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Career Conversations: Contract and Freelance Medical Writing

Hi Frieda! Thank you for taking the time to chat with me about your career journey! I came across your profile on LinkedIn while researching medical writing and you were the first person to pop up! I'd love to hear more about how you've made it your career!

1. Tell us about yourself (school, graduation date, etc):

I attended the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio for pharmacy school where I was a member of the inaugural class and graduated in 2010. I also hold undergraduate degrees in biochemistry and Spanish from the University of Texas at Austin.

2. What was your first job out of school?

Answering this question depends on which school you're referencing since pharmacy was a second career for me. My first career out of pharmacy school was working as a community pharmacist for a small, regional grocery store chain serving predominantly rural communities. Before pharmacy, I had a brief stint as a chemist for an aerospace company that specialized in overhauling and repairing turbine jet engines.

3. You're a full-time writer now, how did you get interested in medical writing?

As a child, I always enjoyed writing and was in English for the Gifted & Talented. I won first place in a writing contest in the first grade and published a poem in the fifth—long before self-publishing became mainstream.

Believe it or not, I actually fantasized about writing for magazines I liked to read (many of which have since folded) as well as writing novels and children's books. However, as I got older, the "you-can-be-anything-you-want-to-be" encouragement talk they always give young children shifted to a "yeah-I-know-I-said-that-but-this-is-how-the-real-world-works" narrative. I was told that nobody really writes for a living, and if so, they do it after they retire or have made a living in a more stable industry like Alex Haley, Frank McCourt, or Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Growing up in a small town with very limited resources in a pre-Google and pre-ubiquitous internet era, my ability to research other options was minimal, and I ended up abandoning the dream of writing. During my last year of high school, I also tabled pursuing my passion for art because of the push towards graphic design. Since I had an affinity for science and also enjoyed it, too, I picked the next best thing.

It wasn't until my second internship with Procter & Gamble during pharmacy school when one of my projects exposed me medical writing did I begin to re-explore pursuing my dream. Because writing can be technical as well as creative, I feel extremely lucky to gain the best of both worlds.

4. When you were starting out your career as a PharmD, did you know that medical writing was a path you could take or was available to you?

As a PharmD student, I was not aware until my second internship with P&G during the summer of 2008. As a PharmD graduate, yes, I was aware. I landed my first magazine article the year before I graduated.

5. How did you make the pivot into medical writing? What was the process like?

That is a very convoluted story, but here is the short answer: I initially tried to freelance while still practicing, but the long hours and pace made it hard to pursue. Then, when I would get projects, I found they took much longer to complete because I had to literally turn my pharmacy brain "off" in order to turn my writing brain "on." After burning out from in managed care, I began scaling up my pursuit of writing. The slow transition helped me to recover from burnout while building my confidence in a new career.

6. Can you share with us what it was like earlier on in your medical writing career... were your pitching to publications? How did you know who to pitch to?

I tried many things—publications, more traditional medical writing roles where you're more likely to see pharmacists such as those that had a pharmaceutical tie, etc.. I didn't necessarily want to limit myself in the early stages because I began to see how diverse the industry is when it comes to the types of writing you can do.

7. As a new grad who has been job searching, I'm finding it difficult to be qualified enough for any role and I'm constantly told I have no experience, am not qualified, or aren't an expert... how did you approach this when entering the writing space?

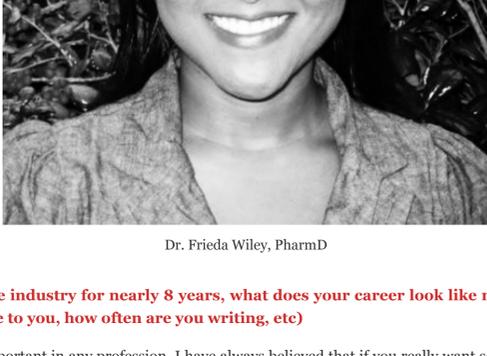
That's a great question. How I would respond really depends on the feedback I get and the way it's delivered, but in general, I always try to demonstrate tangential skills or provide examples of other things I've done that illustrate my competence. I think the most important thing above all is to portray your confidence. After all, if you don't believe in yourself, why should anybody else.

8. Medical writing appeals to many different disciplines, you don't necessarily have to be a pharmacist. Have you found it difficult to find a role because you're a PharmD or feel like you lose opportunities to PhD, MDs, or other professionals?

Yes and no. To your question above, sometimes, I still miss out on opportunities because I either don't have "enough experience" or I don't have the exact skill set they are seeking. As a freelancer, rejection is a very real and common part of the process. Someone will always tell you know. If you give up or let that deter you, you will not be successful.

9. I love transparency and understanding what goes into the process or the hustle. When did you get your first article published and which one was it? Are you willing to share that story with us?

Technically, the first thing I ever published was a poem in the 5th grade called, "Every Time." I published my first magazine article in the fall of 2009, the semester before I graduated from pharmacy school. I'm not sure if this counts, but I also "published" some pamphlets and handouts I created for an association and while on rotation with the Indian Health Services.



Dr. Frieda Wiley, PharmD

10. After being in the industry for nearly 8 years, what does your career look like now? (do you pitch to people, do they come to you, how often are you writing, etc)

While networking is important in any profession, I have always believed that if you really want something, you should go after it. After all, who knows who you are and what you want better than you? So, that said, yes, I still pitch. And yes, sometimes, I still get told "no," and I'm okay with that. However, yes, I do get referrals and have people reach out to me.

To your second point: I'm in a full-time contract role right now, and writing is a daily requirement. When I manage multiple clients, sometimes, writing takes a back seat to administrative tasks and other duties.

11. For someone who is looking to get published or get into writing, what advice do you have for them?

Ask yourself: What kind of writing would I like to do? Am I open to doing writing that does in which my name may not appear on the content? How can I learn more about different types of writing? How do I handle feedback? Also, one of the most important questions is: Why am I doing this? I say that because again, rejection is a big part of writing (especially with pitching), so it's not for the faint of heart. No matter how long you've been doing it, there will always be a time when writing might challenge you in a way that makes you question why you're doing it. During those times of doubt, it's your passion that keeps you going. If you aren't truly passionate about it, you'll be more likely to give up. Perhaps I'm embellishing a bit, but I equate the process to actors auditioning for a role. You have to have a develop a thick skin

12. What publications do you often pitch to or work with? What do you mostly write about?

I've worked with a variety of publications over the years—too many to name. I mainly write about medicine, pharmacy, and health. I occasionally write about history. I've been writing for Drug Topics and WebMD for nearly 3 years.

13. In your experience, do you think it is difficult for PharmD's to tap into this space?

Yes and no. I say yes because the market for traditional roles has become so saturated that it has caused many PharmDs to consider other areas they may not otherwise have. Depending on the role you're going for, you have to be prepared to answer tough questions. I say no because I firmly believe a PharmD is highly marketable for the simple fact that training masks us master communicators with a broad knowledge base. The knowledge I acquired in pharmacy school as well as my experience in patient care translate into so much of the work I do every single day

14. When you write an article or if you're asked to write something, do you ever need to do extra research to become an expert on the topic? What reputable resources do you use for your research?

Absolutely, and this question raises an excellent point. Many types of writing, including medical writing, require research, and some of it can be quite intense. While some projects may require more extensive research than others, it also depends on your familiarity with the content, too. If you don't like doing research, medical writing might not be quite a fit—and that's okay. There are some other types of writing, such as certain business writing, that require a softer set of skills

15. What are some hardships that come with your job/ medical writing?

As with any role, work-life balance can be a challenge, but you have to stay vigilant and define your boundaries based on your personal situation and comfort zone.

Also, freelance work, in particular, can be very "feast or famine." You have to be prepared and plan ahead because sometimes, work may dry up suddenly and then other times you're so busy you find yourself burning the midnight oil.

16. Best piece of advice for pharmacy students?

Be open to exploring fields you've never considered. And don't immediately say no to something about which you know nothing because you never know whether you'll like it or how it may inform your future decisions. For example, I had absolutely zero knowledge of regulatory affairs when I landed my first internship with P&G, and that was one of the main reasons I accepted the opportunity. I figured if I delved into a field in which I was absolutely clueless, then I would learn a ton—and I did. The added bonus is that if I had declined that opportunity, I probably wouldn't have stumbled upon medical writing—or not until much later on in my career.

Also, don't be afraid to do something that seems random or unconventional. Yes, the market may have changed, but it's during times of adversity and challenge that you stand to experience the most growth. The good thing is that you are earning a credential that is highly versatile. How you exploit that versatility is entirely up to you.

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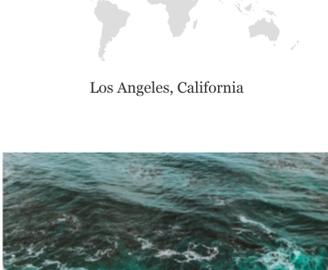
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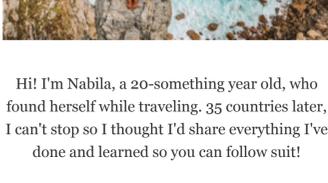
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