

THE ACCIDENTAL MEDICAL WRITER

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How We Became Successful
Freelance Medical Writers.
How You Can, Too.

Cynthia L. Kryder and Brian G. Bass

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Cynthia L. Kryder and Brian G. Bass
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By

Cynthia L. Kryder, MS, CCC-Sp

and

Brian G. Bass

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<http://www.theaccidentalmedicalwriter.com>

Cynthia L. Kryder and Brian G. Bass

DEDICATION

To my family: husband Kim, and daughters Chelsea and Shannon. You motivate me to do my very best always. Thank you for your support and love.

Cyndy Kryder
August 2008

For my wife, Andrea, and my daughters, Morgan and Courtney, whose encouragement makes my success possible and whose love makes it meaningful.

Brian Bass
August 2008

Cynthia L. Kryder and Brian G. Bass

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About the Authors

Cyndy Kryder has worked in the field of health care in some way ever since she grabbed her Master's Degree in 1977 and headed to her first professional job as a speech-language pathologist at a private school in suburban Philadelphia. Her 9-year stint working in a pediatric-rehabilitation hospital developed her passion for writing patient-education materials and cemented her interest in the field of medicine. She launched her freelance medical writing career in 1992 and is thankful for the freedom and flexibility it offers her. Like her coauthor, Brian Bass, Cyndy currently writes promotional, educational, and scientific pieces for professionals and lay audiences in a number of different therapeutic areas and for a wide range of media. She also assists companies in their publication-planning efforts. A member of the Delaware Valley Chapter of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA), Cyndy presents workshops and leads roundtable discussions on various topics for freelance medical writers and editors.

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Brian Bass has been a professional writer for all of his career, including more than 20 years experience as a freelance medical writer specializing in medical education, communications, and advertising. He went out on his own in 1989 and never looked back. Today, Brian writes scientific, educational, and promotional materials for health care professional and lay audiences in a wide range of therapeutic areas for print, electronic, and interactive media. He has won awards for his work in sales training, sales motivation, and physician education. His successful freelance medical writing business now includes a team of other highly qualified freelance medical writers who work with him, including his coauthor, Cyndy Kryder. Brian is a member of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA), and he frequently presents workshops, roundtables, and panel discussions on topics of interest to freelance writers and editors at local and national meetings in the United States and abroad.

You can contact Cyndy and Brian at
<http://www.theaccidentalmedicalwriter.com>.

Cynthia L. Kryder and Brian G. Bass

This book provides you with the benefits of almost 40 years of collective freelance medical writing experience, consolidated into these lessons, mistakes, and tips. Keep reading to learn more.

Cyndy's Lessons:

Lesson #1: It doesn't matter if you don't have so-called "published" pieces. Most people can find something they've written to include in their portfolio.

Lesson #2: Always, always, always get paid to learn something new.

Lesson #3: You have to spend money to make money.

Cyndy's Mistakes:

Mistake #1: Being seduced by the allure of a regular paycheck.

Mistake #2: Treating freelancing like a job, not a business.

Mistake #3: Trying to do it all.

Mistake #4: Marketing to the wrong audience.

Cyndy's Tips:

Tip #1: Find mentors who know what they're doing and listen to their advice.

Tip #2: Join the American Medical Writers Association.

Tip #3: Buy the right desktop resources.

Tip #4: Become proficient with your computer software.

Tip #5: Update your software regularly.

Tip #6: Always say yes.

Tip #7: Market yourself continually.

Tip #8: Honor your deadlines.

Brian's Lessons:

Lesson #1: It doesn't matter what you know. What matters is what you learn, and what people are willing to teach you.

Lesson #2: It is easier to get forgiveness than it is to get permission.

Lesson #3: With good input and direction, plus a good example or two, you can do almost anything.

Lesson #4: Never underestimate the motivating power of fear.

Lesson #5: If you want good people to work for you, pay them well and pay them on time.

Lesson #6: Relevance is relative.

Lesson #7: Every time the phone rings, it's a chance to be a hero.

Lesson #8: The time to look for work is NOT when you need it.

Lesson #9: If you want to win the race, you've got to cross the finish line.

Lesson #10: Never stop taking risks.

Brian's Mistakes:

Mistake #1: Not knowing what I couldn't do.

Mistake #2: Not trusting my instincts.

Brian's Tips:

Tip #1: Know what you know, and know what you don't know.

Tip #2: Promise what you will deliver, and deliver on what you promise.

Tip #3: Deliver on time, on target, and on budget; first time and every time.

Introduction

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. Cyndy grew up at the end of an era where women were relegated to certain roles and career choices and rarely switched boats in midstream. Brian grew up at the end of the same era, when a man was expected to get a good job and stick with it until retirement.

We wrote this book 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 wrote this book to tell you how we became successful, so you can gain the confidence and skills to become successful, too.

In our journeys to becoming successful freelance medical writers, we made different mistakes and learned different lessons. The tips we have to share with you can help you avoid some of the pitfalls and perhaps get to the benefits that freelance medical writing has to offer a bit faster.

We have worked together as colleagues for a long time, and we are committed to sharing what we know with other professionals who are interested in pursuing freelance medical writing as a career. Over the years, we found that giving seminars at local and national meetings was one way to reach aspiring freelance medical writers, but it never felt like quite enough. That's why we wrote this book, launched a website, and

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made a commitment to publish an entire series of books to help you achieve your personal and professional goals.

When we started out, we often found ourselves flying by the seats of our pants. We did things intuitively because 20 years ago there wasn't a lot of information out there about how to become a medical writer, let alone how to become a *freelance* medical writer. As you will find when you read our stories, it wasn't always easy.

It is our hope that by reading about our unqualifications and our quests for success, you will be inspired and armed to take a risk and pursue something for which you, too, might feel that you are currently unqualified. That doesn't mean that anyone can become a successful freelance medical writer. You can't go from plumbing, for example, to medical writing, without some type of commensurate experience, either in science, writing, health care, or a similar area of expertise. Medical writing requires a distinct set of skills, which you will be able to discern as you read this book and others in our series. A medical or science background helps, but isn't essential. Likewise, a writing background can provide an advantage, but isn't mandatory.

Is this book just for people who want to become successful freelance medical writers? No. The strategies, lessons, and tips that we provide can be applied to any freelance endeavor. We achieved our success through medical writing, but our tips and techniques can be applied to other types of writing as well as to other types of freelance businesses.

Is this book just for people who are in the same circumstances in which we found ourselves at the time we first became freelance medical writers? No again. Freelance medical writing is a perfect career choice whether you're returning to the workforce or planning your exit, plotting a career change, or releasing your inner muse.

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This book will give you the confidence you need to get started and the foundation you need to become successful. The other books in our series will teach you how to do what we do, so you can overcome your personal unqualifications and become a successful freelance medical writer, too.

Will this book make you a successful freelance writer by itself? No. But with its tips, strategies, and lessons, it holds the potential to give you a foundation on which to build your own success, however you define that for yourself. You ultimately are the one who determines your success. You'll decide which messages in this book to take to heart and which to discard. Your success lies within you.

Are you ready to take the next step?

Section 1: Cyndy's Story

My Unqualifications

I had my initial clue that my career wasn't going to mesh well with my lifestyle as a parent when my female boss called me 4 hours after I delivered our first child and requested a teleconference to discuss certain work-related issues that just couldn't wait. I had gone into labor around midnight, delivered our daughter at 5:45 that Monday morning, and by 9 a.m. all I wanted to do was breathe in the beauty of my newborn and possibly take a well-deserved nap. In the euphoric haze that accompanies childbirth, there was no way I could lead a conference call and sound intelligent on the phone.

At that point in my life my official job title was Clinical Director at a suburban Philadelphia rehabilitation hospital. In that capacity, I managed a residential-living program that retrained adults with traumatic brain injury and taught them how to live independently. I directed staff, managed budgets, soothed the frayed nerves of patients and their families, and was the person responsible when something went wrong. And if you know anything about health care, you know that things always go wrong.

Still, I enjoyed my job and was perfectly willing to put in the extra hours necessary to get everything done. My salary was adequate (not great), benefits were good (OK, looking back, those were definitely great), and, having been recently promoted, I felt as though I was climbing the corporate health care ladder. With a master's degree in speech/language pathology from Bloomsburg State College (now Bloomsburg University) in Pennsylvania, plus 12 years of experience working as a speech pathologist under my belt, moving into an administrative position was exactly what I wanted to do.

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As one of those women who came of age during women's liberation, I had always assumed that I could have it all—and have it all at the same time. But I never considered myself to be driven. I worked hard to maintain a balance between work and play and enjoyed satisfying activities outside of work: gardening, sewing, and reading, to name a few. Being bulldozed by an aggressive boss who placed work before family was never part of the plan.

The morning I became a parent I kindly declined to participate in the conference call and took that nap instead, but I spent the next 2 years juggling my professional work and my personal life. Parenting was tougher and more enjoyable than I had ever imagined. With the birth of our second child, and a paycheck that was dwindling as more dollars went to pay for day care, I knew I needed to do something else.

With an infant on my lap and a toddler dancing around the kitchen, I called my neighbor, a 50-something successful medical writer, and asked the question that opened the door to my career in freelance medical writing: "Tell me how I can write stuff and get paid for it."

Why have I told you all of this? Well, I'm certainly not trying to reinforce the assumption that it's not what you know but who you know, although having a mentor to nurture you along the way is something I would recommend (you'll read more about that later). Nor is this meant to be an endorsement of working motherhood.

What I'm trying to demonstrate here—and my colleague, Brian, is trying to convey as well—is the circuitous paths we took to medical writing. And if we could do it, so can you.

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When I graduated from college with an advanced degree in speech pathology, I didn't even know what a medical writer was. Today I'm the sole proprietor of a successful freelance medical writing business who's produced materials for some of the major pharmaceutical players: Abbott, Wyeth, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Johnson & Johnson, Novartis, and Pfizer. I've been a medical writer for more than 16 years now, and I don't see an end in sight, although God may have other plans.

Convincing folks that a speech pathologist could become a writer—and a good one at that—was a challenge. Even my husband, Kim, scoffed when I told him I was going to earn a living as a freelance medical writer. “A writer?” he asked. “What kind of experience do YOU have as a writer?”

Good point.

I'd like to tell you that the whole business of, well, developing a business was easy, but I won't lie to you. Work and money didn't just flow automatically once I hung out my freelance shingle. There were some years when my receivables were well under the poverty level and others when I billed out enough to feel confident about paying 2 college tuitions in the future. One year, days stretched into weeks that stretched into months without a paying job coming across my desk. It was tough and disheartening—and I began to panic. I knew what my husband was thinking, even though it was unspoken: “At least do something to bring in some bucks, because my salary isn't enough to support all of our needs.” But I never gave up, despite the bumps and bruises I encountered along the way. And I know you can benefit from my experience.

You're obviously interested in learning more about how to become a medical writer or you wouldn't have bothered to buy this book. So let me warn you up front. In these pages you won't find a step-by-step plan that

you should follow exactly to become a successful freelance medical writer. Instead, you'll read about how Brian and I developed careers in a field where some of our potential clients (and former colleagues from our previous professional lives) considered us unqualified. We'll tell you the things we did right, but, more importantly, we'll explain where we went wrong; you'll have the benefit of hindsight. Along the way, you'll find practical advice that you can use to make changes in your own life.

As you read this book, you'll see that Brian and I took quite different paths, but ended up in similar places. He had more experience in writing, advertising, and marketing; I had more experience in health care and a background as a clinician. Both of us had the entrepreneurial drive to work independently and create our own businesses. Neither of us is a doctor or a nurse or an English major. For better or worse, our strengths and weaknesses dictated the choices we made when we took the leap into freelance medical writing.

The fact that the wage I earned was secondary income for my family also played a major role in the business decisions I made (or avoided, for that matter). With a husband who worked full time and brought home the benefits, I had the luxury to grow my business more slowly than did Brian. And being a female affected the approach I took to my freelance career. Yes, as much as I hate to admit this even though it's true, gender does make a difference, as you'll see when you compare Brian's story with mine.

If freelance medical writing is something you're considering, but you don't feel qualified, don't be discouraged. You can make it big in the business of freelance medical writing without experience. I know. I did it. So did my coauthor. And so can you.