

Simple Revising Techniques

Contributed by Anne Wayman

Saturday, 25 March 2006

Last Updated Saturday, 08 November 2008

The revising process is different for every writer. Stephen King does two drafts as well as a final polish. Kurt Vonnegut rewrote every single page in a novel several times until he got it exactly right. As a general rule, two drafts is the bare minimum. And the more drafts, the better your story will be...

The revising process is different for every writer. Stephen King does two drafts as well as a final polish. Kurt Vonnegut rewrote every single page in a novel several times until he got it exactly right. As a general rule, two drafts is the bare minimum. And the more drafts, the better your story will be. The first time, just get your story down on the page and don't worry if you have found exactly the right words. When it is finished, take a couple of days off or work on a different story, so your eyes will be fresh when you head to the second draft. Then the second and third times around you can be critical; slash, cut and burn. Stephen King follows the formula, "second draft equals first draft minus 10%." Removing ten percent is a good goal; the second draft should always be tighter and cleaner.

There are some techniques that can make editing easier. The simplest is to read your story aloud. You will naturally catch sentences that don't flow, notice awkward dialogue and find places where you need to insert commas. Another good technique is to print out your story and highlight each character's dialogue with a different colored marker. Read all of one character's lines at the same time. Ask yourself if the tone and style of the character remain the same. Does the character highlighted in green sound different than the one in blue? Each color should have its own consistent and unique sound.

Now, using your trusty markers, highlight all the narrative in one color. This is a good way to visually see the amount and location of expository. If your marker runs dry you know you have a huge problem. Cut out all unnecessary narrative.

The most obvious editing technique is to run a spell and grammar check. Your computer will of course catch misspellings, but it will also identify sentences in the passive tense. Listen to your computer on this one. Avoid the passive tense whenever possible.

Other things you can avoid, but which your computer won't catch are speech tags other than "she said," and adverbs ending in "ly," such as she screamed hysterically, he walked funnily etc. While there are some times when these two types of words are necessary, these times are rare. Unless you must have them, take them out.

Once you have had your way with the manuscript it is a good idea to pass it off to a trusted reader. It is amazing what a completely different pair of eyes will pick up. In the best case scenario, you would have a reader who is also a writer. For ideas on how to connect with other writers, see the article called "The How's of Writing Group ."