

Medical Editing: Behind the Book

Barbara Gastel

"Of all the ways to begin a book on medical editing, a poem would not be my first (or second or third) guess," a review¹ of my recent book, *Medical Editing: A Guide to Learning the Craft and Building Your Career*,² begins. Fortunately, the reviewer concludes that the lighter touches enhance the book, which is mainly for prospective and beginning medical editors but also can serve others. Both in content (see Box) and approach, the book draws on my learning over the years as editor, writer, and teacher of writing and editing. The following is the tale behind the book, with emphasis on my experience as an "editor as editee."

The Path to the Book

People often ask how long it took me to write the book. Depending on the perspective, the answer could be about 50 years, about 25 years, about 10 years, or intermittently over a few years.

My involvement in editing began with editorship of my middle school newspaper, and my interests in medicine and writing originated even earlier. All 3 interests remained active during high school and college. As college graduation approached, I struggled to decide between seeking an editorial career and a medical one. Back then, a clear path existed only to the latter. So, I took the easy way out and attended medical school.

Early in my medical studies, a fellow medical student mentioned that the *Johns Hopkins Medical Journal*, edited by a faculty member, was seeking student assistant editors. I applied and was accepted. The experience was pivotal, and I decided to pursue a career in medical communication. Thus, the roots of the current book date back to 1976, when I joined the staff of the (since-defunct) journal.

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Fast forward to about 25 years ago. My career path had led me to a mass media fellowship and then to employment in government and ultimately academia. At Texas A&M University, I developed a science editing course, which I have taught ever since. I also provided medical editing training in China, where I had taught for 2 years. By about 10 years ago, I surmised that my teaching materials on science editing could form the basis of a book.

Since 2017, I also have taught substantive editing in the University of Chicago Certificate Program in Medical Writing and Editing. Several years ago, the program's administrator said the University of Chicago Press was seeking book ideas. I had been envisioning my book for its series Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing. I expressed interest and met with acquisitions editor Mary Laur, who oversees the series. She recommended focusing on medical editing and invited me to submit a proposal.

Preparation of the book proposal followed. As is common, it consisted of a cover letter, annotated table of contents, curriculum vitae, description of expected market, and sample chapter. Peer review of the proposal followed. Then came an advance contract—and the writing of the rest of the book. The manuscript underwent peer review, which was followed by final revisions. Then came copyediting, cover design, page design, indexing, and printing. Meanwhile, I collaborated with the marketing team.

Editor as Editee

As an editor (including editor-in-chief of CSE's *Science Editor* from 2000 to 2010) and a teacher of editing, I found it instructive to be in the author's role again. Acquisitions editor Mary Laur helped with large-scale issues. As noted, she recommended focusing on medical editing rather than science editing as a whole. (Much of the book's content, though, also applies to other science editing.) She devised the book's subtitle, which was much clearer than my working one. She guided me in responding to peer review and in refining the preface to clarify the scope of the book. It was her fine idea to bring my editorially related poem, which had been buried in the middle of the manuscript, to the front of the book.

As one who advises others about responding to peer review, I found it enlightening to have my own work peer

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reviewed. For the proposal, the reviews were an author's dream: All 3 reviewers were highly positive, and their suggestions were helpful and consistent with my vision. For the full manuscript, however, my experience with reviews was mixed. Two of the 3 reviewers were highly positive and had few, if any, suggestions. Reviewer 2, though, was derogatory and seemed to want a different book. That review was nevertheless helpful. For example, based on this reviewer's recommendations, I added lists of key points to the ends of the chapters.

It takes a manuscript editor to fully appreciate one, and I appreciated mine. I had striven to submit a clean and concise manuscript, and to my relief, the manuscript editor made few changes. However, her fresh eye picked up glitches I had missed. She also had helpful queries. For example, when she asked why items in one of the lists appeared in the order they did, I realized that clarification was needed. I enjoyed working with the manuscript editor, and she said she appreciated working with a professional writer and editor.

Involvement in marketing also is part of the author experience. As with previous books, I completed a detailed questionnaire for use in marketing. Currently, authors also are expected to take a more active role. For me, doing so has included signing books at a conference, posting in social media, writing an online article for *Writer's Digest*, being interviewed for podcasts, giving online presentations for professional organizations, and donating a signed book to a professional society's silent auction. I enjoy the marketing activities, though adding them to an already busy schedule can be a challenge.

Looking Ahead

These days, fewer venues are publishing book reviews than when my previous books appeared. However, some reviews have come out—and, thankfully, they have been positive. I hope more reviews will appear. As well as helping to publicize the book, reviews often provide useful ideas for refining such books and doing related writing.

Having written *Medical Editing*, I can now draw on it as a resource in my teaching. I sometimes base presentations on material in it. I also assign parts of it in my Texas A&M course and University of Chicago course. (The libraries of both universities provide the book online, which keeps me from facing a conflict of interest.) Because the book contains exercises from my courses—plus answer keys—I have had to develop some new graded exercises. Pedagogically, the situation is an asset: Students can do the published exercises, check their answers against the keys, and then complete analogous exercises.

Involvement in marketing continues, in part through presentations related to the book. I also hope to keep using

Box. Contents: *Medical Editing: A Guide to Learning the Craft and Building Your Career*, by Barbara Gastel (University of Chicago Press, 2025)*

- Chapter 1: The Scope of Medical Editing
- Chapter 2: Key Resources for Medical Editors
- Chapter 3: Approaching an Editing Project
- Chapter 4: Copyediting: Editing for Mechanics and More
- Chapter 5: Substantive Editing: Editing for Content and Organization
- Chapter 6: Editing Conference and Career Communications
- Chapter 7: Additional Aspects of Medical Manuscript Editing
- Chapter 8: Ethics: Your Own and Others'
- Chapter 9: Careers in Medical Editing

*For a detailed table of contents, see <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo257227736.html>.

social media in this regard. For the latest edition of *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*,³ of which I am now lead author, I provided a nearly yearlong series of weekly LinkedIn posts, each featuring highlights of a chapter. Starting in late 2026 or early 2027, I expect to provide a similar series for *Medical Editing*. Such series can simultaneously maintain visibility of a book and share core content with readers (such as those in resource-limited environments) who cannot buy or access the book.

Medical editing is a continually evolving field. New ideas arise, new resources become available, the artificial intelligence landscape keeps changing, and more. Thus, changes have occurred since I reviewed the book's final proofs. I try to keep track of such changes, both to supplement material in the book and to help be prepared if eventually a new edition seems warranted. The story is now extending for more than 50 years.

Resources and Links

1. Hutchason B. A review of "Medical Editing" by Barbara Gastel. Northwest Editors Guild. <https://www.edsguild.org/blog/a-review-of-medical-editing-by-barbara-gastel>
2. Gastel B. *Medical editing: a guide to learning the craft and building your career*. University of Chicago Press; 2025.
3. Gastel B, Day RA. *How to write and publish a scientific paper*. 9th ed. Greenwood; 2022.