In Part 1, I told of my early life as a non-learner and how a newspaper editor named Jack King finally got my attention and made me serious about learning the craft of writing.

Mr. King took me on full time to write (and to learn), and he even entrusted his editor's chair to me when he took his vacation. After a couple of years, I was sure I was ready to shoot for a Pulitzer. Little did I realize that ahead of me was so much more to learn about writing in a way that has value in the real world. Following the newspaper gig were jobs in human resources and administration that afforded opportunities to write policies, procedures, instructions and even contracts and legislation. With every new experience, I discovered more that I did not know about effective writing. And, unfortunately, I concluded at each juncture that I had finally arrived.

In the late 90’s, recalling the post-college smell of newsprint in my nostrils, I re-launched a full-time writing career that has by now spanned fifteen years. As the feared Y2K Armageddon approached, large companies were breathless to replace aging technology with software that recognized the year 2000 as something other than a string of zeros. The world was on edge, and such software required documentation. That was my entry to hard-core technical writing, where possessing knowledge and the words to express it were not enough. This brand of writing was so much about consistent use of commas, indents, bulleted lists, numbering, indexes, em-dashes and perfectly uniform formatting. I felt I was back in first grade. A “novice” my supervisor called me. And she was sadly right. I thought I was a great writer. But my writing was going nowhere unless I learned and flawlessly stuck to the rules. Good pay with lots of pain in the process.

But in the pain led to progress. Not until the back side of middle-age did a business editor successfully school me to recognize and avoid passive voice. I recall school teachers attempting to root out passive voice, but I never got it until this late stage of life, long after any serious writer should recognize and easily navigate such choppy waters of sentence structure.

Moving then into grant writing ten years ago, I was no longer so sure of my writing ability. As a journalist, my first articles sounded too much like eighth grade poetry. Then my first technical writing read more like a news story. And those first stabs at grant writer, I was told, sounded a bit too (you guessed it) technical. Now I had to hone the edge of the quill that moves hearts, even while instructing minds.
The further I move into this writing career, the more I realize that I have yet much to learn. It is still painful when a draft narrative returns to me with red marks, but I embrace the pain with thanks. And I sometimes cringe reading what I wrote years ago and realizing how much I still have to learn. Will it be ever so? I think that it will. But at least we now have it settled that I was the person who saved the world from Y2K.

At age five, I was the greatest writer in all of history. Today, I am just so thankful for those who taught me, including those who tried and failed. As writers and editors, we never fully arrive. A new discovery awaits us just around the next turn of a phrase. My new challenge for 2012: The Chicago Manual of Style. What’s yours?