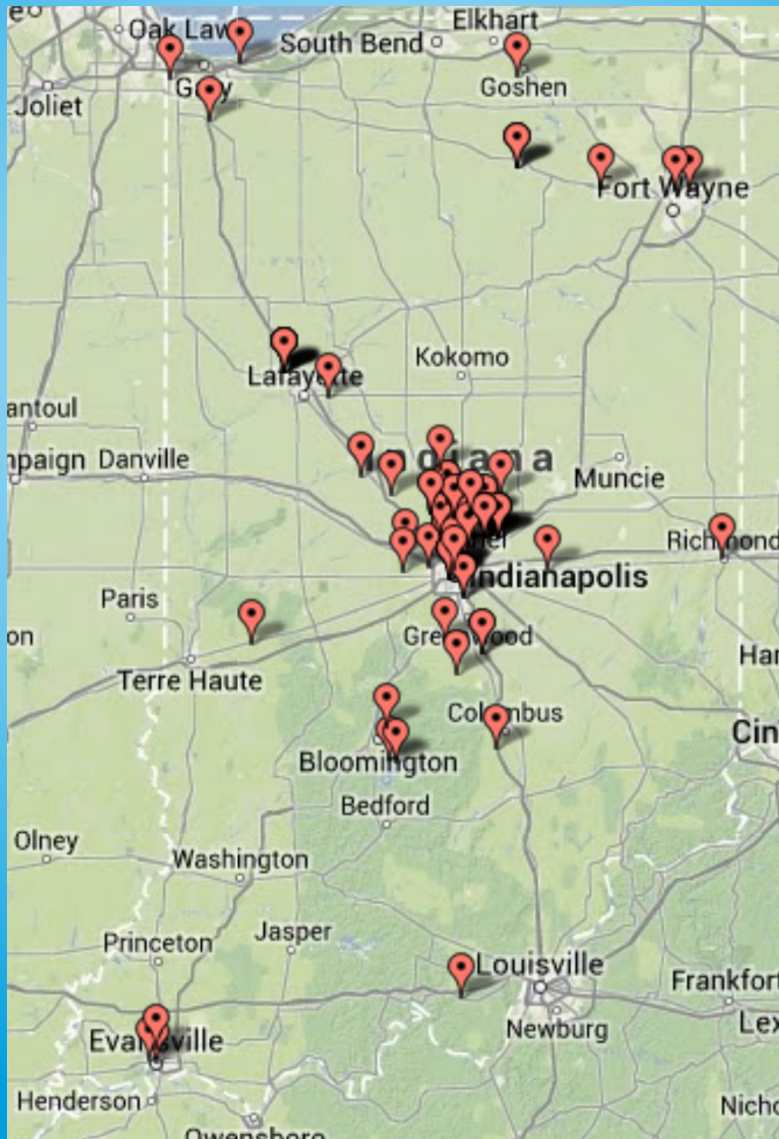


AMWA

Indiana Chapter Newsletter

December 2015



American Medical Writers Association Indiana Chapter

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Coming Attractions

June 10 & 11, 2016
AMWA Indiana Chapter Conference
Indianapolis, IN

Links

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[WilliamsTown Communication Blog](#)

Please let us hear your voice!

Let us know if there is anything we can do to help you benefit professionally from your AMWA membership. Volunteering to help our chapter or national association is a great way to have fun while meeting some wonderful people, improving yourself and the profession, and becoming and being the leader you were meant to be. Join our LinkedIn group, come to the chapter events, or click on the name of a chapter officer or committee chair above to join the conversation about medical communication and our chapter.

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Cover

Find AMWA members near you by searching the AMWA member directory by city or zip code.

This map of the locations of our 93 chapter members was created with [BatchGeo](#).

Dear Indiana AMWA Members,

It's an exciting year to be part of AMWA!

AMWA is continuing to expand educational opportunities on both the national and local level. AMWA online learning is now up: http://www.amwa.org/online_learning. This site provides instant access to learning activities that will help you hone your professional skills and advance your career. The first course launches this month and is entitled "Ten Essential Characteristics of Effective Tables and Graphs." AMWA will follow this by launching courses throughout next year.

**AMWA provides
instant access
to learning
activities**

At the local level, Bill Pietrzak and the Education committee are planning a phenomenal chapter conference for June 10-11th. We will be releasing more information about the conference as the date draws nearer, and we hope to see you all there! In addition, our monthly presentations have been well attended. Just two weeks ago we heard Joseph Giaconia present on writing the first draft of a manuscript. Previous talks have covered job hunting and résumés, online research, personalized cancer therapy, and the phases of drug discovery. I encourage each one of you to take advantage of these events as they are one of your membership benefits. Not only do I always learn something new from the speakers, but I also appreciate the opportunity to talk to fellow medical writers.

During this busy holiday season with all the shopping and the delicious treats, it is easy to forget to take a moment and reflect on our blessings. So, I'd like to close this letter with my thanks to all of you for joining Indiana AMWA. Our chapter is only as strong as our members, and it is through sharing our collective knowledge and talents that we all benefit. I also want to thank our board members and volunteers for donating their time and talents to this organization. I am consistently amazed by the generosity of our volunteers.

We are here to support the medical communications community; if there is anything we can do to help you, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Best,

Laura Town

Laura Town
President
AMWA Indiana chapter
ltown@willtown.com

Laura is the 2015-2016 president of the AMWA Indiana chapter and owns WilliamsTown Communications, a publishing and e-learning firm. WilliamsTown specializes in producing healthcare content for nursing and allied health professionals.

Save the Dates

June 10 & 11, 2016

AMWA Indiana Chapter Conference

Indianapolis

Find updates to chapter and community events on our [Web site](#)



Interview with Laura Town

This interview was conducted by David Caldwell on December 10, 2015, for the AMWA Indiana Chapter Newsletter (AICN).

Laura Town (ltown@willtown.com)

David Caldwell (davidccaldwell@att.net)

AMWA

AICN: Laura, thank you very much for all you have done for AMWA at both the local and national levels. AMWA hired your company to help develop its online education program. You organized outstanding chapter conferences in 2014 and 2015. This year, you are doing an excellent job as our president. Why did you join AMWA?

**Our members
are open and
willing to help
each other**

Ms. Town: My company hires medical editors and writers, so I was looking to cultivate new talent. I wanted to learn more about the profession because it is so broad and I know only a very small niche of it that doesn't involve most medical writers. I wanted to know more about regulatory writing, promotional CME, and other areas that I am not involved in on a day-to-day basis.

AICN: What do you like best about AMWA?

Ms. Town: I really like that our members are open and willing to help each other. Not many networking organizations have members who are as helpful and kind and willing to share their time and expertise as our members are. I think this is the main strength of our chapter.

For example, a potential chapter member recently called me and wanted some advice on getting into medical writing. She has an advanced degree and has done research but does not have

much experience in medical writing. Barbara Lightfoot (our chapter's program chair), Esther Asplund (our chapter's president-elect), and I each talked with her for an hour. Other chapter members met with her at a couple of chapter meetings and helped her with her resume. Since then, she has had 3 job interviews.

AICN: Can you tell us about new services AMWA offers or will offer soon?

Ms. Town: The big push is for online education. AMWA is developing a set of [online interactive learning activities](#) that will give members additional learning opportunities in their homes. The first, which was released just this month and is for members with basic or intermediate knowledge of the topic, is *Ten Characteristics of Effective Tables and Graphs* by Cindy Hamilton. Three others on regulatory writing are in progress.

**AMWA's big
push is for
online
education**

AICN: What are your goals for the Indiana chapter this year?

Ms. Town: I would like to sustain our membership. I'm scheduling more chapter meetings to give our members more opportunities to interact with each other. We are widely dispersed geographically—across Indiana and across the large Indianapolis area—so I'm holding meetings in different locations to attract members who live far from downtown Indianapolis. As always, I want an excellent chapter conference with strong attendance, insightful speakers, and real educational value.

AICN: Would you like to share any professional advice or resources?

Ms. Town: For those interested in designing online courses or in writing for an online audience (something companies are focusing on these days), several valuable books by [Ruth Colvin Clark](#) describe how to write for someone who is digesting information from a screen rather than from a page. My post, "[Freelance](#)

[Writing Meets Online Education: How to Get Involved](#),” offers additional advice.

Career

AICN: What was your path to medical writing?

Ms. Town: I kind of fell into it. My degree is in liberal arts (political science), not science. When I left school, I joined Macmillan Computer Publishing (now known as Pearson Education) as an editor and worked my way up for a few years. A second publishing company then hired me as a publisher to edit, and to find authors to write, textbooks for nurses. While there, I decided to use work I did for the nursing community and contacts I made to start my own business, WilliamsTown Communications. We edit books and create online courses for a variety of disciplines, but specialize in health care, mainly in the areas of allied health and nursing.

AICN: Why did you decide to start your own company,?

Ms. Town: My decision was not made lightly or spontaneously. I wanted financial stability, a flexible work schedule, and the chance to lead. To make that dream a reality, I built the foundation of my company by freelancing for 2 years while working full time for a publishing company. I developed a roster of clients and secured enough contracts to cover my salary for 1 year before flying solo.

AICN: What is your role in your company and how do you stay current with what you need to know to do your job?

Ms. Town: As the owner, I create business alliances, market the company, interact with clients, and manage employees who do almost all of the day-to-day project work. I learn from AMWA by participating at the national and local levels, by reading the *AMWA Journal*, and by taking advantage of AMWA’s many educational

**WilliamsTown
Communications
edits books and
creates online
courses**

resources. I'm always reading in the medical field. For example, I may read a 400 page textbook to decide whether and how I could present that information online. I network with fellow entrepreneurs and learn from them how to meet particular challenges.

AICN: How do you keep your job fresh?

Ms. Town: I'm always learning new skills and working with different people, so my job is never dull. Our projects address topics ranging from nursing and allied health care to political science, history, and physical education. For example, we recently wrote a long conversation among parent, child, and welfare worker that was part of an interactive simulation created by a video gaming company for child welfare workers.

AICN: How many people does your company employ?

Ms. Town: Right now we have 7 employees and a network of 150 independent contractors. We typically hire from 2 to 10 independent contractors for a project.

AICN: What do you look for in the medical writers you hire?

Ms. Town: We hire both medical writers and medical editors. Successful candidates for a medical editing position show both technical and social skills by scoring at least 90% on our in-house editing exam. The exam tests ability to edit an unedited manuscript, passages from an unedited textbook, and about 30 sentences containing common errors. In evaluating an examinee's answers, we look for tact in querying an author and for modesty in making edits without querying the author.

Our medical editors show technical skill, tact, and modesty

Successful candidates for a medical writing position have an advanced degree that is relevant to the project, provide excellent

We work hard to meet timelines

writing samples, are agreeable and easy to work with, and commit to meeting deadlines.

AICN: How do you market your company?

Ms. Town: Mostly with the [company Web site](#) and by word of mouth. I haven't marketed much because the companies I started doing business with 11 years ago are still our clients and keep us busy. But in addition to our long-standing work with textbooks, we are now developing online-learning courses. So I'm starting to market those courses through different online-learning organizations.

AICN: Do you put any standard elements into your contracts with clients?

Ms. Town: We write our own contracts, based on a standard contract approved by an attorney years ago. They always define the scope of a project and specify how many revisions a project fee covers, so that we can be certain about the extent of our commitments. We charge by the hour for additional revisions and for work that is outside of the scope.

AICN: How to you persuade a client to agree to an edit or timeline?

Ms. Town: Edits are not a problem for us. Most of our clients are universities and large publishers who accept our editors as experts.

We rarely change a timeline because we work hard to meet it. That's one our selling points. Many companies like ours won't commit to meeting deadlines. We hire extra people and work extra hours and weekends, if necessary to meet a deadline, because we understand that the client has business pressures. If we must change a timeline, we start the conversation by explaining our need and by giving the client a choice—the expected product 2

weeks late or something less than expected on time.

Developing AMWA's online education program has helped us develop new collaborative skills. For each product, we form one vision from many valuable volunteer voices and suggested contents. In contrast, we create products for all of our other clients independently or in collaboration with only one outside person.

I'm proud of how the *Tables and Graphs* online learning activity (see above) turned out. I think AMWA members will really enjoy it. It is the perfect length, gets to the heart of the matter, tells you exactly what you need to know, and is entertaining. I'm confident we can do that with the rest of the learning activities we are developing.

AICN: How do you approach an assignment on a topic unfamiliar to you?

Ms. Town: We either hire expertise or try to quickly become experts ourselves. We learn the state of the art by reading the literature. If necessary, we interview subject matter experts or hire them to walk us through the project or to do some of the work themselves.

AICN: What is your secret to communicating well?

Ms. Town: First, I try to know my audience and its psychocognitive profile. That's important because we create textbooks and online courses for a wide range of audiences; for example, elementary students, nontraditional community college students, and AMWA members. Then we design a product written clearly and concisely for the unique needs and cognitive level of each audience.

I try to know my
audience and
its
psychocognitive
profile

AICN: Is there any additional information or advice you would like to share with our chapter members?

Ms. Town: If you want to freelance full time, map out a business plan beforehand; don't start spontaneously. Cultivate clients continuously. Be willing to put in the hours and to work hard all of the time. Be prepared for fluctuations in the amount of work. Manage your money carefully.

***Science Connect* at Indiana University**

Esther Brooks-Asplund, PhD (esther.asplund@att.net)



How many of you planned for your medical writing career while a college student? While this may be true for some of you, I was unaware of the opportunities in medical writing as an undergraduate student. On 28 October 2015, the Indiana University Arts & Sciences Career Services hosted *Science Connect: Discover the Possibilities* in the Indiana Memorial Union at IU Bloomington. *Science Connect* is a career planning and preparation event for students majoring in the natural and mathematical sciences so that students may learn of careers outside the traditional medical school route. The event consisted of two 30-minute “speed networking” sessions with professionals in the science field followed by a final networking event. During this event, I shared my story, beginning as an undergraduate majoring in math and computer science, up to my present career as a freelance regulatory writer. Like me, the undergraduate students were unaware of the opportunities in science writing, and upon learning of these opportunities, several of the individuals enthusiastically left the event with the hope of fulfilling their passion for both science and writing.

**Undergraduates
are unaware of
opportunities in
science writing**

If sharing your story of becoming a science writer with students is of interest to you, please contact me to discuss how you might do this with local universities in Indiana.

Esther Brooks-Asplund is the 2015-2016 president-elect of our chapter and owner of Hoosier Medical Communication Services in Bloomington, IN.

Report: Guiding Consumers Through the Healthcare Maze: The Patient Advocacy Movement

Sean Dixon (sdixon@willtown.com)

I recently attended a presentation by Michelle Hanley of MedSavvy Healthcare Advocates LLC regarding patient advocacy. One of a number of things that struck me while listening to this presentation was Hanley's statement that information plus tools does not equal knowledge. We do have a lot of information available to us regarding health care consumer needs and concerns. But how do consumers make sense of it all? How do they get the information they need?

Hanley made the point that medical writers can bridge the gap between health care providers and health care consumers. It does seem that involving medical writers in patient advocacy efforts could be effective if it involves writers with an understanding of what they are writing about effectively communicating that information at a level most people can understand. Hanley identified translation work as an advocacy area in which medical writers could be involved, not just in translating documents to English from other languages but also in translating medicalese to more consumer-friendly terms.

**Medical writers
can give health
care consumers
the information
they need**

I think a huge part of this issue is that the information health care consumers need often is complex and difficult for them to decipher. Think of all the information involved in forming a proper diagnosis and plan for treatment of a patient's condition: the symptoms the patient has presented, the patient's history, various tests and exams, the physician's own knowledge of the body and health, the involvement of the physician and other health care professionals in monitoring the patient's condition, the potential involvement of specialists and assisting physicians in providing their own opinions. Now think of making all of that easily and quickly comprehensible to patients with a low level of literacy, or patients with disabilities related to reading or visual comprehension, or patients whose first language isn't English and whose command of English is not strong. It's easy to say that a mechanism should exist for making health care information easier for consumers to understand. What's hard is seeing how that should work in practice.

The health care consumer population is as broad as it gets. Effectively, it's all of us. In writing a piece—in determining topic, structure, tone, length, and language level, among other issues—every writer needs to consider the audience. Knowing the audience is critical to know what angle to take on a topic, what tone is most appropriate, how long the piece should be, and so on. Having a specific audience in mind is enormously helpful to a writer because it can clarify so much of what needs to be done. However, having an audience of potentially everybody means that writers need to think in much broader terms than is typical. It can be done, but it's more difficult.

**What
mechanism can
make health
care
information
easy to
understand?**

Having a specific subject—what oncology patients need to know, for example—can certainly help narrow that field. But assumptions about what those patients know and can understand will still have to be as low as possible to accommodate as many people as possible. This is difficult when the information necessary to communicate is medical information that needs to be precise and accurate; that is, how low level can some of this information be and still properly represent the facts? This is also

difficult when the range of cultural issues to take into account is so vast. It's also true that more savvy consumers can get frustrated with information that seems to be taking too long to get to the point because it's trying to leave no one out. Even with a specific topic and task, communicating to such a broad audience effectively involves a careful balancing act.

It can be done, but the writers involved need to have a solid understanding of what they're writing about as well as the strong ability to communicate complex concepts simply, directly, and in plain language. That's a rare skill set. Medical writers can bridge the gap between healthcare providers and consumers because so much of the problem here is information and communicating it effectively. But to do that well, medical writers need to have a knowledge and skill set that's difficult to find, and that can't be found by going to the lowest bidder. We as a society need to push for medical writing to be a high-standard profession with income potential that will attract the writers with the best combination of skills and knowledge for the job.

Sean Dixon is an editor for WilliamsTown Communications and has worked in publishing creating educational content for the past twenty years.

Writers need a solid understanding of what they're writing about

2016
AMWA

Medical Writing & Communication Conference

OCTOBER 6-8 | DENVER, CO

Show Me the Research Money: Tips for Writing Federal Research Grants

Angela Beeler (angela.beeler00@gmail.com)

Your clients have a remarkable idea. They have painstakingly spent decades, literally decades, of their lives working on this idea. Maybe it will decrease the debilitating effects of Alzheimer's, maybe it will provide an early detection screening test for cancer, or maybe it will provide for increased quality-of-life for patients with traumatic brain injuries. The problem is that further research is needed to test their idea, but that research costs money. Not only that, but they have the added pressure of maintaining funding for promotion and tenure and keeping a steady paycheck coming to their research staff. Grant writing, particularly for grants from the federal government, can seem like a daunting task. There are so many rules and regulations that many people don't even know where to start. For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services grant application guide for the National Institutes of Health is nearly 300 pages long¹. However, there are some very simple tips that can be followed to ensure yourself and/or your client that the process can not only be done, but can be done successfully.

1. One size does not fit all: The federal government spends countless hours meeting, discussing, drafting, and voting on the federal research priorities. Even further, each organization or agency has its own set of specific priorities. It is from those priorities that funding opportunity announcements (FOAs) are created and released. It is extremely important to make sure that the project being proposed is within the scope and mission of the agency and the FOA. Time should not be wasted by submitting a proposal on a treatment for lung cancer to the National Eye Institute. However, many times the uncertainty about what FOA to respond to or what institute to submit to is not that obvious. If this is the case, don't be afraid to call the Program Officer listed on the

The HHS grant application guide for NIH is nearly 300 pages long

FOA. That is what they are there for. They can provide invaluable guidance, saving all parties involved a lot of time and energy.

2. Don't bite off more than you can chew: Many investigators think that it will help their chances of getting funded if they address every single potential focus of an FOA or propose what should really take five years in a three year budget. This is a double edged sword. If you propose something and you are awarded, you can be held accountable to complete the objectives as you set them out in the application, thus you may be scrambling to try and do everything that you said that you would. On the other side, reviewers may see right through this and know that it is not realistic, in turn giving the application a poor score. In either case, the best solution is a thought-out, focused application. The application is likely to fair better with two to four concrete aims that can be accomplished within a reasonable amount of time.

3. Put your money where your mouth is: This goes along with #2. Although the budget and justification are typically not scored portions of the application, they are still important, necessary components. This is particularly relevant for the independent grant writer. In many cases, a grant writer may be assisting with drafting of the research strategy and other scientific portions of the proposal, while the investigator or an administrator compiles the budget. It is critical that the entire application is reviewed together to make sure that consistency is maintained. It is essential that all of the proposed activities in the research strategy are covered in the budget and vice versa. Additionally it is much more difficult to ask for more funding, as opposed to explaining why there is funding left over. Make sure the budget requested is reasonable, allowable, and allocable but also enough to accomplish the aims realistically.

4. Collaborators matter: Environment and Investigator are two of the five review criteria for a National Institutes of Health grant application. That in and of itself should say something. This is not the time to be modest. The investigators need to talk about how wonderful they are and how what they have done in the past

Write a
thoughtful,
focused
application

Ask the agency for clarification

has prepared them to conduct this new study. It is important to remember that most of those past endeavors were not accomplished alone, nor will this new project. Use the personal statement of the biographical sketch to highlight that past collaborative work. With the new format of the biographical sketch, specific publications can be referenced in this context. If there are gaps in the experience or resources of the team, bring someone in to fill those gaps. One caveat to this, each member of the team does need to serve a purpose with a defined role. It is not worth the budgetary space and potential negative review to saturate the personnel section with numerous investigators who are only going to be involved in spirit. Effort certification is required for federal grants.

5. Follow the instructions: In elementary school, did you ever have to do that activity where the teacher gives you a piece of paper with a list of 25 or so activities to test whether or not you can follow directions? The first activity is to read each item on the list before you do anything and, when you get to the bottom, the last item listed says not to do anything on the list. You want your grant application to shine just like the student who is sitting quietly while his/her fellow classmates are multiplying 8552×7948 on the back of the paper, underlining all numbered items, punching holes in the top right corner, or the best, shouting out loud "I am nearly finished. I followed directions." The application could be deemed nonresponsive if the instructions are not followed and not even sent for review. Furthermore, the reviewers know what to look for and where. If they can't find it, you are not likely to get them on your side.

6. But don't expect it all to make sense: There is a wealth of information out there regarding completing and submitting an application: the organization's website, the application guide, supplemental instructions, the FOA, etc. Even though it is imperative to follow the instructions, sometimes contradictions and vagueness can be found. If there is any uncertainty about completing the application, contact the agency to get more clarification. If this proves to be unhelpful, then best judgement

should be used. The FOA instructions typically supersede other agency instructions, so follow those first (other than local, state, or federal laws, of course).

7. Reviewed but necessarily not read: Not all grant reviewers in a particular review session will read each and every grant application. This is why it is important to have not only a very well written specific aims page or abstract but also a well formatted application. With a research strategy section of anywhere from six to twenty-five pages, formatting all of that text cleanly and correctly will help make the reviewers' job easier, which in turn could reflect positively on the outcome of the application. Many grant reviewers are not paid and volunteer time out of their busy schedules to review grant applications. With the limited time that may be spent on the application, it is vital to make the specific aims or abstract impactful.

8. Write for the reviewer: Most grant reviewers are subject matter experts. It is important to not get lost in the weeds. A proposal needs a clearly stated hypothesis and focused objectives with descriptive methods; however, maybe more importantly, it needs to excite the reviewers. You want them to serve as advocates for the proposal, therefore it is important to persuade them to advocate. This can be accomplished without drowning them in background information, prose, and verbose details that are not necessary. The proposal should be crafted to communicate the researcher's commitment and enthusiasm to the project, so that the reviewer can be persuaded to think the same way.

9. Get the application reviewed before it is reviewed: This may be difficult for some people to do. There are not many who want to see their life's work critiqued and redlined. However, the risk of the damage to the ego is much less than the reward of submitting a stronger proposal. If the time and resources are available to have another colleague review the application, this will undoubtedly prove beneficial. There are typically always items that the investigator may not have addressed that will be brought to light by having the application reviewed prior to submission. It

**Don't get lost in
the weeds**

Use a poor
review to
rethink, revise,
and try again

is much better to be able to address those items before expending additional time and effort on submitting a lower quality application.

10. If at first you don't succeed: The current success rate for a National Institutes of Health research grant application is under 20%. In fiscal year 2014, 54,519 research grant applications were submitted and only 9,241 of those were funded². Although those may not seem like great odds, 0% of 0 applications submitted will be funded. A poor review outcome should not necessarily be met with discouragement. It should be taken as an opportunity to rethink, revise, and try again.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Public Health Service, (2015, November 25). SF424 (R&R) Application Guide for NIH and Other PHS agencies. Retrieved from http://grants.nih.gov/grants/funding/424/SF424_RR_Guide_General_VerC.pdf.

² Rockey, S. What are the Chances of Getting Funded? (2015, June 29). Retrieved from <https://nexus.od.nih.gov/all/2015/06/29/what-are-the-chances-of-getting-funded/>.

Angela Beeler is a certified research administrator and the pre/post award research coordinator at the Indiana University School of Nursing.

Happy Holidays!