

Revision Requests

By Holly Lisle

If you skipped the section on Concept Discussions at the beginning of this article, read it now.

If you have read it, there are still a few extra things you need to keep in mind.

One: Your editor knows the market better than you do. This is a tough nut for most writers to swallow and if you aren't careful, can become a point of friction between you and your editor. If your editor says, "The ending is too downbeat to do well in the American market; we need to think about ways you can give it a more upbeat ending," for example, you can take one of two tacks.

The first is to say, "Look, I'm the writer, and this is the way I envisioned the story, and I don't care how the American market prefers upbeat endings. I claim artistic license, dammit; I don't want to change so much as a comma, much less rethink the ending."

This may get you some points among your peers as the Artist with Integrity and Vision, but your editor is going to be justified in labelling you a Pain-in-the-Ass Artist, and at this point in your career, your buddies at the cafe aren't going to be putting money in your pocket, and your editor is.

The second way you can approach the situation is to say, "Okay, I can see how that ending might be a little dark. Do you have any recommendations for giving it a more upbeat feel without gutting the whole meaning of the book?" Then you listen to her ideas, and come up with a few of your own, and sit down at the computer and rework the ending in the manner that feels best to you.

And you send it off, content in the knowledge that you have made your book as marketable as you can.

And I do hate to sound like the Commercial Sell-Out from Hell here, but if you don't work to make your book as marketable as you can, you can kiss any hope of a full-time writing career goodbye. Publishers – all publishers – publish books in order to make money.

If you aren't willing to help your publisher out by writing books he can hope to sell, he will simply stop buying books from you. Put your heart into your stories, and your soul, and the best of what you have to offer. Then be willing to reshape your stories to make them better, more marketable, more accessible.

Keep the heart and the soul in there—don't get cynical, however easy it may be to get cynical. But keep your eye on the sales figures and the bottom line, too.

Two: Nothing you write is perfect. I know this comes as a shock; it's a shock to me every time I finish a book and find that it still needs work. But you cannot let the fact that your editor will want rewrites on what you thought was a finished book (and she will) shake you.

No matter how good you are, your editor will be able to spot places where you were lazy or sloppy or didn't think consequences through carefully.

She will find ways to make your book better. This is her job. Don't give her a hard time for doing it. Remember that in the long run, she's making you look brilliant, and however tough this whole process might be for your ego right now, you will be the primary beneficiary when you get through it.

Three: You can be replaced. If nothing else I tell you sticks, make sure this does. Your publisher doesn't need you. Your agent doesn't need you. And your editor doesn't need you.

For every 'you' out there who has gotten far enough to have a book accepted and to think that now you have the world by the throat, there are ten thousand others waiting for a chance, with their manuscripts ready and their minds made up that this is what they want to do.

If you have a shitty attitude and think you're God's gift to the field, well, one of them won't. And you'll find that your books stop selling and your agent stops returning your calls, and you can take full responsibility for your crash onto your own shoulders. Why should anyone have to put up with a jerk when there are people out there who write just as well as you do and who are pleasant to work with?

You don't have to grovel, you don't have to eviscerate your work to sell it, you don't have to kiss ass—but you do have to remember that you are not the answer to everyone's prayers and the salvation of the book industry. Not yet, anyway. When you sell like Stephen King, come back and we'll talk.

Manuscript Proofing

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