Goodbye Ghostwriters!*  
Karen L. Woolley

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Goodbye Ghostwriters!*  
How To Work Ethically and Efficiently With Professional Medical Writers  
Karen L. Woolley, PhD

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**Key words:** authorship; codes of ethics; drug industry; peer review; research

**Abbreviation:** SOP = standard operating procedure

**Why Do I Need To Know About Professional Medical Writers?**

If you recognize the ethical and scientific obligations to publish your research, but have not always been able to do so, you are not alone. Between one third to two thirds of medical research may remain unpublished. The main reason for nonpublication is lack of time, but limited manuscript preparation experience or English writing skills can also present challenges for authors. Although limited by time, experience, or language, researchers may seek medical writing assistance. Although the legitimate role of professional medical writers has been recognized by journal editors, authors need to know how to work appropriately with writers. The purpose of this article is to describe how authors can work ethically and efficiently with professional medical writers—and, in so doing, say goodbye to ghostwriters!

**What Is the Difference Between Professional Medical Writers and Ghostwriters?**

Before describing how to work with writers, professional medical writers must be differentiated from ghostwriters. For the purpose of this article, professional medical writers are writers who abide by ethical guidelines for medical writing (Table 1). When a professional medical writer assists authors, the writer ensures that the authors control the content, and that the writer’s involvement and funding source are acknowledged in the publication. In contrast, due to ignorance or ill intent, ghostwriters may try to control the content and not disclose their involvement or funding source. Ghostwriters can expose authors, journals, and sponsors to justifiable, but undesirable, media attention.

**Who Works With Professional Medical Writers and Why?**

There is no single “type” of author who works with professional medical writers. A survey on author attitudes toward medical writing found that authors who reported that they would use medical writing services included junior and senior academics, men and women, and those with excellent medical writing skills and extensive medical writing experience and those without. Professional medical writers may help authors prepare manuscripts based on studies sponsored by not-for-profit (eg, academic institutions, patient advocacy groups) or for-profit (eg, pharmaceutical, biotechnology, device companies) organizations. The prevalence of medical writing assistance in publications from high-ranking, international, peer-reviewed journals was recently reported to be 6% for non–industry-sponsored research and 10% for industry-sponsored research. As the number of, and demand for, medical writers is increasing, more authors may have the opportunity to work with professional medical writers in the future.

*From ProScribe Medical Communications, Noosaville, Australia.  
Professor Woolley is a paid university lecturer in medical writing and drug development and is also the Chief Executive Officer of ProScribe. ProScribe’s PhD-qualified professional medical writers are paid by academic, biotechnology, and pharmaceutical clients to provide medical writing services. ProScribe staff do not ghostwrite.*

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Table 1—Guidelines From Medical Journal Editors and Medical Writers on Acknowledging Medical Writer Involvement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guidelines</th>
<th>Acknowledging Medical Writers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. CHEST Instructions to authors: ghost authorship*</td>
<td>“Any editorial or authorship contributions made by outside organizations, persons, funding bodies, or persons hired by funding bodies, must be appropriately acknowledged, and any potential conflicts of interest (ie, who paid for the extra editorial work) . . . must also be acknowledged.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors: uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals: writing and editing for biomedical publication: ethical considerations in the conduct and reporting of research*</td>
<td>“All contributors who do not meet the criteria for authorship should be listed in an acknowledgments section. Examples of those who might be acknowledged include a person who provided . . . writing assistance. . . . Editors should ask authors to disclose whether they had writing assistance and to identify the entity that paid for this assistance.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. World Association of Medical Editors: policy statement: ghost writing initiated by commercial companies*</td>
<td>“Medical writers can be legitimate contributors. . . . their roles and affiliations should be described in the manuscript.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Good publication practice for pharmaceutical companies*</td>
<td>“The contribution of the medical writer should be acknowledged.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Task Force on the Contributions of Medical Writers to Scientific Publications. American Medical Writing Association position statement on the contributions of medical writers to scientific publications*</td>
<td>“. . . acknowledge . . . the company's involvement in the . . . preparation of the publication.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. European Medical Writers Association guidelines on the role of medical writers in developing peer-reviewed publications*</td>
<td>“Biomedical communicators who contribute substantially to the writing or editing of a manuscript should be acknowledged with their permission and with disclosure of any pertinent professional or financial relationships.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Although additional guidelines and statements have been published on publication ethics, the guidelines listed in this Table provide practical advice for authors who want to work with professional medical writers.

Authors elect to work with professional medical writers for various reasons. The most common reasons that have been cited by authors were that medical writers could help them prepare manuscripts that would: (1) be better written, (2) be of higher quality, (3) take less of their time to prepare, and (4) have a higher chance of being published. Although more direct evidence is required, research indicates that medical writing assistance can reduce publication delays and enhance quality.

**How Can Authors Work Ethically and Efficiently With Professional Medical Writers?**

Authors can work ethically with professional medical writers by following guidelines developed by journal editors and professional medical writers (Table 1). There is a high level of consensus among these guidelines, with each reinforcing the importance of transparency. Essentially, authors working with professional medical writers need to do the following: (1) acknowledge the medical writer, and (2) disclose the associated funding source. If no funding was used for the writer’s services, this should be stated explicitly. Before writing begins, authors need to confirm that their medical writer complies with these guidelines.

Fortunately, the process required for ethical manuscript preparation aligns well with the process used for efficient manuscript preparation. Professional medical writers will, ideally, follow a standard operating procedure (SOP) that facilitates ethical and efficient manuscript preparation. Manuscript SOPs may vary among writers, but every writer’s SOP should require that authors and writers work collaboratively throughout the process. The SOP should clarify that authors are responsible for identifying the key messages and data to be presented in the manuscript. The SOP may then recommend that the writer develop a comprehensive structural outline based on the author-identified messages and data. The outline should be reviewed, edited (as necessary), and agreed to by the authors. The SOP may then clarify that the writer prepares the first, full-text version of the manuscript only after the key messages, data, and the scope and sequence of content have been author approved. An experienced medical writer will be able to efficiently convert the approved outline into a submission-ready manuscript. The writer, rather than the authors, can perform many of the time-intensive tasks in manuscript preparation. These tasks include the following: drafting text that is clear, concise, credible, and grammatically correct; preparing figures and tables; tracking and incorporating author feedback; ensuring the manuscript meets the requirements of the journal (eg, word count, formatting); and finalizing
the multiple text and graphics documents usually required for on-line submission. The SOP should mandate that authors retain responsibility for approving the final version of the manuscript and submitting it to the journal. A professional medical writer can help authors efficiently address the issues (eg, problems with writing style, graphics, formatting) that have been previously identified as persistent problems in manuscripts submitted to CHEST,16 and help ensure that manuscripts are prepared ethically.

Readers of peer-reviewed publications need to know that authors, not medical writers, control the messages and data presented. Medical journals and professional medical writers need to work together to educate authors and readers about appropriate medical writer involvement. The monthly medical writing series in CHEST is a perfect example of how editors and writers can collaborate to benefit authors and, ultimately, readers.

SUMMARY

Authors who are limited by time, writing expertise, or English writing skills may seek medical writing assistance. Medical journals have recognized the legitimate role of professional medical writers, but the onus is on authors to work with professional medical writers, not ghostwriters. A professional medical writer can help authors prepare manuscripts ethically and efficiently by following a well-defined manuscript preparation process.

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