AMWA freelance survey 2018 feedback

An online survey developed in SurveyMonkey was used to ask AMWA members about their current freelance rates. The 10–item survey contained categorical items, some of which also allowed for open-ended responses. Three items allowed only for open-ended responses.

In October 2018, all AMWA members were emailed an invitation to complete the survey. The survey was promoted in emails to AMWA members, on the AWMA Facebook page, and on the AMWA website. A reminder to complete the survey was sent in December 2018.

This report is based on the responses received from the 31 AMWA members who completed the survey.

Survey results

Geographical location of survey respondents (31 responses)

Most survey respondents (71.0%) reported that they live along the eastern coast of Australia (Table 1). The remaining respondents live in New Zealand (19.4%) or Western Australia (9.7%). No respondents reported living in ACT, Northern Territory, or Tasmania.

Table 1: Geographical location of residence of survey respondents

	n (%)
New South Wales	11 (35.5)
Victoria	8 (25.8)
New Zealand	6 (19.4)
Queensland	3 (9.7)
Western Australia	3 (9.7)

Years working as a freelance medical writer (31 responses)

Just over half of the respondents (52%) reported they had worked as a freelance medical writer for 5 years or less (Table 2).

Table 2: Years spent working as a freelancer medical writer

	n (%)
0 to 5 years	16 (52.0)
6 to 10 years	8 (26.0)
11 to 15 years	2 (6.5)
16 to 20 years	2 (6.5)
More than 20 years	3 (10.0)

Hours per week spent working for clients as a medical writer (excluding administrative tasks and other non-billable hours) (31 responses)

Close to two-thirds of respondents (64.5%) reported working 10 to 30 billable hours a week (Table 3). Only 6 (19.3%) reported working more than 30 billable hours a week, and only 5 (16.1%) reported working fewer than 10 billable hours a week.

Table 3: Hours per week spent on billable medical writing work

	n (%)
Up to 10 hours	5 (16.1)
10-20 hours	9 (29.0)
20-30 hours	11 (35.5)
30-40 hours	5 (16.1)
Over 40 hours	1 (3.2)

Clients AMWA members work for (31 responses)

Multiple responses were allowed for this item. The most frequently reported clients were Communications/marketing/advertising agency, Healthcare organisation/provider, and Pharmaceutical company (Table 4). Seven respondents used the Other field to report they worked for the following clients:

- Medical not-for-profit
- Publishers in Australia and internationally
- Health charity, health app, natural health products, healthcare software
- Publication in the biopharma/medical device space
- Supplements company
- Medical software company
- Peak industry body for horticulture

Table 4: Clients freelance medical writers work for

	n (%)
Association or professional society	6 (19.4)
Biotechnology company	4 (12.9)
Clinical or contract research organisation	1 (3.2)
Communications/marketing/advertising agency	11 (35.5)
Digital agency	1 (3.2)
Government	4 (12.9)
Healthcare organisation/provider	10 (32.3)
Individual author/researcher	6 (19.4)
Medical device company	7 (22.6)
Medical education company	5 (16.1)
Pharmaceutical company	10 (32.3)
Research or education organisation	6 (19.4)
Translating company	2 (6.5)
University	6 (19.4)

Services provided as a freelancer (31 responses)

Multiple responses were allowed for this item. The most frequently reported services provided were editing, scientific publication work, and copywriter (Table 5). Three respondents used the Other field to report they provided the following services as a freelancer:

- Clinical practice guidelines
- Articles: financial, investment of life sciences, medical technology, biotechnology and other industries
- Content/journalism

Table 5: Services provided as a freelancer

	n (%)
Editing (including copy editing, proofreading and indexing)	23 (74.2)
Scientific Publications (journal articles, chapters in books)	18 (58.1)
Copywriting	16 (51.6)
Consumer (print or digital)	15 (48.4)
Research support (systematic reviews, literature reviews)	14 (45.2)
Slide kit	12 (38.7)
Poster presentations	9 (29.0)
Meeting services (conducting, coverage, planning, reporting)	9 (29.0)
Continuing Medical Education or similar (CME/CPD)	7 (22.6)
Marketing/advertising	7 (22.6)
Project management	6 (19.4)
Regulatory writing	4 (12.9)
Translating	1 (3.2)

Strategy for charging for freelance jobs (31 responses)

The most frequently reported strategy (61.3%) for charging for freelance jobs was by unit of time (hour or day) (Table 6). Only single-choice responses were allowed for this item, so one respondent used the Other field to report they use all three strategies to charge for freelance jobs. A second respondent used the Other field to report they charge different fees for different clients, usually on a per hour and per word basis.

Table 6: Strategy for charging for freelance jobs

	n (%)
By unit of time (hour or day)	19 (61.3)
By the job (fixed fee)	9 (29.0)
By unit of work (word or page)	1 (3.2)

Standard/average hourly rate for freelance jobs (31 responses)

Free text responses to this item only were allowed. Information about currency and GST was not directly elicited. As such, Australian dollars have been assumed where a currency was not been specified. Where rates were given as a range (e.g. $50–90), the mean value (e.g. $70) has been reported in Table 7. Please note that this item did not ask what freelance service (e.g., writing, editing, translating, etc) respondents perform at these rates.

Table 7: Rates given in Australian dollars

Australia — hourly rate	n
$A70 to $A89	7
$A90 to $A109	6
$A110 to $A129	4
$A130 to $A149	2
$A150 to $A180	4
$250	1
Australia — per word rate	**n**
$1 per word	1

Five respondents gave hourly rates in New Zealand dollars:
- $NZ100 ($A95) [n=1]
- $NZ115 ($A110) [n=2]
- $NZ120 ($A115) [n=2]

One respondent gave their hourly and per word rates in US dollars:
- $US 150 per hour ($A212)
- $US 1 to $2 per word ($A1.41 to $A2.82)

Currency conversions based on 1 NZD = 0.954229 AUD; 1 USD = 1.40861 AUD (rates on 24/01/2019 — https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter).

Strategies freelancers use to determine rate to charge (30 responses)

Free text responses to this item only were allowed. Three respondents said they did not vary their freelance relative to client/industry/project or by service offered. The remaining responses are presented below — please note that it was not unusual for respondents to report more than one method of determining rate, so some individual's responses have been split across the categories they represent.

Interestingly, only two respondents reported they determined their rate by when they had last increased their fees or by the deadline of the job. Only one respondent reported they did not have a strategy for determining their freelance rates: *Yes. I don't have a pricing strategy, I make it up as I go. I'd love to have a standard fee schedule set up by AMWA that I could quote*.

Mostly, respondents determined their rate by one or both of the following:
- type of work
- type of client.

Type of work
- *Research, interviews, writing is charged higher than copy editing and proofreading.*
- *Yes, by difficulty level. Writing is charged more than translation*
- *I'm still working this out, but I would charge more for writing from scratch than for editing,*

- *Yes, amount of lead-up research required*
- *Varies depending whether project is ongoing, how much research needs to be done*
- *Yes, depending on the type of work*
- *Projects for large organisations or government often involve more meetings and admin time, which is reflected in the time I allocate to the project.*
- *Generally, I try to work out how long it will take altogether and use my hourly/day rate to determine a project fee.*

Type of client — budget of client, country of client, regularity of client business
- *Usually slightly higher for pharma industry clients*
- *Varies by country — US and UK businesses can support a higher hourly rate than NZ-based businesses. I don't vary rates by project type*
- *Only variation is the exchange rate — I work for British and European agencies*
- *NZ clients pay less — $NZ80 is the going rate*
- *Yes. More for private*
- *Yes — cheaper for private authors than for industry*
- *Yes, and depends on the client's size*
- *Yes. Their budget.*
- *More for large organisations, less for individuals. Sometimes rates are set, with no variation — all or nothing.*
- *By client type and their location — lower rates for small, NZ clients and higher rates for overseas/pharma/medical device clients.*
- *charge companies more than not-for-profit etc*
- *Academic, small companies 100 per hour Large companies 150 per hour Large corporations 170 per hour*
- *Yes, regular client*
- *for profit or not-for-profit are factors*
- *Yes, charge approx 10% more for international clients*
- *Yes, depending on budget for some*
- *I drop it a little when working for not-for-profit groups.*
- *Yes, editing is sometimes charged per word depending on client (e.g., I subcontract to Oxford Scientific Editing)*

Time since last fee increase
- *time since we last increased our fee*

Timeline of freelance job
- *deadlines (charge more if it's a rush job)*

Source of clientele (31 responses)

Multiple responses were allowed. Word of mouth was clearly the most common source of clientele: 23 (85.2%) of respondents selected this response (Table 8). Six respondents used the Other field to report they source clients through the following:

- *Existing clients refer me to others, or take me with them to a new agency*
- *Pitching/regular clients*
- *Google (SEO)*
- *Existing clients from employed medical writing experience*
- *Freelancers who used to work for me*
- *I go chasing them!*

Table 8: Source of clientele

	n (%)
Word of mouth	26 (83.9%)
LinkedIn	12 (38.7%)
Your own website	11 (35.5%)
AMWA 'Find a Writer' Page	10 (32.3%)
Other (see below)	5 (18.5%)
Social media	4 (12.9%)

Other comments and thoughts from experience as a freelancer

Ten respondents provided comment:

- *Always add in a few extra hours to your proposal to cover the unexpected if you don't use them don't bill them. Remember to include the number of rounds of corrections you will allow for editing etc in the proposal*
- *Don't charge less than $100/hour*
- *It's been so helpful to refer to AMWA's standard fee range and the Clever Copywriting School's rates page when negotiating rates with clients.*
- *I try to make sure that no more than 60% of my business is with a single client as I have been stung in the past by being overly dependent on a single client. I have a handful of smaller, reliable clients that make up the other 40% and they have often helped me through tougher times when larger clients have messed around by not paying invoices on time*
- *In the niche I work in (providing scientific writing [journal articles, training kits, congress posters/presentations] it's who you know rather than advertising or cold calling ... it's word of mouth referrals that get me new work, and the best thing is to get on the books with one big healthcare communications agency. I'm still working for the same company I was employed by 16 years ago in London, although I have worked for a number of different agencies both in Australia and Europe, in between. The bottom line is — do a good job on every job and clients will continue to use you and refer you to other teams within their own company. If you're looking to break into this market, the best time of year to cold call is from about September to December, when the agencies are desperately scrounging around for writers.*
- *Invoices — pay within 14 days and do not do a second project if not paid for the first. Each client is different, so fees differ for the job at hand*
- *Nail the brief first to avoid issues*

- *Never accept the first rate. Always ask if there is room for negotiation!*
- *Raise rates gradually*
- *I find it important to be transparent about who you have worked for and any conflicts of interest that may arise — often this gains respect with potential clients.*

Summary
AMWA is grateful for the 31 members who completed this survey. Although responses cannot to be assumed to be representative of all AMWA members, they do provide an indication of the most commonly practices used by freelancers. In summary, respondents tended to report they:
- charge by unit of time (hour or day)
- use word of mouth as their source of clientele
- provide one (or more) of the following services: editing, scientific publication work, copywriting
- work for clients in the following industries: Communications/marketing/advertising agency, Healthcare organisation/provider, and Pharmaceutical company
- use a combination of strategies (usually type of work and type of client) to determine freelance rates to charge.

No responses were received from medical writers based in ACT, NT, or Tasmania. Given the online nature of many medical writing positions, geographical location of the writer is somewhat irrelevant. However, it would still be interesting to know of any variations in these states/territories.

AMWA exists for the benefits of its members, so it was pleasing to note that 10 (32.3%) members reported the AMWA Find a Writer webpage is a source of clientele for their business. One respondent also reported they found it *helpful to refer to AMWA's standard fee range and the Clever Copywriting School's rates page when negotiating rates with clients*. Another respondent stated they did not have a pricing strategy and that they would *love to have a standard fee schedule set up by AMWA that [they] could quote*.

To provide even greater insight into freelance rates, future AMWA freelance surveys should include the following items:
- whether freelancer requires a milestone payment
- whether (and how often) freelancer has issues receiving payment for a completed job
- whether freelancer includes GST in their rates (this was reported inconsistently by respondents in this survey)
- which currency respondent is giving their rates in (as noted, $A has been assumed where not indicated)
- whether freelancer uses a contract for their jobs.

Finally, it is recommended that findings of the AMWA freelance survey are reported at the AMWA annual conference. Issues relating to payment (what to charge, how to receive payment, etc) are of relevance and concern to medical writers individually and as a collective body, and as such should be presented and discussed in an open forum.