Jeni Chappelle
e d i t o r i a l 's

TOP
DOWN
REVISING

a quick start guide

**polish your manuscript for submission
in as little as 2 weeks***

* your mileage may vary

WHO AM I?

I am Jeni Chappelle, a freelance novel editor with more than twelve years of editing experience and a lifetime of word nerdiness. In my editing, I use my own internal conflict between logic and creativity (thanks to being an Aries with Virgo rising + a healthy helping of ADHD) to help authors shape their stories and bring their books out into the world. I have edited a wide variety of novels and had the pleasure of working with thousands of authors from all over the world, including bestselling and award-winning authors.

I am a member of Editorial Freelancers Association and ACES, a co-founder and editor for Twitter pitch event Revise & Resub (#RevPit), and co-host of the Indie Chicks and Story Chat Radio podcasts.

I consider myself a hobbit (minus the big, hairy feet) and live in a tiny town near Charlotte, NC with my family and way too many pets: two dogs, five cats, two fancy rats, a rabbit, and an aquatic turtle.

I edit all genres of fiction for middle grade and up but especially love elements of fantasy, history, and mystery. I get really excited by underrepresented cultures; stories that work real-world concerns into fictional settings; characters with psychologically-sound motivations and reactions; realistic non-romantic relationships (although she loves a good romance too!); and new twists on old favorites—whether that's character, plot, concept, or tropes.

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INTRODUCTION

WHO IS THIS FOR?

This guide is for authors who've been through the whole writing process—planning, drafting, revising, feedback, more revising, more feedback, repeat ad nauseum…until you are finally ready to send it out into the world. It's for authors who have learned a ton about craft but often struggle to apply it to their own writing. It's for authors whose inner editor is smart, strong, capable—and very, very annoying.

The writers I know have a lot of knowledge—they've read the craft books, they listen to podcasts and read blogs, and they are part of writing communities. But even when you understand all the theory, it can be hard to apply that information to your own writing. In fact, sometimes it seems like the more you know, the harder it is to write and revise because you're more aware of the kinds of mistakes you can make. This makes writing one of those things you have to learn by doing.

Revising is like that too. Nobody just walks into revisions, knowing exactly what to do and then doing it all perfectly. Not even the great writers of classic literature. Not even bestsellers.

All your favorite authors—they had to learn to revise too.

But revising is the place where all those craft resources come into effect. All the craft books, the podcast, the websites, the Twitter threads… Revising is the best place to apply all of that.

It's asking too much of yourself as an author to get these storytelling elements and all those #WriteTips into a first draft. When you're drafting, you're creating the story and the characters, the whole world (even when it's our world because it still needs to feel real). It takes most authors a few times of working through the whole process from concept to polishing before they even start to apply *some* writing advice in their first drafts.

I'm a big believer in messy first drafts. And that writing advice is best applied in revisions.

So, if this is you, and you're tired of your creative side and your analytical side duking it out while you just want to write a damn good story, welcome! You aren't alone, far from it. It's time to harness all that knowledge and energy instead of feeling stuck because of it. It's time for practical tools that will help you reach your goal of finishing a story that's ready to go to agents, publishers, or your editor.

Let's get started. And by getting started, I mean let's talk about your brain.

YOUR REVISING BRAIN

There's a problem we don't talk about enough when it comes to revisions. All the information about your story, your world, your characters, everything you've created, is already in your head. Revising is hard, in part, because your brian automatically fills in gaps with all that information that's already in there.

Consider an example: if I tell you I drank coffee, do you wonder how I got the coffee? What I drank it out of? How it was created?

Chances are the answers to these questions are all no.

Chances are your brain just said, *Mmm…coffee* (or something to this effect) and that was it.
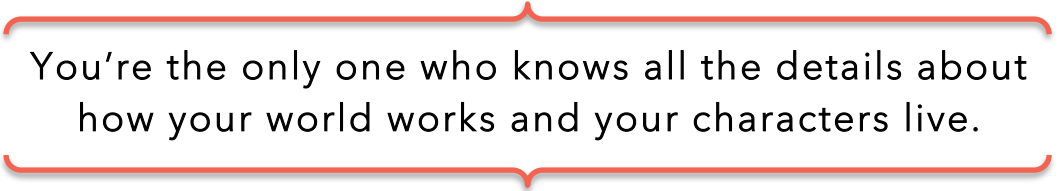
Your brain filled in the important gaps and filtered out the details you didn't need to know to understand my intent. I didn't need to tell you I woke up, got dressed, walked into the kitchen, got the ground coffee out…. You get the idea.

Another example: did you notice the typo in the first paragraph of this section? Or did your brain skim over it, rearranging those letters into the right word without you asking it to? (Really, I wanna know! Message me or @ me and tell me if you caught the typo.)

We do this gap-filling all the time, even for information we don't already have in our heads. We learn to see patterns, and we relate that to previous experience. And it all happens in a split second, so fast we aren't even aware of it. It's how we learn to read. It's how we make quick decisions when needed. It's how we process information. The human brain really is a wonder and is what allows us to create whole worlds in fiction.

I can get really nerdy about this (but I won't—at least not right now).

When you're revising a story you wrote, though, this incredible tool works *against* you.

You're the only one who knows all the details about how your world works and your characters live.

So, miracle that it is, your brain will automatically—quickly and without you realizing—fill in any gaps with all those cool little details you've put so much work into creating. And that means it can be hard to tell what's actually on the page and what your brain is filling in.

Worse, the more you read it, the more your brain fills in those gaps. So, each time you read your full manuscript, your brain becomes less and less able to detect any information that's missing or doesn't fit. That makes the common method of write-read-revise-repeat hard and often ineffective.

HAVE YOU BEEN REVISING THE HARD WAY?

Let's make one thing clear: I am a huge advocate for learning about writing craft. It's an important part of the process of becoming a published author, along with learning and understanding the publishing industry (but that's a topic for another time). I include a list of additional craft resources in every edit and critique, post about craft books and tools on my social media pages, and often have authors tell me their specific concerns so I can make recommendations for where they can learn more.

And there are so many amazing options, with new ones coming out all the time! I'm still reading and learning and figuring out new ways of understanding and explaining things so I can help more authors because we all learn and process a little differently.

But one issue I've noticed is that so many of these seem like they have the same problem: they tell you what to do but not how to do it. Not what actual kind of words need to go on the actual page and where. For a lot of authors, this means there's an ambiguity around revising that feels like trial and error.

Or worse, like you either know it or you don't.

And too often, authors feel like they're in the "don't" group.
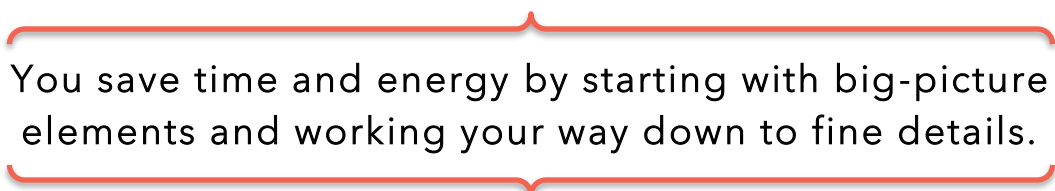
The truth is: revising is a skillset.

And that means anyone can learn to revise—yes, what kind of words need to go on the page and where—and anyone can get better at it.

A lot of people come to the revising process for the first time thinking, *Great, I typed The End so now I just have to look for typos and boom! Done*.

Oh, my sweet summer child.

Of course, it's natural to start playing with word choice, how things "sound," moving words or sentences around, and fixing commas or periods that are out of place. But the problem is when you send your work to someone (like a critique partner or a beta reader) for feedback, they'll tell you all the big-picture changes you need to make. Issues like character motivation and reactions, plot holes, pacing problems, showing versus telling. All the elements that make up the story itself. And if you've already spent time changing all those smaller elements around, you probably did work that will be cut or changed even more.

In other words, you end up doing a lot of double work—or sometimes triple or even quadruple work—when you start with small changes.

You save time and energy by starting with big-picture elements and working your way down to fine details.

Bonus! It means not having to reread your manuscript so many times.

And we all know now how much better that is for your brian.
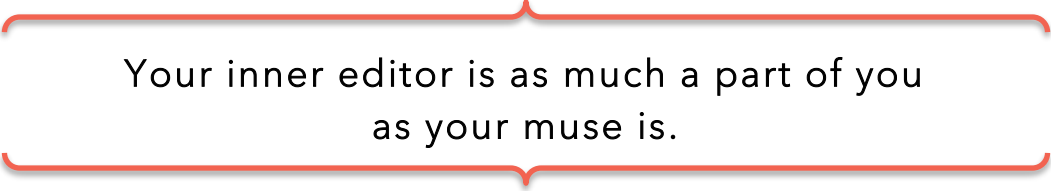
WRITER BRAIN, A.K.A. TUG OF WAR

In creative communities, there's a lot of talk about The Muse and creativity and how to best channel it. We tend to focus a lot on the creative process—as we should; after all, without it, there's no story to worry about.

But for some reason, we don't talk much about the more practical side of being an author: how to balance your creative time with the rest of your life, take good care of yourself in the process, keep from getting burnt out, deal with rejection, manage imposter syndrome.

It's like we're supposed to know how to do those parts.

And part of the Stuff We Don't Talk About is the inner editor. When we do, it's normally with this idea of shutting it down, zoning it out, silencing it, or something else that equates to: how can I make this voice go away?

Tough love time: you can't.

> Your inner editor is as much a part of you as your muse is.

The sooner you accept this, the sooner you can learn to work *with* your inner editor instead of against it.
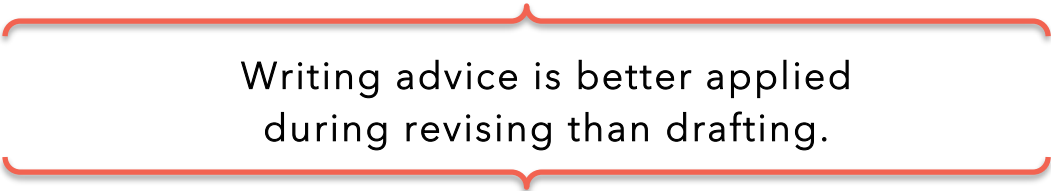
But first you *have* to stop telling it to go away.

Yep, ignoring your inner editor will only make it act out. Like a toddler trying to get your attention, the more you try to ignore it, the louder and more annoying it gets. (This isn't a dig against kids—I love kids, but sometimes they're loud and annoying.)

Instead of trying to make that voice go away, if you take a moment to think about the goal of your inner editor—what that voice is trying to accomplish by telling you all of this—you'll realize it's saying, "You know this stuff."

Which is true. Otherwise, you wouldn't be screaming it at yourself.

But what the inner editor doesn't consider is what?

Writing advice is better applied
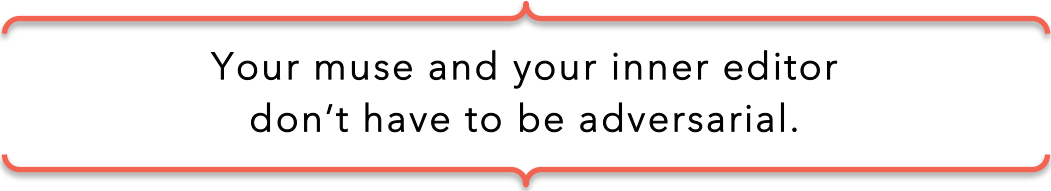during revising than drafting.

Oh, right. That thing I mentioned earlier.

Some fundamental realizations will help you further understand your inner editor.

1. A perfect first draft is a unicorn. Even a good first draft that doesn't need a big rewrite is rare for an author's first several manuscripts.
2. Drafting and revising are different (but related) skills. Drafting needs a focus (creative) that is separate from revising (largely analytical).
3. Pantsing and plotting aren't that different. Plotters like an outline, and pantsers like a "discovery draft." Either way, the first thing you write will be you figuring out the story, and the second draft is probably going to need a lot of work (at least for the first few manuscripts).
4. Regardless of which camp you're in, you have to apply craft knowledge on a practical level, meaning you make the words do what you need them to do.
5. When we talk about improving your craft, it really means your skills at *revising*, not trying to make your first draft perfect. You'll probably never get to a point that you don't need to revise and then go through edits.

6. Your muse is the keeper of your ideas and inspiration. Your inner editor is the keeper of all your writing knowledge. Another way to think about it: your muse shows you what you want to do; your inner editor shows you how to do it. And you need both in equal part.

You might not like this last one. But remember when we were talking about all the learning and practicing to be a better writer? That's how the inner editor is born. The more you know about writing and technique and craft skills, the more your inner editor will say, *Hold on, something's not right here*. The only reason it didn't say it so much when you first got started is because it didn't know any better.

Your muse and your inner editor
don't have to be adversarial.

When you learn how to listen to both and sort through what each tells you, it will help you take your writing to the next level and save you a lot of energy. And now that we understand a little more about the nature of the inner editor and its intent, we can start to figure out how to use its powers for good instead of … well, not evil, but at least frustrating.

I THOUGHT THIS WAS ABOUT REVISING

I can practically hear you groaning, *when are you going to get to the tools and the practical part?*

I promise I'm getting there.

Drafting and revising are both hard when your brain is at war with itself. When you're drafting, it's the inner editor that won't be quiet, and when you start revising, it's the muse who feels neglected.

Have you ever spent a huge amount of time completely changing a scene that ends up going nowhere because your muse was all, *You know what would be cool?* or *What if I just …?*

It's essentially the same problem as when your inner editor wants to take over drafting: these are separate (but related) parts of the process, and you need to let them each do their thing.

Like toddlers fighting over a toy (really, I do love kids), that means keeping one happy enough to leave you alone when it's the other's turn to be in control.

For drafting, this looks like making notes for yourself about anything you know you will need to change or address in revisions.

For revising, you have to manage your muse so your editing brain can do its thing. This is especially hard because authors work so hard to cultivate their muses that not listening to them feels all kinds of wrong. But the strategy I'm proposing keeps the boring analytical portion to a minimum so your muse can come back out to play. In the meantime, make sure you're keeping track of all those *What if I just …* thoughts. You never know when there might be story gold there.

- The way our brains work makes it hard to see problems in our own writing.
- When you revise without a plan, it can mean going over the same thing more than necessary, which makes writing issues even harder to recognize.
- But you can learn to revise in a way that can work with your brain instead of against it.
- Understanding how it all works is important to that process.

PREPARING TO REVISE

The first rule of revising is: don't revise yet.

Yeah, I don't encourage jumping into revisions as soon as you finish drafting. That might be more fun, and it might feel like you're wasting time if you wait. But having a strategy for how to approach your revisions is key to effective self-editing.

Before you are ready to revise, you first need to let your manuscript "rest."

Letting it rest means not making any changes, not reading it, not looking at it. Don't even open the file. This resting period gives your mind a break from the story for a little while, and more importantly, that helps you gain objectivity.

More objectivity = less gap-filling

Sometimes people ask me how long they should let a story rest. There's no one right answer. It depends on your brain, your life, your story, where you are as a writer, and probably a dozen other factors. If you haven't figured out what works for you yet, I say start with letting the story rest for a month.

The good news is you can use that time to prepare for when you *are* ready to revise.

One caveat here: give yourself time to relax. I know, I know. What is *re-lacks*? But writing takes a lot out of you, and even if you "treat your writing like a

job," remember that you need time away from your other job too. So let your mental energy and creativity recharge.

If you approach the story again after the allotted resting time and it still feels too fresh, you haven't gained enough objectivity and/or recharged enough. Give yourself some more time. Again, this is something you'll figure out the more you go through the whole process of writing and revising. It's okay to feel it out and do some trial and error.

No one just naturally knows how to revise.

If you have thoughts about what you want to change while the story is resting, note them *somewhere that isn't your manuscript*. Personally, I like handwriting notes because that's how my brain works. Phone apps can be a great option because most of us will have our phones with us anyway. You can also usually use phones for dictation, which gives your eyes a nice break from screens.

There are a lot of non-revising ways to keep working toward your writing and publishing goals while your manuscript rests. Just a few ideas: brush up on your craft skills, read a critique partner's manuscript and give them feedback, read potential comp titles.

You can also start *planning* your revisions so you're ready when it's time to start.

GATHER THE ESSENTIALS

Before you even start reading your manuscript again, whether this is your first draft or your tenth, it will be helpful to spend some time thinking about the fundamental elements of your story. The elements listed below are essential to modern novels because they form a chain reaction that underpins your story. That chain is:

motivation → action → consequence → reaction

Bookmark this!

Below, I address the most fundamental storytelling elements and offer brief explanations. Please be aware that these are oversimplifications of how they are generally used in stories. Of course, every story is a little different, but while there are exceptions, they are few and far between and usually not commercial fiction.
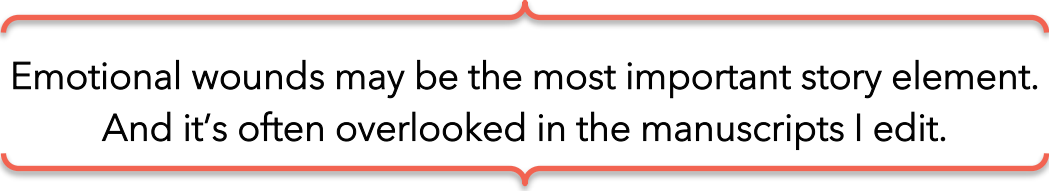
EMOTIONAL WOUND

To effectively revise your story, you need to know your protagonist's emotional wound. This is, simply put, a past trauma that stays with your main character to the time of the story and has a profound (often subconscious) effect on their worldview, emotions, and behavior. This is the why behind all their choices, reactions, and actions.

To put it in perspective, think about real people and how our psychological wounds often make us our own worst enemies. Perfectionism, insecurity, lack of trust, a sense of unworthiness—it can take us years of hard work to learn to cope with these in more constructive ways and stop sabotaging ourselves in large and small ways.

Your protagonist will be the same.

From a story perspective, this emotional wound—and the lie they believe about themselves as a result—needs to be challenged by each external obstacle they face in the plot, and it's at the heart of their internal development arc as well.

Emotional wounds may be the most important story element.
And it's often overlooked in the manuscripts I edit.

Not sure how to get started on an emotional wound?

Think about what your main character believes is holding them back, what they'd give anything to change or have or be, and then trace that back to The Thing that hurt them or made them feel they aren't enough. This might be a one-time event, or it might be a pattern of things that happened to them over a period of time. Importantly, it's always something that happens well before your story begins so that it's really ingrained in their minds and behaviors.

INTERNAL GOAL

That thing you just figured out that your main character wants to change or have or be more than anything else?

That's their internal goal.

To create a complete character arc, this internal goal has to apply to their life before they start the journey of the story. In other words, it needs to be present in some capacity from first chapter, and it needs to have changed by the end. This is what's behind your protagonist's actions and reactions.

The emotional wound and internal goal work together
to create meaning and motivation.

EXTERNAL GOAL

The external goal creates your plot arc.

For genre fiction, this is defeating the villain, making it to the new destination, finding the person who has been taken from the main character, etc. Wanting to achieve this goal is what gets your main character involved in the events of the plot. Their desire has to be strong enough to push them outside their comfort zone. Otherwise, they would just walk away from the dangerous or life-changing call to adventure. That's why these stories are called "plot driven."

In contrast, upmarket fiction, literary fiction, and a lot of contemporary or general fiction is often "character driven" (again, I could go on and on about this because these are terms that are very commonly misused, and I get huffy about it. But I do have [an article on my blog](#) that goes into a little more detail about the distinction if you want to know more). For the sake of your revisions, what that means is if you're writing in one of these genres, the internal obstacle is actually what pushes the story forward.

In other words, your main character makes a change in themselves *first*, and that's what causes the external conflict, not the other way around like it is in genre fiction.

Even character-driven stories need external goals and conflict.

REACTIONS

When you take the previous three elements into account, how will your protagonist react when obstacles come up that keep them from their goals? When faced with danger, do they choose fight, flight, or freeze? Are they a strategizer or an act-first-think-later type? How does this tie to their emotional wound and character arc? How does it influence their actions and decisions? How does it change over the course of the story as external events force them to dig deep and face down their inner demons?

These questions aren't rhetorical. You need to know the answers to revise effectively.

Reactions encompass thoughts (aka, how does this stimulus affect how the character thinks about themselves or their world?), emotions (how does it make them feel about themselves and their world?), internal visceral responses (where do they feel those emotions in their body?), and external physical responses like facial expressions and hand gestures that reinforce their feelings. And your characters will need to react to small and large stimuli. They shouldn't only react when something big happens.

STARTING POINT

Where does your story start? Okay, but where does it actually *start*?

That might be the hardest problem to figure out for most stories.

Your characters' lives need a sense of continuity.

You want the story to feel like your characters had a life going on before your story begins. Otherwise, every story would start with the main character being born. And ideally, as I mentioned above, the story you're telling now should be impacted by events from the characters' past.

But that can make it really hard to decide where exactly The Story starts.

A story should start by showing an everyday conflict in the character's ordinary life. We need to see what their life is normally like so we can have an idea of how it changes. This also lets you set a baseline for their reactions so we can see how they change over the course of the story. That needs to happen for a couple pages.

But then, something out of the ordinary happens.

A seed of something is planted that will eventually force the protagonist out of their comfort zone.

What you want to show the reader is how the main character gets involved with the events of the main plot. There's this thing they need to do–what makes them put that first foot on the path they think will lead them to that goal?

Characters won't leave their comfort zone without good reason.

Humans would often rather be complacent, even if it means being less satisfied than they might be if they took some risks.

Another way to think about it: Do you know the inciting event of the story? This will be the point at which your character decides they have to be involved in the plot. After this, they will go on the journey, try to defeat the villain, or fight whoever took their person. If you can identify that point, next identify how they even got to this point. What was the small thing that changed and led them in

this direction to begin with? Then ask, what were they doing right before that happened? That's where your story starts.

ONE LAST THOUGHT ABOUT PREPARATIONS

Of course, this all makes it sound easier than it is. Don't be afraid to talk these elements over with trusted critique partners. Sometimes they can see things more clearly than you can (because of the gap-filling) or ask you just the right question to turn on that lightbulb over your head.

Once you know these elements and let your manuscript—and yourself—rest, you are ready to start self-editing.

- Gaining some objectivity on your writing is essential to good revising.
- Let your manuscript "rest" for a while before you revise.
- During that time, identify your main character's emotional wound, internal goal, external goal, primary reactions, and the starting point of your story.

TOP-DOWN EDITING

As my dad would've said—No, this doesn't have anything to do with riding in a convertible with the top down.

That would make editing hard, I think.

No, it's a framework to think about the editing process. It seems like a lot of times we talk about writing in terms of building blocks. *Put this here, and then build on that.*
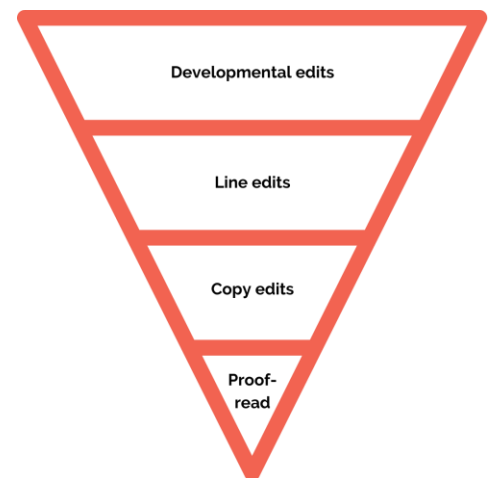
But in my head, the editing process is an upside-down triangle.

At the top is developmental editing or editing for story content. This is where you'll look at those overarching story elements like plot, pacing, structure, character arc, etc.

The next section down the triangle is line editing. This is the next largest element of writing—not about the story itself anymore but about how the writing itself flows, what the style is like.

Then we move down the triangle to copy editing. This is what most people think of as editing: spelling, punctuation, and grammar plus other things like repetition and awkward word choice.

At the very bottom of the triangle is looking at the finest details in proofreading. In my mind, that's the order edits should go in—the elements with the most impact on the overall manuscript down to those with the least impact.

Top-down editing
Definitely not Illuminati

SELF-EDITING. FINALLY.

As I mentioned earlier, you need to focus on content first. When I say content, I primarily mean plot and character arcs. How plot and character work

together is really the heart of the story structure. Everything else weaves in and out of that.

You might be thinking, *Okay, great, I'm gonna look at my story for content. Fantastic. What does that even mean? What does the actual work look like? What are the practical steps I need to take?*

STEP ONE

To start any developmental edits, whether your own story or someone else's, you have to read the whole manuscript, start to finish, to see what is actually on the page.

Sounds easy enough, right?

But instead of just reading your manuscript, make notes as you go, two different kinds.
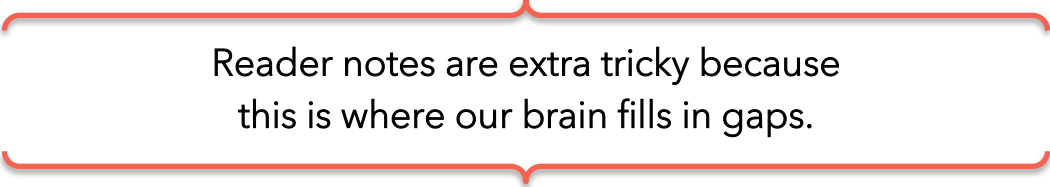
Homework. Yay!

READER NOTES

The first kind of notes involve your thoughts about the story as a reader— the good, the bad, and the weird (because it's very likely you'll have questions for past you). This brings us to an important point that's fundamental to your success at revising:

It's essential to note what you do well
and not just what you need to work on.

This will likely take some time for you to learn too, so don't stress if you're not feeling it right away. But going through your whole manuscript with that in mind will take you a long way toward that understanding. So make sure you're noting what works, not just the problems. This isn't just about feeling good about yourself, although I could definitely make an argument that letting yourself celebrate how far you've come is a fantastic strategy to make your writing career more sustainable long term. No, there's a more immediate reason for this as well. You can often figure out how to approach the issues that need help by studying what you're doing well and then extrapolating from there.

So, as you read, consider: What about the story feels successful? What doesn't work? What do you like? What do you not like? Are there any specific questions a reader might have, based on what's actually on the page?

Reader notes are extra tricky because
this is where our brain fills in gaps.

It's important to think as much like the reader as you can, in terms of what's actually in the story versus what's in your head. This is all about trying to get that objectivity to see it from a different perspective and get out of the space where your brain is filling gaps.

* Read the manuscript on a different device than you would normally write and revise on. That can be a mobile phone, tablet, laptop, or even printing it out.

* Try using a different font than you wrote it in. Calibri is Word's default font. If it's written in Calibri, try switching to Times New Roman or Garamond to give it more of the feeling of a printed book. Some writers swear by–gasp–Comic Sans.

* Use a text-to-speech app. The voices on these can be very robotic and definitely take some getting used to. But if they work for you, it can be a great tool to process the story differently.

* When you're making reader notes, watch for anything that slows the forward movement of a story. This doesn't necessarily mean they're bad or need to be taken out, but it is a red flag that you need to evaluate its impact on the story.

Some issues to watch for when you read:

- Backstory
- Excessive narration or description (aka info dumping)
- Flashbacks
- Transitions. Does the beginning of each scene have enough orientation that the reader isn't confused but not so much that it gets boring? Does of the scene entice the reader to keep going?
- Characterization. Do you get a strong sense of the interior world of the character, their thoughts and feelings versus the external world of forward movement and the plot, action, and conflict?

In terms of format, it's about what works for you. No one else is ever needs to see this so don't sweat that part. You can use the comment feature of your

word processing app, make handwritten notes in a notebook, dictate notes into your phone, or come up with something new you want to try.

Okay, so that's the first kind of notes you'll take as you read–notes from your reader brain. When you get to the end of each scene, you'll take the second kind of notes: scene summary.

SCENE SUMMARY

This part is a lot more matter of fact and will hopefully be easier. Format isn't a big deal here either. Bullet point can work, or you can write a couple sentences for each scene, almost like a synopsis. It can be sticky notes or index cards. You can leave margin notes if you prefer. Again, don't be afraid to experiment.

At the end of each scene, note the following:

- The beginning and ending page for that scene **Bookmark this!**
- The POV character if you have more than one
- What happens in the external plot (the external goal and conflict)
- Why it matters (the internal goal and conflict)
- How that leads to the next scene, which is the consequences of the actions in that scene
- How you address each subplot in that scene

If there's anything you don't know, don't spend a lot of time on it at this point. Just leave a note that you're not sure and move on.

Pro tip: next time you write a first draft,
make a scene summary as you go.

Writing the summary as you go saves that step of having to do it when you're done. As soon as you're done with the scene, jot down these couple of notes about what happens in that scene. Then it can also help you pick back up when you come back to start writing the next scene. And even better—you can use this to help you write your synopsis when it's time!

STEP TWO

Now that you've compiled all these notes, it's time to set aside the manuscript itself for a while. Don't worry. You'll come back to it.

For now, let's start with the scene summaries.

If you've worked with me or follow me online, you probably know I love a reverse outline. I have a [blog post about them](), recommend them in almost every edit and critique I complete, and often suggest them to writers I speak to on social media. It's such a simple but useful tool.

A reverse outline allows you to look at the big picture instead of getting stuck looking at word choice and typos.

It all comes back to the brain stuff. More brain stuff: this method also helps you externalize your story. In other words, you get all these elements out of your head in a more concise way that's a lot easier to look at than, say, three hundred pages of text. The more you can externalize your story, the easier it is to find the gaps.

When you get all your scene summaries together, put them all into one document. If you're like me, you might put them in a spreadsheet. In *Story Genius*, Lisa Cron suggests putting each scene on its own card and laying them out to get a more visual sort of reverse outline. Sticky notes can work too. Or you can go old school and use Roman numerals. There are a lot of options, so just pick what feels like a good one (notice I didn't say *the best one*—don't get hung up on trying to make this perfect) and give it a try.

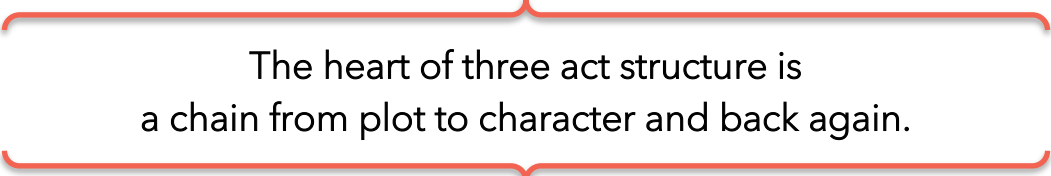## STEP THREE

So, you have a reverse outline. Yay! Progress.

Now what do you do with it?

Step Three is to review your reverse outline and look for problems.

Start with plot structure and pacing. Most stories follow a three act structure. There's also four act structure, five act structure, five plot points, nine plot points, the Snowflake Method, and Save the Cat. But they're kind of essentially based on three act structure.

What matters is that, whichever kind of structure you're using, your plot points need to more or less fall where you want them to fall. And you may need to move things around some for that to happen.

If you haven't worked much with three act structure, this can feel daunting. And sometimes restrictive.

The heart of three act structure is
a chain from plot to character and back again.

We start with the protagonist in their normal world until something changes it (remember, for literary fiction, this will be something inside the main character). That thing affects the main character so much that they're willing to leave the complacency of their comfort zone to take action. That action leads to consequences, which create further obstacles for more conflict for the main character to overcome by taking action.

Every scene needs those elements:

Obstacle + discomfort + action + consequences

Bookmark this!

Every. Scene.

That's the secret of how you create a story with personal stakes, a plot that's intrinsically linked to your protagonist, and a character arc that gives the protagonist the internal resources they need to overcome the final obstacle at the climax.

When you look at it that way, it doesn't feel quite so formulaic but instead a way to ensure the pieces are all working together.

Three act structure cheat sheet

I created a worksheet that lists the major plot points, according to a standard three act structure. Starting at the top, make notes regarding each section for the plot arc (external goals and conflict) and the character arc (internal goals and conflict).

You can [download that here](#).

COMMON PLOT ISSUES

- External conflict. This is the plot arc. Every scene needs to move the main plot forward, and every scene needs to have external conflict. What is the protagonist trying to accomplish in this scene? What's stopping them? How do they try to overcome that, and what are the results? If there is no external conflict, no particular goal, no obstacles, and no forward movement in the main plot, that's a big red flag that you probably need to cut–or drastically rework–that scene.
- Does everything make sense? Does the plot flow logically from one event to the next? Are there gaps that force the reader to make a leap in understanding?
- Does the ending resolve the goals you set out in the beginning? And did you set out those goals in the beginning? It might sound silly, but I often see manuscripts where the goals aren't stated clearly enough in the beginning.

COMMON CHARACTER ISSUES

- Internal conflict, which is the character arc. This needs to be clear in every scene as well.
- Is there a strong internal problem? This is sometimes called the emotional wound, that a main character has an internal obstacle that's stopping them from having what they really want or needs, outside of the events of the story.
- Is that problem stated? Is that resolved (or progress being made) by the end of the story?
- Agency. The main character needs to be the one making the decisions that push the plot forward, as opposed to other characters making those decisions and the protagonist sort of following along.
- Is it clear why the character makes the choices and decisions they make? How is each big choice related to their big internal problem?

STEP FOUR

Now you should have a bunch of notes about your reverse outline, and it's time to pull out those reader notes from Step One. You didn't think I'd forgotten about those, did you?

Step Four is putting all these notes together into a cohesive form that makes sense of the story problems. Most people need to put problems into words to really process them, and it seems like that can be even more the case for writers. So now you've externalized the story and all its issues that need work, and you're also going to externalize how you process them by putting it all into words.

TL;DR: write an edit letter with all the notes from your reverse outline and all the reader notes you took in the first read through.

HOW TO WRITE AN EDIT LETTER

Start with your strengths. Again, it's helpful to see what you're doing well, if you can extrapolate that and it also is a kind of validation that is difficult to get from outside sources. tell yourself, what are you doing well.

Bookmark this!

Then move on to the areas that need improvement. This is an area that you need to address the things in your story that need to change. I recommend grouping this by overarching issue—plot arc, character arc, all those essentials you gathered earlier, etc. Everything we've talked about here. Again, what you're trying to do here is put all of this into words to get it out of your brain so you can problem solve more effectively. Keep in mind that chain from plot to character and back again. Whenever you feel stuck, go back to that.

The third section is final thoughts and next steps. Here, you will pull everything together, summarize your strengths, areas to improve, and how you might go about making some of those changes. This might seem redundant, but the point here is that summarizing it, again, forces you to think more deeply about it. This is also a great place to make notes about what kind of additional resources, information, or research you might need.

STEP FIVE

Whew! You're making great progress. Take the night off, have a beverage of your choice, and let your brain rest. Then it's time to create a plan for your revisions.

Wait, you say. Isn't that the same thing as giving ideas of how to fix the problems?

Nope. If you jump into revisions now, you're still missing a fundamental step. A revision plan bridges the gap from the big-picture issues you've identified and the work you'll do when you go back to your full manuscript.
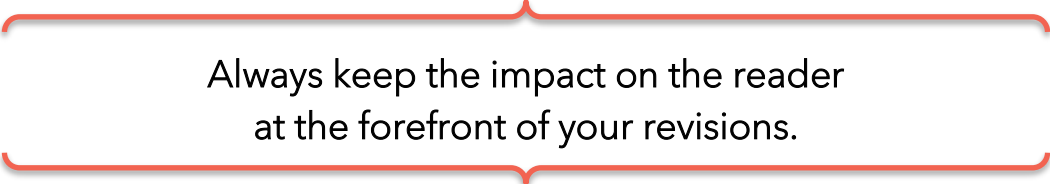
Create your revision plan

Answer these two questions for each of the issues that need improvement in your edit letter:

1. What *specifically* needs to change in your manuscript?
2. How *specifically* will you affect those changes?

Remember that, while the issues themselves are overarching, you'll apply them at a scene and even sentence level so the more specific you are, the less you'll struggle with applying the changes. It's normal not to know how you'll affect those changes. And that's totally okay. Again, revising is one of those things you have to learn by doing. But if you take time to process what you know from your story and what you know in terms of craft skills from studying craft and reading other books, you can figure out how to bridge the gap instead of letting your brain fill it (by pretending it doesn't exist).

For example, if your main character's arc isn't clear, you need to add words that will highlight that arc. Where should that go? What are the mechanisms in a story that show what's happening instead the protagonist's mind? How do you convey that to the reader? The other element in an arc is the change. So how do you use those elements you've identified to show that change?

The reader sees a character's arc primarily through that character's reactions. Their thoughts, emotions, and nonverbal communication (i.e., visceral sensations inside the body and external body language like gestures and facial expressions) are the biggest tools you have for this. They will work with that character's actions and dialogue to create a complete picture for the reader.

Always keep the impact on the reader
at the forefront of your revisions.

This is when you pull out all those craft books, writing advice, and apply what you've learned. Don't shy away from using other novels in your age category and genre like textbooks. Study the techniques the author uses. Break down which words they put where and what impact it has on you as the reader.

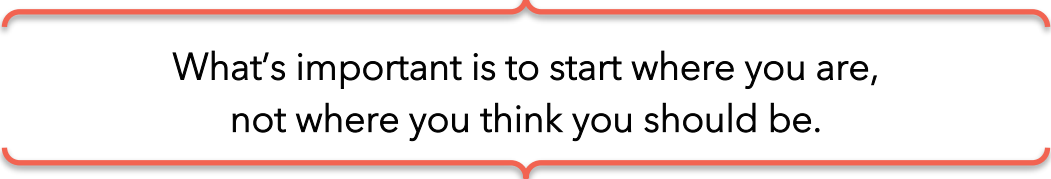Your inner editor is practically crying with joy at being given their moment to shine.

THEN WHAT?

Then it's time for you to actually do the revisions.

And that's a little different for each story.

It's often based on how many manuscripts you've already revised, skills you've learned, what you know about your writing process, different tricks you've picked up along the way, your experience with writing the age category and genre of your WIP.

What's important is to start where you are,
not where you think you should be.

- You need to create a revision plan. Start by reading your manuscript and making reader notes and scene summaries.
- Analyze the scene summaries for problems.
- Use the reader notes and scene analysis notes to write an edit letter for your story.
- Make a plan about how you'll affect those changes.
- Revise!

NEXT STEPS

GET FEEDBACK

Once you get that revision done, you need to get feedback to make sure your changes are impacting the story in the way you intended.

> We are only so capable of
> being objective about our own writing.

That's not a fault in your writer brain—it's the way it's wired to work.

This is where critique partners and beta readers are really helpful. Don't be afraid to ask them targeted questions when you send your manuscript. Sometimes authors want the reader to go in without any preconceived ideas, but if you can give the reader a little more focused way of looking at your story, they can often give you better feedback. Jami Gold has a great list of questions on her website. Hers are intended for beta readers, but they broad questions to help the reader focus on storytelling elements.

A note about finding critique partners and beta readers: I've talked to a lot of authors who've had bad experiences, and that's always upsetting. Try to think of this as more of a long-term relationship you want to establish and less of a one-time deal. When you meet someone who might be a good feedback partner, start small with just a few pages and slowly work your way up to the full manuscript. It sometimes takes some trial and error to find the right group of people, but it can be an invaluable resource when you do.

WHILE YOU WAIT

While your story is with critique partners and authenticity readers, the best way for you to keep honing your own skills and keep working on your own writing process is to focus on your craft skills. There are a few ways to do this.

> The best way to hone your self-editing skills:
> critique other people's writing.

There's a reason the term is "critique *partner*." Giving feedback not only benefits the author receiving but also helps you cement your understanding of the skills and concepts because you're applying them to writing you can be objective about, without your brain filling in so many gaps.

And you can go through the same process we just went through, where you make notes and condense them down, condense them down, and then write it all up. Again, this will help you strengthen that skill.
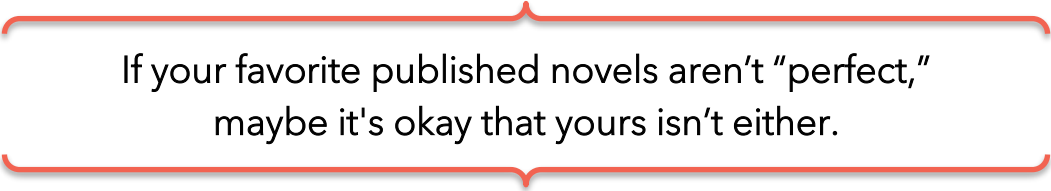
Win-win for you and the other author.

But I suggest a third kind of notes when you're critiquing someone else's writing. While you're looking at the elements I touched on earlier, also think about how you can apply what you're seeing to your own writing as well. If you see something another is struggling with, ask yourself how you handle the same thing.

> Use critiques as an opportunity to evaluate your own writing,
> even as you evaluate others'.

You can actually apply the same technique to published novels. Read analytically and break the story down into those smaller pieces. Externalize your thoughts about the structure, plot, and character development, as well as those reactions you have as a reader. Then write an edit letter using the same process.

Please *please* do not send that edit letter to the author. They don't want–or need–to know what you think of their story structure.

However, if you and another writing friend want to do this with the same book and then compare notes, it can be really helpful to see what the other person noticed. And even outside of understanding structure and learning to revise better, it can show you that 1) even published stories aren't flawless and 2) there's some amount of subjectivity in all writing. Even when you're being really analytical, there's no such thing as complete objectivity. No story, regardless of acclaim or sales, is perfect from an analytical standpoint.

> If your favorite published novels aren't "perfect,"
> maybe it's okay that yours isn't either.

You can also do this with movies. In one of the podcasts I co-host, [Story Chat Radio](#), another editor and I watch movies and then discuss the storytelling elements in them. Believe it or not, they essentially follow the same structure. And what works great about movies is that they're so much faster than books. You can watch a movie in roughly two hours, as opposed to reading a book, which might be eight to twenty-five hours, depending on how long the book is.

The other thing that's great while you're waiting for feedback is to keep learning–craft books, podcasts, social media. Whatever works best for your life and your brain. There's writing information all over when you look. Reach out to the writing community, ask questions, talk to other writers, and look for new

techniques to experiment with. In this way, you can keep growing and learning throughout your writing career.

WHEN YOU GET FEEDBACK ... BACK

Once you get your feedback from your readers, you have to determine what to apply, which can be tricky. In the beginning, it's common to either take everyone's feedback to heart and try to make all the changes, even with conflicting feedback, or alternately, to be so confident you know what you're doing that you don't really apply any feedback.

As usual, the best practice is somewhere in between. Consider your vision of the story, the standards for your genre and age category, what your goals are for your story in terms of means of publication, and the experience the other person has as well. Don't automatically dismiss someone's feedback because you think you're a more experienced author, but it is one factor to consider. When you get conflicting feedback about a particular issue, take some time to let it roll around in your head, go back to your craft resources, and ask clarifying questions to make sure you understand the root of what the feedback is saying and not just the surface level.

And if you still can't decide, go with your gut.

Then write a new revision plan based on the feedback.

I'd like to say you'll only have to revise once,
but there's no set number of revisions to get the content right.

Again, it depends on the story and all those factors I mentioned earlier. Fortunately, when you're revising for content, you may not have to reread the whole manuscript each time you create a new revision plan. You can often work from your reverse outlines and the new feedback instead of having to reread the story—the actual words—over and over again. And remember, the more you can externalize and not have to reread, the more objectivity you retain.

- After you revise, you need to get feedback.
- While you wait for feedback, keep practicing your skills.
- When you receive the feedback, you'll need to create a plan for the next revision.

MORE EDITS!

LINE EDITS

Once you feel good about the content, move on to flow and style. This is the equivalent of a line edit. In my experience, this is where a story really starts to shine and the author can see how it might turn into something they can send out into the world.

Revising for flow and style is detailed work. You're going to move word to word, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, scene to scene, chapter to chapter, just making sure everything flows the way you want it to.

Like with content editing, it can feel like other authors are just born better at flow than you are. I do think there's some truth to the idea that some authors start out better at some skills, but every author I've ever worked with—whether on their first manuscript or their tenth—is already good at some things and needs work on others. That's why comparison in that way can be so self-defeating.

Instead, break it down into components and focus on what you are already good at and what needs to be improved.

Are you seeing a pattern here?

I'll tell you a secret: that's really all editing is. Breaking the story into its components to see what's working and what isn't and figuring out how to get everything going in the same direction. Doesn't that sound easy?

My point is that there's nothing mystical about this and, regardless of your particular issues that need work, the process is the same for every author. A lot of the same techniques we discussed for improving your content-editing skills apply here too: study all the craft you can, use comp titles as textbooks, get feedback, give feedback, and practice practice practice in every way you can.

So, what are the components you'll look for in a line edit?

- Proportion. Show vs tell, characterization, and exposition all require a sense of balance.
- How does the language "sound"? Does the voice and POV feel natural? Is the dialogue realistic? Is the writing engaging?
- Flow. What is worded awkwardly? Do the words make sense in their current order? Do they explain the story in a way that makes sense? For example, does the reader see a reaction to something before we see what caused the reaction?
- Impact. Are you using appropriately strong words to convey the story? Do they add subtext? Are the paragraphs split in places that maximize the emotional connection for the reader?

- Clarity and consistency. Are there parts of a scene that undermine the tension or tone? Is it always clear who's speaking and who takes what actions? Does a character have red hair in one scene and brown in the next?
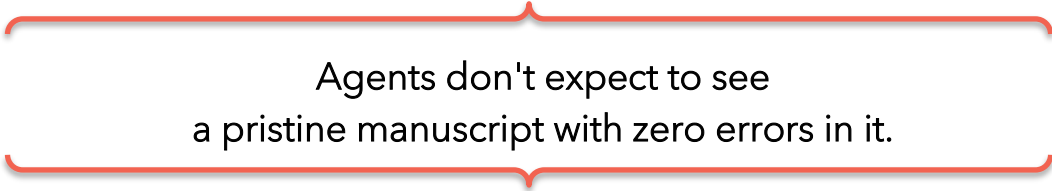
Once you complete the line edits, it can be helpful to get another round of feedback. Sometimes the people who give great content feedback may not be as helpful with flow and style feedback, so you may find you have different beta readers and critique partners for each stage of the revision process.

COPY EDITS

So once you get feedback on flow and make those revisions, the last thing you'll look at is spelling, punctuation, and grammar (sometimes called SPAG behind the scenes).

No matter your next step, no one expects your spelling, punctuation, and grammar to be perfect at this point. If you're planning to query or submit directly to publishers, chances are you don't need to pay someone for a copy edit or a proofread.

Agents don't expect to see
a pristine manuscript with zero errors in it.

You only need to make sure the writing is as clean as you can get it on your own or with minimal help.

If you're self-publishing, this is the step before you'll send your manuscript to an editor and then a proofreader. Obviously, they don't expect a pristine

manuscript either, but doing as much as you can on your own means less work for the editor, which means less money for you.

The search feature in your word processing program is your friend. Search for common problems and remove them wherever you can. Don't feel like you have to eliminate every single one (except for the few where I specifically tell you to eliminate them).

Again, always keep impact on the reader in mind.

Here's a list of problems to search for.

PROBLEM WORDS

- filler (just, very, so, etc.) words
- filter (saw, heard, felt, etc.) words
- adverbs that end in -ly
- prepositional phrases
- words you overuse—we all have them
- smiles, shrugs, blushes, and other common body language
- redundancies (example: *He nodded his head*. Unless otherwise noted, the reader will assume his head is what is nodding so *He nodded* is sufficient.)

DIALOGUE TAGS

- Stick to said or asked most of the time.
- Use other tags sparingly and with intent.
- You probably don't need as many dialogue tags as you think you do. If only two characters are talking, you only need a tag every four to five lines of dialogue to keep the reader oriented.

- You can also remove most dialogue tags that are paired with physical beats. A physical beat is an action that shows who's speaking and reinforces the emotion of their dialogue. Make sure physical beats are in the same paragraph as the dialogue they go with so it's always clear who is speaking and who is taking action.
- Stay away from tags and physical beats that delve into purple prose. For example, thundered rarely has a place in dialogue tags and physical beats.

PUNCTUATION

- Search for exclamation marks, ellipses, and em dashes. Shoot for an average of 1-2 per chapter or fewer.
- If you aren't 100% sure you know how to use these properly, don't use them. Any manuscript can work with only periods, question marks, and commas.
- Parentheses, semi-colons, and colons. Don't use them. They are rarely needed in fiction and almost always used incorrectly.
- Commas are the devil. I've never seen a manuscript without comma problems, and I've rarely read a published novel that I agreed with the comma usage. So do not stress about commas at all.
- Serial commas (also called Oxford commas). Either way is fine. Just do your best to make it consistent.

SPELL CHECK APPS

Regardless of your path to publishing, app like Grammarly or Pro Writing Aid can be great and not terribly expensive. Keep in mind they are not a replacement for human editing because the AI isn't sophisticated enough yet to understand context, especially when we're talking about fiction and conversational language. But if they're available to you, use them, just be cautious.
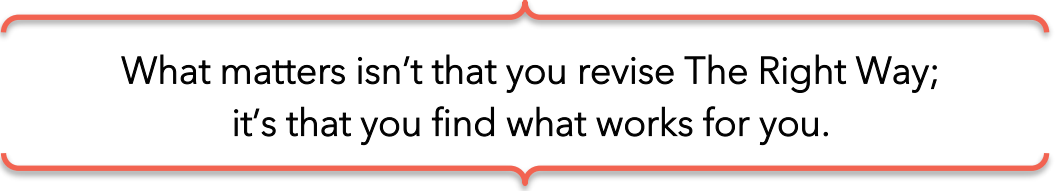
- When your content is as developed as you can get it, move on to line edits and copy edits.
- Line edits perfect the style and flow.
- Copy edits correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Revising can feel overwhelming, especially when it's for a whole novel-length manuscript. But if you break it down and take it in stages, it can be much more manageable. Always remember that every author you've ever loved or admired has had to learn these same skills. They did it. Thousands of other authors are learning right now.

You can do it too.

Just keep in mind that, like drafting and like the novels themselves, revising is a little different for everyone.

What matters isn't that you revise The Right Way;
it's that you find what works for you.

Start where you are. Don't expect yourself to magically know everything all at once or be able to do things you still need to figure out. Know that to be an author means continuing to improve your skills, hone your craft, and experiment with new techniques for as long as you write. It's not a way to get to

the end and perfect your process so you don't have to think about it anymore. The figuring out *is* the process.

And when you're willing to always be a student of your craft, to take each element on its own, and to pair that with how your brain (and your life) works instead of working against it, you will be shocked at how much faster you will reach your writing goals.

I hope you found something useful in this guide to bring into your writing process, whether that's in planning, editing, or just the mindset.

Let me know what helps you and how you tweaked it to work even better.

You can contact me through my website or through my social media accounts.

Website www.jenichappelleeditorial.com/contact
Twitter www.twitter.com/jenichappelle
Instagram www.instagram.com/jeni.chappelle

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