

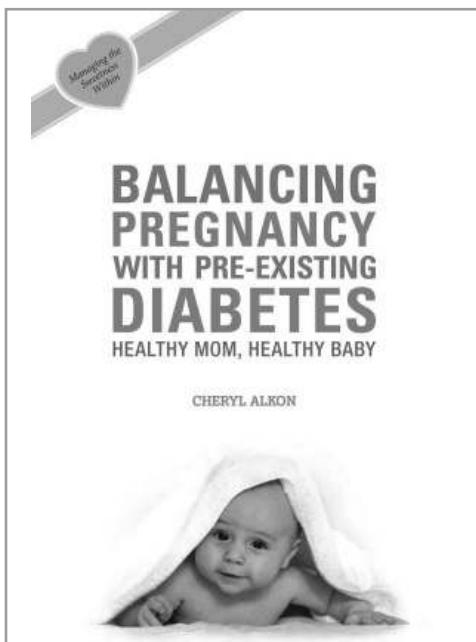
HOW AN ASJA  
MEMBER'S

# *Personal* **EXPERIENCE** *informs her work*



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**T**his summer, I will mark four decades of living with type 1 diabetes. That's 40 years of taking insulin both by syringe and via insulin pump, paying close attention to everything I eat, trying my damndest to walk the tightrope of optimal blood sugar control while so many factors—stress, exercise, too much or too little medication, hormones, food choices, you name it—threaten to make those blood sugar numbers soar or plummet. And that's just what I do to stay healthy every day.



So writing about it all makes sense. And cents. In my case, I write about diabetes because it's a way to make a living out of something I'm doing anyway. When I was beginning to think about getting pregnant, I couldn't find an insider's guide about the topic—so ultimately, I wrote it. *Balancing Pregnancy With Pre-Existing Diabetes: Healthy Mom, Healthy Baby*, was published in 2010 by Demos Health. For the tiny percentage of the world's reading population who can relate to this topic, my book is there for them. I still receive emails and praise from women around the world, years after publication, who thank me for writing it.

But diabetes (particularly diabetes and pregnancy) isn't the only disease in town. I also write or have written about cancer, otolaryngology (ear, nose, and throat stuff), Gaucher disease, allergies, Crohn's disease, and more. And sometimes, I cover nonmedical stuff like business trends for franchise owners, parenting issues, and, once, a feature on my neighbor's astonishing flowers for a gardening website—just because it was interesting and the opportunity arose.

## WHY SPECIALIZE?

Specializing in a topic can mean you know it intimately, or at least better than the average person on the street. This can come out of your life experience, as mine has, or because something really interests you. (Thankfully, I don't have personal experience with every condition I cover). But digging deep into a topic can help set you apart when pitching editors who want new or newsworthy story ideas, or want professional writers who already know a subject well. It can also help you command higher rates from editors who are able to pay more to writers who know the subject well and can deliver clear, well-researched, and fact-checked copy that's a great fit for the publication or website. Doing so can mean less work for the editor to get the story into shape. As a result, that editor is also more likely to hire you again. (And hopefully again, when that editor inevitably moves on to a different position at a title that hopefully uses freelance writers).



It can also shorten the time you spend researching a story, because you likely already know the basics of something and can jump in with deeper questions and thus, glean juicier analysis from your sources. And finally, it can be easier to recycle story ideas for different publications and audiences after you've written about them before. I've covered topics such as medical office renovations both for a general physician website as well as for a specialty-specific trade magazine. I've written about finding childcare for kids with special needs for *USA Today*, a Gannett custom publication called *Back to School*, a magazine for families touched by muscular dystrophy called *Quest*, and for a college alumni magazine that featured a profile of one of the childcare providers I interviewed for the initial story in *USA Today*. One topic, four assignments. Re-slanting the same ideas for different audiences is a great way to get more mileage and money out of the topic.

Since I'm always open to finding new clients, I don't stick solely with medicine and health. But using a specialty can be a way to crack a new market. I've written consistently for a travel editor I met at the 2016 New York ASJA conference who edits blogs for several hotel websites. While I don't know the ins and outs of travel, I've pitched and published stories on sleeping better while on the road, as well as how to travel better with kids—both based out of my own experiences. Having clips in a certain topic can make it easier to stand out when you hear about opportunities from other editors who need similar copy. I answered a job ad about a year ago from an editor at an association for oncologists. I'd written several stories for a trade title for this group of doctors before, and the editor told me that very few of the people who responded to the ad had the kind of clips she was seeking, which made me stand out. This week, I finished writing my seventh story for her.

## MAKE SPECIALIZATION WORK FOR YOU >>>>

**1. Turn your knowledge into a beat.** What do you already know well? What do you already do? How can you sell that knowledge? Some beats, like healthcare, technology, medicine, business, and finance, tend to pay more. If you're genuinely interested in these topics, great—follow the money. But if you love, say, the arts, can you focus on business strategies for artists? Love entertainment? What perspective can you offer that's not already out there? Figure out how to leverage that knowledge to your benefit.

**2. Slant and re-slant.** Look at the stories you've already written. How could you rework an idea to a different title? I've covered telehealth for Office Depot's healthcare website and again for *Modern Healthcare's* custom division. Think also about the different audiences that care about your topic. With health and medicine, there are patients, physicians, patients' families, and physicians' colleagues/employees. Who are the people that care about your topic? What stories can you tell them, or what information can you provide to make their lives easier, their jobs better, their families happier?

**3. Rise to the challenge.** As someone who has used technology to manage my diabetes for a long time, I told a potential client I could easily blog about medical devices. The client, an engineering/manufacturing firm, sent me an assignment where I had to use Google to define half the words in the assigning email, and the device the company worked with had nothing to do with patients and diabetes. Writing the first post was tough, but the client liked it, and I wrote for them for a year. Be open to learning new things even when you think your specialization and pre-existing knowledge will pull you through.

**4. Think about related fields.** Medicine and health are big, but they are tied to insurance. When an insurance client approached me about blogging for them, I thought about how much I know about using health insurance as a patient. My pitches, and subsequent stories, reflected that insight.

**5. Network.** Freelancing can be lonely, but getting involved in groups like ASJA helps you find your people. If you are active in real-time and online writing groups, sincerely sharing advice and leads about potential opportunities for others, others may do the same for you—particularly if you become known as a writer who covers certain topics. You never know where your next gig will come from, but if you're the writer who covers, say, museums and real estate, it's likely people will think of you when they hear about an editor looking for writers who know that field.

**6. Be open to opportunity.** When a family friend told me she had a college friend who is an editor for a magazine for Dunkin' Donuts franchise owners, I sent him clips and a letter of introduction. I don't drink coffee, and donuts wreak havoc on my blood sugar levels, but I'll write about nearly anything for a good assignment. While the knowledge you acquire as a writer who specializes might not directly apply to your next assignment, the research, reporting, interviewing, and writing skills you have can make any editor happy if you do the job well. So while I have little in common with the people who run Dunkin' Donuts franchises, I know how to track them down and ask them questions that elicit interesting anecdotes and insights. And doing that well, on deadline, with clear copy, is what any editor wants—no matter what specialized information the writer knew before she accepted the assignment or whether she actually ever eats at the restaurant she's writing about.