

REVISION

In the revision stage, you strive to make your writing coherent, clear and effective. Out of chaos a fully developed story gradually emerges. Clumsy sentences become graceful; clichés become wit; muddled action becomes drama. If you wonder how to sound original, the answer is: revise and revise. Even if you think your stories don't work, you can make them work—if you revise well.

It's amazing how easy it is to lack courage as a writer. The anxiety of a concert pianist is understandable. She can't go back and improve the passages where she blundered. That you can return to your story and cut the weak parts and expand the strong ones should encourage you as you write your first draft. Therefore, don't look back until you are finished.

As you revise, don't fear changing your text radically in search of its best possible shape. And certainly don't hesitate to get rid of whatever does not work. This is how Isaac Bashevis Singer puts it: "The wastepaper basket is the writer's best friend."

On the other hand, don't rush to throw things away. Give yourself time, and if in a week you still think that something you've written doesn't work and can't be made useful, get rid of it. Sometimes, what appears weak one day may appear fine the next. This is what Conrad Aiken said about his experience: "I would find a crumpled yellow ball of paper in the wastebasket in the morning, and open it to see what the hell I'd been up to; and occasionally it was

something that needed only a very slight change to be brought off, which I'd missed the day before."

So that you don't have to fumble in the garbage among banana peels and cockroaches (although cockroaches come from a noble literary lineage), save an early draft. If you cut too much, you can restore. That knowledge should help you freely look at your text. See it again. Look at what fits and what doesn't. If something is pretty but does not connect to the rest of the text, cut it. Samuel Johnson advises, "Read over your compositions and, when you meet a passage that you think is particularly fine, strike it out." He has a point—if something stands out of the text, maybe it does not belong in it.

Revision used to be painful before word processors. You had to cut out pages, glue them, white out sections, so that most often you'd simply give up on changing here and there, and you'd rewrite the whole piece. (Of course, some good came out of being forced to rewrite thoroughly.) Now, with computers, you don't need to rewrite. We could say, "The delete key is the writer's best friend." You can rearrange passages, compress—revise.

Yes, there's a difference between a revision and a complete rewrite: In revision, you rearrange passages, condense sentences, add here and there and so on, but you probably leave chunks of the text close to the original.

Before word processors, Hemingway did more than thirty drafts of a story. And we got anecdotes like this one, from Isaac Babel's friend, Konstantin Paustovsky: Babel showed Paustovsky a manuscript two hundred pages long. When Paustovsky asked him whether it was a novel, Babel answered that it was his short story "Lyubka the Cossack" in twenty-two versions.

In a rewrite, take a look at what you did in the initial draft and tackle it differently, from scratch, not even necessarily looking at the draft again.

THE FIRST REWRITE

These days when people tell you that they have rewritten something ten times, they probably mean that they have played around with the original text several times. For better or worse (certainly, for easier) hardly anybody does complete rewrites anymore. But many people arrange and rearrange their passages — tinker with the original draft. As a consequence, I think it's now easier to write clean sentences and paragraphs, but perhaps harder to get rid of the larger structural problems because it's easy to remain within the initial faulty structure of a draft.

Rather than say that with computers we have gained something and lost something, we can enjoy the best of both worlds — if we're willing to do the extra work. Write your first draft longhand or on a typewriter. (If you work solely on the computer, you can simulate the typewriter if you don't go back too much. Print out your draft and delete the original from the computer.) Now read your draft and think what you need to do differently. Rewrite it from scratch on the computer. (Or do another longhand draft, and then type it into the system). Save your rewrite and treat it as your starting point for revision.

Through this method you will make sure that you get at least one rewrite as opposed to a series of tinkering. Not that there's anything wrong with tinkering —on the contrary, you get to play around and have fun with the story—but it should not start too early.

In the first rewrite, you want to see the story shaping out of the first draft mass of words. Cut through the words and find the story. Let it emerge. In every draft there is a story desperately trying to

get out. Cut the chains and give the keys to the prisoner.

Carefully read your first draft before undertaking a rewrite. Identify your major conflict, scene, plot. Outline the plot, in a basic

way.

Find the story's big moments. By knowing where they occur, you

save yourself a lot of work because you will build your narration on a strong foundation. So mark your main characters and main scenes. Are there too many characters? Compress two or three characters into one. Are there too many big scenes? Can you compress them into fewer?

Once you decide on your major scenes, begin your rewrite. Expand the scenes. Let the characters act, speak, move in a setting. You don't need to accomplish everything right now, since you'll

have time to revise. Complete a rough rewrite — even several of them. Don't yet worry about your spelling,

diction, cliches or other minute matters.

After you finish these rough rewrites of the major moments in

your story, provide the transitions and background between the big scenes. Make sense of what happens in the scenes. Put the background you cannot fit into the scenes into your narrative paragraphs, where you can simply tell us what we need to know to follow the upcoming scenes.

Read your rewrite, proofing it against the plot outline. (If you change the plot in the first rewrite, outline the new plot and proof the rewrite against it.) Whatever seems useless, cut. If something in no way contributes to your understanding of the central characters, the conflict, and the key event, cut it. Your story must make sense. Here you may spend a lot of time thinking, analyzing.

Some writers do scene-oriented story build-up intuitively, and others arrive at the basic structure after dozens of revisions. If you unfortunately don't belong in the former camp, you still might be able to avoid belonging in the latter by identifying the foundation of your story in the first rewrite stage, so that you won't need to keep restructuring. With practice, you might become so adept at this that it will appear that you work intuitively. Intuition often simply means an internalized technique so that you don't have to deliberate over what to do; a net player in tennis, who through diligence acquires good habits, can react to a passing shot without thinking about what the textbook says about footwork.

But even if you become a highly intuitive writer, you will still most likely need a lot of revision: first rough revision (macrorevision), making sure that all the parts of the story fit together; then fine revision (microrevision), making sure that each word is in its place.

When you finish your rewrite, save it. I always do. The knowledge that I can return to the second draft enables me to take a distant look at my story, without particular attachments to this or that passage, so I keep only what I need and revise freely. I often think I will return to that saved second draft but hardly ever do. And when I do, I notice that though I cut, I have lost nothing.

Be open to any change that suggests itself as important during your revising. And have fun! Most writers prefer revising to the original drafting —some write the original draft so they'll have something to play with.

MACROREVISION

There are different styles of revision, depending on how you write your initial draft. According to F. Scott Fitzgerald writers are either putter-inners or taker-outers.

Those who work from a sketchy draft must add words to give life

to a story skeleton. In revision they pause where they need to add dialogue and description. (Some writers are extreme putter-inners, so when they revise even previously unedited torrents of words, they are more eager to add than to cut.)

Those who write in torrents of unedited words — hoping that the accumulation will contain a story — must eventually cut quite a bit to find the story. I don't need to quote anybody in support of the putter-inner aesthetics; Shakespeare, Dostoyevski and Balzac were putter-inners.

Elie Wiesel gives us the best description of the taker-outer aesthetics: "Writing is . . . like a sculpture where you remove, you eliminate in order to make the work visible. Even those pages you remove somehow remain. There is a difference between a book of two hundred pages from the very beginning, and a book of two hundred pages which is the result of an original eight hundred pages. The six hundred pages are there. Only you don't see them."

Many people are both putter-inners and taker-outers. If you are not, consider becoming both. You could rush through some parts, knowing that you can fill in later. And you can spend much time on other parts — adding line upon line, getting as much juice out of a scene as your imagination and free associations will give you — without fearing that you'll be boring, since you can clean up later.

As you look over your story, first check it against the "First Rewrite" questions above to find your major scenes, your story. (Whenever you have a story, you can use these guidelines. If you have one already, get it out and examine it against the checklists to follow.) Then leaf through this book, chapter by chapter. Each chapter raises questions about the elements of fiction. Check your setting, plot, POV and so on. But to give you a concentrated checklist, I will offer many questions here. If you must rethink an element of your fiction, go to the chapters that address your concerns.

Revision Checklist

All the parts of your story must work before it can fly. Make sure that each part is the best it can be, as though you were an inspector in a Boeing factory. Although a good proportion of stories could be held accountable to this list, many stories set their own rules. For example, a slice-of-life story needn't be structured around a conflict. Make sure that your "own rules" isn't merely an excuse. And if you come up with idiosyncratic rules, hold your story accountable to them.

Plot. Does enough happen in your story? Something must. The event need not be huge, but it must be dramatic and significant.

Is the story structured around a conflict? Can you state the conflict in a sentence or two? What is the struggle about? This is your theme. The theme should not be separate from the conflict.

Do you introduce the conflict soon enough — preferably as a crisis in the first couple of pages? Do you sustain the conflict as a tension long enough, through most of your story?

Is the conflict carried to its logical conclusion? Does the ending make sense in light of the beginning?

Can you identify the key event and its climax? This should be the turning point. You've reached the peak and now things will inevitably slide, faster and faster, to a conclusion. Hitherto, there were options; but now the protagonist's choice has become clear.

Does the story give us enough information on the causes of the main event? Although the advice remains "show, don't tell," whenever you can't show us enough, tell us, summarize, fill us in. After all, you are a storyteller. Whatever happens in the story must

make sense.

Do you present us the right sequence of events (scenes and

summaries) so that the story has the cogency of a good argument?

Do you have a stock plot? (Avoid plots too often encountered in pop novels — for example, the detective investigating a murder is the murderer.)

Is your plot easy to follow? Even if it's a mystery, what happens during the investigation should be easy to follow. John Gardner advises, "Don't play pointlessly subtle games in which storytelling is confused with puzzle-making."

Character. Who are the protagonists? Antagonists? In general, you should have at least two characters, engaged in some kind of action or tension. One character reminiscing and laughing out loud at his thoughts or smiling at ashtrays doesn't offer enough dialectical potential for a story.

Are the main characters well developed (round)? If not, give them sufficient complexity — desires, obstacles, weaknesses, strengths.

Are there flat characters? Perhaps they don't need to be round, but on the other hand, don't let them become stereotypes.

Can you find out the basic motivation — desires and fears — of the main characters?

Do the characters encounter any obstacles? Are the obstacles sufficiently tough?

Does your main character change or come to some crucial insight in the course of the story?

Setting. Is the setting appropriate? Authentic? If it's Cleveland, make sure there's no subway. If it's Venus, make sure there are no people living in forests.

Does your setting work in synergy with characters and plot? The setting could deepen your characterization and ground your plot. Realistically drawn landscapes and cityscapes increase believability, even in fantasy stories.

Have you given us the setting gradually, together with the characters and the action? Or have you dumped it all in a long

chunk in the beginning or middle?

Have you used the setting for special effects (foreshadowing,

mood expression, beautiful images, change of pace)?

POV. From whose POV is the story told? Could you tell it better

from another character's POV?

Is the POV consistent? If it shifts, is there a good reason for it to

do so?

Does your POV shift in midsentence? Midparagraph? Even in

the omniscient POV, you might do better to sort out POVs by paragraphs.

In the omniscient POV, do you enter too many heads? Generally, limit yourself to the main characters. The minor ones can remain external.

Do you use interior monologues to your advantage? If there's a crisis point in which your POV carrier is alone, waiting, you might deliver an interior monologue to heighten suspense and clarify motives.

Do you use stream of consciousness where you can? If there's a crisis point in which your carrier of POV is injured or disoriented, you might switch to a stream of consciousness to reflect the crisis and to change the narrative pace.

Whom does the narrator of your story address? Is there an ostensible audience, like "Gentle reader," "Dear President,"

"Mimi"? Is the audience used consistently?

Who are you, as the author, addressing? An imaginary person,

or a friend, or nobody? Who do you think will read your story? Children, adults, punks, U.S. Marines, Connecticut tax-evaders?

Are there authorial intrusions? Are they warranted? In the "omniscient" POV they are fair game; in other POVs, they may be distracting.

Voice, Attitude and Humor. What voices do you hear in the story? Naturally, each speaker should have a distinct voice, different from the author's in most cases, unless the narrative is a piece of overt autobiography. In the narrative part, is the voice clear enough?

Do you joke at inappropriate moments—for example, at the peak of a tragic action? Some characters may joke under stress: it's all right to reproduce that, but make sure the authorial humor does not undermine the tension.

Are your jokes in poor taste? Offensive to women and minorities?

Do you strain too hard for sentimental effects? Any rivers of tears? Above all, especially in the third-person POV narrative, don't tell that what happened was devastatingly sad, unless you parody sentimental writing.

Timing. Does the story start at the right moment? Or does it start too early, before the main action—or too late? Identify your first crisis moment, and open with it. A swimmer jumps far into the pool rather than swim from the very edge of it. The better you write, the further into the story you'll be able to jump.

Does the story end at the right moment? Find the point when things have begun to fall into place, and cut the action; ending here implies that they will continue to do so.

Do you cover enough time in the story? Or too much? (In a short story, usually you'd cover several days; generally you shouldn't cover more than a couple of years; in a novel, you can.)

Is the chronology—and the grammar that indicates it—clear? If you frequently backtrack in time, try using the present tense for your "now" action, so you can use the simple past tense, rather than past perfect, for your "then" action.

Check your tenses. Within a chapter, unless there is a flashback or a fast-forward, the tense should remain the same. The tense should not switch in a sentence.

Keep the sequence of motions chronological, from first to last. The previous sentence should not ordinarily read like this: "After he lies on a sofa, upon walking in the room, he breathes out his anxiety. . . ." Readers strain to straighten out the sequence of actions here. The same holds true of paragraphs. Keep going forward, except when you have memories and flashbacks. But even then, once you switch into the past to explain what had happened, lay it out as chronologically as possible.

If you've used flashbacks or memories, did you need to? Could you tell the story from the first event to the last without backtracking and without losing the cogency of the story as an argument? This is a difficult choice. Sometimes you must go with the shape of the argument rather than with the linearity of time. It's best if you can accomplish both.

Has the story been paced well? Don't bore the reader, yet don't run out of plot too fast. Make sure that you've done enough showing to give body to any telling you may have done.

Scene and Dialogue. Is the dialogue natural? Do people sound like real people rather than technical books?

Do the characters sound different from the general narrative and from each other? Go through the dialogue, line by line, and give signature expressions to a character, making sure that the other characters don't use the same ones, except when being sarcastic to each other.

Is your dialogue complex enough? Combine small scenes into big ones so that they portray characters, advance the plot and raise tension.

Do you have enough dialogue in proportion to the narrative? There's no set rule, but at least some parts of your story should be written in dialogue, unless you are doing *Man against Nature* or some other type of story in which dialogue might not appear. And despite the current fashion in favor of dialogue, your fiction should include description, summary, and other sorts of narrative—for the change of pace, transitions and quick information.

Is the story told mostly as a nonscenic narrative? If so, your story will sound like an essay. Decide where the action is, and stage it.

Are the scenes compounded ("Mondays she would pray") or are they specific ("One Monday she prayed")? Compounded scenes work well to introduce the main event, but the main event must take place as a fully developed, specific scene. Your story or novel should contain a larger proportion of specific scenes than of compounded scenes and background exposition.

Are the right scenes dramatized and the right ones summarized? Usually, your key event should be fully dramatized (though you should skip greetings and other dull exchanges, unless they can show something important). Some supporting scenes can be summarized, others dramatized. Transitions between various events are usually summarized.

Do you have too many similar scenes? Are there ten quarrels? Maybe two will do; make each unique. If you write three similar scenes to show a pattern, distill them to one, and tell us during it that the dramatic action is part of a pattern.

Are your dramatic scenes long enough? If not, expand them.

Are the dramatic scenes suspenseful enough? Though they must be fairly long, they also must be quickly paced. Achieving this balance can be difficult. Raise the tension of the conflict, and point toward the resolution, which should make sense of it all.

Description and Diction. Do you show enough? The most important story moments must be shown in scenes.

Do you describe characters in a fresh way? (No chiseled features, sky-blue eyes, pearly white teeth.)

Do you genuinely describe settings? (No ominous train stations, squalid quarters, posh offices.)

Do you have enough dynamic descriptions incorporated into the action?

Do you tell enough? You need not show absolutely everything. Sometimes it's all right to tell, for the sake of pacing the narrative. Some crucial points can be both told and shown; if you tell them, show them also.

Are there enough metaphors? Too many? Do they work? Do they create a parallel text? Is the parallel text something you want? For example, if all your metaphors concern various beasts devouring each other, are you sure you want this Hobbesian dimension in your story —and is this killing and feeding frenzy what your story is about? If you have a tame romance with such metaphors, you have a choice: Either get rid of bestial metaphors and resort to botany (although flowers have been overused in this context) or listen to your metaphors. They may suggest a major

plot change. The romance might turn into a struggle and become all the more interesting. In other words, metaphors may bring out the full potential of a story. If you listen to them, your story might grow into a larger one.

Do the descriptions drag or jump?

Are the descriptions effective? Do they engage our senses? Or are some senses atrophied? Why? In most cases, if your sentences do not make us see (hear, touch, smell, taste), cross them out. Leave what you can perceive.

MICROREVISION

When you've successfully answered all of the questions above and made all the necessary changes, you are still not quite finished; you've got to polish. You must cleanse the narrative of any superfluous words. Polishing can turn out to be a lot of work. As James Baldwin put it, "Most of the rewrite is cleaning."

Polishing the manuscript may be similar for everybody — putter- inners and taker-outers alike.

Here, you want each sentence to be sharp, each word to count. Jerzy Kosinski said, "Every word is there for a reason, and if not, I cross it out. I rarely allow myself to use English in an unchecked, spontaneous way. I always have a sense of trembling — but so does a compass, after all. I cut adjectives, adverbs, and every word which is there just to make an effect."

Some clean-up is mechanical. Check your spelling. If you don't have spell-check on your computer, use a dictionary. Now and then I encounter a student who scoffs at spelling. I haven't, however, met a violinist who doesn't care whether his pitch is perfect.

Check your paragraphs. Are they fully developed? Journalistic practices aside, your paragraphs should contain more than one sentence, except in dialogue or when you're conferring special emphasis.

Punctuate conventionally. Write in complete sentences, not comma splices or sentence fragments, except now and then for special effect. Unless you're experimenting, use conventional grammar. The less attention it attracts to itself, the more attention will remain for your story.

Make sure your sentences are not monotonous. Vary sentence length and structure. Don't start every sentence with *I* or *he*. Don't, on the other hand, start each sentence with *although*, *considering*, or other dependent clause conjunctions. It's good to alternate simple and complex sentences, to establish a pleasing rhythm and avoid choppiness and monotony.

Don't let each sentence travel like a runaway train. Some people—even some famous writers—do that, but they are hard to read. In long sentences it's easy to lose track of the subject and the object. It must be clear who is doing what to whom. Who's kicking whom. Be sure that each pronoun has a clear precedent. Consider this sentence: "Above my garage the snow has fallen over a layer of ice, but the frozen sparrow has not moved, and now that the sun is out it's melting." What is melting—snow, sparrow, sun or ice?

Make sure you are clear. Sometimes you must weed out the passive voice and abstract vocabulary to achieve clarity.

Is the language weak? Too many adjectives and adverbs? Passives? Cliches? On the other hand, can you find strikingly fresh usages, *le mot juste*?

Make sure your sentences are direct. Scrutinize your use of prepositional phrases—especially "of" and "in" construction. "The paint on the table in the kitchen" could profitably become "the

kitchen table's paint." You use four rather than eight words—cut the word factor by fifty percent—and speed up the prose. Don't use double prepositions uselessly: "get off of my case" when "get off my case" would do.

Avoid official language and technical jargon unless you need it for comedy or parody. Hereunto, aforementioned and the like belong in legal documents.

Get rid of repetitions. Some repetitions are not immediately visible; they are redundant and superfluous expressions, such as "She came to a complete stop." Complete is superfluous. If the stop is incomplete, it's not a stop. Or, "He lived his life." Life is redundant since it's entailed in lived. "He blinked his eyes." He blinked will do, because the verb implies eyes.

If in a ten-line paragraph you use *love* or *response* (or any other words, other than articles and helping verbs) more than thrice, scrutinize each use, and eliminate it unless it's essential. Find synonyms. For *response*, perhaps *reaction* could do. Of course, some essential grammatical device words, like *a*, *the*, *have*, and *like*, will recur, and you shouldn't worry about them, within reasonable limits.

Delete all unnecessary modifiers in dialogue tags. For example: " 'Will you please please go home?' he said beseechingly." *Beseechingly* wastes time; it's clear from the sentence that a plea is going on. Moreover, *beseechingly* is an awkward adverb—to the verb we add the gerund (*ing*)

suffix, and then we add *ly* to make an adverb. Thus, the word is twice removed from its original verb. The more removals a word undergoes from its origin, the paler it becomes. "He beseeched" might be an improvement, in that light, but since "he said" does not commit redundancy, you should prefer it.

Omit all unnecessary indications of who's speaking. On the other hand, is it always clear who is speaking? Whenever in doubt, indicate the speaker and use *said*.

Do you misspell for any kind of effect—stuttering, dialect, shouting? Keep your misspellings to a minimum. You can indicate outside the dialogue that something is said in a Southern drawl, or even better, you can rely on syntax and word choice to give us the flavor of the voice.

Don't use cliches. Cut whatever you've heard too many times (like "window of opportunity"), unless you need to show that this is how somebody talks. If you are making fun of cliches — why? To educate others? If so, do you strike a pose of being above your reader, or one in which you and your reader are both above most of humanity?

WHEN TO QUIT REVISING

Is there such a thing as too much revision? Yes. Sooner or later you must decide that the story is finished. Further revision might actually damage it. John Dos Passos described this decision: "I usually write to a point where the work is getting worse rather than better. That's the point to stop and the time to publish."

Tolstoy too described how much rewriting may damage the text. "Often in rewriting, I omit things, substitute others, not because the new idea is better, but because I get tired of the old.

Often I strike out what is vivid and replace it with something dull."

Another distinct danger in revising over and over is that you might lose a realistic perception of your story. The lines begin to sound not only familiar but inevitable. The more you listen to a piece of music, the more you may find it gratifying because you

can predict the sequences. This resonance effect through too much repetition will make your work appear fabulously chiseled and meaningful. If this happens, beware. It happens to me after too much revision. What do I do then? I lay the work aside for half a year or so, forget most of it, and when I come back, I'm amazed at how rough it is. I need to revise it at least a couple of times more. The fact is that I did not revise the story too much, from the structural standpoint of the story, but I did from the psychological standpoint. Yes, after too many spins, I get crazy, filled with delusions of grand writing. Perhaps this is some kind of psychological reaction against getting stuck in the revision mode.

Avoid getting stuck in the revision mode beyond the point of diminishing returns. Find that point. Here you need good critical abilities about your work in progress, which you can develop only with a lot of practice. And don't go much beyond that point. The problem is that the story

will begin to lose your individual flavor and voice with further and further refinements. If some rough edges preserve the story's sense of life, keep them in.

The Final Test

After all the revisions, there are still two useful questions:

First, what can you still cut without damaging the story? If the word is pretty but only for its own sake, and not for the sake of the

story, press your best friend, the delete key.

Second, is your story easy to follow? Give it to two or three

readers. If none understands what's going on, you might have to do a lot of revising yet!

Straighten out whatever is confusing—if the chronology is twisted, lay it out simply from A to Z; if the motives are not clear, spell them out simply, in summary, if need be. Writing is communication—and the burden of communication is on you. Now and then I run into a student who during the class critique of his story smiles superciliously, and at the end of it, says, "None of you got it! What happens is this. . . ."

Invariably the writer constructed the story as a puzzle without revealing what happens. I am not saying that one should not write complex stories, but there's a difference between complex and complicated. Something simple can become complicated through unclear presentation. Above all, make sure that you are clear and that you show what happens in the story. The story should reveal, not obfuscate, an event.

To do this test, find somebody willing to read your work. Anybody who likes to read stories can do it; you don't need professional writers and editors for this. (In fact, sometimes they make the worst readers because many of them are jaded—everything may strike them as old simply because they have read too many manuscripts.) Of course, if your friends read your story, they'll probably tell you that they like it. Don't listen to this. Instead, ask them questions. What happens in the story? You need to know whether you've communicated it. Are the characters lifelike? Do they sound real when they talk? Does it make sense that they would do what they did in your story? (But don't ask for what the story means in a philosophical sense. You want a reading, not a scholarly interpretation.)

This is where a group workshop is immensely useful. You can see what comes across to the readers. You need some feedback. Your intentions about how the story should be read may be one thing, the story's reception another.

If you haven't communicated your story, go back and make it clear once again. Tell it. Maybe you've tried to show and imply too much? If the showing doesn't do it, leave the showing and add the

telling. I know, this going back may drive you crazy. But the first several times you attempt a story, the hardest part is looking not only for the story, but for the pattern for writing stories. This is also the most important part.

Be patient and keep working. Perhaps on all matters of writing fiction, that is the best advice I can give you.