

8 Tips on Revision

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1. Why revise at all?

Literature rarely flows off the pen intact, although individual sections may. And we often don't see our own strengths. What may seem old to us is a new story to most readers.

"Poet Margaret Robison taught me that 'the only purpose of revision is to get more deeply to the truth,'" says Pat Schneider in *Writing Alone and with Others*. "She said that she always asks herself, *Is there more that I have not yet seen?* There is a certain purity in that kind of practice of revision. It has nothing at all to do with the marketplace, with the opinions of others, with cleverness, or with rules. It has only one goal: to tell the truth of what has been experienced or what has been imagined."

2. Should I ever not revise?

"Doctor, spare that knife," advises my former playwriting teacher and story analyst Stuart Spencer in his excellent *The Playwright's Guidebook*. "Your first rule in rewriting must be that if you like the work, if it is what you want it to be, leave it alone. Don't start applying the tools [in Stuart's book] or any other ideas for their own sake. As Duke Ellington said, 'If it sounds good, it is good.' Or as John Cheever, the short-story writer, used to say in his classes, the most important criterion for measuring a work's worth is: 'Is it interesting?'" The latter is a loaded question, natch. What's interesting to me, or would have been to Cheever, may not be to you.

When you're writing specifically to be published or produced, however, your play's director or your book's editor may insist that you revise – even if you're content to leave your work alone.

In writing for one's own gratification, I've found that revising for revision's sake can be a form of procrastination. Easier to play with the old stuff sometimes than to move onto something new.

3. What's the difference between revising and editing?

Revising is bigger than editing. That said, certain kinds of editing do involve revision. A developmental editor (sometimes called a substantive editor) reads a piece that's largely or completely first-drafted and asks big questions like: "What's your theme? Who is your main character? Have you thought about adding this? Or thinking more about that?"

That kind of editing is done toward revising the piece as a whole – as opposed to line editing and copyediting, which focus on consistency, grammar, punctuation, and other fine points.

4. Don't revise too soon.

Remember thou keep holy the First Draft. Edit a bit as you write, or the day after, if that's your style. But ignore well-meant advice to "omit needless words" and such at that point. Many pieces in early stages need more material – *often much more material!* – not less.

5. Save your first drafts.

Writers can easily revise the life out their work.

Let me be clear: I mean *we sometimes kill the good parts*.

Seems incredible, but I see this happen again and again. It can occur when work is critiqued by others too early – taking the cake out of the oven after 10 minutes. Other culprits include “too many cooks” who don’t know the writer’s voice and strengths.

Let’s give ourselves and our critics credit: we go straight to the hot spots. Problem is, we get scared and try to stomp out the fire. Timid clients do this to bold advertising copy all the time; no surprise there. But writers do it to themselves, too.

One remedy for this syndrome is to keep your first draft and to refer to it later if you’ve gotten too tidy. Emotional neatness doesn’t count for much in writing.

6. Consider your readers.

“It is only good manners to do so. Are you giving them a good time? Are you confusing them, upsetting them, boring them? Maybe you are and this is part of a deliberate poetic strategy. Just be sure you know what you are doing.” – Stephen Fry, *The Ode Less Travelled*

7. “I can’t tell where I’m at. Help!”

Here’s where two practices from Amherst Writers groups really pay off. In listening to the work of other writers, you are developing a strong ear. Every writer is, or should be, half an editor. And in treating all work as fiction, you are creating a kind of moat around the castle that offers perspective and balance.

Let me turn it over to Stuart Spencer for another astute observation: “It’s not good enough for you to be self-deprecating and say, ‘I just don’t know whether what I do is any good.’ By saying that, you’re abdicating a primary function of the artist. Besides, it’s probably not true. I’ll bet you do know what you think of your work—if only on a gut level. Chances are you’re either being modest because you like it a lot, or you’re embarrassed to admit you can’t stand what you’ve done. Either way, face up to your feelings. They’re one of your greatest assets in writing your play.” Or book, or story, or memoir, or poem.

8. What are some specific steps to start with?

I like these, offered by poet Kim Addonizio in her book *Ordinary Genius: A Guide for the Poet Within*. They apply across the board, not just to poems. The italicized items are Kim’s; the glosses are mine except where in quotation marks.

Leave it alone. Let it sit. Don’t be in the same mood when you read it as when you wrote it.

Find the heat. Circle the sizzling stuff. Identify the core of what the piece wants to say.

Diction. What’s your tone? Is it consistent? (It doesn’t always need to be.) What matters here: word choices, pace, point of view.

Detail. As Kim says: “Usually you can go much further into an image than you think.” At the same time, don’t throw in detail for detail’s sake. “Revise toward significant detail.”

Rhyme, rhythm, sound. This applies not just to poetry but to good prose.

Tension and surprise. Strive for this across paragraphs, units of structure (book chapters, play scenes, poem stanzas), and the entire work. “Only trouble is interesting,” says Janet Burroway in her excellent if academic *Writing Fiction*, a textbook that has additional ideas for revising works as a whole.