

The 2025 AMWA Annual Conference: Some Highlights for Editors

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In keeping with its tagline, “The Resource for Medical Communicators,” the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) provides guidance not only in medical writing but also more broadly in medical communication. Accordingly, its annual conferences include much of interest and use to editors. The current report presents highlights of 3 sessions of the 2025 AMWA annual conference, held November 5–8 in Phoenix, Arizona.

Tips and Tricks for Solving Common Grant Proposal Pitfalls

By Katherine Hollen

This session, led by Crystal Herron, founder and chief visionary officer of Redwood Ink, provided strategies to address common issues encountered when crafting grant proposals.

Herron identified a series of problems or pitfalls and presented advice on addressing each. The advice included the following:

- If a project seems inadequately matched with the funding call, consider adjusting the scope rather than devising a different project. Keep the audience in mind; ensure that the writing is clear, simple, and targeted to reviewers.
- Tell a story that flows smoothly and logically, with details that support the main message. Avoid disjointed writing that obscures the story.

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- To maximize impact, emphasize long-term goals by bolding them. Also explicitly connect the goals to the proposal's significance.
- Present statistical analyses, such as power analyses, clearly and in sufficient detail. Differentiate biological and statistical significance. Ideally, collaborate with a statistician.
- To help the team appear prepared and strategic, identify potential pitfalls and note alternative approaches.
- Link outcomes directly to goals; failure to do so can weaken the overall message.
- Reiterate the impact statement in multiple sections of the proposal to reinforce the proposal's message.
- Build credibility by detailing personnel qualifications and roles. To save space, consider putting such information in tables.
- Promote effective formatting by using templates.
- To help ensure timely completion of the proposal, prepare a timeline and include a buffer.

Kimberly Mankiewicz, scientific editor at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, also was scheduled to speak, but she unexpectedly had to miss the session. However, she and Herron had collaborated in preparing the slides, and the content of the session reflected her input as well as Herron's.

Health-Literate, Designed Trial Results Lay Summaries

By Grace Aneska Cote

A lay summary of clinical trial results explains a study's purpose, methods, and outcomes to nonexpert audiences. As requirements for trial transparency expand, the need for such clear, accessible communication of complex research findings has become increasingly important. In this session, Matthew (Mat) Stevens and Anna Williams, both from Health Literacy Media, discussed how health literacy principles,

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paired with intentional design, can make trial results lay summaries more effective.

Stevens and Williams identified health literacy as a dynamic and evolving concept that extends beyond readability alone. They noted that approximately 40% of US adults read below the commonly cited sixth- to eighth-grade reading benchmark. They also emphasized organizational responsibility to present information understandably.

Other points included the following: Plain language is a tool—not an endpoint. Using shorter sentences, avoiding jargon, and applying thoughtful organization and design can support comprehension, but they do not themselves guarantee health literacy. Rather, health literacy is an outcome achieved when readers understand and evaluate information and use it to make meaningful decisions about their health.

The presenters outlined 4 evidence-based strategies for creating effective lay summaries. First, create a clear structure for easy navigation. Break dense text into manageable sections using consistent layout, visual hierarchy, and clear headings. To reduce cognitive burden, chunk information, minimize use of unnecessary abbreviations, and maintain consistent formatting.

Second, design to engage intentionally. Design should guide attention and signal importance rather than serve as decoration. Strategic use of color, font variation, and emphasis can highlight key messages while allowing less critical details to recede, creating a visual “language” that improves processing.

Third, present results thoughtfully. Visualize data only when doing so conveys a clear and meaningful story. Icon arrays and simple bar charts can effectively communicate risk and proportions, whereas overly complex graphics may overwhelm readers. Explain what the results mean, rather than having readers infer conclusions.

Finally, conduct audience testing. Formal and informal testing with intended audiences can reveal how the information is perceived and thus guide revision as trial communication continues to evolve.

Jam Session for Seasoned Freelancers

By Barbara Gastel

“Let’s not start with AI,” stated moderator Brian Bass, president, Bass Global, Inc, in opening this session. This

lightly moderated open discussion, with experienced freelance medical writers and editors sitting in a large circle, focused mainly on other topics. These topics included how to deal with unavailability to work, nonpaying clients, and slumps in workflow.

Early in session, the issue was raised of how to prepare for planned or unplanned unavailability to work. One participant said that before her maternity leaves, she identified for her clients some fellow freelancers she trusts. Another mentioned having instructed an employee what to do if the freelancer becomes unavailable because of an emergency. A third noted having a file, including instructions for contacting clients, for her sons to consult if she unexpectedly becomes incapacitated or dies.

For dealing with nonpaying clients—or better, preventing nonpayment—participants’ recommendations included the following: In deciding whether to pursue legal action, compare the expected legal fees and the amount of money at stake. In the contract for work, stipulate interest to pay if late. If a new client has an accounts-payable staff, contact it when accepting a project. Require payment up front or upon reaching stated milestones. Provide a discount (such as 15%) to clients who pay up front.

In 2025, reductions in the US government workforce and changes in US science policy affected the environment for freelance work. Some participants said they were having a slump year, some not. Participants offered advice for coping with or helping avoid such slumps. Among the suggestions: Touch base from time to time with entities previously providing work. Be engaged on LinkedIn. Ensure that listings in freelance directories are up to date. Have a diverse client base, to minimize effects of cutbacks by individual sources. When workflow is slow, take advantage of the time to learn new things. Create materials, such as newsletters, that can be of service and attract clients. Stay visible; in the words of one participant: “If you retreat into the mouse hole, no one will offer you cheese.”

The 2026 AMWA annual conference will be held November 4–7 in Washington, DC. For information, please see <https://www.amwa.org/page/conference>.