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# ON REVISION

Writers share useful tips and strategies on how they go about improving their work.

By Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

Writers have a love-hate relationship with revision. On the one hand, we hate it because we want our pieces to come out right the first time, and the drafting process is so much more fun, full of promise and discovery, that we'd rather be writing than revising. On the other hand, we love making it to the revision phase because that means we at least have something on the page, something we can work with—a delicious feeling.

Bernard Malamud said, "Revision is one of the exquisite pleasures of writing." It may take you a minute to get your head around this thought, but consider the word *revision*. It means to re-see. In revision, we have a chance to take a step back and *re-vision* our work and make it perfect, or at least as close to perfect as we are able.

First, let's get a few things straight, the first of which is: nothing ever comes out perfect the first time. When Margaret Atwood was a guest on my podcast, *Writers on Writing*, she claimed that a piece of writing had to go through at least seven drafts. I'm not sure how she came up with the number seven; I didn't ask, and who's going to quibble with, or question, Margaret Atwood?

Counting drafts, though, can be tricky. How massive does a draft have to be to count as a draft? Do minor tweaks count? In the days of typewriters, it was easier to count drafts. These days, not so much.

So how do writers revise? You may have a method that works for you, or you may be looking for new ways to revise your work. Read on. Hopefully, you will find something useful here, a new spin on revision, some trick that reinvigorates you to re-see.

## Where to Begin

Award-winner Richard Bausch (*Playhouse*) begins each writing session "by reading what I have through to the point of jumping the gap across the silence . . . It really is like somebody taking a running start before leaping over a chasm . . . though with a novel, I might begin reading toward the jump-off a

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**—LISA CUPOLO**

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little closer to where it falls in the narrative—but I'm always looking into what I have throughout."

Kelly Caldwell, journalist, essayist, and dean of faculty at Gotham Writers, prints her draft and cuts it into paragraphs. "That way I can arrange them on the floor and move them around. More than once, this has helped me realize I've buried my lede. It helps me see if I'm repeating myself, if I'm lingering on one idea too long. It also lets me see if my paragraphs are too uniform in length. Paragraphs, like sentences, need their own shape and rhythm, which they definitely will not have if I lapse into the habit of hitting the Return key after roughly the same number of words."

Editing is her favorite part of the process, says short story writer Lisa Cupolo (*Have Mercy on Us*). "Getting the bones of the structure of a story down is so incredibly difficult for me," she says. "But once it's there, I print the work, read it aloud, make note of where the story slows down, and write in

the margins and underline. Usually for me, adding action or dialogue is needed when I get back to the page on the screen. But my approach is always changing. I might add a whole new character or change the point of view from first to third person when I'm stuck. I do that just to see how a character sounds or what I learn about them in the process. Then I can go back to the original point of view with a fresh set of eyes. . . . When I get my characters talking, that's when things really take shape."

### **Revising as You Go**

Novelist Jeffrey Fleishman (*Good Night, Forever*) revises as he goes along. "I need to see a chapter in full and then connect to the next chapter," he says. "This makes my first version slower in coming, but it helps in later rounds of revisions that I've done a lot of editing along the way. I find it helps with nuance and layering too. I try to write 500 good words a day. The end of the writing session is editing to which 500 words I'll keep. It helps me see clearly where to begin the next day."

Jordan Harper, author of *Everybody Knows*, says, "I do dozens of drafts, starting with a handwritten draft that types into a very rough draft that is totally unreadable to anyone but me. I'll do several large passes after that, until it starts to really feel like a cohesive book, and then I'll start doing more targeted drafts—one draft focusing on a specific character, one focused on dialogue, one focused on atmosphere and background, etc. Those I do fairly quickly, maybe a couple of dozen times all together."

For Tod Goldberg, author of *The Low Desert*, the process depends on what he's writing. "When I'm writing a novel, I tend to revise while I work versus writing 'drafts.' So each day, I'll write and the next day, I'll review the previous day's work, do rewrites on those pages, then any pages that need to be changed because of the changes I've just made. I then do block rewrites at certain stages. After the first 100 pages, for example, I'll pause and review from page one on, to make sure it's all working and try to lock those pages in as much as possible. And then page 200, then 300, etc. This

way, by the time my book gets to my publishers, if there are rewrites to be made, they're rarely fundamental rewrites of the existing text, and more likely structural changes: adding new chapters, cutting things back, that sort of thing. My novels tend to be over 400 pages in manuscript, so there's no 'shitty first draft' for me. By the time I'm done, the book should be pretty good, I hope. There's no number of rewrites per se, it's all a living creature.

"For a short story, I use that same method of writing and rewriting daily, but if the story isn't working, I'm apt to just ditch it versus spending weeks on end trying to get it to work. Sometimes, your story just doesn't work. I'm better off starting something else and stealing from the old story for parts than spending inordinate amounts of time trying to get a broken thing fixed."

### Beta Readers

Peter Ho Davies, novelist and author of *The Art of Revision: The Last Word*, notes that writers often get stuck after workshopping a piece because there's so much to address and so many choices presented. "I try to make a first pass to fix the easy stuff—everything from typos to small issues where I agree with the feedback and can already see how to respond. That step is good for morale—the story is moving forward again, and I'm refamiliarizing myself with it, making it mine again. The next step for me, when assessing all the choices—the *coulda*, *shouldas* of feedback—is to attend to what I *wanna* change, to start with the change that most excites me, rather than the one that feels like a chore suggested by others. Following that excitement makes revision easier and more fun, but I also think that sense of excitement is a tip-off, that in revision, new discoveries and potentials can be found in a draft."

Kelly Caldwell credits her nonfiction writing group for helping her improve the work. "I rely heavily on these brilliant writers to tell me when I'm not making sense, or things aren't working. If my writers group says take something out, I usually take it out."

Jordan Harper says he brings in readers "when I don't know if what I've done is good, but I know

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that if I keep working on it, it will get worse. My theory for beta readers is that they should always be listened to, but it's up to the author to figure out what the actual problem is. Somebody might not like chapter twelve of the book, but that doesn't mean chapter twelve is actually the problem. Maybe you failed to set something up properly in chapter six."

At the other end of the spectrum is Richard Bausch, who says no one sees his work till he believes it's ready. "I had a deeply gifted twin brother who wrote as well or better than I ever did, and we never saw each other's work until it was in print."

### Let It Rest

"When my first draft is done," says Jeffrey Fleishman, "I let it sit for a few weeks. Then I pick it up,

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—CARL VONDERAU

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read it through, and begin revisions. I usually do two revisions concentrating on plot, style, character, and voice. I spend a lot of time on making the voice distinct. The revisions must ensure that the world the reader enters is consistent and alluring, all threads connected, all characters, even small ones, sketched in full. I read out loud—not too loud—while doing revisions. The ear is often better than the eye or mind at catching a phrase/passage that doesn't work."

"Often," Kelly Caldwell says, "after I've let a piece rest, I'll open the story back up and it'll be so obvious what needs to be cut. This happened with an essay I wrote recently—I let it rest for a couple of weeks, and when I opened it up again, I saw that a full section just wasn't working. It strayed too far from the central question. First round, I knew it was too long, but I had no idea what to cut. I didn't even consider cutting that section, because

I wrote it first and it was what inspired me to write the essay at all. So it felt essential. But it wasn't. I couldn't see that until I'd left it alone for a while."

### **How Many Revisions Are Enough?**

T. Jefferson Parker, author of *The Rescue*, says he revises in two stages. "One is as I'm writing, which entails going back to see what I said earlier, and leads me into all sorts of additions, changes, deletions. I basically drop everything and work out the problem/question, then go back to where I was, and move forward. The other is the big one, at the end, when I start from page one, read carefully, and make the changes that seem right. That can take weeks. I do another big revision after I get editorial notes, then again with the copyedit, and again with first pass. By the time I'm done with that I'm ready to call it a day. One thing I've learned over the years is that even the most labored-over published book could have been made better."

"For short stories I usually try to go for that punch at the end of the tale, so I for sure sweat that aspect," says Gary Phillips, author of *One-Shot Harry*. "Revisions are undertaken when the pages are printed out and I read the story from the start with, hopefully, fresh eyes. A scene could get cut or shifted around. A minor character might be eliminated if what I put them in for can be attributed to another, more firmly established character."

"I usually revise a book at least 10 times," says Carl Vonderau, author of the forthcoming *Saving Myles*. "I revised my first book more than 20 times. One way to get a new perspective on a chapter is to print it out single-spaced rather than double-spaced. My mind sees it in a new way then. When I have a completed draft, I will look at the chapters that contribute to only one character's arc. I look at them consecutively to make sure they move that character in the right way. This applies to protagonists as well as other main characters. Everyone in the book is supposed to change. I will also look specifically at dialogue to make sure the voice is there and to take out the repetition. Often the internal voice will repeat what's already in the spoken

dialogue and I need to take out one or the other. I also go through gestures to make sure I'm not using the same sighs and shoulders slumping and slapping tables too much. Another pass will make sure that the characters react to what other characters say without disrupting the tension of the scene. Then there are the subplots and flashbacks. I constantly move these around. I don't want the reader to lose track of these supporting characters and their dilemmas."

*Writer's Digest* Self-Published Book Awards winner Deborah Gaal, author of *Synchronicities on the Avenue of the Saints*, says, "How many times do I revise? I'm not sure, but it's a lot. At least 100. It feels endless since it takes me years to finish a manuscript. But I also allow the manuscript space and time to rest, like resting a piece of meat or fish after it comes off the grill prior to the meal. Throughout this resting phase, I'll periodically read the story through with my left brain and stop when my interest drains. That's where I know the story needs an infusion of energy. I switch to my right brain and see if I can get a spark. What is missing? If I can't get a hit, I let the story rest some more. If the story doesn't thrill me, how can I expect it to thrill anyone else?"

## Useful Tips

"For some kinds of revisions, word processing is very helpful," says Richard Polt, author of *The Typewriter Revolution* and professor of philosophy at Xavier University. "For instance, I catch a certain kind of stylistic defect and then do a search through my whole text to see whether I'm repeatedly guilty of it."

Yes, we all overuse certain words. In Matt Bell's book on revision, *Refuse to be Done: How to Write and Rewrite a Novel in Three Drafts*, there's a page of those pesky words. In the book he also recommends highlighting the weakest sentence in each paragraph and considering whether it can be deleted. For the minimalists among us, he suggests seeing if you can write between sentences or paragraphs, filling things in. "You may be escaping a scene too early," he says. "Look for places where

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**MATT BELL RECOMMENDS HIGHLIGHTING THE WEAKEST SENTENCE IN EACH PARAGRAPH AND CONSIDERING WHETHER IT CAN BE DELETED. FOR THE MINIMALISTS AMONG US, HE SUGGESTS SEEING IF YOU CAN WRITE BETWEEN SENTENCES OR PARAGRAPHS, FILLING THINGS IN.**

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things are static, where you might go from summary to scene."

"I'm not sure how unusual this tip is, but here's an anti-intuitive one," says Peter Ho Davies. "We often get stuck in revision when we face a choice: Should the story be in this point of view or that one? Should it be in this tense or that one, etc., etc.? We freeze, because we fear making the wrong choice, and wasting time (there's that impatience!), but as a result we find ourselves paralyzed, unable to go on. And yet we can't make these choices with perfect information; we have to take a leap of faith. If we pick the wrong one, that's not necessarily a failure, since it may reveal that the alternative was right. In other words, the only way to choose . . . is to choose, and even the wrong choice may reveal the right one."

By the way, it took seven passes to finalize this piece, just as Margaret Atwood advised. **AG**