

## FREELANCE ROUNDTABLE

with Robert Jacoby, AMWA Journal Editor-in-Chief

What medical writer has not thought about being independent? The idea of the freelance life, and how to make it happen, conjures up images as diverse as the people you ask about it. Successful freelancers are on a different road, though, one not travelled by many, and the images they had about their work and



life in the beginning are sometimes far different from reality. In Vancouver, I met with four freelance medical writers willing to share their experiences. We talked about the business, the clients, the work, and the freelance life. I hope you find their stories just as poignant as I did, their advice just as valuable.

*Ed. Note: Contact information for each participant appears on the following page.*

**AMWA JOURNAL:** Every freelance medical writer has a story about getting started in the business. What are your stories, and what type of work do you do?

**EVANS:** It was an accident. Never in my life did I want to be independent or self-employed. I was working for a small agency in New Jersey, where I was being treated pretty poorly. So I had to get out of there. I had a good job offer from Merck, but I decided to go back to California. My former employer also offered me a promotion to come back, but I felt that would be going backward. So I thought, "Why not become a freelance?" That was 17 years ago.

My clients are primarily pharmaceutical or biotech companies, although I also work with affiliated health care and communication agencies preparing manuscripts, educational material, monographs, NDAs [new drug applications], and many other FDA submissions. I also work on sales training projects, patient education materials, and a variety of videos,

slides, exhibits, and posters. So I cover topics with a huge range of media and audience. In doing that, I often work with artists, designers, photographers, editors, proofreaders, and doctors.

**CITRON:** I came upon freelancing by accident, as well, but I had two different starts. One wasn't exactly a false start, but it certainly introduced me to freelancing. I had just finished a Master's program at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and I decided to stay in Omaha for a couple of years. The woman who was head of the program hired me on a contract basis. General Electric Medical Division approached her, looking for someone to write about computed tomography scanners. She assigned that job to me, and I became a freelance working for the company. I loved it. It fulfilled every romantic notion that I ever had about writing.

Years later, after I moved back to Detroit and then on to Toronto, I decided that I wanted to freelance. I had been at the AMWA annual conference shortly before I moved there, and I had met a lot of people from the Toronto area. When I finally made the move, 3 or 4

months later, I called each and every one of these people to set up interviews. Ultimately, I was able to get a freelance assignment from Connaught Laboratories; that really opened the doors to other things. I took that sample of writing to places like the Canadian Cancer Society, the Canadian Diabetes Association, and more. That established my freelance career.

I have worked for nonprofits, hospitals, and small companies. I wrote many newsletters. I think newsletters can be your bread and butter, and everything else gravy. While living in Toronto, I was doing six newsletters, which was just wonderful. I also wrote research articles, monographs, product information, and sales materials.

**BYRNE:** For 6 years I worked full time for the Department of Surgery at New York Medical College, and on the side, I was a freelance at the Westchester Medical Center helping other departments. When I started making more money with the freelancing than with the full-time job, I decided to quit and do it full time. It was a good move. I made more money, and it was less stressful.

## Roundtable Discussion Participants

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I specialize in helping my clients get papers published in medical journals. My niche is one-stop shopping: I provide statistical analysis, writing services, and graphics support. I've been doing it for 10 years now.

**ROBB:** I worked for a publishing company doing medical editing and writing, and then I was in management for quite a number of years. In 1993, the company I worked for went through a reorganization, and they offered a terrific severance package. It gave me a chance to do what I had wanted to do for years, which was freelancing. I was very tired of commuting into New York City, and I took the severance package. It gave me the financial backing I needed.

I write newsletters, articles, and chapters for reference books. My background is a little different from most AMWA members'. I have worked a great deal for attorneys, providing medical reference material for the legal profession.

**AMWAJ:** *How did you prepare yourselves, financially and otherwise, to make the transition to full-time freelance work?*

**BYRNE:** I prepared for 6 years. I would recommend that people take their time. I bought equipment, got clients, learned lessons the hard way, and figured out how to build my business.

**EVANS:** Because you were moonlighting?

**BYRNE:** Right. I wouldn't tell anyone to quit a job and start freelancing.

**CITRON:** I agree. Some people say that you should have at least a 6-month or 1-year cushion of living expenses saved before you begin freelancing full time. When I started freelancing in Toronto, I had a 9-month contract job. That was my bread and butter, and that's when I started going out and finding freelance work. When my contract was over, I had sufficient work to make a decent income. It's very unrealistic to think that you're going to quit your job on Friday and start freelancing on Monday and be able to make enough to support yourself. The truth is that there are very few freelancers who make enough to support their style of living, and often freelancers who are able to do it for a couple of years are married and have the salary of a spouse or have some other type of income.

**BYRNE:** I think that's probably the best way to do it—to have a spouse who works full-time and has benefits so you can make the "extra money."

**AMWAJ:** *How would that affect you, though, as a business person?*

**EVANS:** It depends on what kind of person you are or what it is that you're looking for regarding your own personal satisfaction. It's nice to have that support behind you; but if you're going to be successful at freelancing, you're going to be successful whether that support is there or not. A successful freelance has that entrepreneurial personality that makes her go out and create a viable business because she doesn't want to work for anyone else.

**ROBB:** I found that transition from working in an office environment to freelancing very difficult. I didn't expect that. I didn't realize how important those little morning conversations over coffee were to me. I've gotten involved in some volunteer work and some community activities, in addition to getting to know the other people in the New York Chapter of AMWA.

**AMWAJ:** *How was the transition made regarding your workload? How did you build up your client base?*

**CITRON:** A previous employer was my first client.

**AMWAJ:** *So don't burn bridges.*

**BYRNE:** That's rule number one.

**ROBB:** No matter what you think of the company or the people you work with, you want to leave on the best of terms. People change companies with great frequency. You don't know who is going to be working where in the future. I made a list of names and addresses of people I had worked with over the years, and I wrote letters to various physicians with whom I'd worked in a professional capacity as the manager of the office, telling them I'd gone out on a freelance basis. That was a way of building work for me. I also contacted people who had gone on to work with other publishing companies.

**CITRON:** I did it a little differently. I sat down with the business section of the newspaper and found the names of people who were able to hire freelancers. I also used the phone book extensively, looking up organizations and

then calling to find out the name of the executive director or the creative director. I did that with nonprofit organizations and communications companies. I just started sending out letters and following up with phone calls. It was an awful lot of work, and it got to be very discouraging because of all the no's. Ultimately, you'll reach one or two people, and that's how you start building. Then, when you get the interview, you ask, "Well, is there anybody else you know whom I can talk to or anyone else in your company or organization who might use freelancers and would be interested in speaking with me?" And you just keep going along. You know you've made it when people start calling you because they've heard about your work.

**AMWAJ:** *How does a person working full time in an office setting cross over to freelance work? What do you advise people?*

**CITRON:** When I was working the contract job, I knew there was an end to the contract. The woman I reported to understood that, so I was able to make phone calls. I would set up interviews and maybe take a couple of hours off in the afternoon to go out for the interview. That was a very fortunate situation.

**ROBB:** In many other instances those phone calls and interviews would have to wait until you left the position. You can start doing the research and knowing whom to contact, but I think you might need to wait.

**EVANS:** It depends on the relationship you have with the employer. Certainly, you could do it during your lunch time. You could take your vacation days, which I did.

**AMWAJ:** *Let's talk about motivators, such as stress. How much of a motivator is that?*

**EVANS:** Obviously, it's a motivator. How could it not be? If you don't get out of bed, you don't make any money. Fear is a great motivator.

**BYRNE:** It's a healthy motivator. There's enough stress that you can't lie in the hammock all day; you have to do your work and keep your clients happy.

**CITRON:** I think it's a positive kind of stress. I worked for Michigan Bell as a writer/producer for 2 1/2 years, and



BARBARA ROBB

*I expected to have lots of free time with freelancing. Sometimes I do, but I quite often work evenings. If necessary, I'll work through the weekend. That's part of the job.*

that was more stressful because I had less control over what I did, when I did it, and how I did it. When I work on multiple assignments as a freelance, it can be very stressful because of tight deadlines. But I have control over it, and the control makes a big difference.

**AMWAJ:** *Is having control over your work a good part of the stress?*

**EVANS:** Absolutely. Because you also control your time.

**BYRNE:** And don't forget, when you work for a big company or a medical center, there's a lot of unnecessary stress, like politics. It's the type of thing that doesn't have to be there.

**AMWAJ:** *But for the person who wants to be a freelance, what does have to be there? What are some needed characteristics of a good freelance?*

**CITRON:** I think it's very important that the person enjoys being alone. To work well, you need to be by yourself. I am the type of person who cannot work well with other people around me; that's just who I am. But I think you have to have a tremendous belief in yourself that you're going to be able to succeed. If you don't have that belief when you start out—and that's very natural, to be wary or to be scared of what's going to happen—then you have to at least convince other people that you believe in yourself, because that's the secret. Image counts in this field—in any type of sales. You cannot sell your product until you sell yourself.

**BYRNE:** Somebody has said that entrepreneurs are successful because they have to be. I think you can see that in what Cathryn said. I experienced that, too. I really had no other choice. But regarding the personality of a freelance, you have to be mature, highly motivated, calm, optimistic, and self-reliant.

**ROBB:** That covers it.

**EVANS:** I think you have to have a "Type A" personality.

**CITRON:** People go into this with many romantic notions about what freelancing is. They might say: "I'm going to go out there, and I'm going to be able to charge \$65, \$75, or \$85 an hour, and I'm going to make all the money that I'm able to make." Well, it's wonderful to have that dream,

and it's certainly a goal to reach for, but it is extremely unrealistic when you are first starting out.

**EVANS:** I honestly believed that I was going to make \$60,000 my first year, and that thereafter, it was going to go up. I made \$6,000 my first year.

**BYRNE:** Ugh!

**EVANS:** But I was never discouraged, and I was always laughing. I had a good time doing it. We lived on beans and rice. I think many people experience this quintessential fear of having to "make it" when they are freelancing. But you can't be afraid when you call on clients. You can't be afraid of failure. I'm not afraid of failure. I'm afraid of a lot of things, but I'm not afraid of failure. You must be positive. You must go out there and convince people that you really are competent.

**AMWAJ:** *Let's talk a little bit now about how a day is broken up, how you structure your day.*

**BYRNE:** I keep the structured office hours of 9:00 to 5:00, and I try to start at 9:00 and take a little lunch break and stop at 5:00. I try not to work on weekends. I've found that making that distinction is healthy. The only exception to that schedule was when I wrote my book; the last few years, I made that the first priority. I discovered, though, that that wasn't a good idea. So now I'm working on my second book, and I do that writing in the evening. After dinner, I'll write for an hour.

**ROBB :** I have a child in high school, and that provides structure to my day because while my daughter is in school, the house is quiet, and I need to take advantage of that. I like silence when I work, which is ideal for freelancing. I'd love to be able not to work on weekends or evenings, but I've found that isn't always possible. I expected to have lots of free time with freelancing. And sometimes I do, but I quite often work evenings. I sit down after dinner and do another 2 hours of work. And, if necessary, I'll work through the weekend. That's part of the job.



DANIEL W. BYRNE

*You can't be timid about talking to the client about money. You can't work through the secretary. Go right to the client and say, "This is what I'm going to do for you. This is how much I'm going to charge." Give the client an invoice, up front, and say, "Why don't you get the paperwork rolling while I start on the project?"*

**CITRON:** I'm an early riser. I am more productive if I get to my desk by 7:00 or 7:30 and work until lunch. After lunch, usually at about 1:00 or 1:30, it's more difficult for me to get back into it. But if I'm working on assignments, I have no choice. I don't work well at night. When I'm pushing a deadline, I'll sometimes get up at 4:00 or 4:30 because there are no telephone interruptions at that hour. However, I work in the evenings when necessary.

In terms of structure, with regard to marketing, I think it's better, if you are not pushed for time with your assignments, to set aside one day in the week to do your marketing. Friday, I find, is a good day to contact people or to send out your letters.

**EVANS:** The average medical writer is a person who is self-contained and probably is more introverted than

extroverted. He's not the kind of person who wants to run out there with a briefcase and say to the world, "Here I am!" That's very important for people to know if they're thinking of becoming a freelance, because selling is a part of the freelance life. But you could work for ad agencies and have a situation in which they are doing the selling and you are a regular writer of theirs. I think it's important that people know who they are. I happen to be a little bit of both. I can be a total hermit, even working all night sometimes when I need to. Then I can turn around and be right out there selling.

My day is very undisciplined. When I worked in an office, it was a little better because there is a self-imposed schedule that goes with the office territory. But I'm a night person, and I always have been. Unless I have a project that's really pressing, I will use my mornings to do all sorts of other things, like phone calls. Most of my productive work is done either in the afternoon or in the evening. When I was doing a lot of graphic production, I would do all-nighters with two artist colleagues. Even recently, I stayed up alone all night.

**BYRNE:** I get burned out if I work on the weekends or stay up late. Then I'm exhausted and unproductive for a couple of days.

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CATHRYN D. EVANS

**CITRON:** That’s right. That happens.

**BYRNE:** In the long run, I’ve found that inefficient.

**EVANS:** Right. But I take off 2 or 3 months a year. The third month is usually unplanned, however.

**AMWAJ:** *The work day is as different as the individual. And I suppose different rates are charged for work because of differences in projects, clients, and even geography. A freelance might also charge by the hour or by the project, depending on the type of work. How do you go about structuring your fees?*

**ROBB:** I charge, almost always, on a per-project basis rather than on an hourly basis. The only thing I do on an hourly basis is author’s editing.

**BYRNE:** I combine statistical analysis and graphics, along with the writing, and my clients have found that to be very helpful. I charge \$75 an hour. The first time I work for someone, he might be concerned about the time limit, so I’ll often set a flat price. I’ll say, “This will be a 10-hour job: \$750.” And that will be it. I’ll get the job done. I’ve also made retainer agreements. One day a week I work for someone for \$20,000 a year. It’s nice to have that mix of income.

**AMWAJ:** *That sounds like a critical strategy.*

**BYRNE:** That’s really important. If you’re just working by the hour, that can be tricky.

**CITRON:** I usually charge \$50 an hour for writing and for editing. Many clients in the metro-Detroit area will not pay \$50 an hour for the writing. One HMO magazine that I write for periodically increased my rate from \$40 to \$45, but wouldn’t budge after \$45. However, I like that kind of writing, so I am willing to do it for that fee.

**EVANS:** When AMWA did the salary surveys in 1989 and 1994, one of the things that was demonstrated by the results of both surveys was that roughly half of the freelance work was being billed hourly. My business reflects this: about half my projects are charged hourly, and the other half on a per project basis. How it’s charged depends on the project. For instance, NDA study reports are never billed as fixed fees. They are always billed hourly, and I charge between \$100 and \$125 an hour for that, depending on the client. People with whom I already have contracts are charged the lower rate. Other

projects I have taken on might be billed on a fixed fee rate. Sometimes the projects are as low as \$50 an hour. These would be things I can turn around in a very short time, and I do those sorts of projects because they’re interesting topics to me, like alternative medicine or educational pieces. I also charge less if I take a project through to production. If you ask me to do just the copy and not the page design, then I’m going to charge more. That’s because I like to have control over the entire project, especially how it “looks” in the end. So my rates vary.

**BYRNE:** Another good point to make is that if you start at a low rate, it’s difficult to raise your rates, say from \$50 to \$75 an hour. Most of your work will be repeat business or will come from your clients’ friends. If you try to increase your rates from \$50 to \$75 an hour, they’re going to resist that or think you are just taking advantage of them. It’s better to take the chance and start at a higher rate. Start at \$75 or \$100, and sell yourself on the basis of the combination of unique services you can provide. They can go somewhere else, but they can’t get what you’re selling.

**CITRON:** It’s important that people understand how to calculate a project rate. Sometimes a client will say to you, “I will pay you \$2,000 for this project.” If that’s the case, you take the figure, divide it by the hours you estimate, and calculate whether you are able to finish the project within a reasonable hourly rate. Or a client might say, “Well, give me a project rate.” So you calculate how many hours you estimate it’s going to take. I always keep a record of how long it takes me to do every single project, so that when I bid on the next one, I have a realistic way of calculating my fee. I also think you can charge pharmaceutical companies and business clients much more than you can charge hospitals and nonprofit organizations.

**AMWAJ:** *Do they expect that? Can they live with it?*

**EVANS:** Drug companies have budgets for research papers going to publications.

**BYRNE:** Most of my work comes from doctors. But I do some work for drug companies and even marketing companies hired by drug companies.

**CITRON:** The AMWA salary survey also noted that people making the most money were either in pharmaceutical companies or in the communication agencies that work for pharmaceutical companies.



**BYRNE:** And those folks want things done fast. One fellow called me up; he wanted to talk to me right away. Just for half an hour. He paid me \$500 for a half-hour phone conversation. My wife joked, “How much do I get for answering the phone?” They want things done right away, and they’ll pay for it.

**AMWAJ:** *So clients are different, and projects are different. Would you take on a larger project knowing that you might have to subcontract some of that work? And how would you factor subcontractors into your rates?*

**ROBB:** I don’t subcontract work.

**BYRNE:** I don’t subcontract.

**CITRON:** I don’t, either.

**EVANS:** I do, absolutely. I want to say something about the hourly rate, and this is related to subcontracting. I once worked with a graphic artist who charged me \$40 an hour to do slides, which at the time was an average price. Today, that’s low. Then, because of all the work related to the same project, I had to hire another artist who charged \$75 an hour to do very similar slides. They were doing the same type of work, but the higher-paid artist had a few more slides to do. Her total fee was actually *less* than that of the person charging the lower rate. The one charging me \$75 an hour was costing me time because I had to redo some of her work. So hourly rates can be deceptive. You must think about how long it’s going to take you to do the job. From your experience, from notes you took, you might estimate a project at 50 hours. Automatically double it. Right up front. It’s always double what you think it’s going to be.

**BYRNE:** Beginners can make a terrible mistake by not estimating how long a project can take and not setting the price high enough.

**EVANS:** Also, add 20% for profit. Think of all the things that take you away from the writing part of project. Computer down time and maintenance, system crashes, font incompatibilities, download problems. You also have to consider the clerical aspects of a job—typing, mailing, making photocopies, etc. You must recoup those costs because those costs are what it takes to run a business, *your* business.

**BYRNE:** Rather than subcontracting, I recommend to my clients someone they can deal with directly. I would rather not have the responsibility. I’ll tell them: “I know someone who can take care of this. You talk to him. You work out the relationship, and you pay him directly.”

**AMWAJ:** *So you don’t have to deal with that hassle yourself?*

**BYRNE:** Sure. Why do that to yourself? The writer could be charging \$100 an hour, and then I’d have to charge on top of that, so it doesn’t really help my client.

**AMWAJ:** *You seem to be on your own most of the time. How do you protect yourselves when negotiating a contract? And how do you collect your money?*

**ROBB:** Having a written contract is absolutely essential. When I started freelancing, I had a serious problem with a job I did for someone I knew personally. Our only agreement was a handshake. Eventually, I did get paid, but it was an extremely slow process and a difficult time.

**BYRNE:** I think you can’t be timid about talking to the client about money. You can’t work through the secretary. Go right to the client and say, “This is what I’m going to do for you. This is how much I’m going to charge.” Give the client an invoice up front, and say, “Why don’t you get the paperwork rolling while I start on the project?”

**CITRON:** I had to take someone to small claims court. It wasn’t a large amount, but it was a significant amount for me at the time. I actually had to take him to small claims court three times, at which point the judge, in his chambers, said to me, “You have a choice. I can either send him to jail, in which case you won’t get paid at all, or we can try to work it out.” We were able to work out a payment schedule. The reason I had to go back three times is that he kept failing on the payment schedule. Ultimately, I did get paid, but it took nearly 3 years.

**BYRNE:** In some cases, a contract can be very simple. “I agree to do this, and I’ll have it done by such a date, and you’ll pay me this amount.” Just a simple memo—one page.

**AMWAJ:** *Does anyone get money up front?*

**CITRON:** Sometimes.

**ROBB:** It depends on the client.

**BYRNE:** I’ve found that if you just ask for it, you can get it a lot of the time. I receive my \$20,000 retainer up front. It’s easier for this client because of the client’s budget.

**EVANS:** Sometimes clients want to give you advances at the end of the year. I had a client who wanted to give me nearly \$50,000 in December.

Speaking of contracts and payment, here’s one of the lines I put in my contract: “Upon payment of all invoices, copyright of said material, and all rights, are transferred automatically from Chandos Communications to X-Y-Z Company.”

**BYRNE:** So the client doesn't get the copyright if you don't get paid?

**EVANS :** If a client ever balks at paying, you can say, "Well, you can't use this material because you didn't pay for it. I have the copyright." Actually, I had a friend who did that. She was a designer, she had completed work on a catalog, and the company had not paid, even as the catalog was rolling off the presses. The company was preparing to distribute the catalog, but her accountant called and said, "Sorry, you can't distribute that catalog. We own the copyright." And the company paid. The very next day, the check was delivered in person.

**BYRNE :** When I submit an invoice, I'll wait maybe 3 weeks and then call the accounts payable department and say, "Have you gotten that invoice? I just want to check on the status." Then you can track it back if it has been misplaced. But don't wait 3 months.

**EVANS :** Put a late fee clause in your contract, too. My fee is 10%. Things like this must be in the contract if you want to be able to implement them.

**CITRON:** Make sure that your clients pay you, because if they don't pay you or if they're late in paying you, then many of them won't use you again. If you want to keep writing for them, if you have a good relationship with the person that you're writing for, make sure you get paid.

**ROBB:** There are some companies that, as a matter of policy, will not pay in advance. Sometimes you can negotiate that they will make a partial payment on submission of a certain amount of a project. You can submit, say, 50% of a project and be paid for 50%. But the company will usually not offer that. You need to be assertive enough to ask for it.

**BYRNE :** Here's what I've found to work best. Let's say that completing the project is going to take 3 weeks. At the outset, you can tell the client, "Let's get this rolling, and the check and the project will be finished at the same time."

**EVANS :** Does that work for new clients? I've never done that with a new client. I have tried it on people, and they don't like it. But I can do it with a client who knows me.

**BYRNE :** Well, I like to show clients the invoice right up



MARILYN CITRON

*There are two things that I tell people to consider before they go freelance. First, be persistent. Second, stay focused. I have found that if I don't follow these two words of advice, I get lost.*

front, so there are no surprises. The worst thing you can do is surprise a client with a big invoice. You don't want to be in the position of having worked many hours, showing the client the invoice, and having him say, "I didn't know it was going to cost this much." That's the biggest mistake you can make. You show clients the invoice right up front. If they're surprised right up front, then you say, "Well, let's not do this."

**EVANS:** How can you show them something up front if you haven't done any work?

**BYRNE :** That would be for a flat rate. If the job is by the hour, you can bill in phases. Work out an agreement to bill the client as you complete

the project in phases.

**CITRON:** If you have a fixed-fee project, I think you have to put into the agreement that the client will pay by the hour for time that is spent over the amount that you had originally negotiated. I had an important project with an advertising company in Toronto. It was an editing job on a series of monographs. When I started working, I didn't know that the project was going to include rewriting the first drafts. It took me almost twice as long as I had anticipated. So I went back to the client and said, "I can't do that for this price. I have to charge you more." The client agreed to it because of how bad the drafts of the monographs were when they came in.

**EVANS :** When you're working on a fixed-fee basis, your contract must state exactly what you are going to do and what the client is supplying to you to accomplish that goal. My contracts spell it out: "You will receive one draft, based on this outline that we have agreed on. The background material that this work is based on is . . ."

**CITRON:** And who is supplying it.

**EVANS :** If I'm supplying it, you're paying \$150 an hour for my research company to do that.

**BYRNE :** And the time limits.

**EVANS:** Yes. "One revision. And that revision is a mild edit. If you restructure, add new background material, we go to an hourly basis, or we reassess and start billing in phases. You have 4 weeks to review it—"

**BYRNE:** Right.

**EVANS:** “If you spend 9 weeks reviewing it, my revision will be billed on an hourly rate. If you give it to five people, and there are five copies of the manuscript that I must then deal with, my revision is billed on an hourly rate after the first manuscript.” In other words, my revision is based on getting back *one* copy of the manuscript from the client. Of course, clients could reconcile all those manuscripts themselves, and that’s fine if they do that.

**AMWAJ:** *You try to leave nothing unsaid?*

**EVANS:** You have to cover all the bases.

**AMWAJ:** *You’re even looking into the future to see what might happen.*

**EVANS:** You have to. This is *your* time we are talking about here. This is *your* business. I have all these items in my contracts now because I have been burned a lot in the past. I did a lot of fixed-fee when I first started out, and people would come to me constantly and say, “Do this revision,” and the revision wasn’t a reasonable revision. It was restructuring or adding more material. Then, 9 months later, the client would come back and say, “Remember that paper we did? We now have the revisions to work on.” Well, it’s like starting over on a new project. Who remembers 9 months later?

**BYRNE:** You have to spend 5 hours just getting up to speed again. . .

**EVANS:** . . . even to remember what you did! You really have to specify 4 to 6 weeks as the outside limit to get a revision back from a client. After that, provisions should be in your contract for that to be called new, billable work.

**BYRNE:** If you work by the hour, it’s very important to keep the client involved. Just a simple phone call will do. “So far, we’re up to 10 hours.” “Do you really want me to work on this extra part?” Keep the client informed about the current status of your work. Don’t let the client guess at your progress. The biggest mistake is just to hit a client with a surprise.

**EVANS:** Well, you usually give clients an estimate, even for hourly work. I’ve told some clients, “This looks like it’ll take 15 to 25 hours. At 20 hours, I’ll call you.” Also,



CATHRYN EVANS

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it’s important to remember that when you’re being paid to deliver a Volkswagen, you must deliver a good Volkswagen, not a Cadillac. You must learn how to stop. You might want to be a perfectionist, but they’re not paying you for a Cadillac, and you have to give them a good Volkswagen.

**BYRNE:** It’s very important for clients that their manuscripts get accepted for publication.

Getting a paper prepared for peer review and final acceptance can mean a lot of extra work. You can spend a lot of time doing that, but sometimes it’s worth doing so that you have the reputation of being someone who gets papers published. You may lose a little money on your early projects, but it’s important to build up your reputation.

**EVANS:** Most drug companies budget between \$7,000 and \$10,000 for manuscripts.

**BYRNE:** That’s realistic. A lot of doctors will expect manuscript preparation to be done for a tenth of that.

**AMWAJ:** *Pretend that you have just a few minutes to speak with an AMWA member who is seriously considering the freelance route. What would you say?*

**ROBB:** It seems to me that before you start out in the business, it’s essential to have contacts in the field. It’s essential to have your equipment ready and to know how to use all of your equipment. You need to acquire the skills necessary to run a business before you begin freelancing.

**CITRON:** I tell people to consider two things. They’ve really worked for me, and I’ve found that if I don’t follow these two words of advice, I get really lost. First, be persistent. That means not getting discouraged. You can’t be discouraged when clients, or potential clients, don’t hire you. You just have to pick yourself up and keep going. Second, stay focused. I do my best work when I’m focused on what I’m doing. When I get distracted by all the other things that go on in my life, my work is very inadequate. It isn’t something that I’m proud of. But when I focus on what I’m doing, I produce good projects. I think focus is extremely important.

**BYRNE:** This may sound a little cold, but I think a good policy is to fire your worst client every year. I say that because your worst clients are the ones who cost you money and cause you stress. Let's say you have 20 clients. Single out your worst one, and just refuse to work with that one again.

**CITRON:** That's tough to do when you're starting out.

**BYRNE:** It will make your business more profitable and your life easier.

**EVANS:** I think I kind of like that idea.

**BYRNE:** The funny thing is, those clients may come back to you. I've done this, and they've come back. And when they do come back, they're much nicer, they aren't argumentative about the fees, and they're much more respectful.

**EVANS:** I would say that it's very important to be sure that you really can freelance. You have to be an experienced medical writer. That means that you have to have had a job as a medical writer. You can't just decide one day, "Oh, I think I'm going to be a writer now," and become a freelance, because people who hire a freelance writer want someone who has experience. They don't want to have to train someone. Training takes place on the job. So I think that a person must assess his or her skills and be clear that, "Yes, I am capable of doing the research and writing and editing and other support work that will produce a paper for publication in a medical journal." Or, "Yes, I have written many NDA study reports, and I can do that." Be clear about your skills, because if you're not experienced, you aren't going to get hired, and you're going to ruin the image of the rest of us. The more bad medical writers there are out there, the worse it is for the rest of us.

It's also important for people not to underbill their services, particularly moonlighters. When writers do that, they are devaluing the profession. They are also prejudicing their future income if they do need to become full-time freelancers. If you are moonlighting—and if you don't *need* to work full time, whether it's because you have a rich spouse, a part-time job, a trust fund—you still need to charge the full rate. It's fine if you want to cut your hourly rate by \$2 an hour or something, just to make sure you get the business, but it should never be that you are doing a job for \$22 an hour that should be charged at \$75 an hour. These are simply the rates we charge for the work we do. In that respect, you need to keep in touch with people to find out what the going rate is.

**BYRNE:** People should also know that it is very difficult to be successful as a freelance. There is so much to know

about this business. We've all made plenty of mistakes, and we've talked about some of those here. But there are so many other things that we can't cover; you just have to read and learn in an aggressive yet focused way.

**AMWAJ:** *Well, learning on your own may not be the best way. But if you can learn from others, inside an organization like AMWA, maybe that's part of the solution.*

**CITRON:** Cathryn, earlier you mentioned how important it is for people to have experience and to know that they can work on a research paper or an NDA. Someone might say, "Well, I don't know how to do it; how do I learn?" I think AMWA is a perfect place because we offer courses to help people prepare and because our members are so willing to share their "know how."

**EVANS:** I was trained as an employee to do NDA summaries. Now I can take responsibility for my client so my client isn't getting a novice freelance. I may even be training other writers. I'm making sure that my trainees are doing it right; I'm reviewing everything they're doing. I'm redoing it until they get better and better, and then they can do more parts of the NDA. AMWA courses are helpful because they give you a feel for the work, but you really can't go out and contract to do a job if you've never done it before.

**BYRNE:** If you get a Master's degree in technical writing, you can't just start the next day as a freelance.

**CITRON:** Not in my opinion.

**EVANS:** It takes a while to build your portfolio of work. There are so many projects to do: papers for publication, study reports, monographs, investigator brochures, videos, exhibits, posters. I don't think novices should be naive enough to think that they're going to be hired if they don't have a track record for producing those materials for someone else.

**BYRNE:** What would you say is a good minimum? Is 5 years of full-time work enough?

**EVANS:** I would say 5 years is probably about what you should have if you're going to become a freelance. You could become a freelance after 2 years if you focus on one area. It's not a hard-and-fast rule. There are always exceptions.

