

General Service Office Archives

Changes to the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*

First through Fourth Editions



Archives Note:

Changes to the text of *Alcoholics Anonymous* over the years are summarized here, for an explanatory rather than comprehensive purpose. This document will be revised as additional information becomes available. The “Basic Text” has remained essentially unchanged; there have been minor changes, however. While we do not have a comprehensive list of all changes, we do know that those which were made, were mainly in the form of updating figures (i.e. Dr. Bob's years of sobriety, a change in the statistics in the 'To Wives' chapter, the number of countries A.A. has reached, etc.); correcting typographical errors; and changes in pagination. Bill actively participated in the editing of the First and Second Editions, so naturally any changes to the work were made with his oversight.

Part 1: Statistical/Numerical Changes

Numerical changes were common in printings of the First Edition - as time passed, mentions of years or numbers of people were adjusted to match the growth of A.A. For example, in the 2nd printing, the membership data in the subtitle, which read "...one Hundred Men..." was updated to read "...two thousand men and women..." See table below for additional data:

First Edition Printings of the Big Book:

Printing	Change
1st printing (April 1939)	"...more than one hundred men and women..."
2nd printing (March 1941)	"...more than two thousand men and women..."
3rd printing (June 1942)	"...more than six thousand men and women..."
4th printing (March 1943):	"...more than eight thousand men and women..."
5th (January 1944) & 6th (June 1944):	"more than ten thousand men and women..."
7th (January 1945) & 8th (February 1945)	"...more than fourteen thousand men and women..."
9th (January 1946) through 16th (August 1954)	"... many thousands of men and women..."

Another example of a statistical change can be found in Dr. Bob's story, where the reference to his sobriety changed from 4 years to 6 years in 1941 to maintain statistical data, but this was changed back to 4 years.

The beginning of Chapter 2, "There Is a Solution" was also updated multiple times, where it originally stated:

"We, of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, know one hundred men who were once just as hopeless as Bill."

The 3rd printing of the First Edition then changed it to:

"We of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, know hundreds of men who were once as hopeless as Bill."

And then the 4th printing of the First Edition changed that to:

"We of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS know thousands of men and women who were once as hopeless as Bill."

Part 2: Historical Context Notes

Some notes were added over time that provide additional context to the main text. For example, Chapter 8, “To Wives” is footnoted with a statement added in the [Archives to add??? printing of the ??? Edition] that:

“Written in 1939, when there were few women in A.A., this chapter assumes that the alcoholic in the home is likely to be the husband. But many of the suggestions given here may be adapted to help the person who lives with a woman alcoholic—whether she is still drinking or is recovering in A.A. A further source of help is noted on page 121.”

Additionally, that footnote on page 121 says in part “The fellowship of Al-Anon Family Groups was formed about thirteen years after this chapter was written...” was added in the [Archives to add ??? printing of the ??? Edition]. It was also explicitly maintained by a 1986 Advisory Action that:

“The italicized footnote regarding Al-Anon at the end of the chapter “To Wives” in the Big Book be retained, as it provides information rather than implying affiliation, but that it be printed in small type as appropriate to a footnote and placed at the bottom of the page.”

Part 3: Stylistic Changes and Corrections

The Second Edition, 1st printing introduced updated stylistic choices to the Big Book - changing capital letters to italics in multiple places, for example. This was also when “The Doctor’s Opinion” was moved to the frontmatter and paginated with Roman numerals.

Additionally, there have been minor corrections over time - like the typo of “realy” for “really” that was in the 1st printing of the Second Edition but was fixed for the 2nd printing. In a more recent example, the Fourth Edition Preface was corrected by 2014 Advisory Action:

“A correction to inaccurate text related to the addition of appendices on page xi in the Preface of Alcoholics Anonymous, which currently reads: “The second edition added the appendices, the Twelve Traditions, and the directions for getting in touch with A.A.” Be replaced with: “The second printing of the first edition added the appendix ‘Spiritual Experience’; in the second edition, the appendices on A.A. Tradition, the ‘medical view’ and ‘religious view’ of A.A., the Lasker Award and information on how to contact A.A. were added, and the appendix on the Alcoholic Foundation was discontinued.””

Another example of a minor vocabulary change appears in the “How It Works” chapter of the Third Edition of the Big Book. Specifically, the two versions in question include the phrases, “We were prepared to look **at** it...” and “We were prepared to look **for** it...”

To begin with, in the First Edition/First Printing of the Big Book, the phrase in question appeared as, “We were prepared to look **at** it...” This phrase contained, “**at**” throughout all sixteen printings of the First Edition.

Starting with the First Printing of the Second Edition of the Big Book, the phrase was incorrectly printed as, “We were prepared to look **for** it...” The use of “**for**” instead of “**at**” continued to appear throughout all sixteen printings of the Second Edition as well.

This change in wording was the result of a typographical error that went unnoticed until the mid-1980s. After the mistake was noticed the original phrase containing, “...**at** it...” replaced the mistaken “...**for** it...” The correction occurred in 1985. As we do not have a twentieth printing of the Third Edition in our collection, we are unable to narrow down the exact printing for when the change occurred; the nineteenth printing still contains, “...**for** it...” whereas the twenty-first printing contains, “...**at** it...” However, as the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first printings all came out in 1985, we can establish the year in which the correction occurred.

Part 4: Vocabulary Changes

Individual words have been changed or replaced completely - for example, “ex-alcoholic” was changed to “ex-problem drinker” in at least four different sentences throughout the first 164 pages when the 11th printing of the First Edition was released. One of the most recognized changes in the First Edition Big Book was where the phrase “spiritual experience” in the 1st printing of the First Edition (Chapter 5, How It Works) was changed to “spiritual awakening” in the 2nd printing, thus prompting the need for Appendix II. Bill’s intent in changing the wording was to offer a wider sense of identification to members regardless of whether one’s spiritual growth is a sudden or a gradual experience.

Additionally, the 1st printing of the Second Edition changed the use of “sickness” to describe alcoholism to “illness” - for example, on page 90 “Continue to speak of alcoholism as a sickness,” became “Continue to speak of alcoholism as an illness.” “Leprosy” was changed to “plague” in the 13th printing of the First Edition, as well.

Another example of this type of change is exemplified in the sentence, “**At present, our membership is pyramiding at the rate of about twenty per cent a year**” on page XX in the Foreword to the Second Edition Big Book. This sentence was present throughout all the printings of the Second Edition Big Book (1955 – 1974). When the Third Edition went into print, ten lines of text, which included this one, were deleted as a result of editorial changes. In other words, this sentence did not appear in the first

through third printings of the Third Edition. The deleted text was then restored beginning with the fourth printing of the Third Edition (1978) in accordance with a 1978 Conference Advisory Action. The Advisory Action read: "In the next printing of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the foreword of the second edition be included as it was originally published in the second edition."

Secondly, there were two changes to the wording of the original sentence - the word "**pyramiding**" was changed to "**increasing**" and "**twenty per cent**" was changed to "**seven per cent.**" In the first (1955) through fourth (1960) printings of the Second Edition, the sentence read, "At present, our membership is **pyramiding** at the rate of about **twenty per cent** a year." Beginning with the fifth (1962) printing of the Second Edition, the sentence was changed to read, "At present, our membership is **increasing** at the rate of about **seven per cent** a year."

This sentence containing the changed wording continued to be printed in the fifth through sixteenth printing (1974 – last printing) of the Second Edition. It also continued to appear in the first (1976) through thirty-sixth printing of the Third Edition. In 1990, beginning with the thirty-seventh printing of the Third Edition, the sentence reverted to its original wording to reflect the action of the 1978 Advisory Action.

As for the change in wording from "pyramiding" to "increasing" and "twenty" to "seven", there is no information that specifically addresses it. The change was made in 1962 and since Bill was actively involved in General Service Office affairs, we can cautiously assume that this occurred with his approval. Moreover, it is likely that the change in percentage from "twenty" to "seven" was made to reflect the membership total at that time. In 1960, the estimated membership was 151,606. In 1961, membership totaled 162,037. The percentage difference is approximately seven percent. Similarly, in 1962, membership totaled 176,474, which is just about an eight percent increase. Note that the change in membership percentage was not reflected in following printings! The percentage was only changed at that one point in time.

Part 5: Phrasing Changes

Whole sentences have also been changed or replaced - for example on page 127 (now page 114) it originally stated:

"About a year ago a certain state institution released four chronic alcoholics. It was fully expected they would all be back in a few weeks. Only one of them has returned. The others had no relapse at all. The power of God goes deep!"

With the 2nd printing of the First Edition, this was changed to:

"For several years we have been working with alcoholics committed to institutions. During 1939, two state hospitals in New Jersey released seventeen

alcoholics. Eleven have had no relapse whatever - none of them have returned to the asylum. The power of God goes deep!”

With the publication of the Second Edition, this changed to:

“For years we have been working with alcoholics committed to institutions. Since this book was first published, A.A. has released thousands of alcoholics from asylums and hospitals of every kind. The majority have not returned. The power of God goes deep!”

There was a deletion of two statements made to the Foreword of the Second Edition, when it was carried over to the 1st printing of the Third Edition. These statements are italicized below:

For this there were two principal reasons: the large numbers of recoveries, and united homes.

These made their impressions everywhere. Of alcoholics who came to A.A. and really tried, 50% got sober at once and remained that way; 25% sobered up after some relapses, and among the remainder, those who stayed on with A.A. showed improvement. Other thousands came to a few A.A. meetings and at first decided they didn't want the program. But great numbers of these - about two out of three - began to return as time passed.

Another reason for the wide acceptance... (page xx)

These statements were reinstated in the 4th printing of the Third Edition in 1978.

Additionally, a 2006 Advisory Action changed the implication of a sentence in the Fourth Edition Preface, stating:

“The word “largely” be added to the second sentence in the second paragraph of the preface to the Fourth Edition on page xi, as it originally appeared in the preface of the Second Edition, so that the sentence reads: “Therefore, the first portion of this volume, describing the A.A. recovery program, has been left largely untouched in the course of revisions made for the second, third, and fourth editions.””

Another change in phraseology is exemplified in the First Edition Foreword. For example, some of the text in the second paragraph were modified as follows:

It is more important that we remain anonymous **because we are too few, at** present to handle the overwhelming number of personal appeals which may result from this publication. Being mostly business or professional folk **we** could not **well** carry on our

occupations in **such an event**. We would like it understood that our alcoholic work is an avocation.

To read:

It is more important that we remain anonymous **in order to more effectively** handle the overwhelming number of personal appeals which may result from this publication. Being mostly business or professional folk **some of us** could not carry on our occupations **if known**. We would like it understood that our alcoholic work is an avocation.

Part 6: Expansions

The backmatter for the Big Book has been expanded and adjusted multiple times. In the First Edition, 1st Printing the only backmatter was: Appendix - The Alcoholic Foundation. As of the First Edition, 2nd Printing it changed to: Appendix I - The Alcoholic Foundation; Appendix II – Spiritual Experience. With the Second Edition, 1st Printing the appendices were changed and greatly expanded; they were: I - The A.A. Tradition; II - Spiritual Experience; III - The Medical View on A.A.; IV - The Lasker Award; V - The Religious View on A.A.; VI - How to Get in Touch With A.A.

The well-known quote from Herbert Spencer was moved to the end of the second appendix with the Second Edition, 3rd printing. The quote that reads in part, “There is a principle which is a bar against all information...” first appeared in the First Edition, First Printing of the Big Book (1939), on page 380, at the beginning of the story “An Artist’s Concept.” The quote appeared in this story throughout all sixteen printings of the First Edition, from 1939 to 1955. The story “An Artist’s Concept” was not carried over to the Second Edition Big Book. It was omitted. However, the “Herbert Spencer” quote was reinserted in the Third Printing of the Second Edition in 1959, at the end of Appendix II, where it is still printed today.

The backmatter was again expanded due to a 2001 Advisory Action:

“The Twelve Concepts (short form), with a brief introduction, be added to the Appendices Section in future printings of the Big Book.”

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