

The Evolution of a Book Author

By the time I began writing my first published book in 1983, I had published some three dozen articles in the scientific literature documenting my research—and also a good number of other columns and articles in newspapers and magazines. I had even edited a few articles myself in my career as a scientist and scientific writer. However, in all of that activity, I don't recall ever becoming familiar with the term "text editing." It was a term I was going to become very familiar with by the time my book went to print.

For me, the road to becoming a book author followed a lot smoother route than for most of those who aspire to such a goal. I was invited by a publisher to write a book for them. That publisher was local to the area where I was living. The wife of one of the editors had attended a class I taught. Later, the editor called and asked me to lunch. That conversation led to his invitation for me to present a book proposal. I agreed and, shortly thereafter, my proposal was accepted and I found myself with a contract to write a book.

In 1983, my only tools for such a project were pencils, a legal pad and a typewriter. The first draft of the book was written longhand from my proposed outline and then typed, including some additions and corrections as I transcribed. Several drafts later, I had a fairly clean copy of a typed manuscript to submit to the editor. As I recall, the whole project took me about six weeks. (I was unemployed at the time, so I had time to spare.) It was not a long book; only about 45 thousand words (about 180 typewritten pages). I delivered the manuscript to the editor and awaited his comments.

A week or two later, I received those comments. They were on three typewritten pages, single-spaced. In addition, he included half a dozen reports he had requested from other reviewers, two of them outside experts. This initial editing was not that much different from the kinds of comments I had received from editors of the articles I had written in the past. They spoke mostly to matters of organization and clarity of content. They made no specific requirements; just suggestions as to how the material might be made easier to understand. There were no marks on the manuscript itself—or, if there were, they were only in the margins.

Guided by these editorial comments, I rewrote the manuscript. I don't remember that I retyped the entire MS, so I probably resubmitted it with the initial draft pages cut and pasted where necessary, and pages retyped where substantial changes had to be made. I also don't recall whether or not a second rewrite was required before the MS was accepted. I don't think so. In any event, it was accepted and I thought that was the end of it. It wasn't.

A couple of weeks later, the MS arrived in the mail and, opening the envelope, I received the shock of my life. What I encountered was my 180 pages, each one generously scribbled with handwritten comments in three different colors. My work, which I had submitted confident that it was ready for publication, had been butchered by three different editors, each suggesting how my prose might be better structured to follow accepted practice, conventional usage or—at least as I saw it—how that particular editor felt that it fell short of good writing. There was almost no space left on any page for anything else to be written. I had just been introduced to "text editing."

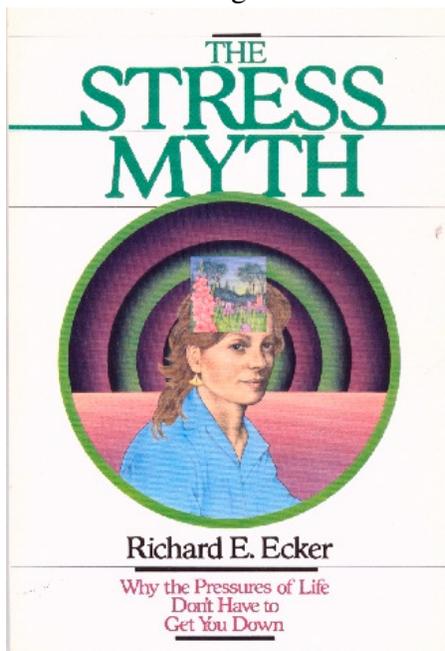
After the initial shock, I began to wade through the comments and rewrite the manuscript, accepting those I could agree with, rewriting passages where I could still say what I wanted to say but in terms that could satisfy a particular objection and retaining those passages in which I felt my original language was best. It was a difficult and time-consuming process, but I'm sure the edited manuscript produced a much better book than it would have been without the

intervention of the text editors. And, I have to admit that I learned a lot as I worked through their comments.

I don't recall any major conflicts with the editors after the manuscript was re-submitted, and that was the last I saw of it. It went into typesetting at the publisher and the next I would see of it would be "page proofs." These were photocopies of the pages of the actual book, as they would appear in the printed copy. At the time (1984), this publisher typeset its books by hand—as I expect many, if not most, book publishers did, so the proofs were many days in being produced. When I finally received those proofs, I had my last chance to make corrections in the text. Anything but minor changes and typos were strongly frowned upon. However, as I recall, my suggestions for change were minimal and the book went into publication forthwith. The end product is shown here.

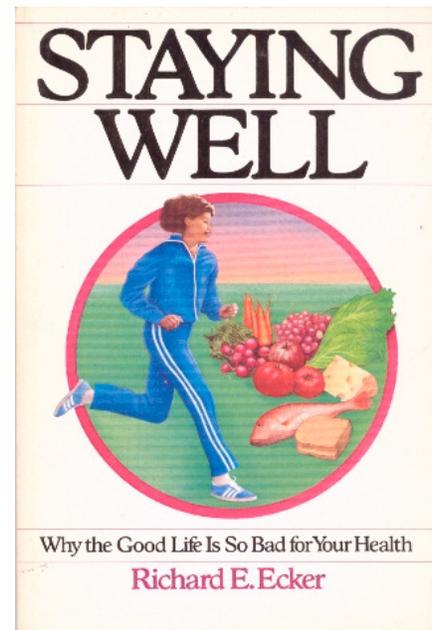
By the time that book was released, I had another manuscript almost ready for submission. Its subject matter was an expanded perspective on one of the topics in the first book. My contract for that first book specified that its publisher had a right of first refusal to publish my next book. So, I submitted the completed manuscript to that publisher and started up the process one more time. However, by this time, personal computers were starting to become more commonly available and I had the use of one for producing this manuscript. Regrettably, the editors at this publisher were not yet equipped for editing on line, so my manuscript had to be submitted and edited as hard copy.

The editing of this manuscript went pretty much the same as for the first book. What I



remember most about this process was that there was only a single text editor and she was extremely intrusive. She had her own ideas about how the book should read and made massive alterations in the text. I ignored most of those intrusions and the senior editor accepted my minimalist rewrite and cleared the manuscript for typesetting. At this point my manuscript made history at that publishing company. It became the first ever manuscript to be transmitted to the typesetter electronically. It was the same typesetting equipment that had been used the year before with my first book, but now I was able to submit the manuscript on a disc in text format and it was communicated from a PC by wire to the typesetting machine. Thereafter, the production of the book was little different than with my first effort. The cover of that book is reproduced here.

During the decade following the publication of this book, I was drawn into the business of self-publishing when my father, by then an octogenarian, decided to write a memoir of his early days in our home town in Iowa. My brother and I agreed to publish it...and we did. By this time—the late 1980s—



self-publishing was becoming more common and, if you knew something about producing “camera-ready copy” on a computer, production costs were fairly reasonable. That book would not have been considered a financial success, but it brightened up our father’s last few years and was well worth our investment.

Inspired by the effort he made to record his memories, I decided to write my own recollections from one particular period of personal history—my service in the Korean War. By this time (the early 1990s), I had a somewhat more advanced PC and I was doing my writing using an early version of Microsoft Word. As I progressed with the manuscript, I kept my father updated by sending him printed (in large typeface) copies of each chapter as I finished it. He delighted in receiving these manuscripts and would usually respond by phoning his approval the same day he received it, and he would always ask me at that time when he could expect to receive the next chapter. I have no question that these phone calls prodded me to continue my writing when I might otherwise have found excuses to table the project.

At some point in the writing, I decided that this was going to be a self-published book. For several years, I had been doing consulting work with the publisher of my first two books (much of it on the use of personal computers in editing and typesetting), so I was familiar with setting up a book for production. I had no trouble locating someone on the staff there to offer advice when I needed it and the art director owed me a favor for helping her with some problems she was having with her home computer. So I was all set to put my book into production when the manuscript was completed. I did the typesetting (in Word) on my computer at home; the art director designed the cover; one of the editors there did the text editing as a moonlighting project; and the production manager was able to refer me to a small-job printer that I could work with to produce the book.

The typeset copy of the book had to be “camera ready,” that is, each page had to be printed out in exactly the size and organization as it would appear in the printed volume. As I recall, I did not at the time have a computer printer that would produce sufficiently good copy for that purpose, so I had to borrow the use of a system for that job. I do recall a number of trips to the printer (perhaps ten miles away in the Chicago suburbs) to iron out some questions about the setup for production. However, it wasn’t long before I had the page proofs to approve and late in 1996 I was the recipient of two thousand copies of “Friendly Fire.” If you are wondering why I ordered so many copies to be printed, this was a fairly minimum press run considering the initial cost to set up production. I did manage to sell a number of them, but I probably gave away a lot more than I sold. It is a good book and I don’t regret the fairly modest investment it required. More recently I have also had it reproduced as an ebook. Here is a link to a description of the book www.ocomm.net/fire .

At some time while I was writing “Friendly Fire,” I began to develop a database of Korean War casualties. This was a major job and it took several years but, in the end, I had the only really comprehensive source of casualties available anywhere. As a result, I began to serve as a source of casualty data for the VFW Magazine, which began doing a fifty-year retrospective on the war in the year 2000. As a result of that relationship, the editor of the magazine suggested that I write a battle history of the war based on its casualties. He even recommended a publisher he thought would be interested in such a book. I contacted that publisher and my proposal was accepted.

By then (2004), I was writing routinely in Microsoft Word and I had even acquired some facility with generating black and white graphics using a computer program I had developed. This made it possible for me to produce some three dozen graphs to accompany the text in the

book. I had come a long way from my yellow legal pad and typewriter twenty years earlier. The publisher I had chosen was noted mostly for producing reference books for libraries. This volume certainly qualified as a reference book. In addition to the graphs there were 151 tables and 131 Medal of Honor citations, quoted verbatim from the awards. So the text was written primarily as introductions to the tables, graphs and awards, and to build an ongoing narrative that connected the various battles and gave continuity to the history of the war.

As I recall, editorial corrections of the text in this manuscript were minimal and the book went to press soon after my initial submission. Certainly my experience with the editors this time was far different from the text editing I went through with my first book. Possibly, the nature of the text in this book made major corrections unnecessary...or perhaps I had become a better writer after twenty years. The book was released with a copyright date of 2005 and is still available as this is being written. It continues to be the only reference available that accounts for every casualty in any American war by battle. Here is a link to a description of this book, including a reproduction of some of its casualty statistics: www.ocomm.net/kbcbook .

Returning briefly to the origins of my career as a book author, I got my start because the wife of a book editor enrolled in a class I was teaching. The class was a stress management workshop. Over the years since she was in my class, I continued to teach on the same general subject, although the scope expanded into a somewhat broader educational experience I began to call "Emotional Survival Training." Recently, with the advent of ebook publishing, I decided to publish on line a manual encompassing the principles I had been teaching. This effort put me about as far afield from my initial experience as was possible to travel. Not only was text editing totally missing from the editorial process, there was essentially no editorial process. As long as I had the required cost (somewhat under \$100) and an acceptable cover graphic (which I designed myself), the publisher formatted my Microsoft Word document (book) for four different popular ebook readers (e.g., Kindle, Nook), including everything needed for the book to be displayed on each of these distributors' web sites—in addition to making it available on line on the publisher's own site as a .pdf file. Here is a link to a description of this book: www.ocomm.net/surviv .

So, in twenty-five years, I have had to undergo a significant evolution as a book author. However, the publishing business itself has evolved even more in the way it prepares its products and presents them to the public.