Confession 8: I don’t like giving out handouts before each session, but it is usually unavoidable

You want the information you are communicating to come directly across to the participants and you want them to look at your slides and not be distracted. I ask a lot of questions when training and want to get answers, so there is no point in providing handouts with the answers at the beginning of the session. I have tried to find a middle-of-the-road solution for this by handing out a selection of the slides and saying that participants will be given a set with the answers at the end. The assessment forms usually include a few complaints about this, and I still haven’t found a good solution. I did once try not handing anything out until the end and was approached by a large deputation in the break, begging me to let them have handouts! Whatever, the handouts should be high-quality and concise, and not just cobbled together, because they are often widely circulated when the participants get back to their companies, and are certainly a calling card for the trainer. Am I alone in preferring single-sided copies?

Confession 9: I am not an expert in English grammar and cannot churn out rules

Even though the focus of my training is the use of English in our context, and I was probably amongst one of the last school years in England to have formal grammar training in English (by this I mean including parsing sentences, which I actually enjoyed²—everyone else thought I was barmy), I am not an expert in English grammar. My interest in the inner workings of the English language and the effects that can be achieved by use of language have certainly been stimulated by studying other languages, and by daily contact with non-native speakers of English for almost the last 30 years. But I am often as frustrated as my students that I cannot say each time “The rule here is ...”—although maybe this would just be too boring!

One of the pleasures of training non-native speakers is that I learn rules from them and they remind me of certain areas where many native English speakers have become sloppy. For example, you will hardly ever hear or read ‘whom’ these days from a native speaker, and I am a prime offender! I think one of the most effective ways of training writers who have to produce large amounts of documentation in English is to edit texts for them and go through the texts explaining why I have made the changes, giving *reasons* and not rules. Because an author’s writing patterns repeat themselves and they often make the same errors (whether a native speaker or not), this is very instructive for both sides. These intensive sessions with authors from different language groups have made me aware of typical errors, and this helps in structuring one’s approach to more general sessions with people from different language groups.

One of the most important messages to get across is to keep it as simple and concise as possible, and whilst it is possi-

² This may have been a familial predisposition: I discovered rather late in life that Sylvia Chalker, editor of the Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar and a leading UK grammarian, who sadly died in December 2006, was my second cousin. It was always a great pleasure to meet her and share many animated discussions.

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ble to train writers on some general aspects of this, nothing replaces being shown how to get an idea across using a string of monosyllabic or simple words where previously such horrors as ‘therapeutic armamentarium’ reigned supreme in a complex sentence starting with a long subordinate clause, and containing misplaced adverbs, perhaps even an unintentional double negative, and the wrong subject-verb agreement (once you find the subject). All things that can happen to native speakers of English too!

All the examples I use are real-life examples for this reason. Those of you who regularly go through texts in this way with colleagues will be aware that it is rewarding but tiring, and most writers reach their limit after about an hour or so of this sort of explanation. But my students tell me that with this method a lot of what I say sticks—more than in general sessions.

Confession 10: I never thought that teaching medical writing had a future

It obviously does have a future, and there is still a long way to go. Apart from the pioneering work done by EMWA in professional training, the courses offered by commercial training providers, the small group of freelance trainers in Europe, and the few courses we hear about that form part of medical training at some universities, those wishing to improve their writing skills in Europe still do not have many options open at present. We see from this issue that impressive efforts are being made in many countries.

I have more enquiries for courses than I can satisfy, including an increasing number from Eastern Europe. So I am looking forward to devoting more time to training in the future, and can even imagine developing a more extensive course together with other trainers and an academic institution after a few more years of experience.

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2. Reeves A. *Myths about English* *The Write Stuff* 2006;15(1):22
3. Reeves A. *More Myths about English* *The Write Stuff* 2006;15(2):58
4. Reeves A. *More Myths about English (3)* *The Write Stuff* 2006;15(4):139
5. Reeves A. *6 More myths about English* *The Write Stuff* 2007. In press

The EMWA Workshop Concept

EMWA credit workshops at EMWA training events count towards a qualification as part of the EMWA Professional Development Programme (EPDP; for details see www.emwa.org). To qualify for credit for a workshop, participants must be enrolled in the EPDP, and for each workshop, complete and return a Needs Analysis and Preworkshop Assignment before the workshop, attend the workshop, and satisfactorily complete and return a Postworkshop Assignment.

The criterion/criteria in British/American English

Which is correct?

The criterion need to be fulfilled *or*
The criterion needs to be fulfilled *or*
The criteria needs to be fulfilled

The COD has the following comment on usage of criterion:

“The singular form is criterion and the plural is criteria. Do not use criteria as if it were a singular, as in ‘a further criteria needs to be considered’ say ‘a further criterion needs to be considered’ “

So the second sentence is correct in British English.

But www.merriamwebster.com has the following comment on usage of criterion:

“The plural of criteria has been used as a singular for over half a century. <let me now return to the third *criteria*—R. M. Nixon> <that really is the *criteria*—Bert Lance>. Many of our examples, like the two foregoing, are taken from speech. But singular *criteria* is not uncommon in edited prose, and its use both in speech and writing seems to be increasing. Only time will tell whether it will reach the unquestioned acceptability of *agenda*.”

So the third sentence is becoming correct in American English.

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Freelance and Small Business Survey 2007

Attendees of the Lyon Conference in 2006 will remember that questionnaires were handed out to freelance members, and I was hoping to be able to update the very successful Freelance and Small Business Survey in 2003. Unfortunately, I received only 17 responses (63 in 2003—probably because I sent out reminders galore and really got behind everyone to return their response, which I did not do in 2006). An effective evaluation of only 17 responses was not possible, and I have destroyed all the questionnaires received. I think it is important to do an update, and would like to do this in 2007 via the web, as was done for the EMWA Salary Survey in 2006¹, which elicited a very good response. I shall be looking into this, and all freelance members will be informed when the questionnaire is available for completion, although this will not be until May 2007 at the earliest.

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1. Goodwin Burri K. Results of the 2006 EMWA Salary Survey *TWS* 2006; 15 (4): 133-4.