Won’t someone please teach me how to write? I am desperate to write! That was my earnest plea at age five, back when teaching letters and how to string them together into words and sentences did not happen until a child was six. So, using what little I was able to glean from looking at books and seeing people write, I made crude attempts to chronicle my deepest thoughts. I recall showing my manuscript to a neighbor lady who squinted at it and handed it back with a patronizing, “Very interesting.” Obviously, the genius of my thoughts went right over her head. I was a great writer, and I knew it. So there!

Despite such confidence, a writer learns sooner or later that mastery is always beyond reach, and that there is ever more to learn and employ about the craft.

In elementary school, I suffered through teacher after teacher whose main concern was spelling, grammar and penmanship—not prolific prose. Obviously, these academics were incapable of recognizing literary greatness. And so the ordeal continued through elementary school. I was born to write. But educators kept boring me with the technical details.

By eighth grade, I was certain that writing was my professional destiny. Even the history teacher was willing to read my tongue-in-cheek poetry in class. And a high school creative writing instructor affirmed there was some talent beneath that rough surface. In college, I majored in mass communications and would have enjoyed writing class were it not for this vexing concept called “deadlines.” Why can’t they just let me write when the spirit moves and disregard the constrictions of form, grammar and, oh yes, deadlines? Simply possessing talent should merit an “A,” I reasoned. The professor sadly disagreed.

Fresh out of college, I coaxed Jack King, the editor of the daily McAllen (TX) Monitor, to let me try my hand at journalism. I provided him a couple of simple reports from school board meetings, and he recognized my potential. He assigned me a feature story examining the legal dilemma visited upon a driver who makes one simple mistake that leads to a highway death. Finally, red meat! I was writing for a reason. No more schooling over commas and construction. I turned the story in only a few days late and awaited Mr. King’s adulation.

This outwardly gruff but inwardly kind managing editor called me in the next day and placed into my hands five pages of red editing marks. “You wrote a great story,” he said, “but it needs some work.” He walked me through edit after edit and instructed me to totally rearrange the story so drama grabs the reader in the first paragraph. This was the
first time an editor (or teacher) actually got through to me and made me realize that artistry, and even genius if there really is any, is worth very little if it cannot be hung neatly across the framework of proper grammar, consistent form and logical construction. And he taught me also that my right-wired brain might not work the same as that of the average reader. I needed to write to an audience and not just to my own ears.

Part 2, coming soon.