

One-Pass Manuscript Revision: From First Draft to Last in One Cycle

By Holly Lisle

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The first draft of your novel is finished. Now, according to the recommendations of any number of writing books, pundits, and writers who go through this themselves, you're in for five or ten or more rounds of revision, in which you'll polish your work until it is a gleaming, perfect pearl ... and in which process you'll dither for months or years.

You can do that if you want. But you don't have to. It isn't the way I work. I find a lot of truth in the adage, "If you don't have time to do it right the first time, how are you ever going to find time to fix it later?"

Which is not to say that my first drafts are perfect – far from it. My first drafts suffer from the same little shop of horrors as everyone else's: poor plotting, crappy characterization, logic leaps, redundancy, aimless wandering, bad writing, worse writing, and utterly execrable writing.

But my first revision is my last revision. If you'd like to cut years off the process of revising, I'll be happy to show you how.

The Supply List

For the process of One-Pass Revision, you'll need the

following supplies –

- A printed copy of your manuscript (Do NOT attempt to do this while working from your word processor and screen. It simply won't work.)
- A cheap spiral-bound 8½" by 11" notebook
- A couple of smooth-writing pens. Don't waste time with pencils – erasers are not your friend when you're doing this
- A table where you have room to stack your manuscript into three piles and have the spiral-bound notebook open at the same time
- Good lighting
- Nerves Of Steel™ (available from Walgreen's, Target, and other national chains) (Yes, that's a joke)

The Process

This first part can be as grueling as the whole rest of the revision if you haven't already thought about it, but it's essential. (I do it before I start writing the book, so all I have to do is copy it over from previous notes – for your next novel, you might want to consider this approach if you haven't already.)

THE PROCESS, PART ONE – DISCOVERY

Start with the spiral-bound notebook.

- **Write down your theme in fifteen words or less.** Some of my regular themes are Love Conquers Evil, Heroes Are People With The Guts To Say "No", and The Individual Can Change the World. (If you're still not sure what a theme is, here's an article to help sort things out: Finding Your Themes)
- **If you have sub-themes and know what they are, write them down too.** I usually have one theme and from three to six sub-themes, depending on the length and

complexity of the project. You may have more or less.

- **Write down what the book is about in twenty-five words or less.** This is not as impossible as it sounds – the micro-summary for the 375,000 word Secret Text Trilogy was “Werewolf Romeo and Juliet versus Renaissance Godfather in the jungle, with magic.” Twelve words.
- **Write down a one-line story arc for the book’s main character.** The story arc for Kait Galweigh in the Secret Text Trilogy is “Kait battles her own nature, magic, her family’s enemies, and resurrected wizards from her world’s past, finds unlikely love, and at terrible cost, saves her world.
- **Write down the main characters, and a paragraph of no more than about 250 words describing the story, sort of like the blurb on the back of a paperback.**

This is not the easiest process to go through, but if you’re going to nail the revision in one shot, you have to have each of these bits of information clearly in mind going in. If you don’t know where you’re going and what you hope to accomplish by the time you’re done, how will you know what you need to fix? Nothing will guarantee that you’ll wander aimlessly in revision hell faster than this.

And let’s debunk one bit of writer myth while we’re here: Doing a seventeenth revision on a project does not make a writer an artist or move him above the writer hoi polloi any more than dressing entirely in black or wearing tweed jackets with leather elbow patches or big, black drover coats. These are all affectations, and smack of dilettantism. Real writers, and real artists, finish books and move on to the next project.

THE PROCESS – PART TWO: THE MANUSCRIPT SLOG

Okay, the stuff above was tough if you hadn’t thought about it

before. But this next bit is rugged no matter how much thought you've given it. We're going to pull out your manuscript and make it bleed.

So where do you start? You start with a mandatory scene check. Is your manuscript written in scenes?

A scene is a cohesive block without which the novel will not stand, encompassing everything that a novel has to have, but in miniature. A scene has a start and a finish, characters and dialogue, engages at least one and sometimes all five senses, and offers conflict and change. It takes place in one time and in one place. If the time or the place changes, you're in a new scene. A scene is usually written from only one point of view.

(If you're still not sure what a scene is or if your novel is divided into scenes, check out *Scene-Creation Workshop: Writing Scenes that Move Your Story Forward*)

You may have done one scene per chapter, which I have done on occasion. You may have several scenes per chapter. Your scenes may be as short as a paragraph, or as long as twenty or thirty pages. However, time and place will not change within the scene.

You're going to run through your novel scene by scene and ask yourself the following questions:

- **Does this scene belong in the book?** That is, does it address your theme or one of your sub-themes, contain action, conflict, and change, develop one or more of your characters, and move your story forward? If the scene just tells the reader about your world or its history, or lacks characters, conflict, and change, put a note in your spiral-bound notebook telling yourself which important points of worldbuilding you're cutting, and draw a big X through the entire scene. If the scene involves characters who have nothing to do with the main

story of the book (walk-on characters who got carried away and grabbed lines, and who are never seen again, for example), draw a big X across the entire scene. Even if the scene involves your two main characters, but they're carrying out action that has nothing to do with what your story is about, does not develop them as characters, and does not move the main story conflict or address any of the sub-themes, cross the whole thing out. Does this seem brutal? It is. But the biggest thing you can do to help your story is to make sure each scene is involved in telling your story.

So you've decided the scene belongs in the book. What do you look for next?

- **Is the scene a story in miniature?** Does it contain characters, conflict, action, change, dialogue, setting, and involvement of the reader's senses? Does it have a beginning, a point where things change, and a clear ending? Is it interesting and entertaining? Does it move the story forward? It must do and be all of these things. If it's missing elements (like dialogue, or setting, or tastes, smells, sights, sounds, and textures), figure out how you can add them. Start writing in changes in the margins. Carry them around to the back of the page, and onto additional pages if necessary.
- **What is the conflict of the scene?** Is it the argument between lovers, where one discovers the other has been cheating? Is it the discovery of the body in the garden and the realization that one of the other Queens is a murderer? Whatever the conflict in the scene, make sure you develop it well. Weed out things that don't relate to it, or that weaken its impact. End the scene at the point where the conflict is either made worse, or resolved in some fashion. Cut any material that goes on after this point
 - save it to insert in a later if it's truly important.

- **Does the scene contain elements that no longer fit the story?** This happens to me all the time. I think I'm writing one kind of book when I start, but find that it has become something completely different by the time I finish it. I'll have characters and story lines at the beginning that just flat vanish by the end – and things at the end that I promised myself I'd make fit in the beginning. Time to fix all of those.
- Go over to your spiral-bound notebook, and **write in details about threads you've killed**. Just a line to remind yourself, like: "Cut all references to the Houbar Council – eliminate Houbar Council scenes."
- **Make notes to yourself about new directions you took**. Like: "Find places early on to mention King Purdue and his Queenly Harem. Add a complete scene where Queen Hotibel is murdered."
- **Make notes about characters you've condensed or eliminated**. Like: "The Blue Guy, Fred the Barber, and Hangin' John have all become Hangin' John. Combine them, and correct all references."
- **Offer yourself suggestions about the evolution of your story and theme**. It's entirely possible to discover at the end of the book that it isn't about what you thought it was about when you started it. So when you realize this, give yourself a couple of notes to remind you of what your early scenes are going to need. Like: "Introduce the first potential for a romance when Hangin' John and Queen Bridget meet at the scene of the murder." Or, "Add spiritual elements and internal conflict regarding his faith each time Hangin' John is forced to consider his vows of celibacy."
- **Is the scene well-written?** Can you find words that repeat, grammatical and spelling errors, clichés, stilted dialogue, endless description? At any point do you get drowsy reading what you've written? Are you ever tempted to skim?
- **Does the scene fit logically in time and space?** That is,

if the previous scene takes place on Thursday at noon, and the following scene takes place on Friday at noon, and all three scenes involve the same character, does your current scene take place at some time between Thursday noon and Friday noon and in a location your character could logically inhabit in the time available? And just a note for those of you writing books from multiple points of view. You're not immune from this time-and-place hunt. You just have a harder job – you have to track all of your characters from each scene they occupy to the next, and make sure they aren't in two places at the same time, or in two places they couldn't get from and to in two sequential scenes, and that scenes that take place in one location are in synch with scenes that take place in another location. You can make yourself really crazy with this. All I can suggest, after more than twenty books and a whole lot of character tracking, is this: Take good notes in your spiral-bound notebook, and hope for the best.

- **Is your scene full of weak words?** How many times have you used is, was, or were? How many times have you used very? How many times have you fallen prey to passive voice? How many adjectives and adverbs can you find? Eliminate forms of the verb “to be” wherever you find them, rewriting the sentence with a stronger verb. “It was raining,” becomes “The rain slashed down, tearing up the gardens and ripping leaves from the trees.” “He was tall,” becomes “She looked up at him. And up. And up.”
- **Is the word-count right?** Currently, the most salable length for non-series genre novels for adults is between 90,000 and 120,000 words. Novels written for specific lines (e.g., Harlequin Presents, Silhouette Intimate Moments, Star Trek, Star Wars, or Buffy the Vampire Slayer) have exacting word length requirements that absolutely must be met in order for you to make the sale. If your novel is outside of salable limits by being too short, look for ways to add conflict, to

introduce secondary characters and an additional story line, or to deepen characters' relationships with each other. Don't try to pad a story out with description! Padding reads like padding, and will be the kiss of death for any hoped-for sale. You have to add real story to make the book worth the extra pages and the reader's money. If your book is too long, don't try to convince yourself that yours is the one 450,000 word monster that will knock publishers or agents on their asses. First, look for things to cut. Use look for ways to condense. Cut hard. When it's a tight as you can make it, give it a rest, and then come back and cut some more.

Go through every page and every scene in the manuscript with this same bloody pen. Refer to your notebook constantly, making sure that you correct your mistakes, add in all the cool things the book needs to make it great, tie up all your loose ends, and add conflict to every single page.

You can safely eliminate almost all greetings and goodbyes in conversation, every instance where the character is driving and thinking, or sipping tea and thinking, or taking a shower in thinking. You can skip the parts where characters are getting from point A to point B if they aren't engaged in pitched battle or serious trouble of some sort at the same time. Mostly you can eliminate waking-up and going to bed routines.

You want to give the impression of reality and of a life without actually showing the whole thing. Think of your novel as "A Life: The Good Parts Version." All the sex and violence, passion and struggle. None of the teeth-brushing.

Work the manuscript in three piles. The pile you're reading, the pile with pages that have writing on them, and the pile with pages that don't.

THE PROCESS – PART THREE: TYPE-IN

And then ...

From front to back, your manuscript looks like it's been savaged by rutting weasels. (See **Revising Vincalis** for graphic images of a post-revision manuscript

– **Warning:** Not for the faint of heart.) You've ripped out old scenes, hand-written new scenes on the back of the dead scenes, crammed dialogue in between scratched out lines of description, written little notes to yourself about changes you still want to make when you type everything in. Your final clean pages to scribbled on pages ratio is probably 1:2 or 1:3, or even 1:4.

Start with the first page that bears your scribbles, start with the first line of corrections, open up your document, and start typing. You aren't going to look at the clean pages again – if you'd like to make a bit of space on your desk, you can throw them away.

(If you're thinking, "But what if those pages still need work?" you weren't hard enough on yourself first time through. Stop! Don't type a letter until you're confident that your clean pages are. Go back through the book and give it what it **really** needs. Being gentle with yourself the first time through just means there'll be a second time. And a third. And who needs that?)

As you type in your corrections, you may have improved wording ideas. Go with them. You may think of wittier, more perfect dialogue. Swap it out. You may finally hit the perfect description of the character, the locale, or some other goodie. Terrific. Use it.

You will probably also have completely new plot ideas, have great ideas for new characters who could really shine, and complications that could just change everything. Don't indulge

yourself by putting them in this book. Write them down on a separate piece of paper and save them for the next book. The point of a novel revision is to **finish this book**. I guarantee you that as long as you're willing to keep piddling around with the same manuscript, you'll find ways to make it different. You don't want to make it different. You just want to make it as good as it can possibly be, and then get it out the door.

Why? **Because the definition of a writing career is: Write a book. Write another book. Write another book.**

Nowhere in that description is included: Take one story and make it a monument to every idea you ever had or ever will.

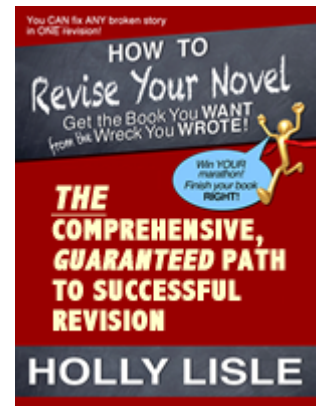
AND A SUM-UP

Does one-pass revision sound like a huge amount of work? It is. Does it sound frustrating? It can be. It can also be exciting, and a lot of fun, and you can walk away from it with some very good books. It's the only revision method I use. Using this method, I can revise a 125,000 word novel in about two weeks. I've never done more than one pre-submission revision, and usually only one, and never more than two, post-editor revisions. My post-editing revisions are usually light.

Go into the process with the determination to make the book really good – as good as it can be. Give it your all, get it done, and then move on, secure in the knowledge that you have made it the best it can be. And that your next book will be even better. Your career lies in writing a book, and writing another book, and writing a book after that.

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While experienced novelists can generally work their way through this highly condensed mini-workshop, the detailed process runs 22 longish lessons. Beginners and pros alike have discovered their secret weapon to fixing broken stories— **How To Revise Your Novel: Get The Book You WANTED from the Wreck You Wrote.**



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