

ROCKING YOUR SECOND DRAFT!



REVISION TECHNIQUES FOR NEWBIE NOVELISTS

By **LESLIE MILLER**

CHAPTER ONE:

ROCKING YOUR SECOND DRAFT

Congratulations!

You've finished the first draft of your new novel.

That's quite an achievement, whether 50,000 words or 100,000, whether it sits in a desk drawer or marches on to publication and literary glory. So what do you do now? Should you send it off to an editor?

In most cases, I'd say the answer should be NO.

You *can* get an editor involved at *any stage of the novel writing process*, but for most authors, learning how to revise and going through a second or even third draft on their own will be the most *cost effective*, and a great way to develop objectivity and polish your craft.

But what if your first draft is a mess . . . and you know it?



Here's my motto: Write it however you write it—but learn to revise.

Learn to be objective, to identify your strengths and weaknesses, and your own personal writers' quirks and indulgences.

Mastering the art of revision will improve your writing pretty quickly. Don't be surprised if you see a huge improvement in your next project, even in the first draft.

And the more clean-up you can do, the less there will be for an editor to do, therefore the lower your editing costs.

According to literary agent Carly Watters,

“Self-awareness is the most important gift you can give yourself as a writer.”

But how do you develop it?

- How do you know if your story is on track for greatness, or has wandered off into the literary slums?
- How do you know if you’re too critical of your own work, or totally self-indulgent?
- How do you know if your plot is spellbinding or scattered, fresh or clichéd, riveting or just plain wrong?

Well, even the pros don’t know for sure.

Even Stephen King makes his wife beta-read his manuscripts well before they go off to the publisher.

Be open to the idea that your work can be improved. And that YOU are the one who can learn to improve it. That openness is one of the keys to developing the self-awareness and objectivity you’ll need to succeed, as well as the ability to take criticism and learn from it—all attributes that necessary for any serious writer.

Successful revisions start with objectivity and self-awareness



- Take some weeks away from the novel, if possible, to get that objectivity. Come back to it with a fresh eye.
- Know your weaknesses as a writer.
 - For instance, if you know you overuse certain words, or if you know you tend to write in passive voice, or your plots always wander off track—you’ll know some of what you need to look for before sending the work to the editor.
- Again, the more work the editor has to do, the higher your editing costs will be!

There are many ways to revise your manuscript, and it will take some trial and error to find out which methods work best for you.

TYPES OF REVISIONS

There is no “right way” to revise, there’s only the way that **WORKS** for you.

In general, revisions fall into two categories: **the biggies**, including:

- Plot issues like structure, pace, believability, cohesiveness
- Character development
- Dialogue
- Theme (if you have one)
- Exposition overdose



And then there are the **smaller issues**.

- Word choice
- Use of passive voice, telling instead of showing
- Repetitive words, boring verbs
- Overused words and other writing quirks
- Redundancy and repetition
- Tightness, crispness and flow

**Always start with the big issues.
Then move on to the smaller ones.**

How to Work with this Book

Effective revising is a matter of trial and error,
until you find the methods that work for you.

I've organized the book into two sections.

1. **The Biggies:** A cornucopia of ideas about how to work on major revisions. Read them through, and see which ones resonate. You won't want to use all of them, nor will all of them suit your personality, or the specific book you have written.
2. **The Smallies:** Loads of suggestions on finding and revising things like
 - a. passive voice,
 - b. overused words,
 - c. unnecessary adverbs,
 - d. flat verbs,
 - e. words that dull down your writing,

Again, not all of them will appeal to you. These techniques might sound time consuming and tedious at first. But they are not that time consuming, and if you are really excited about polishing your prose, I don't think you'll find them tedious either.

Unless you are a naturally brilliant writer, they will help your prose immensely.

These techniques will help you to take flaccid, overly wordy, mundane writing, and turn it into concise, crisp, flowing writing.

Aw, and you thought you needed an editor to do that?

CREATING YOUR PERSONALIZED REVISION PLAN



Move through the book, jotting down each idea that appeals to you, and more specifically you're looking to do with that technique in your own novel. By the time you reach the end of this book, you'll have prepared your own revision map, a personalized guide to revising your own novel. Instead of looking at a massive, daunting, undoable task and having no idea how to start—you'll have a **step-by-step plan**.

Look over the ideas you've written on your list and get rocking!

Here's to your well-oiled, impeccably polished and sweetly purring second draft!

Frequently, new writers send their first draft to an editor, without understanding or specifying what they need done. The editor will straighten out the syntax, perfect the punctuation, and ungarble the grammar.

But the book still won't be anywhere near ready for publication, and nowhere near professional quality, and the author will have wasted his or her money.

I SAY NAY!

There's no point fixing every sentence, every bit of dialogue, if your plot needs major revisions. There's no point in polishing the writing in a scene if it needs to be cut entirely.

That being said, it's possible you might not be able to identify the bigger issues that need work on your own, especially in the beginning.

In that case, going through the novel and cleaning up the small things might be just the thing you need to realize you have too many subplots, or you didn't tie up all your loose ends . . .

- ✓ or you forgot to write a climax,
- ✓ or your dialogue is deadly dull,
- ✓ or your characters are one dimensional,
- ✓ or your manuscript is loaded with clichés,
- ✓ or you wrote a book where nothing happens in the first half.

If you're new to *noveling*, and you want a professional opinion, a critique, perhaps even some writing assistance, there's never any shame in that. In fact, sometimes it's the smart way to go.



You can also learn a huge amount simply by reading blogs which talk about the craft of writing. Here are a few I highly recommend:

[Flogging the Quill](#)

[The Other Side of the Story](#)

[All Write – Fiction Advice](#)

[KMWeiland](#)

[Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writer's Workshop](#)

And how about a great blog that will really improve your grammar over time?

[Grammar Underground with June Casagrande](#)

CHAPTER TWO: THE BIG PICTURE

DOES YOUR BOOK WORK, OVERALL?

Here's that cornucopia of ideas I promised you . . .

Revision Idea #1: Sit down and outline the manuscript as written, scene by scene.

- One or two paragraphs per scene should be plenty. Summarize the characters involved and what happens in each scene.
- See if the overall outline makes sense to you, and presents an interesting story arc.
- Does it follow the general rules of novel writing, with a beginning, a middle and an end?
- Should some scenes be moved around, or cut entirely? Do some scenes leap out at you as irrelevant or wander way off track?
- List how many pages each scene has. Have you given too much page space or detail to a scene that's not really important, and not enough to one that's pivotal to the book?
- Does each scene move the book forward? What is its purpose? If you can't answer that . . . it might need reworking, or cutting. Be brave! Cutting only hurts for a moment.

TIP: Save your first draft exactly as is. Revise in a separate document. You never know when you'll need back some of the material you cut out, or will come up with a genius plot twist allowing you to incorporate that scene again.

Imagine the agony if you hit "delete" and that scene is gone forever!

TIP: If you can hardly bear to delete a scene because it contains some of your best, juiciest, Pulitzer Prize winning writing—but in your heart *you know it does nothing for the novel* and it has to go—save it! Cut and paste it into a separate file.

You never know when that material will spark a new idea for a new story. At the very least, you can read it when you hit those “my-writing-sucks-blues” and remind yourself you are pretty terrific, after all.



Revision Idea #2: Review Your Initial Idea/ Inspiration/ Theme

What was your initial idea when you sat down to write this story? Do you remember? Think back . . . What did you want the book to be? What were your goals for the story?

- Have you met those goals?
- Does the book say what you originally wanted to say when you conceived it?
- Or, do you prefer how the book wound up to your original idea? If so, why?
- What are the things you most love in the book? Why do you love them?
 - Is it the snappy dialogue?
 - Exciting action?
 - Deep emotion?
 - Wild plot twists?
 - Evocative writing?
 - Characters who feel like your best friends?
- Once you know what you did well, that leads us to the next question. Can you bring the rest of the book up to that level? How? What would you have to do? Do you believe you can do it, and are you willing to keep working on it?
- Can you analyze what you did right in the best scenes, and what elements are missing in the ones that don't seem to live up to their more effective cousins?
- What are the things you know are not working? Can they be fixed or should they be cut?

What you wound up with might not be what you originally intended!

Answering these questions might show you where you need to revise, to put the book back in line with your original intention. If that original intention is still relevant, of course.

My novel, *The Core Listeners*, emerged from a very specific idea. I wanted to use the unconventional ideas of a certain teacher—one I'd worked with closely for four years—and weave them into the pages of a fantasy adventure.

I wanted this teacher's concepts to form the basis of the characters, how they lived their lives, and the decisions they were forced to make. In other words, I started my book off with a clear-cut idea and theme.

When I considered my completed first draft, and read it through, I had something to check it against. Did it live up to my original idea, or had it wandered off into something completely different? Had my theme come through clearly enough? Would readers get it? Or was it too blatant, too preachy, taking away from the story?

The answers to these questions informed many of my revisions.

Even if you don't have a specific theme like I did, you probably had a *kernel of an idea* or *something specific* you wanted to say by telling the story.

What was it? Did your story remain true to your original idea?

And more important, since ideas morph and change all the time—did you manage to say what you wanted to say?

Did you go somewhere else entirely, but decide you like where you wound up better than your original intention?

This level of focus leads to the self-awareness and objectivity necessary to do effective revisions.



Revision Idea #3: Character Check

We usually get to know our characters more as we write the book. After the first draft, go back to the beginning and make sure your characters are consistent with what you've learned about them. If you've written quirks or unique speech patterns as you went along, make sure they are there at the beginning.

Are Your Characters Memorable and Compelling?

We remember Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler, Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, Dorothy Gale from Kansas, and Harry Potter, years after we meet them.



One of the best ways to write deep, compelling, and convincing characters is to become a student of human nature.

Do you ever think about why people do the things they do? What drives them? What's beneath the surface? What fear, need, or insecurity might cause them to act the way they do, speak the way they do, make the decisions they do?

Some people have an innate understanding of human nature—including the human dark side—and can effortlessly integrate it into their writing. I suspect Stephen King is one of those lucky souls. But while you are working on developing that skill (and I don't mean on paper, I mean by studying people in real life), here are some other, tried and true character development tips you can try.

How well do you know your characters?

- Write a little bio for each character, with a physical, emotional and mental description, perhaps adding their history, education, the main events that formed their character, etc. (This is for you, not the reader.)



Integrate what you've learned about them into the story, in a way that shows us the depth of who they are, not just the superficial details like where they went to school.

- Interview your characters, based on events in the book. What do they have to say about it? How do they feel about it? What drove them to make the decisions they made or have the reactions they had? What are their hopes and dreams? What have you learned about them, and how can it be effectively conveyed to your readers without giving them the interview.
- Take some time to consider: What do you want the reader to feel about the characters? Love them? Be irritated by them? Fear them? Laugh with them or at them?
- Does what you've written in the book fit what you want the readers to feel? If not, how can you flesh them out to show readers who they are?

TIP: Go through the book and highlight each character's dialogue in a different color. Read each character's dialogue individually and see if it presents a realistic character who fits your intention. Notice if there is any dialogue that doesn't fit, and revise it. Note if everyone's dialogue sounds the same. It's not easy to give each of your main characters their own, unique voice.

But think about the people you actually know, for a moment. Isn't there one blabbers? One who uses a lot of slang, or swearing? One who is on the quiet, but deep side? One who is poorly educated? One who is hilarious?

It's worth the effort to think deeply about who your characters are, and let that come through in their dialogue and in their unique voices.

TIP: Write a list of the first 10 actions each character does in the story. Do these actions fit in with what you are trying to portray? Are they realistic? Why are they doing what they are doing? Do they show us anything about the character, or are they just filling space? Are they consistent with what you know about the character?

Revision Idea #4: Colorcoding

Highlight all **dialogue in one color**,
action in another,
description in a third,
exposition in a fourth,
internal thoughts in a fifth.

Then, shrink down your font to half its current size and change double space to single, shrinking the entire book.

This maps out the book quite dramatically, making it easy to see the balance between all the vital components as you scroll through the document.

Hint: If you've got anywhere near as much **exposition** as any of the other components, it's way, way too much.

Same for **description**, unless yours really sings. Writing evocative descriptions is a special talent; many writers don't even bother to try. Bear in mind, many agents, editors, and readers hate long-winded descriptions and will skip right over them.

On the other hand, if there's hardly any description at all, you'll know to add some. It helps readers to get a visual and to ground the story or scene in a particular place. If description writing is not your thing, don't force it. Just give us enough to get the gist, hopefully integrated into the dialogue or actions of the characters, and continue with the story.

Don't try to be too flowery or copy your favorite author's brilliant metaphors or similes. Just tell us what your main POV character sees, hears, or smells.

So what does that leave?

Action, dialogue, and to a lesser degree, internal monologue, should make up the bulk of the book.

Revision Idea #5: First paragraphs and last lines

Read the first paragraph of each chapter. Do they each have some kind of a hook to keep the reader interested? Are they all the same? Do they make sense from the point of view of where the last chapter left off?

One author broke her chapters down into days, one chapter for each day that the story took place. This was a nice idea, but it locked her in in a way that stifled creativity. Each chapter ended with the MC turning in for the night, telling her hubby she was tired, or whatever. Each chapter then opened with her waking up, stretching, taking a shower, etc.

BORING . . .

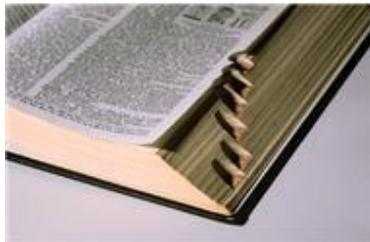
Is there anything about someone's bedtime ritual that makes you desperate to turn the page and see what happens in the next chapter?

Is there anything about someone's ordinary morning rituals, showering, reading the paper, brewing a pot of coffee, which hooks readers and motivates them to charge on through the story?

Got it?

Read the last line of each chapter. It should open a doorway for the reader, giving them something that will make readers want to keep turning the pages. Something that makes them wonder, ask a question, give a gasp, you know what I mean.

However, every chapter should not end with a cliffhanger, because that will get old really fast.



At this point, are you feeling a bit dazed? Flummoxed? Thoroughly intimidated? Overwhelmed? Are you reading this thinking, *I'm really lost*. I don't have the slightest idea what to do or how to start. I can't revise!

Are you wishing you never downloaded this book, because the idea of doing all this work is overwhelming?

In other words, do you need help?



Don't Panic!

No one expects you to try all of these processes. You'd have to be out of your mind.

Pick the ones that you resonate with, and start there.

Some will resonate with left brainers, some with right. Some will resonate with graph and chart lovers; some will resonate with deep thinkers.

None are right or wrong, better or worse; there are only the ones that are effective for you.

Perhaps it's time to get an editor involved??

I hope I haven't given you the impression you will never need an editor.

You will, possibly more than one. Possibly more than one type of editing, or more than one round of editing.

Most authors don't realize an editor can get involved at *any stage in the writing process*, and they can be a huge help with revisions. Make sure you tell your editor *exactly what you need*. Don't waste her time and your money by just saying you "need your book edited."

To many editors, that only means copy editing, and that's not what your book needs at this moment.

Tell your editor you need a *thorough critique* of every aspect of the book—no editing involved. As I've said before, there's no point fixing your punctuation or passive voice if your structure is falling apart and entire scenes need to be chopped or rewritten.

This type of editing service is also called a developmental edit, a structural edit, or my term, [Novel Nurturing](#).

Be open. There may be many problems with your first draft. Novel writing is a complex business with a steep learning curve, so finding many problems would be more the norm than the exception. But the problems are usually fixable, if you're willing to take suggestions and put in the time and effort.



You've already written an entire first draft, so why wouldn't you be willing to do the necessary work to create an even better second draft?

CHAPTER THREE:

TECHNO REVISIONS

MASTERING THE CRAFT OF WRITING

Once you've got your plot worked out and your book is telling the story you truly want to tell, it's time to move on to the smaller things like grammar, syntax, word choice, redundancy, overused words, passive voice, extra words, punctuation and the like.

(I don't cover grammar or punctuation in this book.)

You may believe you don't need to be any good at that stuff, because your editor will fix it.

But getting good at it has to do with mastering your craft. You wouldn't think much of an electrician who left open circuits. You wouldn't be very impressed with a carpenter who didn't know how to use a level. You would run screaming from a surgeon with no idea how best to wield a scalpel.

And yet so many would-be writers don't care about the fundamentals of their trade.

Don't be one of them.

Learn your craft. Take pride in your work.

Of course, the more you revise your own work, the more you will learn about good writing in general and your own strengths and weaknesses as a writer in particular.

The more you revise your own work, the more excited you'll be with the way your words and ideas are flowing, and the more your creativity will emerge—and be successfully transmitted on to the page.

And that's a great feeling!

More Revision Techniques

- **Read it out loud.** Weird dialogue, boring dialogue, overlong sentences and plain old awkwardly constructed sentences will leap out at you. I used this technique with my first novel and I was actually astounded. Things I would never have edited, because grammatically speaking—there was nothing wrong with them—leapt out at me and I fixed them on the spot.

TIP: If you can't read the sentence in one breath, it's too long. (Of course, every rule has its exceptions. Perhaps you are using a long sentence for style. But as a general rule of thumb, this is a good one. Chop 'em down!)

TIP: Print out your manuscript—that's right, on actual paper—and read it from the paper copy. You'll see a million typos you never noticed before, and that's a good thing.

- **Create a wordcloud** to find overused words. This one will appeal all you techno geeks out there. Paste the contents of any scene into Wordle's software and it will spit out a "cloud" of words, with the most used in the largest fonts. You might be surprised to discover you used the word "suddenly" fifty times in a scene or chapter. What's wrong with overused words? They start to leap out at a reader, pulling them from the narrative, and make the prose sound amateurish. Check wordclouds out at <http://www.wordle.net/>

How do you find overused words?

I'm glad you asked! There are many commonly overused words, and there are your particular overused words. I have to be on the lookout for the adverbs "suddenly" and "actually," which are two of my overused *go-tos*, and I can usually remove them with no loss of clarity.

Some other commonly overused, prose-weakening words include

Seemed to/actually/suddenly/then/quickly/just/simplely/actually/then/next

Pick **each one** of these words and use the "find" function in Microsoft Word (I'm sure other programs such as the Mac have their own version. Locate it and use it!)

If your 50,000 word manuscript contains "actually" fifty times, that might be way too much. The "find" function will tell you how many times each word appears in your document, highlight

them throughout your text, so you'll be able to look at each appearance and decide whether or not you want to keep that word.

Finding your overused words can strengthen your writing by providing you the opportunity to:

- Write it stronger.
- Write it more concisely.
- Find a different, more unique way of saying the same thing.
- Substitute a new, more evocative word or phrase for the overused one.

There are a lot of words that
"grey out" your writing.

While they have no major impact in one sentence, the use of them throughout the book can water down the impact of the whole.

I suggest doing a "find" on each one of the words in the upcoming list. Yes, all of them. Once you get the hang of how it works, it goes quickly. Promise!

Consider spending a day or two (broken up into whatever size chunks fit into your lifestyle, of course) doing what I call a **FERN** (Find, Evaluate, Revise if Necessary) on each of these words and phrases.

Really consider whether or not you need each one where it is. Remember, you're shooting for concise, crisp, exciting, evocative, and flowing writing readers will not be able to put down. The kind of writing that really says what you mean to say.

Don't bog it down with excess words that—rather than enhance what you're trying to say—actually weaken it.

- **Almost/ About:** It was almost ten feet high. It was ten feet high. (In many cases, "almost" waters down your sentence, leaving it feeling wishy-washy.)
- **Back:** I went back to the scene of the crime. I returned to the scene of the crime.
- **Going to:** I'm going to go to the movies. I'm going to the movies.
- **Had:** He had suspected he'd be rejected by agents. He suspected he'd be rejected by agents. (Of course, if you are telling us something that happened in the past, had might be necessary to write in the correct tense.)

- **Over:** Walk over to the library. Walk to the library.
- **Quite:** It was quite a strange vacation. It was a strange vacation.
- **Seem/Seems like:** It seemed like things had changed for the better. Things had changed for the better. (This is one of my personal overused words. I delete the “seems,” but I frequently wind up putting them back in. ~~It seems like~~ I’m a bit stuck with that one. See how they work for you!)
- **Some:** She had some money to spare. She had money to spare.
- **Started, begin, began, begun:** He started to look for his missing keys. He looked for his missing keys.
- **That:** He hoped that Leslie wasn’t too crushed when she learned that her query had been rejected. He hoped Leslie wasn’t too crushed when she learned her query had been rejected.
(*That* is one of the most overused words and an easy edit you can make yourself. I’d bet ~~that~~ in at least eight out of ten uses, the sentence will read better without it. Delete, delete, delete.)
- **Then:** Then she got yet another rejection letter. She got yet another rejection letter.
- **Up/Down:** She took the painting down off the wall and put it up on the closet shelf. She took the painting off the wall and put it on the closet shelf.
- **Was being:** Now she was being the kind of person he admired. Now she was the kind of person he admired.
- **Very:** I don’t think you need an example, but “very” is one of *the most overused words* and it can make writing look ~~very~~ amateurish. Instead of creating the emphasis ~~that~~ you want, it ~~actually~~ weakens the prose. Trust me. You rarely need the word very!)

We're not done with FERN just yet!

Passive Voice

This is one of the most common issues I see with new authors. Red flags for passive voice include:

There were/there are/has/have/had/be/been/being.

I suggest running a FERN search for each one. Carefully evaluate each sentence these words turn up in, to see if there’s a stronger, more concise, more powerful way to write the sentence. As you can see by the list of words, passive voice usually contains some conjugation of the “to be” verb.

Passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, but for fiction, it can really bog down your narrative. It's particularly problematic in action scenes. Searching it out helps you strengthen your writing. Again, an editor may not point it out to you—it's not grammatically incorrect—so she might just leave it.

As well, there's a style of writing that's not specifically passive voice, but it uses those same verb constructions and has the same effect of slowing down your narrative and causing readers to feel one step removed from the action.

Here are some examples:

NAY: We were driving along the highway. I could see a car that looked like it was heading directly toward us, seeming like it was out of control. I wondered if maybe we were all going to die this afternoon. Fred was honking his horn very, very loudly.

This is typical of much of the writing I edit.

There isn't anything grammatically wrong with it, and I know exactly what the writer is trying to say. I get the picture. But it's loaded with extra words and awkward verbs—it could definitely be improved.

Take a look at the edited version:

YAY: We ~~drove~~ sped along the highway. A car ~~headed~~ careened directly toward us, clearly out of control. Would we all die this afternoon? Fred ~~honked~~ blasted his horn.



I took it from 46 words to 25 words.

I think you'll see how much fresher, crisper, and more exciting the scene reads in the second version. This is a perfect example of how extra, unneeded words and passive constructions dull down your writing.

Notice I also changed dull verbs for more evocative ones, eliminated the need for the redundant adverbs, very, very, in the last sentence.

And speaking of dull verbs . . .

Adverbs:

Adverbs are highly controversial. Many editors and publishers feel they are the sign of weak writing. I'm not sure, personally, that eliminating an entire category of words from one's writing is appropriate.

However, as with the word "very," adverbs that are meant to strengthen a sentence just may weaken it.

NAY: She walked leisurely down the street.

YAY: She strolled down the street. She wandered down the street. She meandered down the street, stopping at each shop window.

All of the verbs: strolled, wandered, and meandered, are more colorful and more descriptive than walked. And they paint the picture without needing the adverb "leisurely."

If you read Harry Potter, it's got adverbs galore. Apparently, only JK Rowling can get away with heaps of adverbs. More power to her!

Stephen King claims to detest them, but even he is loath to eliminate every last one.

Where do you stand on the whole adverb controversy?

Search out adverbs in your text. See if you can write the sentence in a stronger way, but don't drive yourself crazy if you can't. Remove the adverb entirely and see if it changes or weakens the meaning of your sentence. You might find you want to leave it out, you might find yourself adding it back in.

Run a FERN search for all words ending in ly. Does each sentence need this word, is there a stronger, more descriptive, more active verb you can substitute?

Some words ending in ly are adjectives though, so don't go crazy trying to eliminate them as well.

By the way, dull, ordinary, insipid, mundane verbs are another of the issues I see with new writers. If your book feels like it's missing something: it's just not exciting enough, the emotions don't run deep enough, it isn't compelling enough, spicing up your verb choices will be a huge help.

NAY: He got out of the car and went into the store. (Yawn . . .)

YAY: He lurched out of the car and staggered into the store, grabbing the nearest shelf for support.

He slid out of the car and waltzed into the bodega, grinning widely.

He burst out of the car like a roman candle and sprinted toward Costco.

He eased out of the car and slunk in the direction of the pawn shop.

Notice how each one has a different feel? Notice how the original sentence has no feel at all? It conveys movement and moves your plot forward, but it does nothing else.

[Read more about the importance of evocative verb choice here.](#)

If you want your writing to sing, choose the strongest possible verbs.



Flat verbs are another thing an editor *might not change*, because there's nothing technically wrong with what you've written. This is why clients occasionally send me a manuscript that has already been edited—but it still won't attract an agent or a publisher.

It's still a snooze-fest . . . and the client doesn't know why.

No editor will rewrite your book! Learn to improve it yourself.

After all, you do want to be a terrific writer, don't you?

Adverbs in dialogue tags—we all use ‘em.

He said, laughingly

She asked, haltingly

Can you strengthen the dialogue to show us what you mean, without the adverb? Sometimes you can; sometimes you can't. Do the best you can with adverbs, checking to see if you really need them, if they're doing the job you hired them to do, or if the sentence could be strengthened and work even better without them.

That's all I have to say.

Sometimes, only an adverb will do. For instance:

- “I understand,” she said angrily.
- “I understand,” she said sadly.
- “I understand,” she said softly.

You could strengthen the dialogue or add an action beat, to show what you mean to say without the adverbs.

- **Strengthened dialogue:** “I understand, dammit. Don't keep telling me the same thing.”
- **Adding an action beat:** Her eyes reddened and her lips drooped. “I understand.”

Those rewrites work in place of angrily and perhaps instead of sadly (perhaps not), and strengthen your scene, too.

But how could you ever get across the concept of softly without the word softly?

So consider each adverb in turn. In the third example, I believe adding the adverb softly creates a stronger picture.

More FERN Searches

Phrases like, “he saw, she felt, they heard” tend to remove us from where we want to be—right in the narrator’s POV. They weaken the impact of whatever the character is seeing or hearing.

It’s time for another FERN search and destroy!

NAY: She felt terrified when she heard the bomb explode and saw the blinding flash of light.

YAY: She reeled backward, heart skidding in her chest as the explosion shook the ground and a blinding flash of light lit the night sky.

The first is indirect; the second is direct. Give it to us straight, please. Let us have it right between the eyes. Or rather, right from your POV character’s eyes and other senses, to activate our senses.

And speaking of POV (Point-of-view) . . .

KEEPING YOUR POV STRAIGHT



POV has various challenges, whether you’re writing in the first person or in the third. (Novels written in second person are quite rare.) When you read through your first draft, make sure your POV is consistent in each scene. Here are some things to look out for.

FIRST PERSON

If you are writing a first person narrative, everything you put down must be something already known to the character. You can only tell us what he thinks, does, knows, feels, sees, or hears.

For instance, you cannot write, “John wondered how the hell they were going to get out of this mess,” because your narrator, your “I,” would not know what John is wondering. That’s inside John’s head, and you are telling the story from someone else’s point of view.

You could turn it into dialogue, for example: “John, you look lost in thought,” I said.

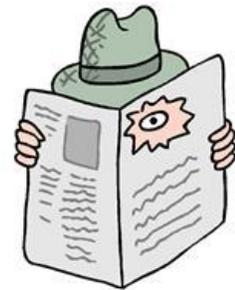
“Yeah, wondering how we’re going to get out of this mess,” he said, frowning.

You cannot write, “Little did I know that one day, I’d look back on all of this as the major turning point of my life,” unless your narrator is telling us something that happened in the past. If she is talking about something in the present, she would not know that information yet. Get it?

THIRD PERSON

If you’re writing third person, be careful of head hopping. This refers to a POV switch in the middle of a scene. Here’s an example.

Joe Schmo entered the hotel through the cellar door, pulling his mini-flashlight out of his coat pocket. Good thing he’d remembered to bring it; apparently the power was still off. Although he’d never admit it, he was as scared of the dark now as he had been as a kid.



“Hello? Is someone there,” Merry Mayd called out. What a relief, she thought. I’ve been stuck down here for hours.

What’s wrong with that scene?

Hint: Two characters should not equal two different points of view!

It starts out in Joe Schmo’s POV. Then it switches into Merry’s. How do we know it’s switched? Because Joe, from his point of view, would not know what Merry is thinking.

If you find POV confusing, imagine what it’s like for the reader.

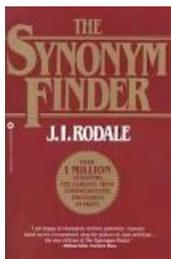
Each scene should be told from one specific point of view. If you start with Joe’s, then continue with his POV until the end of the scene or chapter. This keeps us in his head, so to speak, and makes everything more immediate for a reader.

Switching POVs midstream throws us out of the narrative. It doesn’t allow the reader to make as strong a connection with any one character, and it can be thoroughly confusing if the reader is not sure who’s thinking what, who’s seeing what, etc.

(And it's one of those things that screams *amateur* at the top of its lungs.)

So keep your POV clean! Sure, you can switch it up at the end of the scene. But remember, too many POV changes never let us really become involved with any one character.

I worked on a book for an author who had nine POV shifts in her first chapter. Yes, she signaled the shift correctly, and it was clear she was intentionally moving into another character's POV, but it was simply too many characters. Halfway through her manuscript, I had no idea which were supposed to be the main characters, and I didn't care anything about any of them.



Use Rodale's Synonym Finder to add new color to your vocabulary.

It's like a thesaurus on steroids!

MISCELLANEOUS TIPS

- **Check your dialogue tags and beats.** Make sure they are not overly repetitive. A character cannot smile or laugh every time she speaks, no matter how happy a person she is. She'll come across like an idiot. It also makes it sound like your descriptive powers and imagination are sadly lacking.

Mix it up. See where you can eliminate any tags, or where an action can precede the tag, showing us what the character did before they spoke, eliminating the need for the tag. If characters do perform actions before or after they speak, are these actions of any import, or did you just write them to give the character something to do? Do they move the plot forward, or show us something about the character?

Example: He opened his hand and the Hummel crashed to the floor. "That's what I think of your precious family heirloom." Notice how adding the tag, "he said angrily" is entirely unnecessary. The action, also known as a "beat," before the line of dialogue tells us his mood and shows us more about this character.

- **The best tags are “he/she said” or for questions, “he/she asked.”** Use all others (she shrieked, she demanded, she growled, she snarled, she whimpered, etc.) *very* sparingly. If you can’t fight the urge to use them, look at the dialogue instead and see where you can strengthen it to make the tag unnecessary.

Again, as with adverbs, don’t go crazy trying to get rid of every last tag other than “said.” There’s a fine line between revising your work for clarity, effectiveness, and power—and rendering it sterile, voiceless and personality-less.

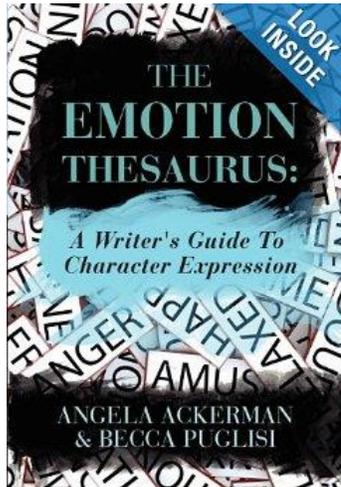
An occasional, “she growled,” might be just what the book doctor ordered.

- **Names of emotions and adverbs usually tell, not show.** Which is frequently the opposite of what you want. Telling us your character was sad, mad, glad, scared, wasted, is not the same as showing us. What does sad, mad, glad, etc. look like for that particular character?

Evaluate each adverb tag and each name of an emotion to see if the sentence really puts us into the character’s head, or if it could be used as a place-marker telling us to insert more evocative writing.

NAY: She was sad.

YAY: Her shoulders drooped.



Remember, readers want to see it.
They want to feel it.
They want to hear it and smell it.

Simply saying it was ugly or she was angry does not accomplish the task.

Not sure how to convey the actions or expressions that would express different emotions? Not sure how to show the difference between anxious and angry?

Check out the excellent *Emotion Thesaurus*, by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi.

- **After tightening and cleaning up your draft, have at least three beta readers give you feedback.** Don't go crazy trying to implement each one of their suggestions. Use your discretion—it's your story, not theirs. But if more than one reader has the same complaint or question, that usually indicates an area needing revision.

For a list of sites where you might find a beta reader, [click here](#)

HOW MANY DRAFTS?

Each author works differently. But generally speaking, newbies can expect to write at least three drafts:

1. the first rough draft,
2. major plot and scene revisions, making sure the story works overall and tells the story you intended to tell, then tightening and fixing the writing (passive voice, too much exposition, telling, not showing, etc),
3. and a revised draft based on the feedback from your developmental editor or trusted beta-readers.

And then, after you've revised it as much as you can on your own and gotten some great feedback—send it to your editor for the copy-edit.

But what if . . .

You don't believe you can look clearly enough at your own work to do the major plot, theme, character development and scene revisions yourself?

If you're just too new to novel writing, or if you want a professional opinion before going any further, then it's better to get an editor involved **before** you bother tightening up dialogue, eliminating overused words, etc. The book might need major revisions rendering all your revising work useless.

Make sure you tell your editor that you want a critique/assessment/developmental edit, *not* a copy edit!

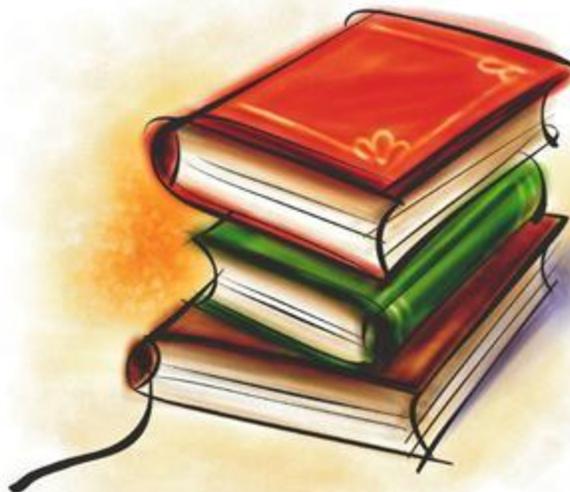
Not every editor provides that service.

IN CLOSING

Revising will not only teach you to be a much better writer; it will save you mega-bucks on editing passes, help you develop your craft, your writer's voice, and *your confidence*.

Have you compiled a list of the revision techniques you're going to use? Are you ready to rock?

We learn as we go. So get going!



- **If this book has been helpful to you**, I'd love to hear about your experiences. Email me: info@lesliemillerwordsmith.com.
- **If you've got killer revision techniques** to share, I'd love to include them in this book.
- **If you have questions**, please send them to me and I will respond in my blog. If you have the question, chances are others have them as well.
- **If this book has merely whetted your appetite**, here is some more suggested reading. (Of course, I hope you're reading my [blog!](#))

Rock Your Revisions With This Recommended Reading List:

- ❖ [THE 5 BIGGEST FICTION WRITING MISTAKES \(& HOW TO FIX THEM\)](#)
- ❖ [Be A Published Author: Four Steps To Successful Revisions](#)
- ❖ [TIPS FOR REVISING YOUR MANUSCRIPT](#)
- ❖ [Revising Tips for Novelists: The Revision Outline](#)
- ❖ [Life and Death: Proofreading Your Novel](#)
- ❖ [A writing tip from editor Cheryl Klein](#)
- ❖ [Ponder, Polish, Perfect: How to Successfully Revise](#)
- ❖ [Revising your novel in 10 easy steps](#)

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