

Revise ~~Revise~~ Revise: A Guide*

“First drafts are for learning what your novel or story is about. Revision is working with that knowledge to enlarge and enhance an idea, to *reform* it.”

-Bernard Malamud

“All of us have failed to match our dream of perfection. I rate us on the basis of our splendid failure to do the impossible. If I could write all my work again, I’m convinced I could do it better. This is the healthiest condition for the artist. That’s why he keeps working, trying again: he believes each time that this time he will do it, bring it off. Of course he won’t.”

-William Faulkner

The Developmental Stages of a Creative Work

1. **Initial generating stage:** The piece is being messily generated. This stage eventually leads to the first (rough) draft, when a piece with a recognizable beginning, middle, and end has begun to take shape. What kind of feedback should you get at this stage? Answer: “Awesome! Keep going!” Basically, it’s too early to show it to people at this stage.
2. **Creative revisioning stage (drafts 1-20+):** Although a first draft has been generated, the piece is still under “deep” creative construction that often requires complete rewriting of the point of view, the setting, the scenes, the characters, the plot, etc.
3. **Constructive revisioning stage (drafts 2-20+):** The piece has solidified, and can now be examined, and critiqued, as a whole piece, rather than as something that is still under primary construction. Usually this is the best time to workshop a piece.
4. **Copyediting:** The piece is done, and now it’s just about wordsmithing, grammar, awkward syntax and phrasings—anything that distracts from a smooth, polished read.

Analytical/Mechanical Exercises for Revision Inspiration:

1. Retype the story or a section of the story. The idea is that the simple act of going over the piece word by word will spark new ideas. Changing the font or printing it out can also help.
2. Highlight all of the verbs and make sure they are active and interesting. New writers tend to focus on adjectives and adverbs when verbs are where the real action is—literally, because verbs describe what the characters are doing.
3. Highlight all adverbs and consider deleting them. Often ending in “-ly,” adverbs modify verbs in often shitty ways. (Example: “he closed the door *angrily*” is much weaker and less efficient than using a more active verb: “he *slammed* the door.”)
4. Highlight all abstractions or generalities. Watch out for big philosophical statements like “love is the force that drives humanity” or vague statements like “it started out normal.” Concrete sensory detail is best—always start there.
5. Examine all imagery (any object, person, or place described using one or more of the senses). Is the imagery precise enough? Is it original and interesting, or cliched? Is it flowery/overly sentimental?

6. Highlight all metaphors and similes. Make sure they add something to the story. Ask of them the same questions you asked of the imagery. Don't rely too much on metaphor. Telling us what something is *like* before telling us what it *is* is often a sign that more precise writing is needed.
7. Read out loud and listen to the rhythm of the language—especially for dialogue. If you stumble, highlight the sentence.

Creative Exercises:

What you write from creative exercises don't necessarily end up in the final project, but are often helpful in thinking of new ideas or figuring out new approaches to parts of your story. Think of them as experiments.

1. Free write in the voice of a character other than the narrator or protagonist. You could try writing their diary. See what you learn about how they think and sound.
2. Write about an event in your character's past without which the current situation couldn't exist
3. See how much you could cut from the beginning of your story. Entering a story is like entering a party: better to be fashionably late than awkwardly early.
4. Make a list of things that *won't* happen to the characters as a result of the scenes in the story.
5. Describe physical aspects of the scene in great detail: the setting, the characters, the clothes, the food. Do this obsessively. Don't worry about whether it is interesting.
6. Describe a number of unrelated events occurring nearby (or far away) as the scenes of your story unfold.
7. Change the setting to an unlikely place (for example, move the story from Paris to Milwaukee). Adjust the details to fit.
8. If narrative/summary, rewrite as a scene (or vice versa).
9. Combine characters or scenes.
10. Change the tense or the point of view of the story.
11. Do some research on a topic, place, or situation related to the events of your story. Take a walk. Play basketball. Watch something dumb on Netflix. Read the news. Tell a lie. Write somewhere you don't usually write. Try to explain/talk about/read your story to your mom or your cousin or your friend or your pet, etc. Read something you like. Read something you don't like. Stay up late. Go to bed early. Wake up before everyone else. Etc. Just make sure you return to the writing.

*Copied/paraphrased in part from Alice LaPlante's *The Making of a Story*