



# Writing Hurts Like Hell

The Revision Process

## **It All Starts with a First Draft**

Ever see those advertisements for books and courses on how to write a novel? The writer, dressed casually, smiling confidently, sitting in a clean airy room, possibly the livingroom, with a spanking new laptop on the coffee table, merrily whipping up the next bestseller of the year, soon to be a movie. Or that traditional image of the paper rolling into the typewriter, words stamping onto the paper, pull out the paper, rolling in another sheet, sending it off to the publisher and waiting for the royalties to roll in. I don't think this would happen even in the movies anymore.

The reality is...every novel starts with a first draft. And that first draft is rife with bad writing. Even after you've submitted what you deem to be a perfectly written novel to a publisher and had it accepted, you'll be assigned one or more editors who will show you just how imperfect your novel really is. The fact is...

**No novel is ever written**

**Every novel is re-written**

**And re-written**

Some writers need less revision, some need more, but all writers need to make the manuscript that goes to the publisher as close to perfect as they can, and there's a process for this. Before you begin that process though, you need to get away from your novel for a while.

## **Take a Break**

The problem with revising a novel right after you've finished the first draft is that you're too close to it. You may have a setting that you can see vividly in your mind and the words you used to describe it re-create that scene perfectly for you, but your readers may see something completely different in their minds. A scene you intended to be serious may come off as humor or tongue-in-cheek because of the words you used or a situation you saw as serious but, in the heat of writing, you didn't notice the humorous relationship between the characters or a setting that was completely inappropriate for the action.

Former American president William Howard Taft once said, ""Don't write so that you are understood, write so that you're not misunderstood." You do this by getting away from your writing for a while. When you come back to it with a more objective mind, you might find yourself misunderstanding things that made perfect sense to you when you were writing them.

I generally take three to six months, and it's not always easy. The novel's sitting there waiting to be polished and finished, calling to me. But I ignore it. I do a lot of reading during this time and might even start a story dump for my next novel. Sometimes I write short fiction or poetry. But

the last thing I'll do is look at that first draft because I know that's the worst thing I can do for it. If I have thoughts about it, like how I should have written a certain scene, I make a note of this and forget about it until I'm ready to get on with the revision process.

After you've been away from your novel for a few months, it's time to polish and groom your manuscript and the worst way to do that is to start micro-editing on Page 1. Can you imagine spending two or three evenings making Page 1 a masterpiece and finding out a couple of weeks later that you need a different beginning and Page 1 will have to be deleted?

Bummer.

I use a five step process for revising my novels. It ensures (as much as possible) that I won't be deleting passages that I've had to wring out my soul to produce.

### **Step 1: Just Read**

Read the entire manuscript from start to finish without making any changes. This is the way a reader will read your novel. You're going to read passages that will make you cringe, but don't do anything to them. Leave them be for now. You'll come back to them later.

All you're doing at this point is looking at the *story*. Does the story, regardless of spelling mistakes, compel you to read on? Does it unfold the way you want it to with ebbs and flows, high points and low points? Are the characters real? Are the settings convincing? Are there passages where you're not sure if you really understand what's happening after being away from the story for a few months?

The urge to make changes is going to be great but ignore it. Just read. If you absolutely cannot resist the urge to make some kind of change, then quickly circle or highlight the material in question and read on.

### **Step 2: The Big Changes**

The first draft of my fifth novel had over 180,000 words. In the second draft, I cut over 35,000. That's a lot of words. That's a novella. I dropped two characters that, after six months away from the novel, I realized weren't essential to the story. I deleted every scene in which they appeared and every instance where something happened that had anything to do with them.

You might have to add a few scenes or expand some existing scenes in this draft, but mostly, you'll be looking to pare things down. You'll be looking at your manuscript from a high level, looking for things like:

#### *Scenes That Don't Advance the Plot*

There will be scenes that seemed essential in the storyboard but, once you start filling out the concept with actual writing, you realize that the scene isn't really all that important. It could be a conversation between two people that was essential to understanding a later scene that might be

deleted in your second draft (that would be the one we're talking about now). It might have been a chase scene that made sense in the storyboard but now you realize that it's one chase scene too many and it doesn't do anything to advance the story.

### *Non-essential Characters*

There may be characters in your story dump that fascinate you, maybe because of an endearing language quirk or they're just plain likeable, so you gave them lots of appearances in the novel. But after you've had a few months to cool down and look at your writing objectively, you realize that many of their appearances do nothing to advance the plot and might even irritate or bore the reader. I've always felt that it's better to pare down characters than to pare down readers.

You may also have one or two prominent characters that seemed important initially but when you see them in the context of the finished first draft, you realize their roles don't really help to advance the plot. They may be crucial to a subplot that you decide to cut because you realize you have too many subplots.

Every character in your novel must serve some purpose, including minor characters. If a character is just a station attendant gassing up a main character's car, he should give the main character information or help set the mood by being cheery or suspicious. Every element in a novel must count for something...or be counted out. A note of caution though: If you delete a character, make sure you eliminate any reference to that character or any effect that character may have had on any other scene.

### *Inconsistencies*

These are the things that are almost impossible to pick up while you're writing and immediately after you've finished writing your first draft. Inconsistencies are details in your novel that don't match other details. For instance, you have a character wearing a red shirt on Page 4 and in the same scene on Page 8 he's wearing a blue shirt.

You'll likely catch most of these in this phase, but you won't catch them all. Almost always, that takes another pair of eyes, either a friend you ask to read your final draft or the editor assigned to you when your novel has been accepted for publication. But you should still try to correct as many inconsistencies as you can.

### *Juxtapositions*

Juxtapositions are things that don't make sense to the reader because the information they need to understand the story hasn't been given yet. For instance, Jake is wondering why his father killed himself but the suicide scene doesn't come until a few scenes later.

Something like this is usually picked up in the storyboarding phase but if you add scenes later, then it's possible they might not be in the right order. To avoid this, when I add scenes in the first draft, I make up a card for it and add it to the storyboard where I can see exactly where the scene makes sense.

I know some writers who make timelines for their novels, charts that show when every event in their novel happens, even if it's a historical event mentioned in passing. This helps to pinpoint juxtapositions.

### *Modulation*

Modulation is the rhythm of your novel. You should think of your storyline as a roller coaster with high points of intense action or emotion and low points of calm. If your novel is a straight line of intensity from start to finish you'll exhaust your reader's mind. It's too much...like drinking ten cups of coffee in one evening. The first and second cups may be enjoyable but by the fifth cup you're not even tasting the coffee. It's just hot liquid passing through. Drink a glass of orange juice after every third cup and the next cup of coffee stands a better chance of having taste.

In a fast-paced novel, you need the occasional calm scene to allow the reader to grab a second breath. In a slow-paced novel you need the occasional peak in action or emotion to keep the reader awake.

As I mentioned earlier, I use red dots on my storyboard cards to indicate heightened action. This allows me to stand back and see where the novel slumps for too long or yells at the reader with too much action.

In this draft, you may have to slow things down or speed them up with additional scenes.

### *Mood and Atmosphere*

When you're writing your first draft you're getting into the details and you won't always see the bigger picture of the scene itself, keeping in mind that the storyboard shows the big picture of the novel but not of each scene.

Some scenes don't need any particular mood or atmosphere. For instance, a transition scene in which one of your characters is traveling from home to work and possibly thinking about the day ahead, but most scenes will have some sort of mood. A funeral scene will be heavy and quiet, a beach party will be light and loud, a chase will be fast and tense. The mood should match the content of the scene. You're not likely to have a beach party funeral unless your novel is a comedy or you're writing about some very weird people.

But when you're writing that scene in the first draft, you may be paying more attention to action or dialog than to the mood. For instance, you have a scene in an old house where people are disappearing and the remaining people who were dumb enough to go into the house with the curse on it in the first place are seriously creeped out. But you get into the thoughts of one of the characters as she thinks about the pool party she attended few days earlier and the pool party thoughts continue for a page or two. Any suspense you've built up in the scene is going to disintegrate. Those thoughts the character is having are actually a scene within the scene and don't belong here. Delete the pool party or re-locate it.

### *Conversation Drag*

Conversation drag is related to most of the things above. It's also one of the most consistent problems with first-time novelists. Suppose one of the scenes in your first draft is a conversation between two characters or maybe several characters. On the day you write this scene, you're in top form and the words seem to pour out of the mouths of your characters as you write furiously. The tone, dialect, timing, diction and descriptions of physical gestures are perfect. It's like you're right there watching and listening to the conversation. It's the best dialog you've ever written. But it goes on for fifteen pages and as well-written as it is it really doesn't do a lot to advance the plot or reveal character in a way that hasn't already been done in previous scenes. You need to read through this closely and delete those parts of the conversation that, when they're gone, the conversation still makes sense and accomplishes whatever reason you had for writing it.

Your fifteen page conversation might be ten times more effective if it's pared down by a few pages. Long, pointless conversations, no matter how well-written, run the risk of boring the reader. Bored readers stop reading.

Here's a helpful hint for revising conversations: Read your conversations out loud. You'll be surprised at the difference between what you had in mind when you were writing and what the conversation actually sounds like.

### *Over Describing*

It doesn't take two pages to describe a fire hydrant. You might describe it as red with a blue bonnet and go on to include the green operating nut, pumper nozzles, breakable barrel coupling, breakable flange, drain outlet, gate, upper barrel, weather shield and so on...until your reader is comatose from too much detail.

Writers a hundred years ago produced descriptions that were close to scientific observation and were lauded for their keen eye for detail. Today, readers won't tolerate arduous description. Today, you mention just the red fire hydrant with the blue bonnet and maybe a line or two on its condition; peeling paint, shiny and new...something that might suggest the character or mood of the setting.

Ask yourself, "Does this two page description of the meadow behind the house really need the part about the robin feeding worms to her young in the nest clinging to the large branch with veins like those of a champion weight lifter after a three hour workout in a hot gym with...?"

When it comes to description, it's best to keep it to a minimum. Suggest the object and let the rest be filled in by the reader's imagination. This will make your job easier and help to more readily engage the reader.

Once you've finished the big picture revisions, it's time to bring out the magnifying glass.

### **Step 3: Down to the Line**

Congratulations! You've re-structured your manuscript where necessary, ruthlessly deleted superfluous material, relocated scenes that were misplaced, corrected inconsistencies, added

missing scenes and done some high level re-writing. By now, your manuscript is fairly stable and you're not likely to make any sweeping changes that will require mass deletions or major structural changes.

Now it's time to get down to the nitty-gritty and focus on words, sentences, paragraphs and pages. This is the fine tuning part where you correct spelling and grammar, where you put each page under a microscope and ask: How can I make this better? This could mean deleting superfluous words, using more precise words, breaking a long sentence into two sentences, breaking one paragraph into two, turning the description of a conversation into actual dialog, re-writing sentences that don't make sense, combining sentences to smooth the flow of language, making sure that each scene uses a consistent tense and asking yourself if the point-of-view is appropriate to the scene. But mostly...

### **Revision is almost always cut, cut, cut**

When you write your first draft, you write quickly. This will almost always lead to overwriting, which is exactly what you want. It's much easier to cut superfluous writing than to write new material. Let's look at an example of material that can be cut.

Ted thought that he was the only one in the group of young men, who were all members of the same soccer team, who had any really realistic ideas about where their little enterprise was going and what they should be doing, as a team, to make some lasting changes at the outset of their venture, rather than wait until their mistakes were so entrenched as to be impossible, or unnecessarily difficult, to change way down the road.

This is the kind of bad writing produced in the first draft of a novel. It's seventy-eight words that almost mentally exhaust the reader and lose most of the meaning with too much information. Let's cut it down a little.

Ted felt alienated from the others by his insistence on proceeding cautiously with their venture so that mistakes made now wouldn't be compounded in the future.

Twenty-six words, and it's much easier to read and understand the basic message: Ted feels alienated because he's not going along with the others. (Oops...that was even shorter.) This sentence could have been re-written any number of ways. You have to look closely at the sentence and ask yourself what's being said, and then say it with fewer words.

Most of your re-writing won't be this drastic though. Mostly it'll be dropping a word or two. Editors want `tight` writing. They want the writing pared down to the essentials. Anything that doesn't reveal character, advance the plot or compel the reader to keep reading gets tossed.

Here's a helpful hint: Before you begin line by line revisions, read *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White. It's a small book but huge on what it can do to improve your writing.

#### **Step 4: One Last Run at It (and maybe another)**

After you've finished the line-by-line revisions, put the manuscript away and don't think about it. After a week or two, bring it out and read it from beginning to end. You'll find things that you missed earlier, but this round won't take nearly as long. If you want to make absolutely certain you've done your best, put the novel away for another week or two and go through it again. I bet you'll find a few more things that need polishing.

### **Optional Step 5: Bug Your Friends**

When you're certain that you've done your best, pass the manuscript around to a few close friends. When they've finished reading it, take them out for a coffee, beer or dinner and ask them for their honest opinion. Ask them what they liked most and what they liked least and for any general hints on how to make the novel better.

Some of this feedback will be helpful; some, not. But it will give you an objective view that, though it might mean going back to the revision stage, could make your novel more publishable.

If you feel that you don't really need anyone else's opinions, then you're done. You're ready to start looking for an agent for publisher. If you don't have one lined up then google Editors & Preditors (spelling is correct). Good luck!