

Quill

Fall 2003, Volume 9, Issue 3



Calendar of Events

Saturday, November 8, 2003

Mid-Atlantic Chapter fall meeting
Three Keys to Successful Freelance
Medical Writing
(details on this page)

October 21-23, 2004

AMWA Annual
Conference
St. Louis, MO



Coming Soon: The E-Quill?

Should the *Quill* go all-electronic? Would you still read the chapter newsletter if it arrived in your email box (as a PDF file) instead of in your "snail-mail" box?

The Mid-Atlantic Chapter Board of Directors is considering whether to convert the *Quill* into an electronic newsletter. Printing and mailing this newsletter three times a year is the chapter's single largest expense. The chapter is now devoting more resources to its Web site (www.amwa-midatlantic.org), which can provide more timely information than a three-times-a-year newsletter.

What do you think? Is it important to you to continue receiving the *Quill* on paper? Would it be a better use of the chapter's resources to go to an electronic newsletter? Send your opinions to *Quill* editor Eleanor Mayfield (elmayfield@radix.net).

Three Keys to Successful Freelance Medical Writing

Save the date: Saturday, November 8

Register now for the Mid-Atlantic Chapter's exciting fall program on Saturday, November 8, 2003, in Baltimore.

We have lined up three great speakers who will offer insights on marketing your medical writing, breaking into speech-writing, and landing a book contract.

Check your email or the chapter Web site (www.amwa-midatlantic.org) for details, including the meeting location and directions. Sign up today!

Reports from the 2003

AMWA-MAC Chapter Conference

Four workshops were offered at the 2003 AMWA Mid-Atlantic Chapter conference, held on June 7 at the Embassy Suites Hotel near Baltimore-Washington International Airport. Below, one attendee at each workshop reports on what he or she learned.

Building a New Drug Application

It takes a village to build a good New Drug Application (NDA). That, in a nutshell, is the message I took home from Howard Smith's workshop at the AMWA Mid-Atlantic Chapter conference.

I have been involved in clinical research for 15 years and am aware of the importance of an NDA. However, this workshop gave me a new perspective on what it takes to prepare an NDA.

The NDA is the pharmaceutical company's request to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for

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President's Message:



Kudos to Two Great Volunteers

This issue of the *Quill* marks a milestone, not simply as the last issue of the calendar year, but as the last issue produced under Eleanor Mayfield's stewardship—and possibly the last print issue we will release, as we debate how best to distribute the chapter newsletter in the future. So it seems particularly fitting to express, on behalf of the chapter, our great gratitude for the time and effort Eleanor has devoted to managing, editing, and producing the *Quill* for the past several years.

Those of you who have edited a newsletter know that it requires dedication, patience, and organizational and project management skills to keep the publication on track. With unsurpassable professionalism, Eleanor has met the challenges: lining up articles, negotiating with printers, and working with our designer to see each issue from the planning stages through delivery to your mailbox. For this, we owe her a debt of gratitude.

I'd also like to thank Jennifer Sizemore, who resurrected our dormant core curriculum program three years ago and has since managed this annual event with skill and grace. Her efforts have not only made AMWA's excellent core curriculum widely available to our membership; they have also contributed to the chapter treasury so that we could fund such projects as the Web site and our new student scholarship award. All of us who have attended any workshops at the annual chapter conference are grateful to her for making this possible. It's good to know, as Jennifer leaves her position as core curriculum coordinator, that the program has moved into Lori Alexander's capable hands.

Every member of the Mid-Atlantic Chapter (this means you!) has the opportunity to contribute in some way to the chapter's welfare—whether you take on a modest task, such as cleaning up after a chapter program, or a larger one, such as organizing a regional chapter event. To all our volunteers, past and future, please accept my thanks and that of your fellow members for all that you so generously give.

—Tamia Karpeles, ELS

Announcements

- ◆ The Mid-Atlantic Chapter's Southeast Virginia satellite is alive and well and planning a meeting this fall. Details will be sent by e-mail and placed on the chapter Web site (www.amwa-midatlantic.org) as soon as they become available. To be placed on the email list for information about Southeast satellite activities, please contact Rachel Preston (rprx@yahoo.com).
- ◆ *Quill* editor Eleanor Mayfield is stepping down after several years in the job. This voluntary position involves soliciting copy for the chapter's three-times-a-year newsletter and coordinating production with the designer, Jenifer F. Walker, and the printer. The job is not onerous and is a great way to stay connected to chapter events and issues! If you're interested in volunteering or would like more information about the editor's position, please contact Eleanor (elmayfield@radix.net) as soon as possible.
- ◆ Farewell and heartfelt thanks to Jennifer Sizemore, who has coordinated the Mid-Atlantic Chapter's annual conference for the past 3 years. And please welcome Lori Alexander, who has stepped into the conference coordinator's position. Check the chapter Web site (www.amwa-midatlantic.org) within the next few months for information about the 2004 chapter conference.

Reports from the 2003 Chapter Conference

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approval to sell a new product. After spending millions of dollars to get to the point of filing the NDA, the company has to pay a user fee of \$500,000 to the FDA to have the NDA reviewed—with no guarantee of approval. Therefore, it is the medical writer's job to write a persuasive argument that substantiates the company's request to market its product.

I had heard that templates are available to guide one through the task of writing an NDA, but I learned that it takes much more than a template to build a good NDA.

An NDA includes multiple technical sections, including—but not limited to—descriptions of the chemical make-up of the product, the manufacturing process for the product, the controls used to ensure product quality, the results of animal studies that were conducted using the product, the clinical findings from trials in humans, and statistical data about the product.

Each section of the NDA may be hundreds of pages long. Then, many copies must be made to be submitted to the various FDA reviewers. And finally, the NDA must be delivered to the FDA (Mr. Smith said he usually rents a van!).

I now see that it really is *building* an NDA—and a template is just a tool!

—Janice James, NP, MS

Sentence Structure and Patterns

Participants in Flo Witte's workshop on sentence structure and patterns learned how to describe the parts of a sentence, select the sentence patterns that provide the most appropriate emphasis for the concepts expressed, shorten overly wordy sentences (like this one!), and correct mistakes in sentence structure.

Although many people think run-on sentences are simply overly long sentences, said Ms. Witte, they are actually two independent clauses (each of which has a subject and verb and could be a sentence on its own) that are "fused" without punctuation. An example of a fused, or run-on, sentence is:

Gestures are a means of communication for everyone they are essential for the hearing impaired.

Participants also learned that verbs typically express a concept more strongly than nouns. For example, when this sentence

There was a tendency for the medication to produce a reduction of cardiac output.

is changed to

The medication tended to reduce cardiac output.

the emphasis shifts from the *tendency* to the *reduction*, which makes the meaning clearer. Moreover, changing *reduction* to *reduce* cuts several unnecessary words from the sentence. If an author objects to such a change, point out that the shorter the article, the less space it will take up in a journal, which may increase its appeal to the journal editors. Shorter, simpler sentences are also easier to read for those for whom English is a second language.

One tip for producing good sentences is to keep together concepts that belong together and separate ideas that do not belong together. Another is to pay close attention to the order of the elements within a sentence; changing the order of the concepts can change the emphasis within the sentence.

The following sentences illustrate how mistakes in sentence structure can produce humorous results.

The robber was described as a six-foot-tall man with a heavy mustache weighing 150 pounds. (misplaced modifier)

Spending four hours on the operating table, a tumor as large as a golf ball was removed from the patient's stomach. (misplaced participle)

This workshop made it clear that correct grammar is not all the medical writer needs to produce good prose. Good sentences convey information that the reader wants to know and can understand with as little effort as possible.

—Deborah Berlyne, PhD

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Reports from the 2003 Chapter Conference

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Tables and Graphs

When you sit through a 3-hour workshop and never look at your watch, you know that the workshop was either worthwhile or entertaining. This one was both.

Instructor Howard Smith had two objectives for the workshop:

- ◆ To help us understand what type of graphic is right for what purpose; and
- ◆ To teach us how to create clear and effective graphics.

Mr. Smith's basic message was this: Graphics are an essential part of your article—every bit as much as the prose. Their purpose is to simplify data for the reader. Once you know the point you want to make, choose the graphic that will best support it: for example, a table, a line graph, or a bar chart.

A table works best when your data is words or when absolute numbers are important. If, however, you want to show a trend, use a line graph. Bar charts work well if you want to compare data. Bar charts also offer versatility—you can place them vertically (good when making observations at different times); you can turn them on their side (best when making observations at a single point in time); or you can combine them.

Through handouts, visual demonstrations, and lively class interaction, Mr. Smith taught us how to construct graphics. We learned about table field, indicators, titles, column heads, spanners, stubs, and footnotes; line graph keys, legends, and error markers; and bar graph scales, scale breaks, and stacked bars. Throughout the workshop, Mr. Smith gave lots of tips on software, formatting, and word choices.

Take this workshop early in your medical writing career—and remember Mr. Smith's advice: "Choose your graphics appropriately and make them serve the purpose of your particular paper."

— Louise Wides

Writing About Health and Medicine for Consumer Magazines

As a medical writer, do you dismiss the thought of writing for consumer magazines? Do you think that almost all such articles are written by a

few successful authors? Maybe it's time think again.

About 2,000,000 magazine articles are published each year. Half are written by freelancers. Since 1997, sales of health, nutrition, and fitness magazines have increased 15%. In 2000, 16% of total editorial pages pertained to the topics of food, health, and nutrition. Instead of assuming that consumer articles are a long reach, we ought to be thinking of the never-ending need for new material.

That was Jill Shuman's encouraging message at the Mid-Atlantic Chapter Conference at the Embassy Suites Hotel Baltimore on June 7, 2003, where she taught the workshop on "Writing About Health and Medicine for Consumers." To get going, you have only to come up with a good idea, find the right magazine, and write a successful query letter. That's all there is to it—except for the actual writing, of course.

Ideas are everywhere. Check out the magazines you might want to write for. There is a magazine for almost every consumer group: Airline passengers, Minneapolitans, even blue-collar working men. Successful consumer writers read magazines regularly to keep up with the latest trends. According to Ms. Shuman, *People* magazine is particularly good at reporting what people are thinking about.

Writing from an intriguing point of view is key. Published articles keep covering the same subjects but tell the stories in different ways. Successful authors recount a unique and personal experience or relate someone else's unusual story. Self-help articles work especially well for women's magazines. Stories related to holidays, commemorative occasions, and the season sell well. Interviews with interesting people always find an audience.

When writing a query letter, your best bet is to keep it short and interesting. Your goal is to get the editor to call you. Once you're on the phone with the editor, you explain your concept and sell your idea.

— Richard Kapit, MD

Chapter Scholarship Program Established

The Mid-Atlantic Chapter Scholarship Program is in the final stage of development, with plans to present the first awards at the chapter's 2004 spring meeting. The chapter will award a \$500 scholarship for the 2004-2005 school year to the top applicant and a one-year complimentary AMWA membership to a runner-up.

The scholarship program is designed both to help support students enrolled in academic programs that lead to a career in medical writing and to draw more students into AMWA by heightening awareness of the organization and its opportunities for professional development.

The scholarship program will be promoted this fall by distributing brochures and applications to colleges and universities in Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, DC, that offer undergraduate programs in technical or medical writing, journalism, or health sciences.

To be eligible for the scholarship program, a student must be a sophomore or junior, have an interest in medical writing, and have an overall GPA of at least 3.0. In addition to the application, two letters of recommendation from professors and a 500-word essay on their medical or technical writing career plans or goals are required.

The scholarship program was developed under the leadership of Cindy Hamilton, PharmD, ELS, chair of the scholarship committee. Other members of the committee were Lori Alexander, MTPW; Michael Altus, PhD, ELS; Julie Longlet; and Lynn O'Connell. Cindy has stepped down as chair of this committee, having assumed the position of Treasurer of AMWA. The committee thanks Cindy for her commitment to this program and welcomes the new chair of the scholarship committee, Lori Alexander.

Chapter members can help to ensure the success of the scholarship program by

- ◆ Suggesting appropriate schools in the mid-Atlantic region at which to promote the scholarship program.
- ◆ Joining the scholarship committee, which currently needs at least two new members.
- ◆ Promoting the program by getting the word out to students you know or to schools in your area.

To suggest schools, volunteer for the committee, or ask questions about the scholarship program, please send an email to Lori Alexander (alexandl@asco.org).

– Lori Alexander, MTPW

Mid-Atlantic Chapter Board of Directors 2003-04

President

Tamia Karpeles, ELS

410-544-0216

tamiak@comcast.net

President-Elect

Susan Tamborini, MS, MBA

202-333-2552

s.tamborini@verizon.net

Treasurer

Maryalice Ditzler

800-257-5529

ditzlerm@cadmus.com

Secretary

Rachel E. Preston, PharmD

804-968-4724

rprx@yahoo.com

Board Members

Lori L. Alexander, MTPW

703-299-1183

alexandl@asco.org

Bruce B. Dan, MD

301-320-2122

drbbd@aol.com

Janice Deal, ELS

703-691-3090

jdeal@Ideal-Services.com

Elaine A. Richman, PhD

410-664-4485

erichman@erols.com

Immediate Past President

Susan J. Atlas, PhD

410-740-0086

sja25@cornell.edu

Quill Editor

Eleanor Mayfield, ELS, ELM Communications

301-681-8977

elmayfield@radix.net

Quill Design and Layout

Jenifer F. Walker, MA, Cartref Communications

540-338-4120

editor@cartrefcomm.com

Lessons Learned from an Annual Conference

The 2003 AMWA annual conference and Hurricane Isabel arrived almost simultaneously. The hurricane is now history (thank goodness), but the lessons learned from the Miami conference will never be forgotten.

1. Nothing can keep AMWA members away from an annual conference. A total of 770 people—including more than 40 members of the Mid-Atlantic Chapter—registered for the Miami conference, making it the third largest conference since 1996.

2. Plan ahead. A week before the conference, AMWA members wondered where the hurricane would strike. What would happen if it came ashore in Miami? Would the conference be canceled? Experience with 9/11 and the 2001 Norfolk conference inspired AMWA's staff to develop a detailed management plan for crises like hurricanes. Fortunately, we did not have to activate the plan in Miami, but many resourceful AMWA members worked together to ensure the conference's success.

3. Take advantage of local talent. Many volunteers are needed to organize the annual conference and fulfill obligations so that none of the sessions have to be canceled. The following Mid-Atlantic Chapter members deserve special recognition:

♦ Maryalice Ditzler, Edie Stern, and Eve Wilson,

who led workshops

♦ Janice Deal and Lynn Limon, who conducted open sessions

♦ Lori Alexander, Lisa Dwyer, Norman Grossblatt, and Edie Stern, who led breakfast roundtables

4. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Mid-Atlantic Chapter president-elect Susan Tamborini was determined to reach Miami. She caught a late-night flight to Charlotte and, with little time to make her connection, thought she had boarded the plane to her final destination. No one was more surprised than Susan when she landed at La Guardia Airport! Early the next morning, she boarded the right plane and arrived in Miami, missing only one educational session.

5. Stay in touch. Thanks to Hurricane Isabel, some Mid-Atlantic Chapter members were unable to reach Miami. As soon as Howard Smith learned that the hurricane might be headed toward his home, he alerted conference planners and faxed his teaching materials to Miami so that a substitute could teach his workshop. Open-sessions coordinator Gayle Scott did her homework before the conference, and all five of her sessions took place smoothly.

– *Written by a grateful annual conference coordinator,
Cindy W. Hamilton, PharmD, ELS*

Eleanor Mayfield
10227 Green Holly Terrace
Silver Spring, MD 20902

