

REVISION

By Robin L. Perini © 2002

“Good novels aren’t written. They’re rewritten and revised.”

—Jack M. Bickham

When a writer begins on page one, the process of revision and rewriting seem far removed from the creative inspiration required to formulate a first draft. But if you want to become a published author, revision, rewriting and polishing are a must.

Revision. Rewriting. Polishing. Such a confusing array of words, and you’ll find that depending on whose book you read, use of the word differs, which is why I want to give my definitions up front.

The word “revision” derives from the French word for “seeing again.” To my mind, revision is conscious re-seeing: looking at the overall picture of your manuscript—plot, character, theme, etc. The big stuff.

If you look up “rewriting” in the dictionary, you will find a definition that uses the word revise. But that’s not how I think of it. Rewriting to me means analyzing the word choices, grammar, syntax. The little stuff.

Polishing is accomplished after you revise and rewrite. For most, it’s a second level of revision and rewriting. When you’re ready to polish, only a few flaws will jump out at you. Like adding a vase of flowers to a remodeled kitchen, polishing is the final touch.

As your education and experience in the writing process increase, certain techniques will become unconscious. Whereas now, you may have to consciously go back to your manuscript and add character movement and nonverbal communication to your dialogue, chances are this technique will soon begin to appear in your first drafts. The process of revision, rewriting and polishing (I’ll call the entire process editing) lead to becoming a better writer.

The key to successfully editing your manuscript is simple to say and extremely difficult to do. But every professional writer must be able to wear two hats. One of writer, one of editor. You *must* be able to read your manuscript as if you were an editor. If that means you have to put your manuscript down for a few days, or for a month, do it. Come back to it with objectivity and ask the tough questions.

Identify your own strengths and weaknesses. As you edit, play up those strengths and minimize your weaknesses.

Use every trick in the book to make sure you are wearing your editing hat. I use certain music, I edit in a certain place in my house, I wear certain clothes, I use a certain color of pen and sticky note. All these things remind me “You’re in the editing mode.”

Revision: Big Stuff Editing

Revising makes wearing the editor and writer hat even more difficult. When you’re revising, you must also be creating new possibilities in your head. Your analytical editor side must use your creative writer side in order to decipher the best possible final manuscript. Take your analytical editor through the following key steps, then allow your creative juices to flow within each section.

(For more information on many of the topics touched upon in the remainder of the

article, please see other articles within this guide.)

What is Your Story's Goal?

Why did you write this book? The answer is not, “So I can be published,” or “To make money.” Ask yourself what is the underlying question of your book specific to your characters. The best story goals combine your plot and characters into a specific question. *Jacob Marshall must avenge his father's honor by implicating Serena Jones' father, only to realize revenge often hurts the innocent.* This is different from the theme of your book, which I will discuss later, though the story goal may incorporate the theme. Write your story's goal on a 3 x 5 card in one sentence or less.

Now that you have your theme on a 3 x 5 card you can take it wherever you go to edit your manuscript. As you analyze your manuscript, ask the question, “Does this scene directly relate to the story's goal?”

Nowhere is this question more critical than the first chapter. *Does your first chapter directly relate to your story's goal?* Of course it does, you say. However, if all you have in your first chapter is character background, wonderful description, and a history lesson, the answer is no. If the answer is no—get rid of the chapter. Weave the information from your first chapter through the rest of the book. A common mistake for writers is to put too much background into the first 100 pages of the book.

Relating your scenes to your story's goal is the first step in analyzing each and every scene in your manuscript—the key to revision.

Analyzing Your Scenes

A chapter is made up of scenes, and each scene must serve a specific dramatic function.

A scene's possible dramatic functions are:

- Exposition.** A scene that provides information that the reader must have. (Telling through narrative, or other characters)
- Character.** A scene that illuminates the character through his or her actions or thoughts. (Showing your character through introspection or action)
- Plot.** A scene that advances the plot or subplot.
- Conflict.** A scene that advances or affects the conflict.

Exposition and Description Scenes. Analyzing the number of exposition and description scenes is extremely important in the first few chapters because this is where the writer tends to overburden the reader with backstory, facts and setting.

Exposition scenes must serve not only a dramatic function, they must also give *new* information. This is necessary early in the story, but use exposition with caution. When you *tell* the reader information about your character through narrative or through secondary characters (such as dialogue between secondary characters), you distance your reader from the story. If you are receiving comments from editors or critique partners that you are telling, not showing, look at the number of primary exposition scenes. Ask yourself, what facts are absolutely necessary to the story and *when* that information must be revealed. A full blown conversation between the hero's sister and her friend about your hero's tragic past is not necessary in chapter one. Bring those facts out in little snippets of introspection and in small pieces of dialogue throughout the story, with the most crucial piece of information being revealed in close proximity to an intense conflict

scene which hinges on that information.

Exposition is necessary. It provides the reader with information they need to know. But always ask, “Is it *all* necessary, *now*?”

Unlike exposition, description serves no dramatic function. Pages and pages of description will bore today’s reader. Weave description into the action so that your setting becomes another character. A museum is not just a collection of art and hallways. Most writers could go on for pages describing the building, the marble hallways, the art. That is not what the reader wants to know. She wants to know that the marble hallways echo with footsteps warning the heroine of an enemy’s approach. The reader wants to know that the painting hanging in the main hallway reminds the heroine of her father’s house where she experienced psychological abuse. A cold shiver when she passes the painting, for example. The reader wants a sense of place so that she can immerse herself into the story, but linking place to conflict and emotions gives your description more than beautiful words. Your description comes to life and becomes another character.

Character Scenes. Scenes which provide your characters with the opportunity to make decisions and act in specific ways because of ingrained traits are character scenes. But like exposition scenes, you need to trickle information about your character throughout the story, so that your reader is always asking, “What am I going to learn about him now? Can he change?” Character scenes answer questions like: “Why is he/she afraid to have children? Why does he/she dislike cats? Why does he/she love thunderstorms?”

But showing your character’s reactions and revealing his/her motivations is not enough. Your character must grow in the story. And that growth must be logical, not an all-of-the-sudden revelation of the error of his/her ways.

A character scene revealing that your hero is afraid of heights again and again and again doesn’t interest the reader. Trickle the information through the book. In an early scene, reveal the hero’s dislike of an elevator. In a later scene, reveal his physical reaction to his fear of heights. In a later scene create introspection that places him hanging from a parachute, in a tree with enemies below him searching for him. In the final scene, perhaps the hero must overcome his fear to save the heroine. He can articulate his conflict. Build your scenes to create complex characters who grow.

Conflict and Plot Scenes. If there’s trouble here, you probably need to overhaul your book, not just revise it. The main question to ask concerning plot and conflict is: Have you tied up all the loose ends? Did you resolve every internal conflict? If you included a red herring in chapter eight, did you deal with it? As you’re reading the manuscript, follow every twist and turn of the plot. Write down every question you raise. Did you answer it?

The content of the scenes is not the only consideration. Their order is important as well. Are the least important dramatic conflicts resolved first, leading to an increase in tension? When is the central and most important conflict resolved? It should be in the last 1-5% of your manuscript. If not, there’s a major plotting problem.

Another helpful exercise is to plot your time and place as you’re moving through the book. Make sure that your time, dates and places match up. Were your characters in the car at night and suddenly they’re in his apartment the next morning? What happened? If you’re writing a mystery and the last murder took place ten days ago, have you accounted for those days? Take a hard look at these details.

Most scenes will have more than one dramatic function, but all scenes *must* have at least one function. Ask yourself, what is this scene's primary function? What does the scene give the reader? Do you have mostly exposition with a few pages of character and plot thrown in? Identify that scene as a primary exposition scene, a secondary character scene, and a secondary plot scene. Do this with every scene in your book and write the scene's function in the margins using different colors for each function.

There will be more exposition scenes toward the beginning of the book, because in the beginning you need to introduce the reader to new information. You need a good mix of types of scenes to create a balanced book. Too many plot scenes with no character and the reader will wonder at the character's motivation. Or may cease to care about the character altogether. Too many character scenes without plot and your story stands still. Too many exposition scenes with nothing else, and the reader may wonder if she's reading a dissertation on your setting.

Now start from chapter one and analyze. If you discover a pattern of identical types of scenes in a row, it's time to re-think, re-see: revise.

Several uninterrupted exposition or plot scenes can affect pacing as well as your story and characters. Pacing involves analyzing your manuscript in reader time. Though it may take days to write a chapter, a reader can get through that same chapter in twenty minutes. What you're looking for are the places where the book slows down (exposition and description), or flies with the speed of a racing locomotive (plot). Mark the areas where you notice problems, then go back and analyze the scene. Why is it moving so slowly?

Is there too much description or narrative? Can you weave it into the action or give the information in the form of dialogue? Is there not enough introspection or narrative?

Pacing is very subtle, and small changes can make a huge difference. If you cannot figure out why the scene isn't working, try using Dwight Swain's scene and sequel technique discussed in the pacing article in this guide.

While you are analyzing scenes also read for smooth transitions between scenes. Transitions are the glue that holds the scenes together, just as glue holds a mosaic together. You don't want to see the glue, only the picture created by the pieces. As you go through your manuscript, examine the transitions, verifying that they never call attention to themselves. No reader should ever be aware of a transition.

There are two types of transitions to be aware of. Smooth and Abrupt.

Smooth transitions range from a few words to several sentences in length using phrases like, "Several weeks passed before...", and "Meanwhile, back at the dairy farm...". They are invisible and should be unnoticed. As you're reading, if a transition jumps out at you, mark it in order to fix it later. You don't want to interrupt your quick read while you're in the flow.

Abrupt transitions imply either a time lapse, location change or point of view change and are indicated by a text break. At any abrupt transition, be sure you can justify it. The biggest text break is a chapter break. Each text break should end leaving a question or unresolved situation in the readers mind—a reason to turn the page, and continue reading the book.

Analyzing scenes is a complex layered process, like editing itself. Read your manuscript and mark any areas that seem awkward, or not quite right. Then go back and

read scene by scene, analyzing for dramatic function, necessity, order, pacing and transitions. Scenes are the building blocks of your story, and the overall balance and strength of your story depends on each and every one of them.

Point of View

Each time you change point of view, note it on your manuscript. Then after you've completed your initial read, go back and decide if each change is necessary.

If you have other problems in a scene, like a slowing pace or not enough emotion or conflict, try rewriting the scene in the other character's point of view (if you have a multi-viewpoint book). Sometimes writing the same scene from another perspective is just what the reviser ordered.

Theme

Every novel should have a theme. As an editor, you can use theme to unify your book and weave all its aspects together.

By definition, genre fiction has a given, underlying theme. In a mystery, there is a given that a crime will be solved. In horror, that evil can be anywhere. In romance, true love conquers all. In fact, many would call these underlying themes simply the definition of that genre.

Your novel needs something more. That something is theme—the unifying silken thread of your novel.

To illustrate how to use theme in the revision process, let's take the theme, "*You must look beneath the surface to discover the worth of a person.*"

The plot of this book could be that the hero appears to be the villain, and the villain appears to be a friend. The heroine may be in the modeling industry where appearances are key. What is the point of having a plot with this theme, if your subplot is about a child and his lost dog. It will seem tacked on. Why not a subplot concerning a horrible painting that is concealing a Picasso?

Obviously these are major changes, but in the revision process, you must re-see your manuscript. If the change will make your book stronger, you give the change serious consideration.

You can use everything in your book to reflect on your theme. Send your hero and heroine to see *Beauty and the Beast*. The ultimate movie about judging on appearances.

With the idea of theme in mind, add to or alter the details in your manuscript, reflecting the theme and weaving the threads of your book together.

Big Stuff Editing is crucial to the success of your novel. Anything that occurs to you as you read your manuscript—flag it, jot it down, but don't fix it until you've read the entire manuscript. That way, if you need to weave theme in, or alter the subplot, you are working from the whole picture.

Rewriting: Small Stuff Editing

I will utilize the word rewrite for this step of the revision process. If revision is re-seeing and recreating by looking at the big picture, rewriting is when we take the microscope to the manuscript.

The purpose of your manuscript is to communicate your story as clearly as possible so that you can sweep your reader away into another world. In revision, you took care of

making that world a coherent, logical and interesting place to be. Now you need to make sure there is nothing in your manuscript to throw them out of that world. In short, we need to eliminate the distraction.

Your goals:

1. **Make it concise.** This means make it short, precise and simple. Sandra Canfield says it best. “In simplicity lies power.” Pick that one word and pick it correctly.
2. **Make it logical.** Rewrite so that each paragraph, sentence and chapter reads in the easiest, least distracting way. Try for literal meanings and logical order. If the reader has to work to read your manuscript, you’ll lose her.

The key to rewriting, as in revision, is to distance yourself from the manuscript. As a self-editor you’re in the best position to catch that a sentence is not conveying the meaning you intended, because you know what you did intend. Unfortunately since you know what it should say, you often read it that way.

In order to combat this double edged sword, invoke a critical and challenging attitude. Ask yourself constantly if there is a better way to say that. Is there a more vivid image that fits in with your theme? Is there a more precise word or phrase? Is there any way someone could misread a sentence?

Two levels of Rewriting

Rewriting has its own levels, as does the entire process of editing. I think of one as the music and one as the lyrics of a song.

The lyrics to my song come first. It’s the words: grammar, typos, word usage and redundancy. This is where you view your manuscript as if you were the toughest English teacher you ever had in school. Invest in a grammar book and use it.

Some of the most common errors to look for are:

1. **Weak Sentences.** Most of the changes are akin to making the sentence more concise.

- a. The big tip off to weak sentences is weak verbs and excessive use of adverbs. Don’t say *walked quickly*, say *raced*. Search for any forms of the verb *to be*. Chances are you can rearrange the sentence making it stronger. (*is an example of* becomes *illustrates*)
- b. Look for verbs hidden in prepositional or other phrases. (*the level of consumption decreased* becomes *consumption decreased*)
- c. Look for strings of prepositional phrases. (*the possession of a new car* becomes *a new car*)
- d. Let your verbs do the talking and keep your adjectives and adverbs to a minimum. Choosing precise verbs and nouns gives the reader a better picture and reads more clearly. (*walked slowly* becomes *shuffled* and *sturdy tree* becomes *oak*)
- e. Avoid adverbs, especially intensifying adverbs. Very, just, conclusively. These words diminish your verb. If you choose the right verb, you don’t need these words.
- f. Avoid relative clauses. Again, the key here is to make it concise. (*She fiddled with the pearl necklace that she wore.* becomes *She fiddled with her pearl necklace.*)

- g. Avoid redundancy. (*finally finished* becomes *finished*)
- h. Modifiers. They can cause problems, and many times they aren't necessary. *Actually, interestingly, only, just, etc.* The best example of misplacement of modifiers I've come across is in a tape from the 1992 National RWA Conference on Deciphering Rejection and Self-Editing.
- Original Sentence: I hit him in the eye yesterday.
- **Only** I hit him in the eye yesterday. (Nobody else hit him.)
 - **Only**, I hit him in the eye yesterday. (He was going to give me a million dollars until I went and did that.)
 - I **only** hit him in the eye yesterday. (I didn't do anything else to him, I don't know why he was so perturbed.)
 - I hit **only** him in the eye yesterday. (Nobody else got socked.)
 - I hit him **only** in the eye yesterday. (I refrained from hitting him anywhere else, which was very noble.)
 - I hit him in the **only** eye yesterday. (He has one eye, and I got it.)
 - I hit him in the eye **only** yesterday. (My how time flies when you're having fun.)
 - I hit him in the eye yesterday **only**. (Other days I picked on other body parts.)
2. **Use superlatives sparingly.** Best, most, worst, saddest, happiest, exclamation points are strong emotional triggers and using them often tends to detract from key emotional scenes. If your hero is the best, most in chapter one, where do you go from there?
 3. **Information Repetition.** Once you say something in dialogue, you don't need to repeat the fact in the narrative.
 4. **Word repetition.** Unique phrases of description should be used two to three times in the entire manuscript at the most. The more striking the phrase, the less you should use it.
 5. **Clichés.** Get rid of them unless you're using them in dialogue for a particular reason. Each character should evoke their own particular imagery.
 6. **Don't trust your spell checker.** Is it from or from? Enough said.
 7. **Take breaks.** When you're editing for word usage, it's important to take frequent breaks and to come at the process refreshed.
 8. **Practice on other people's work.** Whether it's a book you just bought or a critique partner's manuscript, editing other's work gives you a good sense of the attitude you must take to your own manuscript.

Once you've rewritten the manuscript so each sentence, each paragraphs says what you intended it to say, you're ready to look at the flow of the manuscript. If your manuscript is a song, the music consists of the sense, flow, sound and rhythm of the words. Don't make the mistake of checking the flow before you make the appropriate grammar and meaning changes. Each word changes the rhythm of your sentence or your paragraph.

The best way to test your manuscript's flow is to read aloud. Sometimes this is the only way to catch flaws in this very subjective area. I have even read into a tape recorder to decipher problems with a particularly difficult chapter. Your choice of words and style

of sentences influence the overall tone and smoothness of the book.

Polishing

Polishing the manuscript is the last look before you send the book to the publisher. You have revised by concentrating on the characters, conflict and plot, and you've rewritten, concentrating on syntax, grammar and word usage. Take each sublevel of revision and rewriting and combine them. Find that one loose end you didn't tie up, that one place where you could reemphasize the theme, that one time when your sentences didn't quite get your meaning across, that one awkward word.

In addition, analyze if the first sentence, first page, first paragraph and first chapter are the caliber of writing that will drag the reader in, including that most important reader—the editor. Look at the last sentence of each chapter. Does it make the reader want to turn the page? Will the last page of the book leave the reader with the impression you want him or her to have of this book?

Conclusion

Revision, rewriting and polishing. In short, editing. It's not something to be afraid of. It's part of the process if you want to be a published writer. The "Big Stuff Editing" will sell your manuscript. The "Small Stuff Editing" will help sell your subsequent manuscripts because the more polished your manuscript, the easier you make the editor's job.

Take this advice to heart:

"I've rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers." —

Vladimir Nabokov

Use editing as a tool to polish your writing so that your story sweeps your reader into the world you've created.