

Learn to Rewrite--finishing the manuscript is just a beginning...

Join Bestselling, Award-Winning Superromance author Anna DeStefano and Harlequin Superromance editor Johanna Raisanen as they share insight and techniques for navigating the editorial revisions required to sell your next manuscript

1. Storytelling is both art and hard work

Losing ourselves in our characters and creating magical journeys for our readers is an art we as writers are privileged to enjoy. But if it were that easy, every wannabe author would have a book on the shelves.

- Hard work is demanded of every creative writer, and the work we do is storytelling. Writers are craftsmen with a tool belt of skills they use to create a book that's ready for the marketplace.
 - An important tool if your goal is to become and remain published (and to publish stories readers love), is the ability to revise a manuscript until it's ready for production.
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- In *A Creative Approach to Writing and Rewriting Fiction*, David Kaplan tackles the question "Why Revise." And he suggests that, "**You need three things to be a good fiction writer...talent... a knowledge of craft... and just as necessary, a devotion to revision, to a merciless re-working of your writing until it is the best it can be...**"
- Talent and craft will only get you so far. If you're content with our first drafts (if you want to go no further than celebrating reaching The End), you're sacrificing what the audience might read and experience if you were willing to put in the hard work required to make the story better.

2. Publishing is a team sport

So, delivering a story that will touch a reader's heart **is a job**. A hard-working, digging deeper until you get it right job, that involves a healthy dose of teamwork.

- If your goal is to be a published writer of creative fiction, get used to the idea of **being part of a collaborative process**. To do just about anything but self-publish, you must first pitch a story to an editor who's agreeable to buying it (once you find one), then gain editorial approval of the completed project, then revise the work until the publisher is ready to begin production.
- Embrace the scary concept of revision, accept for the sake of argument that rewriting is going to happen, and you're in a better place to **work with your editors, rather than dreading, or worse fighting, their feedback**. The process is basically the same for both the published author and the unpublished writer looking at her first rejection or revision letter.
- I'm not talking about editing here--the type of line editing and copy editing that is done once a story starts the production process. By revision, **I mean the willingness to do extensive rework of your story structure and character development**, until you're finally telling the story you intended to tell from the start.

And your editor's job is to help you tell the story you want to tell, in the most affective way possible. You're a team. Your editor's input is vital to the success of the finished product. Trust that he or she can see things, problems you perhaps overlooked, that will stand in the way of you accomplishing your story goals.

3. Revision Fear

What is it about revisions that has us running scared? Especially when those revisions are coming from an outside source, like an editor.

- *My creativity is at it's best in my first draft. I don't want to revise my voice out of my story.*

I agree one hundred percent. My characters and their emotions, and the other basic story elements that make up my voice, are never more uniquely mine than in my first draft. I do another workshop that discusses how I plan and plot out my characters' journeys, then how I let myself pick up the story from the proposal stage and write freely (without going back to revise) until I've finished the first draft. That's my process--that's how I capture the essence of the story I'm trying to tell.

But... it's the thoughts and ideas I'm capturing as I write my draft that I wouldn't part with. I'm NOT so much married to the way I've executed each and every idea. Because of my research, and my experience writing the draft, by the time I reach The End, I have a firm grasp of what I've tried to accomplish. **Whether or not I've actually carried through on my story goals is a question for the next stage of my process--revising.**

- *Frozen in Love.*

If you're too easily satisfied with how a scene or plot is executed, or perhaps too in love with your first draft attempt, then you might find your self freezing up at the thought of revising what's already been done. What's the point? What's wrong with it the way it is? I can't change things, if I don't understand why they need to be changed, and I like it the way I wrote it the first time. I can remember a time when I asked very similar questions.

But now, as much as I see the first draft being for me--it's an exercise in me finally grasping exactly what I want my story to do--I've learned to see future drafts as being for the reader. Does the reader see what I'm trying to convey? Do they experience the emotions I'm trying to paint, or are the words getting in the way? If the way I tell the story isn't working, how can I change things so the reader gets the seamless experience I want her to have?

- *But I have a deadline, and there's no time!*

Talk to any prolific writer, and you'll get an earful about deadlines. How tight they are, how quickly you have to write to build a reader following, and how long it takes to get a finished book through production and onto the shelves.

But does that mean you have less time for revisions... or perhaps, could it be that you have less time to get that first draft done, so you move on to the hard, but rewarding, work of polishing your story into a winner? Is your goal to finish the first draft right before your delivery deadline? Or is it to make sure you're leaving yourself time in your tight schedule to do the kind of revisions you know need to be done? Basically, what's more important to you--finishing draft 1 in time, or draft 2? Or perhaps, for the really ambitious, draft 3?

My current schedule is to have a book released every six months. My short-term goal is to increase that to producing three books a year. But as I work toward that goal, I don't want my process to change--I finish my 1st draft early enough to leave me time for extensive revisions BEFORE my editor sees my "rough" cut draft. These are changes I do on my own. This is me rethinking what my story's accomplishing, before I receive my editor's revisions--which are basically what she needs to see done before the production process can begin.

The benefit of my process--any rewriting I've done before I discuss revisions with my editor helps me articulate to her what I'm trying to accomplish. And it helps us better collaborate on how to achieve what I see the story and characters needing to do. **Basically, I make the time to revise my draft on my own first, because it saves me time when I'm working on my editor's revisions--which, generally, I only have a few weeks to complete.**

4. The work that comes after *The End*.

Kaplan suggests something that forever changed my concept of my role as a creative writer. "**The purpose of writing a story is to rewrite it,**" he tells us.

- The first draft is only a steppingstone to get to the second, the second to get to the third...and on and on, until your deadline, your editor, or your own sense of story tells you that you're done.

- It isn't practical for our goal to be perfection, because then we'd never finish the book. But our goal should always be to do it better... with each new story, each new character, and each new draft. As I say in my website logo, **Every story is a new beginning.**
- Consider Tolstoy, who wrote War and Peace eight times (without a word processor), and was still revising at the galley stage. Or James Joyce, who drove his publisher crazy with his endless revisions of Ulysses.
- We can't take years to write each of our books. Again, we're very much in an on-demand industry that requires prolific and timely production. **But what if we carved out time to do whatever revising we can? What if we consider revision part of the drafting process, not just an afterthought, "nice to have," if we every get around to beating a deadline?**

What if dedication to revisions is what makes the differences between okay writing and good writing? Between a good read and can't-put-it-down storytelling?

5. Taking constructive criticism after you turn the book in--it's all about attitude

Bottom line, editorial feedback is a vital tool that helps you shape, refine, and hone your stories.

- All sensitive, creative emotions aside, working with your editor will be your job for as long as you publish. Make a mess of this relationship because your feelings are hurt or your self-esteem can't take it, and you're making a mess of your professional writing career. Interesting characters may emerge organically in your first draft. Character depth can take a trip or two back to the well to conquer.
- If you've yet to publish, do yourself a favor and get really good at listening, rethinking, and being flexible about change now. Because that's the heart of the business you're getting yourself into.
- Yes, revisions challenge you emotionally and professionally. But they also make you dive back into your stories and understand better what you're trying to accomplish. And when you revise, you learn to let go of what you can, and stand up for what you can't.

- Revisions aren't personal Let me repeat that. Revisions ARE NOT personal. Revisions are about making your story stronger. Your editor is the first pair of eyes to see the manuscript after you've submitted it, and she can often recognize a problem in the plot or an inconsistency in character that an author might miss. Editors are on our side, working with us. They're working hard to help make sure our stories shine.

6. Areas to keep in mind as you self-edit your own work

So, what do I look for as I rewrite what I've just spent months writing the best I could?

- Revise before you begin writing
- Revise as you go--learning as you write your first draft
- Revise openings
- Revise secondary character journeys and arcs
- Moving plot points and secondary plot devices to build pacing and heighten conflict
- Revise and smooth out primary character arcs
- Cut what's not essential--particularly, backstory
- Add what is essential--particularly, backstory
- Rearrange the plot to focus your characters on their goals--the plot should drive external and internal conflict, as well as propel the character towards what's at stake.
- Revise endings for impact--beyond the hook
- Revise prose for punch
- One final read, to pull it all together

7. Some practical tips for receiving and working with editorial revisions

Suggested Reading

Revision: A Creative Approach to Writing and Rewriting Fiction

David Michael Kaplan

The Complete Guide to Editing Your Fiction (Writers Digest)

Michael Seidman