REVSING AND EDITING FICTION
Moving beyond the first draft
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"I'm not a very good writer, but I'm an excellent rewriter." James Michener

"Good stories are not written. They are rewritten." Phyllis Whitney

Completing the first draft of a story is an achievement. You created a world, painted a setting, and fleshed out your plot. You gave life to characters and spent time thinking about voice and dialogue. Yet, as impressive as this is, the true work of writing has only just begun.

Writing is rewriting. We hear this from new and established writers across all genres. We *know* revision is a necessary part of writing. Still, the process of revising and editing stalls many of us. It can feel overwhelming, or uncomfortable, to assess our own work. We may not know where to begin, or what to do with the feedback we've received. Revision is not a mystical or specialised process. In revising our writing, all we are doing is adding detail, deleting the unnecessary, and rearranging for clarity and effect. Here are some common best practices to keep in mind as you sit down to work.

Start with the Story

It's best to start by looking at the larger craft elements. Think about how the story is working as a whole. Is it being told in the best and most logical way? Are characters and conflict clearly defined?

1. Revising for Character Development and Characterisation

Character Development

The first step to creating conflict in your story is to define your protagonist's goals. What do they want? There must also be something at stake for the character. What happens if they don't attain that goal?

> **Consider** your protagonist's goal. Is it clear to the reader what that goal is? What is at stake for the character? Is this evident for the reader?

Characterisation

Are your characters presented in clear detail for the reader?

> **Consider** the details. Are your characters clearly described? What do they look like? Do they have unique mannerisms, habits, flaws? What motivates them? What do they want? What do they fear?

2. Revising for Structure

When revising for structure we are rearranging plot points and events for clarity and effect. It helps to keep the elements of the Five-Point Narrative Structure (situation, inciting incident and rising action, climax, falling action, resolution) in mind – see Bunting's "Freytag's Pyramid".

> **Consider** the critical plot points and events. Are they laid out in the best possible (most logical) way for what you are setting out to accomplish?
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> Where does the story start? What is the inciting incident? Would the story have more impact if you started at the moment where everything changes for your protagonist? Is the point of resolution clear?

3. Revising for Point of View

Remember that point of view is what allows readers to experience the story as it unfolds. Readers can only know what a story's chosen POV reveals to them.

> **Consider** the point of view in your story. Is it consistent? Are there any moments where the POV shifts? Look out for changes in tense in your writing as this often signals an unintentional POV shift. See Bunting's overview of point of view.
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> A rewrite may be something to take on if you feel it makes the most sense to tell the story from another POV. For example, first person might suit a story that requires a sense of urgency whereas third person might suit a story where you need to thoroughly describe a setting.

4. Revising Dialogue

i) Subtext and Context

Subtext is the unspoken or less obvious meaning or message in a literary composition. Subtext is important to think about when drafting dialogue. Keep in mind that what a character does is often more revealing than what they say.

> "*I'm fine," John said, before he walked off and slammed the door.*

In this example, the reader understands that the character is *not,* in fact, fine. There is no need to tell us *how* John is speaking here (i.e. there's no need to write: "*I'm fine," John said angrily, before he walked off and slammed the door.).* If you've given **context** (in this case, the door slamming), it's not necessary to explain in what tone a character is speaking. A reader will know what is implied. **This is the subtext**.

So when revising dialogue:

Consider your dialogue tags. It's usually best to stick to simple dialogue tags like *he said* and *she asked* to let the reader know who is speaking. Avoid using too many distracting dialogue tags and adverbs to describe your character's emotions (e.g. *he smiled, she snapped, I laughed, she said grumpily*). Instead, let the characters' actions and words show what they're feeling.

Stage your dialogue. Use location and action as tools to reveal emotion. Imagine the characters in your scene; picture that scene set on a stage. Now think about how the characters would move, where they would stand, what they would focus on and so on.

For instance, if you have two characters in a room and one is upset with the other, rather than write: *"I don't believe you," he said coldly.*
Write: *He looked out the window at the empty street. He did not turn to her when he said, "I don't believe you."*

ii) Unnatural Dialogue

Dialogue should sound believable and natural for your character. For example, if your character is a twenty-year-old university student, they'd be unlikely to say: *"I do not understand what you are referring to. I was simply minding my own business with my friends."* More realistic speech might be: *"I don't know what you're talking about. I was just hanging out with my friends."*

Consider reading your dialogue out loud. Listen for cadence and word choice. Does it fit the character? Does it fit what you're trying to accomplish? If it sounds formal, stilted or awkward, then rewrite.

iii) Walls of Dialogue

One thing to look out for are long blocks of dialogue. Oftentimes, these can confuse a reader. Is it clear where the characters are when they're speaking? Are they moving from one location to another? Is time passing?

Consider including details about location or time to help keep the story (and the reader) grounded. Consider breaking up long blocks of dialogue with action and movement to keep things interesting and show what a character is doing and feeling as they speak.

Getting into the Details of Prose

Once you've got the overall story in place, the next step is to get into the detail of the language. Read lines and dialogue out loud. Think about areas where the pace of the story slows down. Think about sentences and passages that may be unclear for a reader. Is your descriptive language too vague? Is more information needed? Or would less, in fact, make more of an impact? When **editing your language**, look out for the following:

1. Active Language

Keeping language succinct and active is important. **Sentences in the active voice have energy and directness.** They are less wordy than those in the passive voice – and in general active sentences improve a piece of writing by getting across an idea, point, or emotion with more impact.

In reading over your work, consider if the subject in your sentences "acts". For instance:

I hit the wall.
You are driving too fast.
Claire will carry the bags home.

In each of the above examples, the subject performs the action of the verb. The sentences are punchy, direct and it's clear who's doing what. Compare to the passive sentences below:

The wall was hit by me.
The car is being driven too fast.
The bags will be carried home.

Writing in the passive voice means constructing sentences which foreground the object (*the wall, the car, the bags*) rather than the agent of the action (*I, you, Claire*). At times this can make your sentences confusing or dull. Overall, passive writing slows the pace of the story.

2. Necessary vs. Unnecessary Action

Keeping your language active and succinct also requires thinking about what is necessary to tell the reader. Knowing when you're providing too much information can be tricky, especially when your characters are on the move. The last thing you want is to give a line-by-line diagram of every movement, which slows the pace and is tedious to read. Look at this cumbersome example:

They arrived at the airport. Lucy grabbed her bag and stepped out onto the curb. She walked over to her father at the boot of the car. He opened the boot and reached for the suitcase, extending the handle to hand it to her. Lucy took the suitcase and said goodbye before walking towards the airport.

Consider if it is necessary to see the characters doing all of these actions in such detail. Is there a better way to showcase the action? What is important to the storyline? Compare to the more concise text below:

They arrived at the airport. Lucy's father grabbed her bag from the boot. He handed it to her and said nothing. Lucy stood there for a moment before saying goodbye. What else was there to do, but walk towards the terminal?

3. Descriptive Language

We know that interesting language is more engaging to read. Most of us also know that it's not that easy to write. Common issues to look for are descriptions and figurative language that may be:

- **too wordy** (making a passage or scene be difficult for the reader to get through)
- **unclear** (inaccurate or vague language that does not convey the exact meaning)
- **distracting** (e.g. a word or phrase that does not fit the overall tone. It may sound forced in some way, perhaps too formal, showy or slang for the rest of the story.)

Consider ditching the thesaurus. In general, it's best to cut any words or expressions you wouldn't normally use.

4. Mixed Metaphor

Remember that a metaphor takes two seemingly unrelated subjects and draws a comparison between the two, treating them as equal: *The moon was a sickle*.

Consider how you are using metaphor. Are your metaphors mixed? A mixed metaphor is one that gets confused, using two competing comparisons: *At first she was a weighted barge, then a sunflower tracking the light.* The metaphor starts out on water with a boat and ends up on land with a flower, leaving the reader with a confused and scattered image. This could be revised to unify the imagery and create an extended metaphor: *At first she was a reluctant bud, then a sunflower tracking the light.*

5. Misuse of Words to Describe Action

Sometimes in trying to find an interesting way to describe an action, we can fall a bit wide of the mark. Focus on the verbs in the description of action below:

I scrambled towards the undergrowth, doubling over against the din from the fireworks above that was threatening to engulf me. The dried grass crunched beneath my nails as they dug in, determined to hang on to something for balance but I forced them to push me on.

Consider how appropriate the choice of action words is. Would one "double over" against din? Do nails have agency? Can they decide to "dig in"? Can they be "determined to hang on to something for balance"?

It can help to picture yourself in your character's place as you work through some points of action. Always use the most accurate language you can to specify exactly what you want to say. A better rewrite might be: *I scrambled towards the undergrowth to get away from the fireworks exploding overhead. The din was deafening. I clawed my way through the dry grass, digging my nails into the soil.*

6. Avoid Overuse of Adjectives and Adverbs

Cutting adjectives and adverbs can often make your writing much tighter.

Consider would one adjective suffice where there are two? Is there another way to describe an action or emotion without using adverbs (e.g. *excitedly, slowly, carefully, etc.*)?

Webpages Cited

Bunting, Joe. "Freytag's Pyramid: Definition, Examples, and How to Use this Dramatic Structure in Your Writing." *The Write Practice,* thewritepractice.com/freytags-pyramid/.

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