

# **Editing and Re-Writing**

**by Ian Bone**

"I write to find out what I'm writing, and once I get the sense of that, the hard work begins" **E.L. Doctorow**

"The beautiful part of writing is that you don't have to get it right the first time, unlike, say, a brain surgeon. You can always do it better, find the exact word, the apt phrase, the leaping simile." **Robert Cormier**

"Half my life is an act of revision." **John Irving**

"Writing is rewriting. A writer must learn to deepen characters, trim writing, intensify scenes. To fall in love with a first draft to the point where one cannot change it is to greatly enhance the prospects of never publishing." **Richard North Patterson**

I considered giving this little paper a fancy title, but in the end decided on the prosaic 'Editing and Re-Writing' because it reflects the fact that this is the no-nonsense, hard work, sleeves rolled up, fingers dirty, part of the business. That's not to say that inspiration can't come at this stage – those bright ideas that get your heart racing. Mostly, however, when you are reworking and self editing, you are refining something concrete. That is, a work that is heading towards what you want to say.

How many drafts do you consider are enough? Do you have a number in mind? Are you consciously aware of a limit that you reach when you revise your work? Or do you rework it until you 'get it right'? Since the proliferation of computers as the main tool of writers (Yes, I'm old enough to have been a typewriter lad!) the whole notion of what constitutes a new draft has changed. It's no longer necessary for the writer to sit with red pen in hand going over the manuscript and making changes, crossing out large sections, refining words with a stroke of the pen, then sitting back at the keyboard to type it up all over again.

Now days you can boot up your computer and go over what you wrote yesterday, or that morning, and make changes on the run. Is that a new draft? Or is it simply fiddling with what you've started on? Do you consider it to be a draft once you've printed it out? (In much the same way as the papers coming out of the typewriter were a draft.)

Whatever you consider a draft to be, whether it is the total revision of a complete version of the manuscript or an ongoing process in Word, the art and the act of rewriting and

editing your work is *crucial* to the production of fine writing. There is no other way. You will not hear too many absolusions from me, but this one is set in stone.

If you think you are genius enough to get the perfect story down in one draft, then please peddle your wares around to the publishers and leave the art of writing to us mere mortals. Even the most talented of writers have to redraft their work, although many seem to develop faulty memories around this issue and claim they can bang it off in one go! I would even hazard a guess that Mr Bukowski worked up many drafts of his work until he was happy with it, contrary to his assertions about what makes a writer.

The following is a no-nonsense outline of some of the things you should be checking on when you redraft and edit your work. This part of the job can be nit-picky and fine to the point of pedantry, or it can address bigger issues with your work and allow you to analyse, step back and see where the general direction is heading. Use the following points as a guide or a reference or as a checklist, it's up to you. But please, whatever you do, work on adding skills and methods to your writer's toolkit so that next time you sit to bang out the first draft, you'll skip over a lot of the blind alleys and 'mistakes' that you find yourself editing out of your work these days.

You can only get better at this.

So, in no particular order, here are some of the things you should be considering when you self edit and re-write your work.

### ***1. Balance of Narrative Techniques***

In writing fictional prose we use a variety of narrative techniques to say what's happening and what's being spoken and what's being thought or felt and what we want the reader to be thinking. The techniques are many, but the most commonly used are generally described as:

- Action
- Dialogue
- Inner thought
- Thematic exposition, or authorial voice

Each of these can be broken down into subsections.

#### **Action**

- i. Pictorial description of action and of setting, where the use of language will delight the reader or evoke images that build on emotion and a sense of theme or mood.
- ii. Straight-forward description of action, where what is happening is simply told.
- iii. Rhythmic description of action, where you deliberately heighten tension by speeding up action and truncating gaps between time and events (good for describing dramatic scenes like a fight or an argument or a highly charged moment). Rhythm can also be used to deliberately slow the action down and linger over a moment or a detail. Once again, this can heighten tension used within a dramatic scene, or it can allow the reader time to think and breath.
- iv. Symbolic, metaphorical or contrapuntal action. The action serves as a symbol or metaphor for the emotional intention of the scene, or as a harmonic counterpoint to the emotional intention.
- v. Incidental action, where the action is simple and merely serves as something for the characters to do whilst they engage in important dialogue.
- vi. Character-centric description, where we are deliberately being given a skewed version of events.
- vii. Narrative summary. Strictly speaking this refers to action and dialogue. This is where a part of the narrative is summarised for the reader, often to speed up the pace or to relay information that would otherwise be tedious to read in detail. Should be used *sparingly*.

### **Dialogue**

- i. Realistic dialogue. This is a good tool as well to reveal character
- ii. Stylised dialogue, which serves theme or voice more than realism
- iii. Expository dialogue. (Often called 'maid dialogue', as in, 'There's a man wearing a green trench-coat with a brown stain on the sleeve and an ugly scar on his face at the door sir. Shall I let him in?') Other than in parody, use this one sparingly.

### **Inner thought**

- i. Simple description of what's going through the character's mind at that moment

- ii. Emotional description. Deeper exploration of emotions that the character is experiencing or has experienced
- iii. Commentary, where character comments on the outside action, often used for comedic purposes
- iv. Contradictory or complementary thought that reveals what is not being said or done in the outside action

### **Thematic exposition, or authorial voice**

Essentially, this is where the theme is explored or the author builds on issues and ideas within the text. Often used to tickle the intellect and add 'weight' to the text. A very important part of prose.

In going over your work, look for how these elements are balanced. There's no rule to say that you should have an equal mix of all of them in any given section, however they do go towards shaping the reader's response to the work. If you are leaning too heavily towards one or the other for no particular reason, it can become a bit numbing for the reader to wade through and you'll lose any impact that the particular technique is capable of achieving. For example, vast tracts of beautifully written pictorial prose can wear thin after a while. Or dialogue-driven narrative can leave you wondering why the writer didn't just make a script.

The key here is making the balance work for you. If you want to push the reader into a particular corner, then playing with this balance can help you get those results. If you want the reader to move with the story and be engaged on many levels, then you'll probably want to keep this balance fairly dynamic, but even.

### ***2. Narrative Purpose of the Section***

Some people really get off on reading long unrelated stream-of-consciousness tracts that go nowhere. Good for them! You, however, probably want to say something with your work. And believe it or not, your reader wants you to write words that have a purpose. That's where this tool is a handy one for the toolbox.

Essentially, every scene or section or chapter of your work should be there for a purpose. There are a variety of purposes within a scene that are useful for you to check your

own work against. If you cannot find a reason for the scene other than, 'but it's my favourite piece of writing', then either give it a purpose or cut it out. You must be prepared to murder your babies if they are slowing the writing down. Following is a (not exhaustive) list of purposes to use as a checklist:

- Advance the plot or story
- Provide character information or background
- Explore theme or ideas
- Set up a later chapter or scene with a signpost or signal or 'time-capsule' piece of information
- Emotionally manipulate the reader, either by misinformation or presenting a one-sided view
- Give the reader a breathing space (only if they really need it)
- Resolve a plot line or point that would otherwise be left dangling

The list is fairly self-explanatory, and I'm sure there would be many other purposes you could add to it. However, don't be too rash. A purpose, after all, actually has to have a purpose!

### ***3. Clarity***

Ah, sounds so simple, doesn't it? Clarity. A beautiful word. In this instance, I mean make sure that what you think you've told the reader is actually down on the page. Try to read your work as if you know nothing. Come at it as fresh as you can. Having a break from the work can help this. Asking a trusted reader to give specific feedback on what they understand and what they don't get will help. And it's not only the details, either. When you're reading your work for the first time check that the pieces and sections you've stitched together do actually make sense, both in a narrative sense and an emotional sense. Don't try this when you are tired because you will be too critical.

### ***4. Show Versus Tell***

No doubt you've come across this one before. Simply, make sure you've allowed for the intelligence of the reader to 'get' what you're trying to say to them without having to be told. This is a good one to be used in conjunction with checking the balance of inner thought and

authorial voice. If you are laying out for the reader too often what the characters are thinking or feeling, rather than allowing the reader to get it from your descriptive action or images or dialogue, then you need to re-jig the balance. Same for the authorial voice. We're writing fiction here, not a dissertation.

### ***5. Point of View***

See the paper on point of view on this website.

### ***6. Character evolution***

We can never learn everything there is to know about a character in one sentence. So don't try to give us all the crucial information about a character straight up. Tease it out. The reader will actually like you doing that. It allows them space to discover a bit for themselves about the character. Consider too how you convey this information. Will you use the authorial voice to tell us? 'She was an over officious type who like to keep everyone organised around her...' Or will you allow action and dialogue to do this? 'The trio came down for breakfast to find little place-cards in their empty bowls with suggestions from Caroline about what activities they should engage in that day.' There's no right or wrong method, it's just a question of balance.

Characters should also evolve over the course of your fiction if they are important to the plot. The change doesn't necessarily have to be dramatic, but it should be clear to you, at least, what changes they have gone through. If you want them to remain unchanged, and that is your point, then be clear about that in the way you present it to the reader.

### ***7. Emotional Progression***

This is linked with the evolution of character because characters are the most oft used portal for emotional involvement of the reader. (Some might disagree.) Be consistent with the emotional direction your work is talking. Try mapping each main character. Do they hop about emotionally? Or are they consistent? If they do hop about, is it believable? Is it in keeping with what you're trying to do with the fiction? Or is it at odds? There's a big difference between writing a fully rounded character who is sometimes contradictory, and writing a character that does things without any obvious motivation. The first version works

within the narrative and serves its purpose. The second is convenient and is hammered into a round hole to try and fit what story you want to tell.

You can also map a scene, chapter or the entire work in this way. Does it head in the emotional direction you wanted it to head in? This should be used in conjunction with the purpose of each scene. In other words, a scene or chapter can have an emotional tone to it that creates a whole emotional picture of the work when viewed in this way.

### **8. Thematic Consistency**

More important when working on shorter fiction. If you're setting out to explore gender differences towards a marriage break up then make sure that is basically the theme you stick with. It doesn't mean that everything has to slavishly fit into this box, but if a good section of your work is actually exploring the theme of male rage, then ask yourself how it fits into your overall theme. Have you gone off on a tangent, perhaps? Or, do you want to revisit what your theme is? (Not a good idea to change themes too many times in the life of a work.)

### **9. Grammar**

You thought you were going to get away without this one, didn't you! There are plenty of resources to assist with grammar: on the internet, at the university, in the English department. Aim to get as few red marks on your work as possible. Good grammar comes from practise. Check for these common grammatical tangles that can get in the way of your reader's enjoyment:

- i. Tense. Make it consistent, especially if you are telling a 'back-story' within the story. I can provide handouts on tense if needed.
- ii. Sensible sentences. A sentence mostly contains a subject and a verb. That's about as simple as it gets. You can use 'non-sentence' sentences now and then. They can be quite dramatic. But you must ration them.
- iii. Overstuffed clauses. Complex sentences are made up of clauses. Each clause contains a thought and the progression of clauses within a sentence should *logically* flow from each other and not be separate thoughts. The sentence I just used contained three clauses. I stuck the clauses together with the word, 'and'. Watch out for sentences with a multitude of clauses jammed together using 'and' and 'but' and 'or'

and 'as well as' etc. They can become very tiring for the poor old reader. If you want to explore this style of writing then make sure your writing flows and is not a long list of clauses. Otherwise, consider cutting some long sentences short.

- iv. Semi-related clauses within a sentence. This is where you throw in an aside thought – I knew a writer who did this all the time – that is only partly related to the sentence. And yes, I deliberately threw one in as an example. They're not so hard to pick. They are basically an aside. If in doubt, take it out. Does the sentence still make sense? You can use parentheses ( ) or the good old n-dash to stick an unrelated clause into a sentence.
- v. Commas. Please don't overuse these. Read your work out loud and deliberately give the comma more pause to accentuate them. Are they necessary? At the same time, if a sentence calls for a comma then use it. There are rules for the use of commas and a whole host of very picky people have written them. Seek them out!
- vi. Apostrophes and quote marks. It irks me that I should even be saying this to second year university students... However, there are also rules for the use of these important little squiggles as well. Acquaint yourselves with these rules.

The art of self-editing and rewriting, to me, is the art of being a good writer. I hope this helps.