

THE ACCIDENTAL MEDICAL WRITER

Best of Pencil Points

Volume 1

With updated commentary

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Read what people are saying about *Best of Pencil Points Volume 1!*

“Are you a medical writer looking for a solid resource that will help your freelance business? *The Best of Pencil Points #1* is just that! Since 2009, Cyndy and Brian have been sharing tips and proven strategies with us through their monthly newsletter, *Pencil Points*. *The Best of Pencil Points #1* is a terrific collection of their best and most popular articles, along with current industry updates and business advice.”

—Jennifer Minarcik, MS, Freelance Science and Medical Writer

“I've been freelancing for 25 years, so I was surprised and humbled at first at the number of truly practical suggestions I was finding in *Pencil Points*. Then I just accepted it and began looking forward to every issue. The nice thing about 'Best Of' is that Brian and Cyndy have compiled their suggestions into an almost step-by-step guide for freelancers, so you can start out with best practices that would have taken you years of trial and error to learn.”

—Udi Shorr

“Brian Bass and Cyndy Kryder stumbled into medical writing and never looked back. For years, they’ve been compiling tidbits of tremendously practical information and dispensing it to those of us lucky enough to be on their mailing lists.

Now, they’re sharing the “best of...” with everyone. From the reasons why writers should self-edit, to how to find new clients, to the pros/cons of project pricing vs. per-hour pricing, to useful resources for all medical writers, or how to analyze whether a particular client is worthwhile keeping, Brian and Cyndy have created a simple tome that no medical writer should be without.

Throughout this *Best of* volume, Brian and Cyndy show their passion for writing, for medical publishing, and their love of communication. This is one volume I’ll keep in my office for quick referencing...and you should, too.”

—Michelle Dalton, ELS

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It's hard for us to believe it, but we've been publishing *Pencil Points*, our free monthly newsletter since 2009. In that time, we've given our readers a wealth of insights and inspiration. From tips to help those who are new to medical writing, to practical ideas to help freelancers at all levels of experience build their businesses and improve their bottom lines. Our monthly newsletter achieved its goal by enabling us to share our ideas and experiences with readers on a regular basis.

In *Best of Pencil Points, Volume 1*, we've gathered the best and most popular articles from the first year of *Pencil Points* and added **Authors' Updates** and **Business Tidbits** throughout to give you the added benefit of what's happened and what we've learned since then. We've hand-selected articles from each the 4 main newsletter sections:

- **Just for Newbies**—Information and Inspiration for Writers New to the Business (with Issue #27, this section was renamed [Not] Just for Newbies because we discovered it has also been very popular with experienced freelancers)
- **On the Radar**—Resources for Medical Writers, one of our most popular sections
- **Dollars & Sense**—Advice on the Business of Freelancing, which is of great benefit to entrepreneurs in all types of freelance businesses
- **The Savvy Marketer**—Marketing Tips to Build Your Business, which is also of great benefit to entrepreneurs beyond those in the medical communications field

We hope you enjoy the *Best of Pencil Points #1*, that you find it helpful, and that it informs and inspires you to become successful in your freelance medical writing business!

Wishing you writing success,

Cyndy and Brian

[The Accidental Medical Writer](#)

About Us

We both started out unqualified to do what we do today for a living. We came to the same career from very different experiences, educations, expectations, and needs. Today, we are both successful freelance medical writers.

Cyndy was a health care professional who never planned on becoming a writer. Brian was a writer who never planned on entering the health care profession. We created *The Accidental Medical Writer* series for everyone who is frustrated with working for someone else. For everyone who wants the freedom and security that freelance medical writing can help them achieve. We created this series to tell you how we became successful, so you can gain the confidence and skills to become successful, too.

[Not] JUST FOR NEWBIES
Information and Inspiration for Writers
New (and not so new) to the Business

From Issue #9:

Freelancing's Double-Edged Sword: Independence and Isolation

We work from our home offices. We get to pick and choose which jobs we take and which ones we turn down. We can work in our PJs, if we want (but we don't), and we can throw in a load of laundry whenever we feel like it. Ah, the independence of freelancing.

Yes, a certain allure is associated with being a freelance writer, but here's the thing. We work ALONE in our offices, without the benefit of camaraderie from coworkers. There's no birthday cake for the guy in the next cubicle, no baby shower for the woman working across the hall. And no colleague in the corner office to brainstorm with when we're having trouble interpreting a CSR. And when the computer takes on a mind of its own, we can't just pick up the phone and call IT. That's the flip side of freelancing.

How do we handle the isolation? Here are some tips:

- Plan monthly lunches with other freelances. This gets you away from the office and gives you the chance to compare notes with colleagues in the same situation. And keep the receipt. Lunch with your colleagues is a tax-deductible expense if you're a freelance!
- Join a local business association and attend meetings. Consider the local Chamber of Commerce or another business-networking group. You'll have the opportunity to meet other local business people and network with businesses that might need your services.
- Schedule breaks during your work day. Staring at the computer for hours on end can make you feel even more isolated. Leave the office, go to the gym, walk around the block, say hello to your neighbor, do anything that gives you a change of scenery, no matter how brief.

BUSINESS TIDBIT: *We find that these types of activities don't happen unless we plan ahead. Start today. Open your calendar, choose a day to meet a colleague for lunch, and email or call that colleague RIGHT NOW. Connecting with colleagues has a way of recharging your freelance batteries, at least it does ours. When we return to the office we are even more motivated to grow our businesses.*

- Don't be afraid to call other freelancers when you need another perspective or some business advice. How do you find these colleagues? By leveraging your contacts through the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) as well as other professional societies. Both of us have colleagues we call now and then to complain or bounce off ideas.
- Teach a class for fun. We find that doing something completely different from medical communication can be exciting, as long as we don't overcommit. What are you good at? Cyndy teaches quilting classes; Brian judges educational events for the New Jersey FFA. We find the balance refreshing.

ON THE RADAR

Resources for Medical Writers

From Issue #10:

Dumb Little Man

In our experience, all freelance writers struggle at some point with productivity. We have weeks where we feel as though we accomplish nothing even though we work hard. If you're looking for tips, resources, and websites to save you money and increase your productivity, visit [Dumb Little Man](#). The title alone made us want to take a look.

Jay White started this great productivity blog in 2006 and initially wrote all the content himself. He soon learned the value of having other contributors share their productivity and time-management tips. The result is a wealth of ideas you can incorporate into your own business. Some popular posts on the site are titled:

- How to become more intelligent
- 20 tips for more efficient Google searches
- How to discover your life's purpose
- 20 powerful beliefs that will push you toward success

AUTHORS' UPDATE: Although the articles that are hot on this site change from week to week, there are always excellent articles to enjoy and learn from. As we go to press, one of the hottest topics from the Dumb Little Man is "Never let fears prevent you from succeeding." That sounds like an excellent idea to us!

DOLLARS & SENSE

Advice on the Business of Freelancing

From Issue #11:

How to Bulletproof Your Estimates

Next to actually doing the job, estimating is probably the most challenging task for a freelance. It can also be the most frightening. Estimate too high, and you might not get the job you would have been glad to do for less. Estimate too low and, well...the only thing worse than not getting the job you overbid is getting the job you underbid.

Following are a few tips we use to prepare estimates for our clients that we believe can help you bulletproof your estimates; that is, help you develop estimates that are realistic and defensible. We're not promising that you'll get every assignment, because there are still freelancers out there who will underbid and clients out there with unrealistic expectations, not to mention myriad other variables including experience and availability. And sometimes we're asked to provide estimates that turn out to be simply to keep other writers honest (yes, we hate that, too!).

Bulletproofing your estimates will make you more confident of the estimates you send out, more likely to make money on the assignments you get, and better prepared to defend your estimates in negotiation.

To bulletproof your estimates:

Prepare several estimates for the project using different parameters, then finalize the estimate using one, or an amalgam, of those estimates:

- Calculate the amount of TIME you expect the project will take multiplied by the hourly rate you want to earn (NOTE: this is NOT the same as charging by the hour, because the rate is something only you know)
- Compute by your EXPERIENCE with similar projects and what you charged and how this project compares in scope
- Ask a COLLEAGUE what he or she would charge (HINT: this is a great way to give your estimating an occasional reality check, and to help you keep current with market trends)
- Consider the VALUE of the deliverable to the client (this is the hardest to do without the benefit of considerable experience, but the point is that you may be very good at a certain type of project and you don't want to give it away! Likewise, the perceived value may cause you to lower your estimate under certain circumstances.)

Ask questions:

- Defining the scope of the deliverable and identifying client expectations are critical to estimating success

Make assumptions:

- If the client doesn't provide all (or any) of the information you need, don't be afraid to define the scope of the deliverable yourself
- If you're wrong, the client will tell you, which gives you the opportunity to revise your estimate up or down based on the change in project scope

Put everything in writing:

- Document responsibilities (both yours and the client's), project parameters, timing, project fee, and payment schedule
- Your estimate can then easily become your contract

Itemize revision drafts:

- 85% (or more) of the work goes into the first draft, but provide an estimate with just one big number to a client that includes multiple rounds of revisions, and if the project is killed mid-stream or stalled, you may find it difficult to get more than 50% compensation
- This also protects you when revision drafts get out of hand
- This also protects your client (a great marketing tool!) from paying for revision drafts that aren't needed

To further help you bullet-proof your estimates, we've created a [Freelance Estimating Checklist!](#) [Click here](#) for the free download, which we're making available only to our subscribers. After you use the checklist, let us know what you think. We love your feedback!

AUTHORS' UPDATE: At the AMWA 74th Annual Conference in Memphis, TN, we led an open session titled *What Should I Charge?* Freelancers love to talk money—particularly when it comes to estimating. We engaged the audience by having a game show where we presented a real project scenario, then asked 3 people from the audience to give us their best estimate on what they thought the project should cost. Before we revealed what was actually charged for the project we asked the audience for their thoughts as well. The estimates ranged from low to high, from absurd to obscene, and we all learned a lot about the estimating process.

THE SAVVY MARKETER

Marketing Tips to Build Your Business

From Issue #1:

Twitter Tips for Medical Writers

Popular trends online in 2009 are social networking and anything else related to Web 2.0, a label used to describe advanced internet technologies such as blogging, RSS (really simple syndication) feeds, and member communities that users join to connect with other people who may have similar interests. In fact, according to a report from [Nielsen Online](#), social networking and blogging are more popular than sending email. More than two-thirds (67%) of the global online community now goes online to visit social networks and blogs.

At this moment, [Twitter](#) is the social networking darling, with hundreds of people joining daily. Recent data show that in one month, the number of Twitter users grew by 33%. If you've heard of Twitter, but discarded it as irrelevant to medical communicators, think again.

As a microblogging platform, Twitter's free service enables users to send out short snippets of no more than 140 characters (including spaces). These updates, called Tweets, go to your followers and also appear in the Twitter timeline. Twitter began as a vehicle through which friends, family, and coworkers could communicate and stay connected by exchanging quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing? Twitter has evolved as Twitter users learned that every Tweet counts (and nobody wants to hear about what you're eating for lunch). Today, you'll find more valuable content and less useless information about what someone's doing at one particular moment in time.

What can you get out of Twitter?

- **Traffic:** Use your Tweets to drive prospective clients to your website, where they can read your bio and see samples of your work. You do have a website, don't you?
- **Connections:** Use Twitter as a tool to connect with others in your industry or related industries while increasing awareness of your personal brand. You never know who might be reading your Tweets. As with other social networking sites for professionals like [LinkedIn](#) or Biznik, social networking contacts often lead to other connections that can generate new freelance clients or employment opportunities.

To get Twitter followers and make connections, you need to follow people. Use the *advanced search* function to find Twitter users in your area of interest, follow them, and comment on their posts using the @replies or direct message functions.

- Resources: Twitter offers you a steady stream of ideas, links, resources, and tips. Follow people in your areas of interest and they'll lead you to interesting resources you might not find yourself. We found the earlier link to the Nielsen Online report through a Tweet.
- Skills: The challenge of Twitter is to write a Tweet using no more than 140 characters. In the Twitter world, you need to write tight or forget it, which gives you an opportunity to hone your writing skills.

What should you Tweet about? The best way to optimize Twitter is to become a filter, teaching your followers mini-lessons about medical writing and updating them on topics of interest in the field. The key is to provide followers with information of value. Don't bombard them with constant self-promotion. To see what we Tweet about, you can follow [Cyndy](#) or [Brian](#).

Keep in mind that Twitter is a very *noisy* place. By that we mean the volume of Tweets is enormous. As more people follow you, the volume increases substantially. Since you can Tweet from your computer or your mobile phone, some users send dozens of Tweets each day, which only adds to the noise. The noise level does have an up-side: you can repeat your Tweets, since your followers will probably miss some of your updates, given the number of Tweets they need to filter through.

AUTHORS' UPDATE: It was hard to imagine how popular Twitter would become when we originally published this article in our premier issue of *Pencil Points*. As we go to press, Twitter has 288 million monthly active users and 500 million Tweets are sent each day. To learn about how 1 medical writer uses Twitter for his business, read Larry Lynam's article in

***BUSINESS TIDBIT:** Did you know... social networking sites really DO influence consumer's purchasing decisions. [Data from a survey provided by Kantar Media](#) show that 35% of respondents say that Twitter feeds are influential or extremely influential on purchase decisions, and 23.5% report the same for Facebook. A post on [Webbiquity](#) titled [104 Fascinating Social Media and Marketing Statistics for 2014 \(and 2015\)](#) notes that 87% of businesses use social media to distribute content, and social media budgets are projected to double over the next 5 years. Talk about opportunity for medical writers to market their services!*

the March 2014 issue of the *AMWA Journal*. AMWA members have free access to this publication as a membership benefit. We also now have a corporate Twitter account you can follow, [TAMW Tweets](#).