

Seven Things to Watch Out For When You Rewrite Your Novel

Worksheet

This is the worksheet for the seminar, which you can find in audio and transcript format at: www.writershuddle.com/seminars/dec2017.

There are different levels of editing, and in this month's seminar we're looking at *rewriting*: going from a first draft (which might be a bit of a mess!) to a second draft.

We won't be getting into the nitty gritty of editing individual sentences, but instead we'll focus on the bigger picture of your novel.

Most writers (though certainly not all) end up over-writing in the first draft, finishing it with more words than they need. These seven "things to watch out for" help address that ... but if you tend to come in below your target word count, I've also got a short section to help with that at the end.

#1: Early Chapters That Can Be Cut Out

Sometimes, it takes a while to get into the actual plot of a story – I always find I can cut at least a couple of chapters' worth of material from the first eight or so chapters of my novels.

Did you spend too long warming up? Try paring back the first quarter of your novel and see if the pacing feels better.

#2: Too Many Characters

Although some novels, particularly those that form a series, have a huge number of characters – sometimes less is more! If you've got named characters who only play a very small role, could you amalgamate two of them?

#3: Plot Holes

A “plot hole” is basically a mistake: something that isn't working right in the world of your novel. Maybe a character travels from Cornwall to Edinburgh in two hours, for instance – or takes a whole day to drive from Oxford to London. These can be tricky to spot when you're drafting (especially if you've juggled scenes around), so keep a careful eye out when editing.

Another type of plot hole involves character motivation. For instance, is it *really* plausible for your otherwise-intelligent protagonist to go back alone to the haunted house? If it's necessary for your plot that they do, shore up their motivation (e.g. they accidentally left something precious there, or they're going to rescue another – more impulsive – character).

#4: Inconsistent Characterisation

Of course, it's important that your main characters learn and grow through the course of your novel – this is called a “character arc” and in many ways, it's the whole *point* of a novel! When you're drafting, though, and getting to know your characters, it can be tricky to be consistent about their characterisation.

Maybe your protagonist began your novel with rather a dry wit – but a few chapters in, you realised he was a gentler, more softly spoken sort of person. That's a normal part of the drafting process ... but as you rewrite, do make sure you even out the characterisation in the first few chapters.

#5: Too Much Backstory or Research

This is an easy mistake to make, especially if you write historical or speculative fiction. If you're good at building or researching your setting, all the descriptions may be fascinating for readers as well as for you ... but do take care that you're not burying your story under the details.

If it's important that the reader understands certain details, try to weave these into a scene of action or dialogue – don't just stop the story to give us a history lesson.

#6: A Subplot That Isn't Working

When you're drafting a novel, you may end up trying out interesting avenues that don't quite work. Perhaps as well as your main plot, you included a burgeoning romantic relationship, or an interesting side quest. If this isn't really working with your main plot or characters, remove it.

If the subplot could be taken out entirely without any other word of your story changing, consider whether it's a different novel entirely!

#7: Repetitive Scenes or Passages

When you're drafting a novel over a period of months – perhaps even years – it's very easy to end up repeating yourself. Maybe you have two scenes where characters have essentially the same argument, for instance, or two very similar passages that describe your protagonist's family home.

Watch out for these, and keep only the strongest one. (You may even notice phrases or sentences repeated word-for-word in different chapters – this happens to me quite a lot.)

If you've written a novel that's too short, don't try to expand it by simply making it more wordy: don't just spin things out. Instead, look for ways to add more complexity to the story, perhaps with:

- A subplot (one that adds a new dimension to the story you're telling, even if only in a subtle way).
- A new character, or an expanded role for an existing character: how could they make your protagonist's life more difficult?

Being Organised with Your Rewriting

It's easy to get a bit lost at this stage of editing – you're making sweeping changes, and the version of your novel that's actually on paper from moment

to moment doesn't (yet) quite match up to the finished version that exists only in your head.

A few things that might help are:

Creating a spreadsheet to keep track of when and where each chapter is set – if your characters move around a lot, or if a lot of action is taking place in quite a short space of time, this is crucial.

Including information on point of view character, time and place in chapter headings (you can take it out later). This makes it easy to instantly see *when* and *where* the action is taking place in relation to the previous and subsequent chapters.

Using index cards – either physical ones, or virtual ones on software like Scrivener. These can be very handy if you want to move scenes around, or if you want to mark different scenes as “first draft” or “rewritten” or “to delete?” or similar.

Consider starting your second draft with a blank document: begin again from page one, and rewrite each scene. This might sound like an awful lot of work, but if you're making quite a lot of changes, it's easier than constantly moving and deleting individual sentences and words.

Finally ... don't get bogged down attempting to make your rewritten draft perfect. This is the point at which you're shaping your novel, not doing a final polish – all of that can come later.

Once you have a finished first draft, set aside some time to read through it (ideally on an e-reader device, or as a bound print-on-demand book – you can produce a single one for your own use through sites like Lulu and Createspace). Make notes about any big picture changes you want to make, to plot, character, pacing, and so on.

Exercise:

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Further Reading and Useful Resources

Blog posts:

[The Three Stages of Editing \(and Nine Handy Do-it-Yourself Tips\)](#), Ali Luke, Aliventures

If you want to see rewriting in the context of editing as a whole, this post takes you fairly briefly through the three different stages of editing and offers tips for each.

[The Crash: Braving Your Second Draft](#), K.M. Weiland, Helping Writers Become Authors

Facing the second draft can be tough, and K.M. has lots of practical tips and encouraging words here to help you get going with yours.

Seminar:

(October 2014) [Ten Novel-Writing Lessons Learned the Hard Way](#)

In this seminar, I share some tips that aren't editing-specific but certainly have a bearing on how much editing you might end up doing...!