

# What Stories Teach Their Writers: The Purpose and Practice of Revision

NOTICE

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While I was teaching, I devised several elaborate ways to get the students to revise and enjoy it. The graduate students, given their semipro status, were required to come up with four drafts of four stories, sixteen drafts over a semester. The undergraduate students, who had lots of other things to do and hadn't yet committed themselves to fiction writing, were given a series of playful exercises that asked them to look at their material over and over again in new ways, in an effort to spark and enrich their imaginations. The purpose, however, turned out to be the same—to beguile or to require the students to learn to do what every writer has to learn to do—come at each piece of work again and again with as close as he can get to a new mind and a new sense of joy.

While writers most often think they are writing their work—that is, that they have a thought or two that they are putting down on paper and that they're directing these thoughts from beginning to end to communicate something already present in their minds to the reader—writing is more complex than that. Revision has everything to do with learning both what you are writing and how to write it.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING

Your first duty, if you want to become a writer, is to become teachable, that is, to become receptive. The desire to be a writer, even the desire to write, does not, per se, make you teachable. In fact, every teacher in every writing class has to spend a fair amount of time, sometimes most of her time, showing the students how to become teachable, that is, how to listen to what others are saying about their stories and how not to resist but how to receive. But you do not need a human teacher. Your

own writing can teach you all you need to know, if, once again, you do not resist it.

At first glance, writing appears to be an aggressive act. We come up with some thoughts or a story, take up a pen or sit down at a computer, and put words on the paper or the screen, and the words create something. The thing created is a mental object. It does not exist outside of the mind, the way a painting does or a piece of music does, but it seems to have some of the other qualities of objects. It is self-contained. It is rooted in the world. It makes sense. It is possessable. It belongs, in fact, to the writer, and the writer understandably wants to protect her object. But for the writer at this stage to possess the story to the point of protecting it is to defeat the process of writing itself.

For one thing, writing is not an aggressive act at all. On the contrary, it is a receptive and a responsive act, a process by which the writer assimilates what is seen, heard, touched, and felt—and then responds by molding what's been assimilated into something new. In revising, even the molding becomes a receptive act.

Moreover, if you are observant, receptive, and fluid in your approach, if you understand that your work in progress is not yet an object and not yet ready to be owned by you or anyone else, and if you have faith that what you arrive at will be better than what you began with—that is, more complex, more interesting, and more valuable to you and to the reader—you really do not need an actual human teacher. You have become a learner of writing on your own.

For example, think about waking in the morning and telling a dream. Almost always, when you are telling a dream to someone else, the only thing that interests him about your dream is whether and how he himself appeared in it, and how you felt about that. If he has not appeared, he tends to view the dream as a symptom of some pathology on your part, and he tries to intrude upon your dream with some interpretation of his own. As a *story*, your dream will usually be disjointed, random, and without certain essential connections and facts. In your telling, you may try to plead for the fascination or the importance of the dream, repeatedly drawing your friend's attention to this or that aspect of the dream, but you will readily see that he is unconvinced. Perhaps you will only get a shrug and the response, "Well, that's pretty interesting." But don't lose heart. In unsuccessfully telling your dream, you have learned the first lesson of story writing: that your idea is far more interesting to you than to anyone else, and that you need to work with it, formalize, and

understand it before you can communicate it in a way that makes your friend, or any audience, want it for his own.

### SOURCES OF STORIES/CONNECTING THE ELEMENTS

Not many stories begin in dreams, but most do begin with something that is idiosyncratic to the writer. For me, gossip is a great inspiration. Little bits of stories about the strange ways that people interact always pique my interest and get me thinking about why such a thing might have happened, what points of view the protagonists brought to the incident, and what the antecedent events might have been. I once wrote a story called “Long Distance” that began in a friend’s Christmas visit to her relatives. On Christmas Eve, she heard her sisters-in-law having a *sotto voce* argument about the wrapping of the Christmas presents. Sister-in-law A had wrapped presents for her eight- and ten-year-old children in a certain paper, and sister-in-law B had also used that paper to wrap family presents for her two-year-old. A wanted to preserve the illusion of Santa Claus for her children, and so she wanted B to rewrap the two-year-old’s presents in some other paper so that the eight- and ten-year-old wouldn’t make the connection between their presents and those of the two-year-old. I have to say that almost every feature of this anecdote seemed outrageous to me, beginning with the fact that the eight- and ten-year-olds still believed in Santa Claus, and ending with the fact that sister-in-law A, the guest, was not offering to rewrap, but asking B, the hostess, who had already put on a series of meals, to do the extra work. Obviously, I did not have the whole story here. Probably there were mitigating circumstances but my sense of the strangeness and outrage of this incident was enough to make me want to do something with this anecdote. It wasn’t a story yet, but I thought that later some things might be added to it, or it might draw other ideas to it—and eventually all of the ideas together might reveal some connections not apparent on the surface.

And, in fact, this is exactly what happened. More gossip, more stories, not really related at all except by being present together in my mind, and the whole story of “Long Distance” began to build. I believe this building took several weeks or a month. A certain amount of patient holding of all these things in my mind was required, and patience is one of the first signs that the writer is teachable—teachable by the world, not by a teacher.

On a larger scale, I had a notion of an idea about *King Lear* long

before I ever began or even thought of my novel *A Thousand Acres*. Perhaps twenty years passed between the first thoughts that became *A Thousand Acres* and the actual coalescing of the thoughts that I began with when I started to write. Some five or six years went by after I got the idea for *The Greenlanders* before I knew I was ready to write. In fact, I got the first notions of *A Thousand Acres* before I got the first notions of *The Greenlanders*, but I began *The Greenlanders* and finished it before I was ready to write *A Thousand Acres*. This illustrates, I think, one of the benefits of patience, especially patience that doesn’t know it is patience, which perhaps should be called faith.

For me, one of the principal fascinations of writing a rough draft is seeing connections and relationships between disparate bits of raw material that have swum into each other’s neighborhood. In the story “Long Distance,” the disparate elements were the anecdote of the sisters-in-law, a longer anecdote that another friend told me about a phone call he made to Japan, and the very small detail of another friend of mine saying, when told that it was twenty-two below zero, “Refreshing, isn’t it?” Added to this were several thoughts I had on my own—when a parent insists that a child should eat something or perform some other bodily function over the opposition of the child, is the parent claiming unfairly to possess the child’s body? What does it mean to have your chair and television arranged so that they are facing each other? What does the landscape of north central Iowa look like in the winter? The joy here is feeling these elements, which did not seem to be connected, flow together into a coherent story, and the challenge is, once you have gotten nearly to the end, to find the way they click together in some sort of meaningful whole that the reader can understand.

In *A Thousand Acres*, the disparate elements were the play *King Lear*, farming in the American Midwest, the history of capitalism, the meaning of landscape, environmental degradation, and feminism. “Long Distance” posed an interesting thematic task. *A Thousand Acres* posed a strenuous and sometimes exhausting and dispiriting challenge, but the process was the same with both. I knew all the elements had connections, or they would not have come together in my mind. But I also knew that finding all the connections wouldn’t necessarily come easily or instantly.

This is what revision is for.

## TYPES OF REVISION

There are several types of revision. What we are taught in high school is essentially polishing—finding the right word, collapsing or expanding some ideas that aren't clear, adding examples. By the time you have decided you are a fiction writer, you have mastered this sort of revision. It isn't always easy, but it's just part of the job.

In a second form of revision, the writer is undecided about where she is going, and keeps adding and deleting parts. Each change causes a major shift in the point the author is making and, I think, shows the writer is quite confused about the focus, the audience, the action, or the facts. Going back to the material may or may not be helpful with this sort of larger problem. For real revision to begin, it is essential for the writer to push all the way to the end of the first draft, no matter how awkward the draft seems, for hidden in the rough draft, as rough as it can possibly be, are all the answers to the writer's questions about the material. But all the questions have to be asked, and they are not asked until the whole arc of the story is complete on the page and in the writer's mind. Some authors, many of them well known, do not hold with this view, and they clean as they go. But they are of a different cast of mind than I am, and perhaps know their stories better than I know mine.

A third form of revision involves a failure to commit to the particular elements of a story or novel, its characters and events. I once had a student who was overflowing with imagination. He would sit down, enter a kind of trance, and stand up four or five hours later with a completed story. The removal of any particular brick, though, would collapse the whole building. He would come to class a week later with what seemed to be an entirely different story, with different characters and different actions, and swear that the two stories were the same, though no one in the class could see it. We had to work hard to teach this student how to focus on what he had already written and fix it, rather than discarding it and hoping to get struck by lightning again.

## LISTENING TO THE DRAFT

When writing the first draft, the writer has had to be receptive to the world and the feelings that inspired him; when beginning to revise, he must be receptive to what has already been written, and is there on the page, full of mysteries and clues. The first idea you need to give up when you begin to revise is that you know what this story is about. In reality, you have some memories of what you thought the story was

about, and some other memories of things you stuck in that weren't quite right, and, in many cases, no memory at all of some other things you stuck in, and, once in a while, memories of things you thought you stuck in but didn't. All of these memories have now become obsolete. All you have, the best thing that you could have, is what is actually on the paper. Your story is a success, because it is a whole. You can relax now. Your only task is to let what you have talk back to you and teach you what is missing or superfluous or not quite right, and then to suggest what would be better than what you have. It's helpful, and true, also, to think of the draft you have as containing both what it is and what it will be, just as a piece of marble is said to contain the sculpture within it already. All the artist has to do is find it.

What your rough draft contains is the whole system of the story you have been thinking about, the choices you've made and the other possible choices, too. It contains this because you have had more thoughts about the story than you have put down on the paper, and you have also had more thoughts about the story than you have consciously thought. Your mind is larger than your intellect and works in other ways than simply through your intellect. You have had feelings, intuitions, observations, perceptions, and ideas that are not written down but that have been part of your mind while you were working on and around this rough draft. The rough draft as it stands harkens toward these more shadowy parts of the story, and they will be available to you if you can recognize their presence. But since they are shadowy, you have to develop a heightened sensitivity to what is in your rough draft; you have to be receptive to what you have written as if your memories of writing referred to above are not significant. The art of revision lies in not pressing your self upon the story. The story has now made the first step in separating itself from you. It will not live unless it separates itself from you entirely, and it can't do that unless you are receptive to what it is trying to be.

## CONNECTING TO LITERATURE

On a basic level, every fiction writer attests to the experience of having a character come to life in an unexpected way. A minor character seems to take over the narrative and be more lively than the major character. Scenes that were meant as filler turn out to be central to the narrative, whereas big set pieces lie dead at the writer's feet. Characters that were meant to last get forgotten. Characters who started out as Joe end up

as Bob. Almost all seasoned fiction writers welcome such experiences precisely because when a character takes on a life of his own, he is more interesting to write about and he is making a promise that the story or novel is coming alive. The piece is also separating itself from the dream life of the writer and entering the world of literature.

Every novel or story has dual citizenship. It is an experience and an event in the life of the writer, but it is also an event in the life of the culture. Just as we can see the writer reaching out, assimilating literature, and then producing something, we can also see the history of literature looping through an individual consciousness and pulling something out of it. On one hand, we have a cascading series of lives; on the other, we have a library full of books. Each category is autonomous; I like to think of the writer producing a book, but also of the writer entering into the world of books and being produced, as a writer, by all the books that have come before. It is this, I think, that is your goal. Your rough draft contains a multitude of references to literature, both those that you intended to put there and those that you didn't. Part of your revising process will be to recognize and strengthen your work's connections to other works. This, too, is part of its separation from you, part of the life that it takes on.

A work of fiction connects to literature first through formal story elements. It has characters, plot, theme, style, and setting. As a reader, of course, you recognize these elements in other works of fiction, and now, revising, you become a reader of your own work, who consults her responses to the rough draft in order to understand what is present and what is missing. You must not allow your ego, or your sense of possessing the work, to make special claims for it, but nor must you allow your ego to be unforgiving. You are striving to read your rough draft analytically and diagnostically. It is neither good nor bad. It is simply a work in progress. Judging it is not your job. Understanding it is.

## ELEMENTS OF FICTION

Other essays in this book discuss elements of fiction in some detail. But I want to touch briefly on a few here, especially as they relate to revision.

### Plot

What is usually missing in works by inexperienced writers is the whole arc of the plot. A plot is a simple, formal, organizational device that

almost always develops some sort of conflict. The conflict may be between two characters or within one character. Some fiction lacks conflict, but successful stories without it are few and far between, and, since a plot is primarily organizational, it is *essential* that you learn how to make one. A plot has four parts: exposition (naming the protagonists, defining the nature of the conflict, giving the protagonists a place to be), rising action (the longest part of the story, which develops the conflict, which in turn reveals more and more about the protagonists and the themes), the climax (the largest and most dramatic piece of the conflict, which sets the protagonists more in opposition to one another, reveals the themes most clearly, and sets up the terms of the resolution of the story), and the denouement (the resolution of the climax, which brings the conflict to a state of equilibrium and suggests the meaning of the conflict, either implicitly or explicitly). When you thoroughly understand these plot elements, you will much more readily and easily diagnose what seems to be wrong with your story.

These are the nuts and bolts of fiction writing, the foundation, the basic ingredients. If you reject them or don't understand them, you will always be more or less in a state of confusion when you rewrite. When you first reread your rough draft, you need to ask yourself: Is it clear who the characters are? Is it clear what the conflict is, and whom it is between? Does the reader have a concrete sense of where the characters are in space and time? Are there enough steps between the exposition and the climax so that the nuances of the conflict are fully developed and the climax is understandable? Is there a climax, or is the climax implied rather than depicted? Is the climax well choreographed and easy for the reader to imagine? Is the meaning of the conflict apparent in the climax? Is the relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist clear in the climax? Is the climax dramatic enough, long enough, weighty enough to balance the length of the rising action? Does the denouement get the reader gracefully and meaningfully out of the climax? Does the denouement bring the story to a state of equilibrium?

In my opinion, all of these questions must be asked and answered for you to understand your story. They seem to dictate a certain traditional type of story, but, in fact, even the most experimental fiction contains answers to these questions.

After you have asked these questions of your rough draft, and your rough draft has answered them, you will know your next step. One of

the wonderful things about an organized approach to your rough draft is that you don't have to worry about it. Each step leads logically to the next. There are also close relationships between the parts of the story. What is missing in one part has to do with what is missing in another part, and the parts will talk back and forth through you to each other.

For example, often the ending of a story does not work. You cannot fix this by working on the ending, but only by working on the beginning. The problem with every denouement is in the exposition, and so a bad ending indicates you need to better understand the situation you have set up. A missing climax, also a frequent problem, is not a choice on your part to be nontraditional. It is a confession that you don't know what the conflict is or what it means. The climax is the absolute crux of the story. It is where everything comes together—the characters and what they think of themselves and each other, the meaning of their conflict, the meaning of their lives, the meaning of the action. The climax is where the writer's style rises to its best self, and where the writer's ability to organize is most crucial. It is very tempting to avoid the climax for all of these reasons, but it is the reader's reward. If you avoid it, you have reneged on your contract to provide the reader with something interesting. *You must not stop before the climax or skip over it.*

Problems with the rising action are easier to solve. If you are arriving at the climax too quickly, you simply give yourself an arbitrary number of pages to fill before you allow yourself to get to the climax. If you are meandering, you make yourself cut part of the rising action. Eventually, you will learn the proper balance between rising action and climax and know instinctively when they are out of balance.

Now you have looked at the problems of the rough draft in an organized way and done your first revision. What is in the story already has suggested to you what might still be needed, and even at the stylistic level, words you have already written have suggested what else you might write.

You must keep revising at this level until you have solved your plot problems. Plot problems are so basic that to attach yourself to anything in the story when the plot is still unfinished is to break up the flow of the revision process and unnecessarily protract your work on the story. The good news is that plot problems can always be solved. They are technical in nature. They are about the story being a story, not about you being you.

## Characters

While fixing your plot problems, you'll discover that you don't know as much about the characters or the action as you thought you did, but you have learned more about both. Now they interest you more than before. A good revision should involve you more deeply in your work and make you more eager to get at it. As a good reviser, you will gain two boons. First, your work will get better, and so will be more likely to get published. Second, you will like doing it so much that you will care less and less about whether it ever gets published. Your relationship to the work itself and to the process of working will be strengthened.

Your next phase has to do with fleshing out characters, setting, parts of the rising action, that is, supplying more context for the plot. The context of the plot consists of who the characters are, what they say and how they say it, how they fit into the setting, what the setting means to them, how they view the conflict, what their intentions as they enter actions, how the action modifies their intentions, what their backgrounds are. At this stage of revision, you can see what's missing and can enjoy making the necessary changes.

For example, let's say the rising action was truncated in the first draft, and you had to lengthen it to balance with the climax. You discovered that you didn't know enough about your subject, whaling, to write convincingly about the rising action. Solving this problem is easy—do some research. Either you go whaling or you read about it, or you change the whaling to bass fishing, something you know well. When you have done your research to fill out the rising action, you will know much more about the characters, the setting, and what might happen. Or, let's say, your rising action is long and boring and doesn't go anywhere. In cutting several scenes and combining some others, you will make your characters quicker, more lively, and more interesting, even for you.

## Style

One of the great rules of fiction writing is that style goes along for the ride. You do not need to work on your style in the sense that you need to use original language. You only need to work on your style in the sense that you need to use precise language. When your understanding of your characters and your plot and your setting is specific enough, your style will be specific, too. Your style reflects your knowledge of the situation and your attitude toward it. If you can't make a plot or develop context, you don't know enough about your piece to fix it

stylistically. Style without plot or context is a form of corruption; the originality of style is an attempt to cover ignorance. Fortunately, though, this corruption isn't immoral. It's only boring.

The comic form makes the most stylistic demands, and successful comic novelists, like T. Coraghessan Boyle and Garrison Keillor, are wonderful stylists. Their work bears studying so that you can understand their diction choices and their sense of timing. A wonderful comic style, though, just like any other style, grows out of the fact that the novelist understands more about his material than he is letting on—every word of every sentence communicates, at the very least, what is happening (action) and the author's attitude toward it (tone). It may also communicate the characters' attitudes toward the action, toward each other, and how the reader's attitude toward it all is supposed to differ from the characters'. There may also be references to other works or other aspects of the culture, all collapsed together in a delightful and economical way. An author's style develops—I once edited a book of first short stories of famous writers, and I noticed that most of the stories weren't as interesting stylistically as the authors' later, more mature work.

But I would not say that authors actually have much control over their styles. Your style grows out of who you are. This said, in the last draft of your story, it is both wise and fun to try various word choices, sentence types, and rhythms. Fiddling with the wording is very enlightening, and you should feel no hesitation in owning and using a good thesaurus, but not a dictionary-type thesaurus. A thesaurus that is organized by category into groups of related words is harder to learn to use but helps you expand your vocabulary, and sometimes gives you good stylistic ideas. But even if you use a thesaurus, working on the words will make the story more and more idiosyncratically yours.

### KNOWING WHEN YOU'RE FINISHED

You have now finished revising your story. How do you know that? Well, you are rather tired of it. You can't think of what else it needs. It no longer seems flexible to you—if you were to change some large piece of it, it would fall apart. It holds together. You know more about the material than you have put on paper, but if you added something, it would be a little repetitive. There is nothing that you *want* to add. Now you may decide whether you like it or not. Chances are you do

like it, because you have invested yourself in it more and more all through the revision process.

In approaching your story in a forgiving and receptive way, you have taken a considerable amount of the tedium and fear out of revising. You have gotten closer to the story and more interested in it; you have come to know it. It is now thoroughly yours and yet thoroughly itself. It is as good as you can make it, which is better than you could have made it (better than you did make it) before you revised it. It is not as good as you will make stories in the future, but you have done what you can with this one. It is time to sell it. Good luck.

## EXERCISES

1. Reread a rough draft and ask yourself: Is it clear who the characters are? Is it clear what the conflict is and whom it is between? Does the reader have a concrete sense of where the characters are in space and time? Are there enough steps between the exposition and the climax so that the nuances of the conflict are fully developed and the climax is understandable? Is there a climax, or is the climax implied rather than depicted? Is the climax well choreographed and easy for the reader to imagine? Is the meaning of the conflict apparent in the climax? Is the relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist clear in the climax? Is the climax dramatic enough, long enough, weighty enough to balance the length of the rising action? Does the denouement get the reader gracefully and meaningfully out of the climax? Does the denouement bring the story to a state of equilibrium? Make the necessary adjustments.
2. Examine the ending of a story in progress. Try to solve problems in the ending by revising the beginning.
3. Choose a story or a scene that is in good shape, and edit it for style—word choice, sentence structure, rhythm, and tone. Revise, edit, and polish so that the writing is as good as you can make it.

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