

REVISION

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You've done the research, you have the bare bones of a plot, and your characters are jumping around in your head, wanting to be set free. It's time to sit down and write. Right?{PRIVATE }

Wrong.

Now it's time to prepare to write. Doing your prep work well now will determine how extensively you must revise later.

The right preparation gives you a skeleton from which to work, a pathway that keeps your story from meandering and losing focus.

Synopsis and Character Bios

Start with a synopsis. Mine usually end up being about twelve pages long, and though I use it as a writing tool, I also make it do double duty by using it as part of a selling proposal. At this point, some authors plot out a story scene by scene, but I prefer to work from a detailed synopsis that shows me where I'm going and forces me to work through problems in the plot in advance. To write the synopsis, ask yourself a series of goal-related questions about your main characters, working backwards from the end. What is your character's ultimate goal? How does he/she achieve it? Plot out each step your character makes, and ask the same questions about the goals of the characters in conflict with your protagonist.

The next step is crucial to creating flesh and blood characters. Write character biographies. I only do biographies for the main characters. I use a character chart, broken into four parts: 1) Physiology (date of birth, body type, hair and eye color, scars, etc.); 2) History (how her parents met, how she was brought up, her relationships with her family); 3) Sociology (education, friends, sexual experiences); and 4) Psychology (beliefs, religion, fears, loves, personality type).

You could spend months working on bios that reveal your heroine's favorite foods and colors, and still not know a single intimate thing about her. In developing characters, think about their motivations, the things that make them who they are.

As Jack Bickham says so well, everyone has a self-concept that he will go to great lengths to preserve and defend. A self-concept is the way a person describes himself: "I'm beautiful," "I'm a survivor," "I'm kind to everyone," "I'm a loser." Your story begins when that self-concept is challenged. Unless you know the psychology and motivations of your characters, you cannot possibly know what would most endanger their self-concept, and without that knowledge, your story's conflict will always be external and superficial.

Though the synopsis and character bios are necessary and important, there is one further step that can make the difference between a good read and a wonderful one. That is the emotional outline.

The Emotional Outline

An emotional outline consists of the emotional changes your characters experience throughout the course of the book.

Divide your story into pivotal scenes. These scenes can consist of anything: in a heartland book, it could be: the husking bee, the dance, the fair, or any other scene that elicits a change in the characters. In my first book, *A Candle in the Dark*, my emotional outline was divided into journey points: Leaving New York, Arriving Chagres, Gorgona, and Jimene's house.

Once you've chosen pivotal scenes, plot out what your characters are feeling, their responses, during that part of the story. This is a point-of-view exercise as well, because you focus solely on what one character is feeling and experiencing during any point in time, especially in relationship to the other characters. This should be a purely emotional study, and should include that character's perceptions, however right—or wrong—they are. Some of the questions to ask yourself when working on this outline are: How is the heroine reacting to the hero? How does she feel about him at this point? What does he do to change her mind? Does that frighten her? Why? What does she do to protect herself? How does that create

a threat to her emotions later?

These outlines don't have to be long—mine are usually only about three to four pages per character—but they should be complete. Emotional outlines will not only help you plot out your book and work through weak or unmotivated plot points, it will give you something to refer to when you're stuck halfway through and can't remember how something is supposed to affect or change someone.

A synopsis, character bios, and an emotional outline will give you a firm base for writing the book. If you do them well, these tools will help identify structural problems or weak character motivations before you begin writing.

Unfortunately, I can't promise that these tools will eliminate revision entirely, but they will certainly reduce it, and, if nothing else, give you a stronger sense of where you're going, which for some of us, is the most important thing of all.

Revision

What is revision?

Think of your plot as a skeleton. The muscles are your characters, their emotions and goals are the blood and organs. When everything goes right, the body is healthy. But suppose the back goes out of alignment, or the heart stops.

Revision is the chiropractor/doctor/surgeon of writing. It pops your plot back into alignment, readjusts your characters, and cuts away superfluous or misleading emotions.

There is a difference between revision, editing and polishing—the words are not interchangeable. Revision means making significant changes to the plot, settings, characters or conflict. It means identifying and solving the "big picture" problems and making sure the story theme is on track.

Editing is making changes in how the story is told, analyzing technique and sentence structure, moving paragraphs or pages around for the greatest impact. It means tightening verbiage and making sure your writing communicates what you're trying to say.

Polishing is putting the final touches on a manuscript, looking at word choice and punctuation, and preparing the manuscript for submission.

They're all necessary, but for now let's concentrate on the big picture: revision.

There are several ways to go about revising a manuscript, but before you even start, you must identify the things that need to be revised.

Plot Charting

A few years ago, Kristin Hannah handed me Dwight Swain's *Techniques of a Selling Writer*, and told me to read it. It was the wisest thing I ever did. Swain, along with Jack Bickham, whose articles I'd devoured in *Writer's Digest*, gave me the structure for not only analyzing the problems in a novel, but finding them.

I call it plot charting. For each chapter of my novel, I have a sheet of paper on which I blueprint the chapter, scene by scene, sequel by sequel. To really understand scene and sequel, read Bickham or Swain, but here's a summary:

Each scene must have three parts: Goal (what does the character want?), Conflict (What keeps he/she from getting it?), and Disaster (What happens as a result of the conflict that makes everything worse?)

Each sequel in the book must have these three parts: Emotion (What is the character's immediate reaction to a scene?), Quandary (The character's search for solutions), and Decision (What is the character's new plan, new goal?). For each scene or sequel in the chapter, determine whether each part is there, and describe what it is.

Please remember that this exercise is for your eyes only, and it only works if you are honest with yourself. It is simply a way to map out your book to find trouble spots. If there's no goal in a scene, say it. If there's no new decision at the end of a sequel, tell yourself that too. You are not solving problems yet; this is merely a way to identify them first.

Once you've mapped out the novel, look at each aspect with a critical eye.

Goal: A character should have a major story goal, and it must be important to him beyond a surface level. In order to achieve it, he must take many small steps and go through many smaller goals. At any given point in your story, a character's goal should be evident, even if it's something minor—perhaps as simple as the heroine's need to keep away from the hero. But the character must know what it is, and must believe it will ultimately help him achieve his final goal—as he understands it to be at that moment.

Here are some of the symptoms of problem goals and motivations:

- 1) Violent mood swings: This shows that you haven't determined goals and motivations well enough to know how the character is supposed to feel. Refer to your emotional outline. Is your character on course? Is she reacting to new situations, or to your mood?
- 2) Characters overreacting: If you find your characters breaking into tears for no apparent reason, it could mean that your scenes are not supporting your goals. For example, if the heroine breaks into tears because the hero refuses to buy her a candy bar (and she's not five years old), there better be a good reason for it. What does the candy signify? Have you built up the motivation and the scene so the symbolism is not lost on us? Would there be a better situation for her to react to to make your point?
- 3) Conflicting emotions or inconsistent behavior: Again, if this is happening, your motivations haven't been developed enough.

If you don't know what your character's motivations and goals are in every scene, your reader won't either, and you'll end up with a fuzzy and meandering plot peopled with characters too inexplicable to care about.

Conflict: The conflict that drives your book should be a meaningful one—ideally a conflict between two belief systems (in a romance, his and hers). Your internal and external conflicts should support and enhance each other.

Each scene should intensify the conflict—it either moves the character closer to or farther away his goal.

Watch for these trouble signs of poor conflict:

- 1) Convenient characters or events: Characters popping up for no other reason than to provide a problem or solution for the heroine. Everything that happens in your book should be a product of your characters' goals.
- 2) Coincidence: Make sure every element of your plot is motivated. For example, if your heroine runs into the hero every time she goes someplace, he'd better be deliberately following her because he wants something she has, or it's coincidental. Even minor characters should have goals if they play a part in advancing the plot.
- 3) Weak, unsolved misunderstandings: We've all heard a lot about this particular problem. The general rule of thumb is: if an explanation would solve the problem, don't use the misunderstanding. Conflicts should come from characters' goals, not author manipulation.

Disaster: The disaster should always lead to a bigger, greater conflict. If a scene ends with a character the same distance from the goal as when it began, it's an unnecessary scene.

Sequels: Remember that the way a character thinks characterizes him. The decisions he comes to may not necessarily be rational decisions, but they must follow the character's line of reasoning in a logical way. The decision your heroine makes may not be the same decision your hero makes given the same information, but it must be in character for each of them. Study the elements of your sequel: emotion, quandary, decision, to make sure that each is in character, and that the final decision once again intensifies the conflict.

Finally, look at the manuscript as a whole. Does the progression of your scene/sequels make logical sense? Does each scene have a bearing on the final goal? Does each contribute to the central idea? Play with the order of your scenes and sequels. Reverse them for impact or remove a sequel to heighten tension. You may end up radically changing the order of your scenes to achieve greater impact, or cutting chapters that don't add to the story's movement.

Play with viewpoint. Ask yourself if a scene might be better from another point of view. Generally speaking, the point-of-view character in a scene should be the person most affected by what is happening.

Revision is your chance to objectively analyze your book step by step. It is a learning tool. I think you'll find that the more often you do this, the stronger will be your ability to analyze plot and motivation. With practice, you'll find yourself analyzing problems before and while you write—instead of afterwards.

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