**POLISHING YOUR FIRST DRAFT - ROBIN GLASSEY**

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James Michener said, “I’m not a very good writer, but I’m an excellent rewriter.”

**STRUCTURE**

Does your story have a clear beginning, middle and end?

Does every scene/chapter move the story forward? If not, cut it out.

(\* But keep what you cut in a deleted content file for possible use later.)

Does your story start at the moment of change/inciting incident? If not, why not?

Does your story word count fit the genre you are writing for?

Middle-grade: 22,000 - 55,000 (depending on the subject and age)

Young adult: 55,000-70,000

Adult novels: 80,000 - 90,000

Memoir: 80,000 - 90,000

Sci-fi- Fantasy: 100,000 - 115,000

(word counts according to writersdigest.com)

**HOOK & CONFLICT**

*“Readers look for the surprises in your story the same way a child looks for the prize inside a box of Cracker Jacks. If you don’t surprise your audience, they walk away from your story wondering why they bothered.”*

David Gerrold

**1.** Does your piece/story start with a great hook? Will the reader want to know more?

Example:

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. —George Orwell, *1984* (1949)

Every summer Lin Kong returned to Goose Village to divorce his wife, Shuyu. —Ha Jin, *Waiting* (1999)

The very best writing instructor I ever had was an incompetent. — David Gerrold, *Worlds of Wonder, How to Write Science Fiction & Fantasy*

**2.** Does each chapter end with a hook? Will the reader want to start the next chapter?

**3.** Conflict moves the story forward — your character must be further from his goal than he was in the beginning.

What does your main character value?

Examples of things you might value:

* Money / Wealth
* Friends/friendship
* Siblings/family
* Getting good grades
* Organization
* Justice
* Compassion
* Ferraris
* The Environment
* Productivity
* Power
* Integrity

Do any of his/her values potentially conflict?

How can you reveal the conflicts in those values?

Do any of his values conflict with *themselves*?

Placing your character in a situation that forces him to go against his morals is one of the best ways to create conflict. The conflict should be resolved by the end of the story.

For tips on creating conflict see: <http://thewritepractice.com/creating-conflict/>

**CHAPTER EDIT**

Review each paragraph and each chapter and check to see what mood you are trying to create. Imagine yourself as the character in that chapter. What is she seeing, smelling, feeling, hearing, experiencing? What emotion is she feeling? What is the mood? As you look over your paragraphs and chapters, have you successfully recreated that for the reader?

Make a list of the words or phrases that can help you to create the mood or feeling of a scene and then try to use as many of those words in a paragraph as possible.

**Example:**

To create the feeling of a hot day, make a list of words: Hot, humid, windowless, air, oxygen, stifling, sizzling, stuffy, sweaty, steam, droopy, heat, hard to breathe, as hot as an oven, melt.

**Not this:** It was a hot and humid day, so hot he felt like he would melt.

**But this:** It was at least forty degrees above warm. The day felt like a windowless kitchen where the oven had been left on high for an entire afternoon. Heat beat down from above and sizzled up from the dirt as the earth let off some much-needed steam. The sky had decided it had had quite enough, thank you, and had vacated the scene, leaving the air empty except for heat. No matter how wide a person opened his mouth that afternoon or how deep a breath was taken, there just wasn’t enough oxygen in the air to breathe. The few remaining plants in people’s gardens didn’t droop, they passed out. And the flags that only days before had hung majestically on the top of local flagpoles no longer looked majestic, they looked like multicolored pieces of cloth that had climbed up and tragically hung themselves. (Opening paragraph from Obert Skye’s Leven Thumps and the Gateway to Foo)

But be careful not to use the words see, hear, look throughout your story as in this example:

**Not this:** I *saw* Rebecca collapse on the couch and *heard* her say, “I just can’t do this.”

**But this:** Rebecca collapsed on the couch and said, “I just can’t do this.”

Show don’t tell: <http://www.sfwriter.com/ow04.htm>

**PARAGRAPH EDIT**

When do you need a new paragraph?

When you have a new idea.

When you have a new speaker.

When the same idea goes on for a long time – it can be broken up into multiple paragraphs.

When you have a shift in time and place.

How long should a paragraph be?

It depends. A paragraph can consist of one sentence. Action sequences often consist of short paragraphing to help move the reader along and give the impression of a fast-paced scene. Slower more dramatic scenes have longer paragraphs with longer sentences to slow the pace down. Keep in mind that with today’s eReaders, you don’t want very long paragraphs as it makes books feel like they are longer than they really are.

**SENTENCE EDIT**

**Words you should delete . . .**

**That:** Read the sentence to see if that can be deleted. Does it make sense if that isn’t there? *This is the best day* ***that*** *I’ve ever had.*

Instead: *This is the best day I’ve ever had.*

**Then:** Then is often used in a sequence, but can sound repetitive.

Example: *Then the guard leaned in to check Big Nose’s manacles. Spider held his breath and reached up. Then he pulled on the loose wire, hoping it would slide free. Then it came off, but the guard noticed Spider’s hand close to his vest.*

Instead: *As the guard leaned in to check Big Nose’s manacles, Spider held his breath and reached up. He pulled on the loose wire, hoping it would easily slide free. The wire came off, but the guard noticed Spider’s hand close to his vest.*

**Seems:** This word weakens the sentence it is used in. If something happens it shouldn’t “seem to” happen, tell us how it really happens.

**Suddenly:** Often used in stories to indicate something is happening without warning. Most of the time you can get rid of this word, making your writing sound stronger.

Example: *Suddenly, from within the trees, a branch cracked. I sat up straight and goose flesh pimpled my skin.*

Instead: *From within the trees, a branch cracked. I sat up straight and gooseflesh pimpled my skin.*

**Don’t play Favorites**

Favorite words/phrases are filler words and phrases we fall back on as we write — written tics. Readers will pick up on these written tics, which can jar them out of the story each time they come across them.

To avoid jarring the reader, find and replace (or delete) your commonly used phrases in your draft. Microsoft word has an actual find/replace tool that makes replacing words and phrases easy to do.



As you become aware of your most used words/phrases you can compile a list to go through once you complete a draft. (On my list of favorite phrases is “the fact that.”)

**Active versus Passive voice/Be, Was**

In passive voice, the target of the action gets promoted to the subject position. Change passive voice to active where possible. (I use a highlighter as I go through my manuscript to see how often I am using was/be.)

*Passive voice: (when the agent is unknown or has no bearing on the discussion)*

Bill’s apartment was burglarized last weekend. (Notice that the agent is missing in this sentence. To make it active we would have to give it an agent.)

*Active voice: (when the subject is doing the action)*

Thieves broke into Bill’s apartment last weekend.

*Passive:* She was dressed in an emerald green dress that matched the color of her eyes.

*Active:* She wore an emerald green dress that matched the color of her eyes.

**Pronouns**

**1.** Make sure your pronouns refer back to the last person mentioned.

**2.** Don’t be vague or ambiguous.

INCORRECT: Although the motorcycle hit the tree, it was not damaged. (The motorcycle or the tree?)

Test a sample of your writing to see how flabby or fit your writing is at the writer’s diet:

<http://writersdiet.com/?page_id=4>

**CHARACTER EDIT:**

***1. Character List-***

List **EVERY** character you mention in your story (major, minor, walk-ons); do you need all of them or are you overwhelming your reader with too many characters?

Can you eliminate a character and still maintain the integrity of the story? Can you combine the role of two characters into one?

What’s the right number of characters? It depends on your genre.

Check character names, making sure they aren’t too similar and can cause confusion.

<http://jamigold.com/2014/10/ask-jami-how-many-characters-is-too-many/>

***2. Character Evaluation-***

Evaluate the remaining characters one at a time; does he/she appear enough in the story; do they appear too much? (For example: are you making a minor character look like a major character by giving him too much emphasis?)

Have you given too much attention to a walk-on character and the reader is expecting her to reappear later?

***3. Character Voice & Appearance-***

Check each character’s voice and appearance throughout the story to see that it is consistent.

Has the character been true to who she is through the story according to her background, class, experiences, etc.?

Is each character memorable?

Keep track of your characters and how they are evolving (Character Bible) especially if you are writing a series.

<http://robinglassey.squarespace.com/news/robinglasseycharacterbible>

**READ ALOUD**

**1.** Read your work out loud. What sounds good on paper or on the computer screen can sound completely different once you hear it out loud. You will find yourself changing words, breaks in sentences and shifting phrases as you realize it just doesn’t sound right when you hear it.

**2.** Listen to the flow, end focus (last word/s in the sentence) and sentence length. Where do you really want the emphasis? Powerful words, most important words will typically go at the end of the sentence.

**BETA READERS**

**1. Don’t give them your first draft.** Remember that your beta reader may become a future fan and advertise your book. So give them the best manuscript you can by doing as many layers of editing possible before sending them a draft.

**2. Give them guidance** Tell your beta reader what kind of feedback you are looking for. Provide a list of questions you’d like them to answer. These might be questions about the characters or the concept of the book.

**3. Don’t take it personally.** You won’t always like or agree with what your beta reader says, but remember that they have taken the time to read your manuscript and respond. Take their comments with a grain of salt. Consider what they say and ask yourself if their advice will make for a better book. If so, apply the changes to your next revision. If you don’t like their comments, don’t try and defend your position. Simply thank them for their comments.

**4. Return the favor.** If someone offers to beta read your book, it’s a good idea to return the favor. You have a greater chance of keeping them as a beta reader if you help them out with their projects. I also mention my beta readers in my acknowledgements.

For examples on questions to ask beta readers see:

<https://killzoneblog.com/2014/06/15-questions-for-your-beta-readers-and-to-focus-your-own-revisions.html>

**FORMATTING**

Choose your fonts, spacing and format.

How much space do you want between the chapter heading and the first line of the paragraph?

How much space do you want between lines?

Do you want a dropcap at the beginning of each chapter?

How do you want your chapter headings to appear?

Do you want your page numbers centered? At the bottom, at the top?

Check your genre to see what types of fonts and spacing are recommended. Look at some books to get ideas on how they have handled formatting.

Once you have decided on your formatting be sure and **write it down**. If this is the first book in a series, you should consider keeping the same formatting throughout the series.

**\*Remember that formatting for a paperback and formatting for an eBook are different.** Fancy fonts do not work for eBooks. Save a separate copy of your final manuscript to begin stripping down your formatting for your eBook or hire someone to format for you.

If you are submitting to a publisher, be sure to strictly follow the submission guidelines so you aren’t rejected from the beginning. Some basic expectations are 1” margins, standard font (Times New Roman, Arial or Courier), each new chapter starting on its own page, indenting each paragraph five spaces and double spacing the entire text.

**Editing tip sites:**

<https://www.pinterest.com/RobinGlassey/> (see Editing tips for Writers board)

<http://bubblecow.com/editing-your-own-book-the-top-ten-book-editing-tips>

**Formatting your eBook:**

<https://kdp.amazon.com/help?topicId=A17W8UM0MMSQX6>

Creating an eBook table of contents: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BYd5YCLo_A>