

# My medical writing journey:

## How I discovered self-mentoring and used it to improve my career and life

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### Abstract

Medical writers can greatly benefit from receiving mentorship, mentoring others, and learning how to keep themselves accountable through self-mentoring. Through mentorship, they can get unique advice to accelerate their career development and connect or reconnect with the reasons that led them to become medical writers in the first place. In this personal piece, I share how different kinds of mentorship have impacted my career since I left academia to pursue medical writing. I hope this inspires others in the field to explore how mentorship can help them advance their careers.

### Leaving academia and finding my first mentors

My journey into medical writing started during the third year of my PhD when I discovered that I did not want to pursue an academic career or become a college professor. This was not an easy decision; I had been trained in academia all my life and felt lost and anxious when I thought about pursuing other career options.

Luckily, around that time, I became a member of the Cheeky Scientist Association (CSA), a worldwide organisation that helps PhDs transition from academia to industry. CSA offers a lot of useful materials to help you plan your transition, but what makes it unique is that it gives members access to a private group where they can interact with other PhDs who want to transition or are already working in industry.

I found my first medical writing mentors by posting and interacting with others in the CSA

private group. This cohort of mentors played a pivotal role in my transition by helping me find my path and providing personal and professional guidance.

Here are some examples of things that I discovered by interacting with my CSA mentors during the last year of my PhD:

- 1. How to deal with impostor syndrome:** When I first started interacting with my mentors, I discovered that they were people just like me, instead of superheroes who achieved the impossible every day. This helped me realise that I could be valued outside of academia.
- 2. Medical writing is not only for native English speakers:** From the moment I decided to leave academia, I knew I wanted to do science communication, but I felt that I couldn't become a medical writer because English wasn't my first language, and I had never lived in an English-speaking country. In the CSA private group, I found many examples of medical writers who were non-native English speakers, which gave me the courage to pursue medical writing myself.
- 3. The importance of planning:** Making any dream come true takes time, and transitioning out of academia is no different. My mentors showed me the importance of figuring out what I wanted and working towards it. This was invaluable since it helped me put almost all pieces of the transition puzzle together by the time I defended my PhD.
- 4. They shared their stories and encouraged me to find my path:** My mentors were always willing to share their stories and pitfalls, which helped me figure out what I wanted my career to look like and what steps I needed to take to make that happen.
- 5. Where to find clients:** Once I decided I wanted to become a freelance medical writer,

my mentors shared insights with me and even referred me to some of my first clients.

Some of these mentors are still in my life, some I have lost contact with, but I hold each of them in my heart as their experiences and guidance helped me through one of the most difficult times in my life. They also showed me the qualities I still value in a mentor: good communication skills, openness to talking about their past experiences, ability to give feedback, and a good dose of vulnerability.

### Self-mentoring and freelance medical writing go hand in hand

With the guidance and encouragement of my first mentors, I started doing freelance medical writing. This was a change I enjoyed, but that also took some getting used to. I went from working with a micromanaging principal investigator (PI), to having a lot of flexibility and, for the first time in my life, not having anybody pushing me and keeping me accountable. I also learned that I needed to develop a new skill set in addition to written communication, which I thought was the most important thing when it came to medical writing. I had to get better at marketing myself and managing my finances, time, and projects.

Some of the mentors I mentioned in the previous section were also freelance medical writers, and they helped me set the first stones of my freelance business. They made me realise that there is not a right way to be a freelancer. In order to have a thriving freelance business that fulfilled me as a person, I had to set goals that would work specifically for me and keep myself accountable to those goals. In short, I had to become my own mentor.

In the beginning, I didn't realise that what I was doing was self-mentoring. I didn't even know that self-mentoring was a concept.

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Eventually, however, I realised that there were many parallels between the learning process I went through with my mentors while I was in grad school and the soul-searching process of building my freelance business. That is when I discovered self-mentoring as a formal concept.

According to Dr Marsha L. Carr, self-mentoring occurs when a person is “willing to initiate and accept responsibility for self-development by devoting time to navigate within the culture of the environment in order to make the most of the opportunity to strengthen competencies needed to enhance job performance and career progression.”<sup>1</sup> And that is exactly what I had to do when I started freelancing.

I had to take responsibility for myself and identify the aspects I got right and the aspects I had to get better at when it came to my freelance journey. It is not always easy to be in a self-learning process. You have to assess yourself

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constantly and come up with strategies to improve, which can be exhausting. But the process is also gratifying. Self-mentoring not only taught me a lot about myself but also made me a better freelancer and project manager.

Being your own mentor is a process of self-awareness; you have to identify your strengths, weaknesses, needs, and limitations, as well as what to expect from the process to achieve your goals.<sup>2</sup>

After my first three months as a freelancer, I put the self-mentoring process in place and assessed all the aspects of my freelance business to identify my strengths, weaknesses, needs, and limitations. This is what I found out:

- The writing part was a strength. I seldom had clients who were dissatisfied with my work or required a lot of edits once I delivered a project.
- I needed to improve the administrative

aspects of freelancing – organising my finances and being able to compare one project to another using objective measures.

- The lack of organisation hurt my ability to make informed decisions when I was offered a project or made a pitch.
- The marketing part of freelancing was a weakness. It didn't come naturally to me, and some of the strategies I put in place to improve that part ended up yielding little result.
- Keeping myself accountable and consistent in my work was my main limitation. I went from being very hard on myself one week to cutting myself way too much slack the next. Consequently, I didn't have set work hours, which affected my work-life balance and prevented me from growing my business.

I decided to focus on fulfilling my needs and removing my limitations.

I gave myself a month to learn about time tracking apps (I ended up choosing Toggl) and started tracking how much time I spent on each task. I also set a goal to develop a system that



allowed me to compare different projects, even if they took different amounts of effort and were paid based on different parameters (word count, full project, hourly, etc.).

Within a month, I was easily tracking my time and had a working system to compare projects in place. Achieving these milestones allowed me to better estimate how much time a project would take and compare projects objectively. This facilitated my decision-making process when accepting offers and provided peace of mind.

I realised that keeping myself accountable to my work hours would take longer than a month.

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I had to work on several bad habits and do some soul searching to identify what prevented me from having a steady routine while working from home. So, I gave myself three months to come up with a system that allowed me to be more consistent.

In the end, I came up with several hours I wanted to work every day and used an adaptation of the Pomodoro Technique, the time management theory that advocates working in 25-minute increments, to achieve those hours without overworking. Each Monday, I also dedicated the first two hours to planning my week, assigning time slots to each project.

Designing the system was easy, but it took me longer than three months to master it. Life used to get in the way, and I would let it. So, I decided to break the big goal into steps to make it easier to see if I was making progress. By the time I accepted a full-time job, I would stick to my routine 80% of the time, which was not ideal but was also a significant improvement from having no routine at all.

The next goal that I set up in my self mentor process was to increase my marketing efforts and advocate for myself. I started my full-time position before I had time to achieve that goal. However, I'm going back to freelancing soon, and I'm excited to work towards this goal again.

Self-mentoring is a term that is unfamiliar for most people, yet most of us are conscious of the



benefits it can bring as we identify that successful people have systems in place to help them achieve their goals and stay accountable<sup>2</sup>. Self-mentoring is an ongoing process where you set goals for yourself and trace a path to achieve those goals. If you learn how to keep yourself accountable and celebrate the small victories, you can get enormous benefits from being your own mentor.

## Coming full circle: Becoming the mentor

At the beginning of 2020, I got the opportunity to become a moderator for the Medical Writing Organisation (MWO), a community of established and aspiring medical writers created by Cheeky Scientist. This was the first time I was

in a position of leadership in a professional setting. As a moderator of the MWO, I inspire and advise aspiring medical writers to create a transition plan and strategy. Using my previous experience to help people who are now going through the hurdles I went through a couple of years ago is beyond rewarding. Every time one of the members thanks me for my advice or relates to something I say, I feel extremely valuable because I can see that I am making a difference.

In January 2021, I took over the role of programme leader of the MWO community, replacing the original creator of the programme and one of my dearest mentors, Evguenia Alechine. In a way, taking over as programme leader is like a rite of passage. I started as a mentee when the MWO first launched in 2019, used the resources of the community to streamline my freelance business and self-mentoring strategy, and now am in a position where I have gained enough experience where I can help others create their own paths. This does not mean I have all the answers, but I see people benefit from my experience every day, and being able to mentor them is a privilege.

I have always thought that we are biased when it comes to judging our own path because we are the only ones who know how imperfect it actually was, how many successes came close to being failures, whereas external observers can only judge based on the outcomes. The people in the MWO community remind me every day how valuable my path can be to them and how I can help them improve by mentoring them. I learn from my mentees every day. Some of them have even become mentors. I am a better person from having the opportunity to participate in and lead the MWO community.

Being a mentor, I learned that you do not have to know all the answers or have gone through the same path as your mentees to inspire them. Being a good mentor is about empathy and vulnerability. You need vulnerability to be able to talk about your previous experiences – good and bad – to inspire others. You need empathy to put yourself in the shoes of others and give advice or feedback that relates to their particular situation. In the end, everyone can be a mentor. You do not

need to be an expert; you just need to be open enough to let people relate to your particular story in a way that allows them to come to answers to advance their own story.

Since leaving academia in 2018, I have experienced the benefits that mentorship can have on your career, either by being mentored, mentoring yourself or mentoring others. Each of those experiences has made me a better person and a better medical writer, and I truly encourage all readers to give any mentorship a serious chance.

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## Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by Cheeky Scientists or any of its programmes.

## Conflicts of interest

The author was employed by Cheeky Scientist, which developed the Cheeky Scientist Association and the Medical Writing Organisation discussed in this article.

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