

# AMWA MID-AMERICA

**Winter 2016**



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# A Note from the Editor

Magdalena Berry, MA

Dear Chapter Members,

Greetings!

We hope you are enjoying some time off during this holiday season!

This issue of our chapter newsletter includes a report on the St. Louis Freelance luncheon series and minutes from the recent Chapter Officers meeting. I've also contributed a brief description of how I developed the course I teach at Missouri State. I'm grateful to AMWA's educational programs and to its members, who were, and are, extraordinarily generous with their insight and expertise, for my success.

You can find more information about the chapter and some other resources for writers at our chapter web site: [www.amwa-midamerica.org](http://www.amwa-midamerica.org)

As always, feel free to send me any suggestions or contributions for this newsletter.

Magdalena Berry

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## Chapter Officers

**President:** Rona Clair Grunspan, MD

**Treasurer:** Leslie Neistadt, ELS

**Secretary:** Linda Landon, PhD

**Membership chair:** Laura Sheppard, MA

**Kansas City events coordinator**

**Newsletter chair:** Magdalena Berry, MA

**Webmaster:** Lisa M. Balbes, PhD

**St. Louis Freelance Luncheon Coordinators:**

Lisa M. Balbes, PhD, Joanne M. McAndrews,  
PhD

# St. Louis-area Freelance Luncheon Series: TechWrite STL

Joanne McAndrews, PhD

Lisa Balbes, PhD



The TechWrite STL group continues to hold bi-monthly lunch meetings. At most meetings, a topic of interest to freelance medical and technical writers is presented by a member and discussed by the group, usually over lunch at a local restaurant.

At the November meeting, Lisa Balbes and Joanne McAndrews presented a summary of topics covered during the past 10 years of TechWrite STL meetings, and solicited feedback on the future of the group. Those present agreed that the current format of five lunch roundtables per year and one dinner with a guest speaker per year was working well. In addition, there was interest in a field trip each May to learn more about St. Louis-area organizations that use or need technical

and medical writers as well as visits to other places of interest to those in the field. Attendees brainstormed a list of topics and speakers for future meetings.

Upcoming luncheons include “Getting Those Difficult Interviews” by Mary Jo Blackwood on January 10, 2017 and a presentation by a local financial planner in March 2017.

Lisa Balbes and Joanne McAndrews have been co-organizing the group since September 2006, when it was formed as a merger of the local AMWA and STC-CIC groups. A schedule of upcoming luncheons can be found on our chapter website (<http://www.amwa-midamerica.org/index.html>). A complete list of past topics, as well as handouts, is available on the History tab on that website.

## Meet a New Member: Valerie McDavid

Valerie is a graduate of Washington University, periodontist, full time active duty Army, stationed at Ft Leonard Wood. She is very interested in getting into medical writing, especially academic articles. She is also very interested in developing CE courses, especially online versions.

She is hoping to attend the January luncheon in St. Louis, and adds,

“I hope I can bring something to the group and I know I will gain a great deal from meeting with you all as well.”

Welcome, Valerie!

# AMWA Mid-America Officers' Meeting Minutes from November 07, 2016

The meeting was called to order at 2 pm by chapter president, Rona Claire Grunspan. Six members were present, including Rona Claire Grunspan, Lisa Balbes, Joanne McAndrews, Linda Landon, Laura Sheppard, and Leslie Neistadt.

## **Events in St. Louis**

The St. Louis TechWriteSTL Freelance group is continuing to organize the St. Louis-area Freelance Luncheon Series every other month to discuss topics of interest to freelance medical/technical writers in the St. Louis, MO area. The November 2016 and January 2017 speakers are engaged. At the November meeting, Joanne McAndrews and Lisa Balbes will lead a retrospective analysis of what this group has done over the last 10 years, followed by a discussion of where the group should go in the future. The speaker for the September 2017 annual chapter dinner has been arranged but other 2017 meetings have not been finalized. Joanne McAndrews and Lisa Balbes continue to organize the events. For information on TechWriteSTL activities, please visit <http://www.amwa-midamerica.org/>.

## **Events in Kansas City**

Rona Claire Grunspan is working with Laura Long to plan events in Kansas City for 2017. Contact Rona Claire Grunspan ([ronaclaire@gmail.com](mailto:ronaclaire@gmail.com)) if you or someone you know is interested in organizing an event in Kansas City.

## **Treasurer's update**

Leslie Neistadt provided an update of our chapter checking and savings account balances.

## **Newsletter**

Magdalena Berry published the fall chapter newsletter.

## **New members**

Laura Sheppard reported on new members. The chapter has one new member.

## **AMWA Medical Writing & Communication Conference**

Members activities at the annual convention were discussed. The annual chapter dinner at the conference was well-attended and fun.

## **Housekeeping**

*Chapter Officer Meetings*—The next Chapter Officers Call will be January 9, 2016 at 2 pm Central/3 pm Eastern via WebEx.

*Minutes*—The September 2016 minutes were approved.

*AMWA Chapter Leader Calls*—The Chapter Officers meeting are held on the first Mondays of every month at 10 am CST. Members have volunteered to attend the November and December of 2016 meetings and the January and February of 2017 meetings.

The meeting adjourned at 2:26 pm.  
Signed,  
Linda A. Landon, PhD. ELS

# “Writing in the Health Professions”: Notes on Designing a Course

Magdalena Berry, MA

Around 2005, which frankly doesn't seem that long ago, I volunteered to teach a course on “medical writing” as part of the professional/technical writing program at Missouri State. After all, I'd been reading doctors' literary work related to medicine for years, beginning with a memorable article by Richard Selzer in which he described a Tibetan physician diagnosing a heart murmur by feeling a patient's pulse. While I had a vague idea that this interest would be relevant, I had no idea what was meant by “medical writing.” Thanks to AMWA, I do now. Here, I briefly describe the process of building my course.

One of my colleagues, Marianthe Karanikas, who had friends in the industry, told me to join AMWA right away, and I did. Then, as they say, my troubles began. “Medical writing,” I discovered, encompasses an enormous depth and breadth of knowledge, as indicated by the course offerings in AMWA's various certificate programs. There seemed to be two major categories of classes: those that enhanced scientist's abilities to write (punctuation, structure of scientific papers), and those that provided writers with specific subject area knowledge (the endocrine system or developments in regulatory writing).

All right. I had to get a handle on my topic. But I also had to figure out how to design a new course from scratch. Generally, when you teach a course at the university level, you have some prior experience with the

material, or you can reference other similar courses. This was not the case for me. I found very little online that I could reference with regard to undergraduate courses in technical writing programs. How much science did my writing students need to know? More to the point, how much did I have to learn in order to provide substantive content? What would the course content look like?

I spent a few years preparing to teach the course: shepherding it through the university's approval system, locating a text, creating a syllabus. I started attending AMWA conferences and began core curriculum workshops in the Editing/Writing track. Thanks to AMWA's excellent educational program, what initially seemed overwhelming became easier to conceptualize. Nonetheless, my first semester, teaching three hours weekly on Monday nights, was a disaster, and I had to re-think the course content and delivery for the next go 'round. Furthermore, after a few semesters of trial and error, I faced the additional, and considerable, task of putting the entire course online for distance learning.

Even though I had reservations about online instruction, this challenge turned out to be an opportunity. The effort of mapping out my material to work with the course management system we use at Missouri State produced a small epiphany. I had to ask a question fundamental to the writing enterprise: What's my story? In other words, what's the narrative I'm presenting in my

course? Answering that question demanded a clarity that had previously eluded me, and everything got easier. Really, the sun broke through the fog and everything got easier.

So what is the story? Technical writers take specialist information and make it accessible for non-specialist audiences. The key is “audience,” and that’s how I structure my class. We start with patients (patient education, health literacy), move on to the general public (web sites, health writing and journalism); examine science writing for medical journals, and finally, look at the pharmaceutical industry in terms of the types of writing involved. As I tell my students early in the semester, the course won’t teach them to be medical writers, but it will provide an overview, a tour, if you will, of the various audiences and genres encountered within the profession. For example, one assignment calls for them to read a published article and design a poster for it, according to best practices for scientific poster presentations.

While most of the class is comprised of English majors, it’s also an elective at Missouri State that UMKC approved for students wanting to go to the PharmD program at UMKC.

My students don’t know what “writing in the health professions” means when we start out. By the time we’re done, though, they’ve explored a field that employs their skills to communicate vital information. They’ll never look at WebMD the same way again.