

Equipment and Software for Medical Writing

By Emma Hitt, PhD

I know what I like when it comes to equipment and software for medical writing, but for this piece, I thought that the best strategy would be to send an email out to the HittList and see what everyone else thought was important. I am so glad I did, because this article turned out to be packed with some incredibly useful information—much beyond what I could have come up with myself.

I mostly copied information from people's emails. Names are cut and pasted from people's signatures, which may not uniformly include their degrees and certifications. Thank you so much to all who responded!

The article first describes software (for PC and Mac) and equipment. There is also a section on comprehensive lists, and finally a section called "keeping it simple."

The bare bones basics that medical writers need are a computer and a monitor (with lots of people suggesting 2 monitors), MS Office, and the Internet. The most popular referencing program by far was Endnote X4. Several alternatives to the expensive Adobe Acrobat were suggested. Medical spellcheckers Dorland's and Stedman's were also extremely popular. Dropbox seems to be popular for transferring large files. Olympus was the most popular brand of recorder.

If you read this and see one of your favorites missing, please email me at emma@hittmedicalwriting.com. I will save your email and update this piece periodically. Again thanks to all who contributed!

Software

For PCs (possibly but not necessarily compatible with Macs)

Word Processing Alternatives

Open Office. I'd like to say that it's a great FREE suite of office programs -- at least as good as Microsoft Office, and it includes a drawing program, which MS Office does not. It is a big download -- just under 200 MB as I remember. If one is familiar with MS Office, it should be absolutely no problem to find his/her way around in OO. OO allows saving files in various formats, including MS Word, Excel, Access, etc., and it opens files received in such formats. I suggest that users set the default "Save as..." format to MS Word format to ensure compatibility with colleagues when sending files around. The same goes for MS Excel.

OO looks and feels just like the MS programs (with only very slight and rare differences). I go back and forth between MS and OO on my various computers and really notice no difference in functionality, ease of use, or compatibility.

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OO does not include a contact manager, such as Outlook (and neither does MS Office). However, Mozilla Thunderbird is an excellent e-mail program and includes an address book/contact manager that will import contacts from other programs. Thunderbird is another free program.

Dan Keller

Voice Recognition

Dragon Voice Recognition Software. <http://www.nuance.com/for-individuals/by-product/dragon-for-pc/premium-version/index.htm>

Karen Cooksey

I consider Dragon Naturally Speaking software to be very useful in helping me transcribe taped interviews. It's a speech-recognition product that offers easy-to-use voice commands for a hands-free PC experience. I use the home version, and it saves me a lot of time transcribing taped interviews, and it's great when it comes to recognizing medical terminology. It's currently on sale on Amazon.com for 36% off the regular price \$99: <http://www.amazon.com/Dragon-NaturallySpeaking-Home-Version-11/dp/B003VNCRNQ> / Dragon Naturally Speaking website: <http://www.nuance.com>

Jaimie Lazare

I use Dragon on my iPhone for quick dictations, or if I'm pressed for time and the ideas are flowing. I also use documents to go into my iPhone to sync documents between my desktop and my phone, if I want to review a paper or article and do some light editing while on the metro...

Ruben J. Nazario, MD

FTP/file transfer and sharing

See also the section under Macs.

I like Ipswitch FTP transfer. Easy to use. <http://www.ipswitch.com/>

Emma Hitt

I highly recommend PleaseReview for collaborative reviewing of documents.

It has a few glitches but is incredibly useful for documents that have multiple simultaneous reviewers.

Everyone reviews the same document (online access).

The author can allow reviewers to see each other's comments, and reviewers can comment on others' comments. I don't have the latest version (4.0) which also does collaborative authoring, but that feature looks very useful.

Linda Gritz, PhD

<http://pleasetech.com/>

Transcription Programs

Express Scribe is a great free audio transcription program -- easy to use, and a very small program. It loads, starts, and stops the audio. (It does not convert speech to text.)--

<http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/index.html>

Dan Keller

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Another description about that program: Express Scribe from NCH, an Australian company. It allows the use of keyboard commands and runs in the background so that I can write in Word while using the controls. Best of all, it's free!

<http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/index.html>

Neil Osterweil

Here is the info from Express Scribe website: Express Scribe is free professional audio player software for PC, Mac or Linux designed to assist the transcription of audio recordings. A typist can install it on their computer and control audio playback using a transcription foot pedal or keyboard (with 'hot' keys). This computer transcriber application also offers valuable features for typists including variable speed playback, multi-channel control, playing video, file management, and more.

Medical Dictionaries, Grammar and Spellchecker Software

Most useful software is Stedman's Medical Dictionary. Even though most of my clients use Taber's, Stedman's comes with dictionary software that loads into Word so spellcheck doesn't flag every 3rd word as potentially misspelled because it's not in Word's basic dictionary. This has saved me a LOT of time.

Caryl Haddock

Stedman's Plus Medical/Pharmaceutical Spellchecker:

<http://www.stedmans.com/product.cfm/376/228>

Works seamlessly with Word's dictionary to spell check medical and pharmaceutical documents.

According to the web site, "Stedman's Plus Standard Edition delivers solid, dependable medical and pharmaceutical spellchecking, with content updated annually. If you need more than a yearly update, check out [Stedman's Plus Premium Edition](#), our subscription product. The Premium Edition keeps you on the cutting edge of medical and pharmaceutical terminology with three comprehensive issues per year." But you don't need the premium edition to reap the benefits.

Melissa L. Bogen, ELS

Stedman's Medical Spellchecker Plus

<http://www.stedmans.com/product.cfm/642/216>

Lynn Yoffee

Whitesmoke writer for Bio-Tech available at whitesmoke.com

Mercy M. Davidson

From the Whitesmoke website:

- **Grammar and Spelling**
Comprehensive grammar check, along with spelling, punctuation, style and more!
- **Full Text Translation**
Translate full texts from any application in one click
- **Multi-Lingual Dictionary**
Don't let languages be a barrier! Now you can understand them all with one easy click
- **Artificial Intelligence**
With algorithms based on artificial intelligence and natural language processing technology, your writing couldn't be in better hands.

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Dorland's medical spellchecker
Ingrid Sprague

Medical dictionaries are available for free download at Filebuzz.com
Mercy M. Davidson

Backing up work

Backup software is often overlooked, but I rely heavily on mine. I use Carbonite (www.carbonite.com). Other than signup, which takes five minutes, you don't have to do anything. The software works in the background to backup your files whenever you have an internet connection. I've used it to recover documents I accidentally deleted or wrote over, and I have colleagues who have used it to recover all their documents after a laptop was stolen or broken. Recovery is simple and can be achieved on any device that has internet access. It costs less than \$5 a month. Recovering a single lost document will make it worth the cost of a year or more. (Emma Hitt says—I use Carbonite too—it has saved me more than once.)

Bryan DeBusk, PhD

I have every single email automatically copied to a Yahoo account that I don't check. I have 58,000 emails in my inbox going back about 4 years! I am waiting for the day when Yahoo tells me to delete some of these emails, but they haven't yet. Whenever my computer has died, I have been so thankful to have all my email backed up. Yahoo makes it incredibly easy to search through emails too. I have looked for and found an obscure email I have needed many times. Also, I usually need files backed up real time because I don't want to lose minutes or hours of work (as opposed to Carbonite which has a delay time of a few hours when it is running in the background). When I am working on a piece, I might email the piece to myself once or twice, and because it goes to my Yahoo account also, I know it is backed up and accessible from any computer if my laptop dies.

Emma Hitt

Time Tracking/Invoice Creation

For keeping track of how much time I spend on freelance projects, I use TraxTime:
<http://www.spudcity.com/traxtime/> . It's inexpensive and easy to use.

Anne Mattarella (and many others)

When it comes to administrative tasks, I remain organized with the help of Harvest. It's a Web application used to track time spent on assignments and to create invoices. I use it to track my time on projects, to determine how much time I'm spending on billable/non-billable tasks, and to create invoices for clients. <http://www.getharvest.com/>

Jaimie Lazare

Fanurio. This is time tracking and billing software for freelancers and I love it. It is very reasonably priced, does exactly what I want it to do, has customizable templates etc. for invoices (you can add your own logo etc.), and very fast and helpful customer support. Link: <http://www.fanuriotimetracking.com/>

Jennifer Gan

Free time tracking programs:

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<http://www.freshbooks.com/>
<http://www.paymo.biz/>

Amy Dear, PhD

Referencing Software

EndNoteX4 - It's useful to have reference managing software so that adding references into pieces is quick and easy. This latest version of Endnote is even better, as it will take a whole file of PDFs and extract the data to make up references for each individual file, so you can quickly and effortlessly build an endnote library in minutes. You can get a 30 day free trial (<http://www.endnote.com/>).

Jane de Lartigue, PhD

EndNote (X4 version is the best by far). Available at a discount to AMWA members (www.amwa.org).

Meenakshi Kashyap

EndNote, especially for those times when a long document is being prepared, and at the last moment a few references are inserted in the middle of the document. Automatic reference list generation and re-numbering. It's beautiful. EndNote can be purchased at <http://www.endnote.com/>. I think there may be an AMWA member discount.

Joanne M. McAndrews, PhD

Zotero has made my life so much easier: <http://www.zotero.org/>. I can easily organize my references and access them from anywhere because they are stored on the net. I also can use it to cite, so I was able to get rid of EndNote.

Cindy Porter

This is my new favorite software for managing my references: <http://www.mendeley.com/> It was originally designed for scientists, but I find it useful for my medical writing as well.

Karen Ventii

Acrobat Alternatives

There's the expensive Adobe Acrobat Professional of course, but also...

Foxit Reader. It's free and downloadable at <http://www.foxitsoftware.com/pdf/reader/>. Unlike Adobe Reader, it allows you to highlight text and make comments on pdfs, both of which are visible when the document is saved and opened up in Adobe. It seems to be an effective alternative to Adobe Professional and similar programs, although I believe it's only available on Windows platforms.

Aimee Zisner

Nitro PDF professional. This is a cheaper alternative to Adobe Acrobat and does pretty much everything I want it to, for about half the price of Adobe. Link: <http://www.nitropdf.com/>

Jennifer Gan

I am a HUGE fan of PDF-XChange viewer from Tracker Software. <http://www.tracker-software.com/product/pdf-xchange-viewer> There is a free version, which is essentially a reader-only version, and there are inexpensive professional versions that include PDF editing tools. It is a versatile piece of software that enables comments and highlights on PDF documents for collaborative work. I use

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it constantly to mark passages for fact-checkers, and for many other things.

Valerie D Mulcaire

This is not an Acrobat alternative, but an Acrobat Restrictions remover to unlock secured pdfs, e.g. NCCN guidelines (you know, when you can't cut and paste from a pdf? How annoying is that??). I use A-PDF Restrictions Remover available at http://www.a-pdf.com/security/restrictions_remover.htm (free trial and then very cheap). An alternative suggested by Meenakshi Kashyap is (<http://freemypdf.com/>).

Emma Hitt

Miscellaneous

SnagIt (screen capturing software)

Jennifer Gan

SigmaPlot for graphing

Lowell Stacy

Without a doubt, text expansion software is the most useful tool for writing I use. They're available for Mac and PC -- I've used AutoHotKey and TextExpander -- but they all do the same thing: type long and difficult to type words and phrases with just a few keystrokes. For instance, when I type fdax, the program types Food and Drug Administration. It's extremely helpful for words that you have to bold or italicize because you can include that step (Ctrl-B or Ctrl-I) at the beginning and end of the expansion: nm becomes *Nature Medicine*.

Brian Orelli, PhD

The most useful software for medical writing--besides PubMed--is a database called UpToDate. It's essentially a collection of medical textbooks in virtually all the specialties, updated every THREE months. It's not cheap. Last time I checked, an individual sub was about \$500/year.

<http://www.uptodate.com/home/index.html>

Paul Cerrato

Mindmanager. Available from mindjet (<http://www.mindjet.com/products/mindmanager-9-win/overview>) for both PCs and Macs. To help you develop your thoughts and ideas. From their website "simplify project planning and communicate more clearly with MindManager software. MindManager information maps provide an intuitive visual framework that foster clarity, innovative thinking and communication to improve business results."

Meenakshi Kashyap

For Macs (possibly but not necessarily compatible with PCs)

Time Tracking/Invoice Creation

One of my must-have resources is my time tracking tool. I'm a Mac user, and not all the available trackers are created equal for Macs. But I'd recommend TaskTime4 (http://download.cnet.com/TaskTime4/3000-2066_4-44992.html) This lets me keep track of my time, which I break down by category, and track project status. I can also run reports on how long particular kinds of projects are taking me, or create reports by client, so it's a great tool to systematically monitor your billable hours. Although it can be used to invoice, I don't (I'm just about to move to Quickbooks for

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that).

Alexandra Howson MA, PhD

iBiz (<http://www.iggsoftware.com/ibiz/index.php>), which is useful for capturing the time you work on a project, the billable hours and for generating invoices, and keeping track of multiple projects at once.

Jane de Lartigue, PhD

For accounting I use Excel and to log my time and produce timesheet for clients I sometimes use Tick Spot - this lets you download a free widget that acts as a timer and links through to your daily timesheet - also available as an iPhone app.

Sara Freeman

FTP/File Transfer

Fetch Softworks (<http://fetchsoftworks.com/>) the file transfer client that supports ftp and sftp. It's a Mac compatible alternative to programs such as Ipswich on the PC. It's reliable, fast, costs \$49 and has a cute little dog that runs across the screen as you transfer files (what more could you ask for?). Also, file sending programs such as Yousendit (<https://www.yousendit.com/>) and Dropbox (<https://www.dropbox.com/gs>) are very valuable for transferring large files to clients. Dropbox can also be used to back up important files on your computer as an alternative to an external hard drive, which you can then access from any computer with an internet connection. However, I also use an external hard drive so that I have multiple backed up copies of everything on my computer.

Jane de Lartigue, PhD

I store all my documents on Dropbox (www.dropbox.com). Each time I save a document, it stores it, and also saves the previous version, so I have access to every copy of my document. If I really get in a bind, eg, I accidentally delete a portion of the document or the file becomes corrupt, I can go back to an earlier version. I've also used it as a collaboration tool, although it wasn't designed for that purpose.

Cindy Porter

Optical Recognition

VelOCRaptor - a piece of optical recognition software. If clients send PDF files that have been scanned, in order to be able to use markup tools on the file it is necessary to put them through optical recognition software so that Adobe Acrobat recognizes them. This is a Mac compatible version for \$49; you can have a free trial as well (<http://www.velocraptor.com/>).

Acrobat Alternatives

Preview already installed on my Mac will work as a limited PDF editor. The most recent version of Preview in Snow Leopard lets you annotate PDF documents (you can highlight in one color, draw shapes, write text, etc). Is that all I need to be able to do? I have also come across another piece of free software for annotating PDFs on Macs called Skim, which looks more powerful... Also <http://skim-app.sourceforge.net/> "Skim is a PDF reader and note-taker for OS X. It is designed to help you read and annotate scientific papers in PDF, but is also great for viewing any PDF file."

Amy Dear, PhD

Miscellaneous

I use a MacBook Pro for my work. I have found Dragon Dictate <Macspeech.com> allows me to dictate faster than I can type. Also available is MacSpeech Dictate Medical. I have found DEVONthink Pro Office to be a very useful database of my saved information. That database and the Internet can be searched with DEVONagent. DEVON Technologies has several useful smaller programs, all available at <devon-technologies.com.>

RapidWeaver is an excellent, simple website construction tool available at <realmacsoftware.com.>

Clyde M. Burnham, MD

Equipment

Monitors

The most essential piece of equipment I have is a second monitor. If I could have 3 or 4 hooked up to my Mac, I would be in heaven. (Emma Hitt says “amen” to that!)

Jennifer Maybin, MA, ELS

At least 2 monitors-the bigger the better.

Belinda Peace

My most useful piece of equipment by far – for both writing and editing – is a second monitor. It saves a lot of time by avoiding tabbing or clicking on different icons or tabs to jump from one screen or program to another. When I copy and paste text for flow or to compare documents, I can’t live without the extra monitor. I copy and paste words right from documents into online medical dictionaries, sources into PubMed, all from one screen to another. I just plug the extra monitor from my old desktop into the side of my laptop, so it’s easy and didn’t cost me extra.

Teresa Odle

Recording

The most useful piece of equipment I use is a very simple digital recorder that allows me to tape lectures and interviews discretely and with good audio. The device costs \$119 Canadian, and it has never failed me. It is the Digital Voice Recorder WS-311M made by Olympus and it's great!

Pam Harrison

Olympus DM-420 digital voice recorder (available from many sources, including Staples). When doing phone interviews, I attach it to my telephone.

Karen Cooksey

My primary digital recorder is an Olympus DS-71 -- excellent microphones -- it picks up well in conference halls (as well as can be expected). My advice is to sit near the loudspeaker, not necessarily near the actual person speaking. This recorder has wonderful battery life and records hundred of hours of very good quality audio before it gets full.

http://www.olympusamerica.com/cpg_section/product.asp?product=1399 For even better (near-broadcast) quality, I use a Sony PCM-M10 digital recorder. It has excellent sound, especially when a professional quality external microphone is plugged into it. It also has excellent battery life. --

<http://www.bhphotovideo.com/c/search?Ntt=Sony+PCM-M10&N=0&InitialSearch=yes> Another similar choice is the Edirol R-09HR, but the Sony has much better battery life. --

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<http://www.bhphotovideo.com/c/search?Ntt=Edirol+R-09&N=0&InitialSearch=yes>

Another very good digital recorder is the Zoom H2. It has pretty good battery life, and the internal mikes are really quite good. <http://www.bhphotovideo.com/c/search?Ntt=Zoom+H2&N=0&InitialSearch=yes>
There is also a Zoom H4n, which I have not yet tried, but it has some features that the H2 does not have. -- <http://www.bhphotovideo.com/c/search?Ntt=Zoom+H4n&N=0&InitialSearch=yes> The Zoom H1 is only \$99. Reviews say the sound is very good, but supposedly it feels cheaply made. It's fairly compact. -- <http://www.bhphotovideo.com/c/search?Ntt=Zoom+H1&N=0&InitialSearch=yes>

Dan Keller

Zoom H2 digital recorder provides excellent fidelity. It has a sensitive mic for recording meetings, and it can store many hours of digital files.

Neil Osterweil

A useful tool at times is my LiveScribe pen. It records audio (pretty well 1-on-1 or in a conference hall). It also copies everything you write on its special paper (only slightly more expensive than conventional notebook pads) and will transfer an image of it to your computer. There is also a \$30 add-on program that will convert written (script) text to editable text. It also plays back the specific audio beginning wherever you touch the pen to a written word. -- <http://www.livescribe.com/en-us/>

Dan Keller

Evernote- note taking and organization software. Includes OCR software that will read and index handwritten notes (direct from your LiveScribe pen). <http://www.evernote.com/>

Gavin Buffett

I am using something called a Pulse SmartPen (<http://www.livescribe.com/en-us/>). It has since been released as a newer version, the Echo SmartPen. I use it to record conversations and take notes simultaneously during interviews, among other things. It is quite remarkable, as you can point to a word in your notes and hear what the speaker was saying at that moment. There is a small learning curve, and I probably don't know all the things it can do. In theory, audio files can be exported to transcription software, although there is apparently a transcription software add-on (I have not used this yet). I did have trouble with the battery in the first pen I bought, but the company replaced it with no hassle. Also, some of the software add-ons seems too silly for such a smart pen, but perhaps they are busy working on more applications.

Catherine Wernette, PhD, ELS

You can record sounds on your computer with Advanced Sound Recorder:

<http://www.soundrecorder.net/>. However you can't type and record at the same time because the microphone picks up the sound of the typing. Recently I ran out of memory on my Olympus and recorded on both my iPod and my Blackberry. Both were usable. The iPod worked better than the Blackberry, but neither as good as the Olympus.

Laird Harrison

One very useful resource I use is FreeConference.com for interviews or conference calls with larger groups. If you want to record the call, it costs just \$6.50, and they will provide an mp3 audio file for download. There's also a better monthly or yearly rate. The conference calls can be short or run all day. They provide professional looking confirmation emails and separate dial-in numbers for both

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participants and the moderator.

Denise Johnson

For recording off your cell phone I recommend the Olympus TP-7 Telephone Recording Device – Olympus available for \$10.49 from Amazon.com. Very simple--it connects any type of phone including a wireless to a recorder with a mic jack.

Emma Hitt

Recording wise, depends on what you what to do with the recording, but a good all rounder (which is great for audio interviews, large meetings halls and the like) is the Edriol R-09 by Roland. Used without a mic it picks up great sound. Also the Olympus recorders mentioned already, I've got one that is a USB drive too, which is very handy when someone wants to give you a document or slides unexpectedly or to transfer the files to your laptop. I forget how long ago it was, but relatively recently I met a writer who was still using a cassette recorder!

Sara Freeman

Cameras

My preferred camera is a Canon G10, using the anti-shake feature when I have it racked out to telephoto focal lengths. The latest iteration is the G12. --

http://www.usa.canon.com/cusa/consumer/products/cameras/digital_cameras/powershot_g12

Left name off

Photographic equipment I'd recommend would be the Panasonic Lumix TZ6 or similar - a pocket sized snapper that'll take good head shots close up and speaker slides. For more high quality images, the Panasonic G1 with a telephoto lens often works well.

Sara Freeman

Printers and Scanners

My Lexmark networked 4 in 1 color duplex printer (fax, scanner, copy, print) prints on both sides of the paper with the flick of a setting. I can print from any computer in the house (4 levels). Prints 14 PPM. Best part? Only cost \$69 at Staples! Windows 7 and Mac compatible.

Jill Shuman

Flat bed Scanner (for contracts) \$99.

http://www.newegg.com/Product/Product.aspx?Item=N82E16838111057&cm_re=Scanner_canon-_-38-111-057-_-Product

HP Duplex laser printer (double-sided printing improves the quality of a writer's life). HPs have been great to me and surviving the writer abuse.

http://www.newegg.com/Product/Product.aspx?Item=N82E16828115195&cm_re=HP_Duplex_Printer-_-28-115-195-_-Product

Heather Haley, MS

iPhones etc.

As a Mac user (I converted the instant I went freelance almost 4 years ago, and never looked back) my iPhone keeps everything synced - address book, calendars, mail - and I use the Mobile Me software so I

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can access important files wherever I am. I've got an iMac and a laptop - which gives me two screens if I need it and it's there for when I travel, there's also an iPad lying around as got to keep up with the latest gadgets so I can help build web apps and the like.

Sara Freeman

Wifi Stuff

In the US, seriously think about getting a MiFi device. This not only gives you freedom to access email and the net from anywhere, but also can save a small fortune in hotel or airport internet charges. There is no contract, so you can sign up for a single day or month when required.

<http://www.virginmobileusa.com/mobile-broadband/mifi-2200.html>

Gavin Buffett

Ergonomics

Foot rest (\$65) and monitor riser (\$30) ergonomics are a writer's best friend.

http://www.newegg.com/Product/Product.aspx?Item=N82E16848021313&cm_re=3m_monitor_stand--48-021-313--Product

http://www.newegg.com/Product/Product.aspx?Item=N82E16848075022&cm_re=3M_foot_rest--48-075-022--Product

Heather Haley, MS

Rollermouse Pro: <http://www.rollermousepro.com/> This saves me moving my arm back and forth to the mouse constantly. There is a slight 'learning curve' of getting used to it, but now I love it and dislike using a normal mouse.

Kinesis Freestyle split keyboard: <http://www.kinesis-ergo.com/freestyle.htm>. This helps my hands to be in more neutral position when typing, to avoid repetitive strain injury.

Jennifer Gan

Trackball or mouse, an ergonomically designed desk with ergonomic keyboard tray, and a good office chair.

Monica Nicosia, PhD

Comprehensive Lists and Commentary

Several people contributed lists and inclusive descriptions of what equipment they needed—I thought those would be useful to leave in list form. Some commentary was also provided.

Software:

- Microsoft office
- EndNote for bibliography
- Adobe Acrobat professional
- Mozilla Firefox web browser
- Links to Pubmed, NCBI sites, Genomic databases
- Medical Dictionary -- some are available for free download, at Filebuzz.com

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- Quickbooks for billing and accounting
- Adobe Illustrator or some graphic software for PowerPoint presentations
- Grammar and Spellchecker software (Whitesmoke writer for Bio-Tech at whitesmoke.com)
- A voice recognition software such as Dragon Naturally Speaking 10 Preferred

Equipment:

- A heavy duty desktop computer with GB of HD and MB of RAM
- Double hard drive which has the same data
- A big monitor, 23" or more to have multiple pages open, or a desktop which drives multiple monitors
- A dedicated landline and telephone
- Laser printer
- Copy, Scan and Fax machine
- A smaller netbook for travel
- A voice recording device such as iPhone

Mercy Davidson

- Computer (purchased from Dell, with Word, Excel, Powerpoint, and Adobe Acrobat and CD/DVD player and burner); I purchased Adobe Reader separately and it is necessary if you want to be able to highlight articles for annotation.
- We also have Norton Security as our firewall/protection.
- I have a combined laser printer, scanner, fax machine (Brother MFC-8640N); purchased at Office Depot, I have had it for 5 years and no issues.
- I have a colored printer (HP6940) that I use occasionally; I bought it on line for \$24 years ago, and I don't remember where.
- I organize everything in notebooks. Each project or client has their own notebook. (purchase notebooks at www.costco.com).
- Phone with speaker feature, so I can take notes while speaking with a client.
- A heater for my office, so that I don't have to heat the whole house when I am working away at my desk.
- A calculator.
- A shredder (Fellowes S8 89Ci): I went through 2 shredders until I found this one...works great (I think this is also Costco).
- To get everything in my notebook, I have a Swingline electric 3 hole punch (I love this thing).

Kim Haines

- **For covering a conference:**
The computer should be light enough to be carried around but powerful enough to be productive. I don't prefer Mac over PCs since each different model has merits. However, I would advise that the computer has a CD drive since many conferences still put the abstracts on discs rather than on USB sticks.
- The Digital voice recorder if possible should connect directly with the computer to transfer data rather than require a cable.
- The digital camera should have a good battery life, and be easy to connect to the computer, i.e. have SD card.

- A method of secure backup is essential. Example: USB hard discs or data stored securely on a web “cloud” based service like box.net or dropbox.

Gavin Buffett

This may seem very basic, but I think the most essential software includes a word processor, in which you can easily and clearly track document changes, and a presentation tool of some sort. I use Microsoft Word and PowerPoint. To me, it is more important to be proficient with the software that I chose versus always having the hottest new software. That said, I also stay on top of Microsoft updates and try to keep myself aware of any new software, so I'm not completely clueless.

As far as equipment goes, I think the most useful tool is a reliable laptop that is lightweight, has a long-lasting battery, and runs the vast majority of the software that I need. For me, it is very valuable to be able to work and stay on top of email from anywhere without having to lug around a mammoth laptop. I would say the second most useful tools are storage devices. I use a 1 or 2 GB USB memory drive when I'm on-the-go, and I have a 500GB external HD at home to back up everything on my laptop.

Unfortunately, I don't have any specific suggestions for where to buy these items. I think Microsoft applications are pretty easy to come by, as are build-your-own-computer websites. I can say that I have been very pleased with my 2 GB Geek Squad USB drive and my 500GB Seagate external HD.

Trish Pruis

Essential equipment:

Large screen laptop (with wireless capability to use when working at home and away) plus external flat screen monitor (to be able to work on 2 screens, providing lots of useful real estate for having multiple programs open, makes our work more efficient), an external high-capacity portable backup drive (eg, Seagate FreeAgent GoFlex drive <http://www.seagate.com/www/en-us/products/external/>), MP3 player with good recording capabilities (to record phone and live interviews), a Laser printer, calculator, phone/fax machine, scanner, DSL or FIOS high-speed access, and a USB flash drive.

Essential software:

Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook), Reference Manager (<http://www.refman.com/>) or EndNote (<http://www.endnote.com/>) to generate bibliographies, literature databases, and handle citations within Word, TraxTime by Spud City software (an inexpensive program to easily record and track time spent on projects, <http://www.spudcity.com/traxtime/>), Mozilla Firefox and Internet Explorer, Norton or other antivirus/Internet security software, Adobe Acrobat Standard (not just the reader because in addition to reading and viewing, it's also important to be able to make and mark-up PDFs), an Internet-based reliable backup system (I use Mozy, <http://mozy.com/>), Quicken (<http://quicken.intuit.com/>) or other invoicing/accounting software.

Monica Nicosia, PhD

Here is a list of programs/software other than MS Word:

SAS viewer

Excel

Bookmarks in PDFs

Cross-referencing/referencing tools

Visio

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Other tools:

The largest monitor you can find!

Ergonomic keyboard and mouse

A comfortable office chair

Roopashree Vijaykumar

Waxing Philosophical

I think that, instead of this or that too, the most essential thing regarding software and equipment is to get the basics right, such as reliable internet access and mastering your word processing software.

Packages and products for writing come and go, but you have to have a solid basis to build upon. Anyway, burnishing and improving your writing is much more important than the actual equipment you use to write.

Your question reminded me of a *bon mot* by an old-time Brazilian journalist. Back in the 50s, he quipped that "People who work in newspapers nowadays may be awful journalists, but they are invariably excellent typists." To put it another way, we have to write instead of just type.

Paulo Mendes

Here are a few items I found most helpful.

- A good ergonomic keyboard tray. I use one by Workrite ergonomics. My preference is the single shelf or inline mouse: <http://www.workriteergo.com/shop/scripts/prodList.asp?idCategory=38>
- Essential software: Stedman's medical spell checker; Adobe Acrobat Professional; Visio (Microsoft) along with the basic MS Office suite of products including Outlook.
- For meeting with clients I am more and more often bringing my iPad. The "Goodreader" App is great for bringing reference documents with me.
- I use the Timewerks app on my ipod to track project and billing hours. You can enter multiple clients, projects and rates. I hit the timer when I start a project and when I finish.

Gerri Smoluk, PhD, PMP

A list of FREE software

- As a beginning medical writer who could not afford expensive software, my most useful was FREE software:
- PDF995 for making pdf's (pdf995.com)
- FOXIT for redlining & yellow highlighting references (foxit.software.com)
- SNAG-IT for taking screen shots for artwork (techsmith.com)
- OPENOFFICE (word/excel/pp clones) (openoffice.org)
- PAINT (for graphics alteration) (came free with MS windows)
- OUTLOOK EXPRESS (for email) (came free with MS windows)

Requested to leave name off—but thanks very much for this!!

I cannot live without:

Software

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- EndNote (X4 version is the best by far). Available at a discount to AMWA members. (www.amwa.org). Also available from Thomson Reuters (<http://www.endnote.com/pr-enx4win.asp>).
- Adobe Acrobat 9 pro to highlight text, make pdf portfolios, etc. Available from adobe (www.adobe.com).
- Mindmanager. Available from mindjet (<http://www.mindjet.com/products/mindmanager-9-win/overview>).
- Free my pdf to unlock secured pdfs e.g. NCCN guidelines (<http://freemypdf.com/>).

Application

- Dropbox (www.dropbox.com) for file sharing. Eliminates the need to email huge attachments. Allows easy collaboration.

Equipment

- Olympus Digital Voice Recorder WS-300M for recording interviews with KOLs
- Brother MFC-780W all in one black and white printer/scanner/fax (black and white)
- Ergonomic mouse and mouse pad
- A flat screen monitor to attach to my laptop for viewing multiple documents at the same time
- My HTC phone that lets me check my emails while I am out

Meenakshi Kashyap

These are most useful to me:

- Memento, an Add-in for Word 2007 (<http://ragrawal.wordpress.com/2009/03/07/releasing-reference-manager-beta-for-word-2007/>) and HubMed (<http://www.hubmed.org/>), a PubMed alternative - these allow me to load references into the Word reference manager.
- Google - obviously!
- Wikipedia - not exactly peer-reviewed, but a great jumping off point in research
- Post-it notes, both real and virtual, for making notes
- A white board, for keeping track
- Skype and a headset, for handsfree, cheap and recordable calls
- A radio to keep my sanity!

Suzanne Elvidge

Endnote; Jing (for copying graphics), fast computer; neat receipts for scanning contracts and receipts; large bottle of aspirin.

Debra Gordon, MS

I use conventional writer's stuff--a computer (a Compaq, 5-years old, which I will soon replace); a Philips monitor--old fashioned, but BIG and perfect for my needs; a laptop computer; a printer (black & white, an inexpensive Brother); a little Fax machine (Panasonic); a Sony digital recorder; a Sony camcorder with a tripod, and a Canon camera. --That's about it--nothing really special here. But this covers my basic needs.

Sandra Pelus, MS

In my own scientific writing and editing for medical/science journals I find websites such as PubMed and Google Scholar to be most helpful. The most helpful software packages are: Word, Excel, PowerPoint, SPSS, Endnote, iMovie, QuickTime, and Photoshop. The latter 3 programs are invaluable for graphics and figures.

DeAnna L. Adkins, PhD

Keeping it simple:

I don't use anything beyond the basic, essential MS apps (Word, PP, Excel), although I've often thought about buying a defibrillator! (Emma Hitt says I KNOW what you mean although trying to picture how to use that!)

Meg Phelan

Pretty simple here:

- Word
- EndNote
- TraxTime (www.spudcity.com; handy time-tracking, "punch clock" app)
- Firefox Web Browser
- HP all-in-one printer/copier/scanner

Michael J. Stillman, Ph.D.

For software, my top 3 would be MS Office (Word, PowerPoint, Excel and Outlook) > Reference Manager > Adobe Acrobat. For hardware, just a laptop and web connection is enough for me.

Kerry Padilla

Endnote, Microsoft Word and the Internet are the top 3. Also of note is Microsoft Visio for making flow charts - but maybe that counts more for graphic artists.

Chris Pung

I use nothing fancy: Word 7 for writing and the internet and phone for research. My most essential equipment is my brain!

Margot Fromer

I use a computer and Word. That's it!

Debra Beck

I'm a medical editor and don't really use any special software for that.

John McCleery

How about Aspirin?

Alan Brown (to which Emma Hitt replied to her dear friend—how about aspirin *and* scotch?—actually a glass of chardonnay for me please—but only after I am done writing for the day!)

In the spirit of this week. . . does an Rx for valium count?

Unnamed (but many of us can probably relate!)

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Again, if you read this and see one of your favorites missing, please email me at emma@hittmedicalwriting.com. I will save your email and update this piece periodically. Thanks to all who contributed!

This piece will be posted permanently on my home page at www.hittmedicalwriting.com.

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