

# Training Indian medical writers to meet global English language requirements: Editage's experience in India

Elvira D'souza, Manager—Medical Writing Services, Editage, Cactus Communications Pvt. Ltd., Mumbai, India. Phone 91-22-6714 8888; E-mail: [elvirad@editage.com](mailto:elvirad@editage.com)

## Introduction

India is emerging as an attractive destination for outsourcing medical writing work given the availability of a large English-educated talent pool here. However, medical communication and pharmaceutical companies, specifically those from the US, outsourcing their writing work to India are sometimes dissatisfied with our use of English. Although almost all our medical writers are college-educated and speak English, they find it difficult to write the more direct American sentences. Their understanding of the nuances of the English language is limited to what they learn up to high school. At the graduate level, the focus shifts to learning "Science," and there is little or no focus on developing their English language skills further.

## What Do Clients Expect When They Outsource Their Medical Writing Work?

Any client who outsources medical writing work expects the following:

- Cost-effectiveness
- Adherence to timelines
- Therapeutic area knowledge
- Confidentiality of data
- Compliance with specified guidelines and regulatory requirements
- Grammatically & technically correct language
- Appropriate quality check systems and processes

## The Problem

The English taught in our schools is essentially British English. We learn grammar from British textbooks like Wren & Martin. Many phrases that the British may consider antiquated are still popular in India. As a result, our written English appears archaic and convoluted to the American audience. Indian English also abounds in colloquialisms. The incorrect use of prepositions (pay attention on, discuss about, etc.), the use of the indefinite article "a" before words starting with vowels, and the omission of the definite article are only some of the issues. Most may argue that knowing the nuances of English grammar is not important as long as the science is appropriately conveyed. Not many of the medical writers we employ have the inclination to learn grammar. Employing technically qualified writers with English skills matching those of their American peers is difficult and has a severe impact on recruitment.

## Views about outsourcing to India

*"I have yet to see a foreign-based service that matches the style of good American-based speech or writing. No matter how many years the provider has been using English, it is bulky, archaic, and out of synch. Grammatically correct for the most part, but stiff and pretentious."* (Source: American Medical Writers Association listserves)

## The Challenge

Any training program designed to teach medical writers in India the nuances of the English language must help them in scientific writing. Medical writers should be able to easily correlate this learning with their work. The learning should be in the form of easy-to-apply logical rules. Due to the time constraints on training vis-à-vis job productivity, the system must provide trainees with on-the-job feedback and identify developmental areas. To be effective, this assessment system must also be objective.



## Language Training: The Editage Model

Editage offers medical writing and English editing services. Given the time constraints associated with medical writing assignments, it is not always possible for our editors to edit the work of our medical writers. From the viewpoint of being competitive with regard to productivity and turnaround time, it is necessary to train our writers in the nuances of the English language in order to ensure that their documents meet client requirements and to enable them to self-edit their work during crunched timelines.

## Objective of Training

To ensure that medical writers and editors are trained in advanced English grammar that can be applied to clinical documentation

## Training Elements

The training program, developed by in-house English language experts, guides our medical writers through specific modules on important components of the English language and specifically covers examples in medicine. Our training program includes, among other modules,

- Use of commas (sentence commas, adjective commas, arbitrary commas, etc.)
- Article usage
- Word choice
- Prepositions
- Differences between American and British English

### Examples

#### COMMAS IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

A comma may be used to separate unspaced amino acid symbols in amino acid residues. There should be no space after such commas.

Example

***Asp-His-Pro-(Gly,Phe,Tyr)-Lys***

*Note: The three-letter codes correspond to different amino acids. For example, "His" is the code for the amino acid histidine.*

Use a comma to separate unspaced locants (letters and numbers identifying the location of an atom or group in a molecule) in chemical formulas.

***5-difluoro-2-nitroaniline  
N,N,N',N'-tetramethyldiaminomethane***

#### WORD CHOICE (IN INFECTIOUS CONDITIONS)

It is important to distinguish between the infectious agent and the condition. Infectious agents, infections, and diseases are not equivalent:

✗ ***Chlamydia trachomatis is often an overlooked infection.***

✓ ***Chlamydia trachomatis infection is often overlooked.***

#### ARTICLE USAGE

By convention, the definite article is inserted before specific anatomical structures.

Example

✗ ***Coronary angiography performed 1 year after CABG demonstrated occlusion of right coronary artery.***

✓ ***Coronary angiography performed 1 year after CABG demonstrated occlusion of the right coronary artery.***

#### SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

The binomial taxonomic term is always singular.

Example

***Escherichia coli was isolated and identified by.....***  
[but]  
***E. coli strains were...***

When spelled out, the word "species" may take either the singular or the plural form.  
***This species is highly subdivided.***  
***The species are mostly very similar to one another, morphologically and ecologically.***

## Quantitative Measure of English Language Quality

We have developed a quality assessment system that helps us meet the following objectives:

- To have a quantitative or objective basis to evaluate the English language proficiency of our writers and editors, in addition to other things
- To have a means of ensuring that our clients can receive a certain minimum quality guarantee and that the same or better quality standard can be maintained across all assignments that we send out
- To provide our writers and editors with quantitative feedback about their work
- To identify specific individual and team training needs

## Quality Check Metric: Errors per thousand words [EPTW]

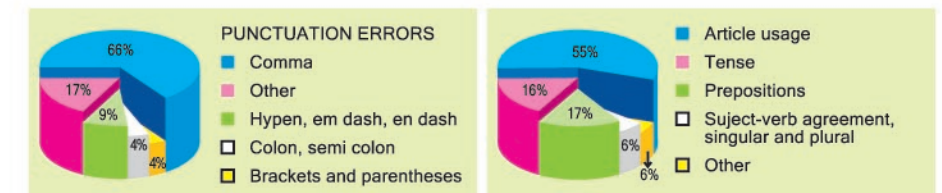
## Language Error Categories

Category	Subcategories	Error Type
Language	Grammar, punctuation, word/phrase choice, sentence construction	Errors related to subject-verb agreement, tense, preposition, article usage, commas, dashes, dangling modifiers, etc.

## Quality Reports

Each writer receives a report that lists the errors in the main categories of the quality-checked jobs and the average score represented by the EPTW.

The reports also contain pie charts that show the distribution of errors in the categories and subcategories.



## BELS Certification

In addition to our internal systems, we felt the need to allow our writers and editors to obtain external certifications that would convince our clients of our skill sets. This led us to start discussions with the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS), and they will be conducting their first certification exam in India in November 2008. Many of our writers and editors will be taking the BELS exam.

## Outcomes of Our Approach

- Our approach is counter-intuitive in that it trains medical writers in the nuances of the English language despite the general perception that this is a difficult task to achieve
- Proof that this system works is reflected in our positive client feedback

*"During the years 2006 and 2007, our company had the opportunity to evaluate the competency and professionalism of medical writers within India. The result of this evaluation was pretty good and we decided to outsource several other documents to Editage, resulting in consistent quality and respect for timelines." AP*