

the run from civilization, in which a young fellow in tweeds at Colgate University lights out and becomes a Robin Hood figure in fatigues in the Caribbean jungle. That fantasy is a story for myself. It also happens to be a very basic American story, as well as a basic white-male fantasy. A wonderful reciprocity between literature and life evolves. It seems to be inescapable."

Stephen Toch

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WORKING AND REWORKING

Early Drafts and the Techniques of Revision

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Every writer must be taught how to write every book she or he writes, and the teacher is always the book itself. Writing becomes good by accretion. It builds on itself; it picks up its own cues, it takes its own suggestions. You rarely if ever start out knowing exactly what you are doing or what is to come, and by the time you reach the middle, you rarely know how you are going to get out alive. The project must be your guide, and it will not be finished teaching you the job until the day you type the final page. Then, if you're lucky, it will let you go.

The stages through which the project leads you to this enlightenment are its successive drafts. I have read all too many *almost* good pieces of work, published and unpublished, that betray their promise simply and solely because their authors did not have the stamina or the determination or the time to run them through another draft or two.

We have said from the beginning that all writing lives off a two-stroke heartbeat of release followed by taking control. Another term for this rhythmic alternation between letting go and taking hold is *revision*, and as David Remnick, the editor of *The*

New Yorker puts it, "revision is all there is." There are writers who imagine that doing a single draft is somehow a sign of superior skill. This is simply untrue. The biographical facts are clear: Most writers, including the most proficient and greatest, produce their work in many drafts, and do so from the start of their careers until the end. It is not even true that as you become more confident and skilled, the number of drafts you do will decrease. Sometimes the reverse is true: When he was my student, Madison Smartt Bell wrote brilliant prose and invariably wrote it in a single draft. It's my impression that his first published novels were not greatly revised from their first drafts. Yet as this born virtuoso's career has made him steadily more accomplished, Bell has become more, not less, of a reviser.

I'm convinced that many novices and even some professionals resist revision not out of laziness or self-delusion, but simply because they do not know how to do one. Nobody is born knowing how to revise, but though they are rarely taught, revision's basic techniques are eminently teachable. You will develop your own methods, of course, but for heaven's sake, don't try to reinvent the wheel of revision all alone. In this chapter we'll be talking about first drafts and the basic methods of revision. In the next we will speak about middle drafts and finishing.

THE DEFINITION OF A "DRAFT"

A "draft" is a version of your whole project written out from beginning to end. It can be the draft of a whole short story, a whole novel, a whole memoir, a whole chapter, a whole essay, a whole anything. The operational word is *whole*. A completed movement from beginning to end defines a draft. Until you have gone that whole distance, you will not have a draft. Don't kid yourself about this: In the days of the typewriter, it was commonplace to crumple up twenty-six pieces of paper revising a

single page. Those were not twenty-six drafts. That was one rather rocky page.

SINGLE-DRAFT WRITING. True single-drafters are a small minority among writers, but their ranks include some pretty distinguished people. When Kurt Vonnegut reaches the end of the first draft of a book, he has a finished book, ready to set in type. When Susan Sontag completes a page (in her fiction at least), she moves on to the next page, and the next day to the next, writing, she says, "as life is lived." The youthful John Updike confessed that "I . . . don't change much, and have never been one for making outlines or taking out whole paragraphs or agonizing much. If a thing goes, it goes for me, and if it doesn't go, I eventually stop and get off." Cynthia Ozick is a single-drafter. When she completes one sentence, she proceeds to the next, and the next, and the next, and she does not turn back. "I don't have to revise at the end," says Shelby Foote, a classic single-drafter. "Revision is heartbreaking." "Rewriting a whole book would bore me," said Anthony Burgess. It's said that Thomas Mann produced his page or two every day mainly as a single-drafter—though I can point to a passage in his diaries where he sketches plans for crucial revisions in *The Magic Mountain*. Single-drafting is not necessarily anything like careless writing or even rapid writing. Far from it. Flaubert spent five years devoting days to a single paragraph and many hours to a single line. And he fashioned the perfection of *Madame Bovary* in what amounts to a single draft.

For obvious reasons, most single-drafting crawls forward at a very slow pace, and it is often anything but haphazard. Yet for the most famous single-drafter of more recent times, speed was of the essence. Jack Kerouac turned his refusal to revise into a kind of arch-romantic principle. Though there is conclusive evidence that Kerouac did revise *On the Road*, he claimed to see revision as *immoral*—as a kind of dishonesty, an insult to karma. "By not revising what you've written," he said, "you simply give

the reader the actual workings of your mind during the writing itself. You confess your thoughts about events in your own unchangeable way. . . .” Just to prove that he himself wouldn’t stoop to it, he typed much of his work, as fast as he could make his fingers fly, on long rolls of Teletype paper that left him with a single, unending page.

Kerouac’s wild run down the shock corridor of his paper roll is not the way most successful single-drafters work. Most revise as they go, and revise a lot. They are the ones who leave their wastebasket stuffed with twenty-six dead page tens. The single-drafter, crawling to perfection, may finish a page or two a day. Three would be a lot. Such a pace may not be your rhythm. As John Irving, a multiple-drafter, says, “I write very quickly; I rewrite very slowly. It takes me nearly as long to rewrite a book as it does to get the first draft.” Some parts of any work will come more easily than others. You may sail through certain pages and never need to touch them again. But a fast first draft—*pace*, Kerouac—will almost always need extensive revision. It will have all sorts of virtues, but a fully developed structure and polish are not likely to be among them.

Plan on a second draft.

MULTIPLE DRAFTS. So how many drafts should there be?

As many as it takes.

There is no rigid norm, but the usual rhythm is about three. The only draft that really matters is the final one, but somehow the three-draft rule of thumb does seem to correspond to some fundamental rhythm in the process. First comes conception. Second comes development. Third comes polishing. Bernard Malamud put it this way: “The first puts [the story] in place. The second focuses, develops, subtilizes. By the third most of the dross is gone. . . . First drafts are for learning what your story or novel is about. Revision is working with that knowledge to enlarge or enhance an idea, to re-form it. . . . The first draft of a book is the most uncertain—where you need guts, the ability to

accept the imperfect until it is better.” And Malamud added, in a phrase that will reach the heart of every multiple-drafter: “I love the flowers of afterthought.”

For obvious reasons, short stories are likely to go through more drafts than novels. Ray Bradbury speaks of doing six or seven drafts of his stories (and calls them “*pure torture*”), while Raymond Carver said his “real work” on a short story began after three or four drafts. (Carver, incidentally, was passionate about revising. “It’s something I love to do, putting words in and taking words out.”)

Does this seem overwhelming? Well, yes, writing is a big job, but there may be some consolation in knowing that one or maybe two of these drafts may go quickly. In fact, one defining trait of any draft you do will be its speed.

FAST DRAFTS AND SLOW DRAFTS

As we have said, you may be someone who does your first draft very quickly. If that is true, your second draft should probably be slow moving. If, on the other hand, you crawl through your first draft—or even if you bog down in it—you would be well advised to capitalize on the inner mastery over your material that this long slow crawl has unconsciously built up in you by moving as fast as you can through the next draft. If the one draft is fast and reckless, the next should probably be slow and painstaking: Where one is sketchy, the next should be crystal clear; where one rides on its self-permission, the next should be self-critical. Where one is guesswork, the next should be researched. A fast draft will be filled with gaps, unproven premises, incoherent ideas, and things that don’t work. Raymond Carver wrote his first drafts as fast as he could, skipping over difficulties, simply to get to the end. “Some scenes I save until the second or third draft, because to do them and do them right would take too much time on the first draft.” Frank O’Connor used to cite Guy

de Maupassant's advice on first drafts: "Get black on white. . . . I don't give a hoot what the writing's like; I write any sort of rubbish which will cover the main outlines of the story, then I can begin to see it. . . . I just write roughly what happened. . . . It's the design of the story which to me is the most important, the thing that tells you there's a bad gap in the narrative here and you really ought to fill that up in some way or another. I'm always looking at the design of a story, not the treatment."

The first draft is likely to be a fast draft, and that is what many writers recommend. On the other hand, there are writers who cannot tolerate the surrender of control over their material that a really fast first draft requires. Almost all writers of fast first drafts have in common a willingness—even a need—to accept a certain self-surrender as an essential part of their working lives. But your first draft doesn't *have* to be fast. Speed does not work, either psychologically or creatively, for everyone. Philip Roth's starts are notoriously slow. You may quite willingly crawl through a first draft, only to move like the wind through the second or third. There is a kind of slow draft that I tend to call the "research draft." This may or may not be the result of a great deal of outside research: It is in either case a draft in which information overwhelms story. It can be a piece of historical fiction or a piece that deals with some very unusual setting or set of people, something that requires the writer to master a special world, as García Márquez did with his Latin American dictator. It can and often does happen in a memoir. Alfred Kazin, Eileen Simpson, and Russell Baker are only three among many contributors to *Inventing the Truth* who produced laborious, even lumbering, first drafts of their memoirs. They may have had to. They had to wait for the second draft to reach the point of intimacy with their own story that permitted that story to "write itself." And it may work that way for you, too.

The desirability of alternating fast drafts and slow drafts was borne in on me so often that it became in my mind almost a kind of rule. Here is a classic scenario: I have encountered it many

times, but the first time I encountered it was in my second year of teaching, and if I handled it properly, it was only through the luck of a novice. A young woman came to me with a mountainous mess that she wanted to make her senior project, a manuscript on which she had been slaving away for a long time about her unhappy marriage. And we began work together, struggling to make progress; struggling to organize the sprawl of pages into some sort of forward movement. It was slow going. I would make a suggestion. We would discuss it. The next week that suggestion would come back—in the form of a further complication in the mess. Characters seemed piled up pointlessly. Solutions were tried, and then discarded, and then tried again. The pages were filled with a lot of anger, a lot of working things out, a lot of resentment and lost love recurring again and again as the pages crawled forward. Whatever was hashed had to be rehashed. The project, along with the writer's spirits, seemed to be sinking under the weight of what I was too inexperienced to know was an absolutely classic case of slow-draft inertia. I tried to be helpful and sustaining, but I had begun to entertain some carefully concealed doubt about whether this thing could ever be pulled together. Meanwhile, the dreaded deadline was getting nearer and nearer. It was inflexible. The writer worried. She struggled against sinking into the stagnant sea of her own pages. She was losing faith. I was losing faith. That was the one thing neither of us could say.

Finally, at the end of a conference very near the deadline, I took a deep breath of my own and, on an intuition, said to her: "Look, you *know* what your story is. It's a very vivid, upsetting, interesting, passionate story, and it's all yours. In this manuscript you have explored every nook and cranny of it. Many, many times over. There is nothing left to explore. Now I have to tell you that you can't turn this in. You've worked hard, I know, but I'm sorry: What we have here is just too much of a mess. I hope you know and believe that I am fully on your side. I have one last piece of advice: Forget what you've done. Forget this whole draft. Never look at a single one of these pages ever again. Don't even

try to fix them. You don't have time to fix anything. Go home, sit down in front of a totally blank page one, remember what you have to say, and *just say it.*"

Tough talk. The deadline was so close it was breathing fire. My student left my office panicked and no longer even secretly warding off despair. She understood that this was *it*. No more long, rambling talks about the meaning of it all. No more struggling through yet another stab at the seventh chapter. No more fixing up this or that. Time's *up*. She had a huge mess of a manuscript, the work of months and months and months, and I had just taken her last shred of faith in it and finished it off. This draft just would not cut it. I had all but told her it was no good, and she believed me. What could she hope for now other than to get her miserable degree and somehow get out of school in one piece? And who *cared* anymore, anyway?

My student vanished for three, maybe four weeks. No more visits to my office. No more messages on my machine. Not a trace of her anywhere on campus. Whenever I thought about her, I would grow glum and groan inside, wondering if I had done the right thing and fearing I had not.

On the very last minute of the very last hour of deadline day, a bleary and disheveled young woman stumbled into the department secretary's office and tossed down on the desk a manuscript as if she were throwing in a towel.

The manuscript was sent to me. It was thin. I've forgotten how many hundred pages were in the tattered stack of the first draft, but this thing was clean and slender, quite compact. I went to my office and sat down to read. And the first page was . . . crisp. Fresh. Smart. Not bad at all. I read on. But this was . . . *good*. Maybe even—*very good*. Where was all that rambling, ranting prose we had struggled with so long? Where was the wilderness in which we had been wandering lost so very recently? This thing sparkled. There wasn't a dull paragraph. It was nimble; it was alive. The story was the same narrative, all right. I was reading about

the very same miserable marriage we'd already explored in such depth, but speed—*desperate* speed—had made it clean, clear, direct, and swept on its own story. Somewhere around page thirty, I remember leaning back in my chair and starting to laugh—laugh—over how good it was turning out to be. I laughed in a baffled mixture of astonishment, relief, and joy. She'd *done* it. One of her thesis readers, a famous novelist not known for treating student manuscripts with kid gloves, began her report: "*This novel is wonderful. . . .*" An important publisher bought and published the book within a year. The author inscribed my copy with a sentence three words long: "*Just say it!*"

What is the lesson of this little tale? It is not, I assure you, that every book can or should be written in three desperate weeks. It is that some people cannot "just say it" until they have gone through the long, introspective, suffering, sometimes all but stagnant process of first-drafting that produced that elephantine unsubmittable first draft. Some things may have to be mastered both internally, and on the page, before you can "just say it."

I am aware of course that many writers, including many novices, use neither a fast nor a slow first draft, but something in between. The more usual method is a stop-and-start forward crawl. Richard Price describes it well. "Typically, what I'll do is write a page, reread it, edit it, write half a page more, and then I'll go back to the very first thing I wrote that morning. It's like the nursery rhyme 'The House That Jack Built,' where you go back to the first line of the poem and go all the way through, adding a line each time, and then back to the first. So, I don't know whether I'm editing, reediting, or writing something new, but it's kind of a creeping, incremental style of writing. I always sort of half-know where I'm going."

"The House That Jack Built" is a perfectly reasonable way to combine revision and first-drafting. I use a variant of it myself. But it does come with certain liabilities. It loses the advantages of speed: beating your inner censor, coming unblocked, getting

narrative momentum. Moreover, "The House That Jack Built" tends to favor beginnings. You go back to the start again and again; you reach the end, exhausted, once. This will show. If you work this way, remember that you will need to give very special attention to the end.

SHOWING A FIRST DRAFT

Most mentors agree: A rough first draft should be for your eyes only. Stephen King calls the first draft a "closed-door draft." If you are a student working with a teacher, or if you are in a workshop, this may not be possible. Your first draft, be it fast or slow, is likely to be cluttered with stuff you won't want others to see: your haste, your wild guesses, your blunders, your raw fantasies, your embarrassment. It's the rare reader anywhere who can see past these things to the piece's potential.

Keeping the door closed can be hard. You naturally want to connect; you want to show the stuff that seems good. It would be nice to have somebody tell you you're not crazy. Resist these temptations. The wrong feedback now can flatten you with a touch. Even a fully justified criticism can intrude on what must be a personal process, and of course blundering criticism will only mess up everything. King puts it nicely: "Give yourself a chance to think while the story is still like a field of freshly fallen snow, absent of any tracks save your own." You will have a use for another pair of eyes soon enough.

Okay, what *should* you do after you finish a rough first draft?

First, feel good. It's quite true that you are not done yet, but this is a real accomplishment just the same. You have come a long way—longer than you may suppose. Some version of your story is down on paper. It is real. It is there. Your story is now within your grasp in a way it has never been before.

Have a glass of champagne. Celebrate. Enjoy the glow.

Then give it a rest.

You will need a little distance from the draft; it will help to come to it cold, and so a little time off, tinkering with another project can be healthy. It should not be long—just a decent cooling period. Resist the temptation—which will be strong—to read and compulsively reread what you have. Various writers suggest various periods of time off. A week? At most a couple of months? Not more. You are not trying to *forget* this draft, you trying only to get enough distance from it to see it again later through fresh and rested eyes. You are trying to get away from your role as writer so you can be your own first reader.

After this time of rest, prepare yourself to read through the whole draft. This should be done in one sitting or something as close to it as you can arrange. If this is a story, a chapter, or even a short novel, do a whole read-through at once. If your project is too long for that, plan on as few sittings as possible. This is a very special moment. Be calm. Give yourself plenty of time. Close the door and keep it firmly closed. Get your notepad and Post-its handy.

And get ready for a bumpy ride.

There are not many rapid mood swings like the ones you are about to go through. The goal, says Richard Bausch, is to "read it with the cold detachment of a doctor looking at an X ray." Lots of luck. If you are an even ordinarily self-critical writer, you will come across lots of things that will make you want to scream. Sloppiness. Stupid blunders. Incomprehensible passages. Boring passages. Embarrassments.

Do not panic. Your twin friends, the sense of rightness and wrongness, are going to be your guides, and they are going to be busy. What you hear that voice—*wrong, this is wrong*—don't cringe, just make a simple note: "wrong," "cut or improve," "needs work," "sentimental." And keep going. And then there will be some surges—*good, this is good*—but don't celebrate; just make a one-word note—"good"—and keep going. Resist the impulse to start serious revision right now. If you're suddenly overtaken by a visionary brainstorm that lifts everything to a new level, okay,

write it down. But you are reading here. So don't write, read. Feel the exact quality of your own reading involvement. Do you forget yourself and read ahead, absorbed and involved? Congratulations. Mark the passage "good." Is that absorption suddenly broken by the familiar voice: *wrong, wrong?* Congratulations again. Are you bored? Does your mind wander? Are you skimming? Good again. Boredom is *always* pointing to trouble. If I don't cut it on the spot, I note boring passages with a one-word acronym: MEGO—"My Eyes Glaze Over." Above all, resist the impulse to overreact. Fight down both panic *and* ecstasy. You are going to fix all these problems. Just keep making those terse notes. Get to the end.

When you are done, *do not make a judgment*. Your manuscript is not ready to be judged. It is ready to be improved. Besides, your judgments may not be very sound right now. Your head will be swarming with a mass of conflicting and even bewildered responses. You will have your notes on the page. And you will have, when the inner tumult subsides, something you have not really had until now. You will know your story. At least you will know it well enough to be ready to take full possession of it.

TAKING CHARGE OF THE STORY. The most typical problems are sketchiness, shallow characterization, undepicted action, and vague description—not to mention a wavering, unclear voice. You are going to attend to all these things.

But begin by taking charge of your story. Though even a completed first draft will rarely provide you with full mastery over your story, you have now managed to tell the story once. True, that's only once, but it does give you the *basis* for getting that mastery in the second draft. Do you remember our remark, a few chapters back, that since there are many ways to tell any story, you may have to tell yours several times before you settle on the right way for it? This may be the moment to try some of these retellings. You certainly do not want to retell the story each time in a full draft. Life *is* short.

This may be the moment to write a scenario. That is, you may be able to write a short but detailed précis or paraphrase of the story that's been forming in this draft. And that scenario may turn into a map for the second draft.

Note well: I'm suggesting you write your scenario *after*—not before—you finish your first draft. You were in no position to write a scenario before you'd done the first draft. You did not know the story well enough for that.

No story is really a story until it can be retold. Paraphrase is one of the mind's most potent instruments of understanding. What cannot be paraphrased has probably not been understood at all. Remember the early days, how you blushed and stammered and felt like an idiot when people asked you about your story? You began the first draft feeling, guessing, that you might have a story. That time is over. Your story lies before you, fresh territory. Now you need a map.

If you decide to do even one scenario, try several. Tell yourself your emerging story again and again until you have, in capsule, a potent credible version that is propelling you into the new draft. If you like, summarize your first-draft version in the first. Then try some other ways of telling it. Change the beginning, change the ending, shift points of view and perspectives. Keep each summary short and try never to devote more than a day's work to any one of them. You are not rewriting. You are summarizing; you are testing possibilities. If your project is a short story or novella, don't produce one syllable over 350 words. If you are writing a novel, the summary should not be more than 3,000 words. Even those numbers are probably too generous. Stick to the story. Don't talk to yourself about the story: Tell it to yourself in this concentrated form. Don't indulge in fancy meditations on the theme and do not theorize. But do include images and motifs and moments that you know drive the story forward, keeping them in a kind of shorthand that you'll clearly understand. Remember, this is just for you. A good model is Flaubert's scenario for *Madame Bovary*, which appears in the appendix of one

of the best books I know about the writing of a great novel: Francis Steegmuller's *Flaubert and Madame Bovary*. It's true, Flaubert was (in *Madame Bovary*, anyway) a single-drafter who wrote his scenario before he did that first draft. But the document is especially useful because it so clearly shows how images and precisely visualized moments can serve as the pivots and stepping-stones for forward narrative movement, while some of the dramatic, even hectic scenes in the novel—Emma's suicide, for example—are noted in a couple of calm sentences. Work quickly. Don't get bogged down. With each new version, reconsider, change, tighten, revise. John Braine, from whom I learned this scenario technique, recommended doing a scenario a day, even it means you must defer dealing with this or that incoherence or problem until the next day. "If you write quickly—ideally producing a summary each session—this will be reflected in the finished novel. The narrative will have an organic unity; it won't be a bundle of loosely linked episodes. And it will flow compulsively; it won't stop and start, run and stagger."

When you are fully satisfied, you will have a map for your second draft.

RULES FOR REVISION

If you are about to begin a second draft, it is best to prepare yourself psychologically by realizing that you are about to rewrite—not polish, rewrite—your entire project. This will be obvious if you do the scenario and settle on one that differs significantly from what you have in the first draft. But in any case, you should plan on rewriting in depth.

If you imagine that a second draft can be created simply by sitting down and starting on page one to polish every line, stop: You are about to fall into a classic trap. You are not yet ready to polish anything. I've repeatedly seen novices slaving away at

polishing rough first drafts before they had really taken charge of the shape and structure and character alignments of the story itself. They had not yet taken possession of the narrative voice, they did not yet really know who their characters were. Polishing happened to be the only technique of revision they knew, and so they were polishing, hoping that it would release the things they needed, the way rubbing Aladdin's lamp released the genie.

It won't. *Do not polish a mess*. Polishing can't give your story its shape. Polishing can't show you what action you need or reveal your characters' roles. Polishing can't even give you the *sound* of your dialogue or your voice. In a second draft, you are going to be hauling huge hunks of prose to completely new places, cutting whole chapters, banishing irrelevant characters, and adding new relevant ones. With or without the help of your scenario, you are going to be dealing with structure. It will be hard work, but the nice thing is that once it is done, it is likely to stay done. You will not be restructuring much in third or final drafts. That is when you'll be polishing.

And so—

REVISE FOR STRUCTURE FIRST. Redrafting should begin by solving the problem of sequence. Always. So should every revision, no matter how minor. Structure determines not only the large shape of the story; it also determines every section, every paragraph, for that matter, the smallest turns in the cadence of every sentence. There is an implicit sequence in *everything* you do. In any novel, or story, or chapter, or passage, there is a necessary sequence: of blocks of information, of events, of sentences. No other will do. You *must* find that sequence, and you must be looking for it all the time. Logic will give you some of it. Intuition will give you some more. The indispensable editorial impulse to simplify the order of things will give you more. As if with a safecracker's sandpapered fingertips, you must *feel* the

tumblers of the right combination falling into place. That order, incidentally, is always there. If your ear is fine enough, it is always findable. Get it right, and the locked door will swing open.

DEVELOP THE UNDEVELOPED. Cutting out the bad parts is not enough. If you wrote a fast first draft, you should expect the second draft to be longer, more complex, and probably slower paced than the first. It will not necessarily be that way when you finish the third draft: This is the time for development. Virtually everything in a first draft needs to be made more vivid, more coherent, and more powerful. Your second encounter with your own prose should make you see more, not less. Act on every insight. Get them down. Fill paragraphs and pages with them. Bear in mind your great advantage over screenwriters: *You don't lose momentum and audience if you dare pause to explain or savor something for longer than ten seconds. Provided it's interesting enough, dynamic enough, suggestive enough, you gain momentum through expansiveness.*

REVISE FOR PLOT. Remember that the plot follows the story, and that while stories can be paraphrased and summarized, plots are nothing if not concrete. Now is the time to give your full attention to this concreteness, finding and getting down the exact ways the events in your story happen, and how those changes drive the story forward. Until now, given the amorphousness of your story, you have not been in a position to pay a great deal of attention to the "mechanisms" of plot. Now is the time to get these details right. How do the twists and turns of this story work, exactly? Aristotle spoke of the "reversals and recognitions" in every story. What are your "reversals and recognitions," and what is the precise way they take place? Somewhere in the course of doing the second draft, you must get complete clarity on every single one of them.

And, speaking of clarity—

REVISE FOR CLARITY. The single most destructive force dooming most first fiction to failure is simple unreadability. As we have seen, the heart of readability is your relationship to your reader. Clarity must be an essential element of that relationship. When I first began teaching, I sometimes imagined I was surrounded by young writers who, for some strange reason, were enchanted with obscurity and opacity as artistic modes, a bunch of Gertrude Steins and Mallarmés. I had never read large numbers of manuscripts in an early stage. Here was a lot of often strikingly well-written work in which I had real trouble grasping what was being said. At first I imagined that this obscurity was somehow intended. It almost never was. These passages were crystal clear to their authors. They could see it all, with all its nuances and details, plain as plain. Why couldn't I?

First drafts, even pretty good ones, can be excruciatingly hard for anyone but their authors to read. The primary issue, line by line, is not their higher meaning. It is their basic meaning. What is going on? Is John talking to Mary, or is he talking to Bill? Are we in Iowa or Guatemala? Nothing is so infuriating as not being understood, but if a reader of good basic intelligence does not know what you are talking about, you have a problem. Don't rationalize it by blaming the messenger for the message. Your reader is not stupid. You are not being understood, and it is *your* problem.

Sadly, your first readers may be reluctant to tell you the truth about your lack of clarity. It is a fact that many readers (especially in a school) will go to great lengths to conceal their bafflement over a piece of prose they don't understand. Rather than run the risk of being thought dense or uncomprehending or phillistine, all too many readers, including many who should know better—editors, teachers, workshop members—would rather skip over an obscurity than admit they just don't get it.

Yet it is simply impossible to be too clear. Always, always make your writing a little clearer than you think it needs to be.

Does this make you nervous? Are you afraid some snob will sneer and call your writing "obvious"? Don't be. If clarity reveals that your scene is *really* too simple, if it unmasks your dialogue as *really* humdrum, then clarity will have done you a very great service. It's pretty easy to cut the "obvious." On the other hand, if your scene is rich and elusive and rare, clarity can only crown those virtues with perfection. Murk—mere murk—sinks. "If a man writes clearly enough," Hemingway said, "any one can see if he fakes. . . . True mysticism should not be confused with incompetence in writing. . . ."

It is time to leave the pretensions of the classroom behind: *No* piece of literature has ever been better *merely* because it is unreadable or obscure. Keep in mind always that "common reader" with whom, as Virginia Woolf reminded us, Dr. Johnson rejoiced to concur. I know, it will be galling when somebody you respect tells you that they "just don't get" that shimmering paragraph, the one you think may be the most mysterious and beautiful you ever wrote. You've got to get over it. They are doing you a favor.

THE 10-PERCENT SOLUTION

It's said that Fred Astaire once gave this advice to a young filmmaker: "Make it as good as you can. Then cut ten minutes." I hope Astaire really did make this remark, because it is at once profound and worthy of his debonair perfection. It belongs alongside Blaise Pascal's remark, in a letter, that he would make it shorter if he had the time.

There is a bit of wisdom about revision that I regularly pounded into the heads of each new generation of students, always imagining I had thought it up myself. It became so central to my teaching that the maxim came to be known around the school, with a smack of irony, as "Koch's 10-Percent Solution."

The 10-percent solution is absurdly, sublimely simple.

Cut it by 10 percent.

Cut *everything* by 10 percent.

If your story is 10 pages long, make it 9 pages long. Twenty pages? Make it 18. If your draft is 300 pages long, knock it down to 270. Do you have a bunch of pages—any bunch of pages—that needs work? They have not been worked on until they have been washed and preshrunk in the 10-Percent Solution.

Once in a rare while someone will come along for whom this rule is unworkable. I'd guess maybe one time in fifty. The best and wisest guide to all cutting is your own boredom. Elmore Leonard put it beautifully when he advised leaving out the boring parts. Do your eyes glaze over as you read? Cut. Are *you* not held? Cut. Been there? Done that? Cut, cut, and cut again. When you are bored—really bored—don't even *try* to fix the passage. Just cut. Is there maybe one lively sentence somewhere in there? Good. Save that one sentence. And then cut. Forget the transitions and the explanations: cut *bravely*. Are you afraid some boring passage is also essential? If it really is essential, it will eventually make its way back onto your page, though we hope in a more lively form.

Cut phoniness. There are going to be certain passages that you put in simply in the hope of impressing people. It is true of me, and it is almost surely true of you. I have maybe never known a writer of whom it is not true. But literary pretension is the curse of the postmodern age. We all have our favorite ways of showing off, and they rarely serve us well. When you have identified your own grandiosity, do not be kind. When Georges Simenon was an eager young wannabe in Paris, none other than Colette herself advised him that his prose was "too literary, always too literary." Thereafter, Simenon spent much of his amazing career cutting away his efforts to impress. "It's what I do when I write," he said, "the main job when I rewrite. . . . [I cut] every word which is there just to make an effect. Every sentence which is there just for the sentence. . . . Cut it."

I have since discovered that the 10-percent solution isn't mine at all. Stephen King, in *On Writing*, says he learned the rule from a rejection slip when he was in high school, back in 1966. One of his stories was returned to him with a rejection slip on which some wise editor had scrawled, "Not bad, but *puffy*. You need to revise for length. Formula: 2nd Draft = 1st draft - 10%." King wrote it out on a piece of cardboard and put it above his desk: "Second draft equals first draft—minus 10%."

Put that equation over *your* desk.

REVISE OUT LOUD

When it comes to line-by-line work, the ear is a wonderful editor—and usually a much sharper, smarter, and livelier editor than the eye. When she was a little girl, Dickens's daughter Mamie was once granted the unique privilege of spending several days reading and resting on a sofa in her father's *very* closed-door study while he worked. This was an opportunity granted to nobody else, but Mamie was getting over being sick, and she was her daddy's darling, and she promised to be quiet. As a grown woman, Mamie wrote a reminiscence of her time in the inner sanctum. As Dickens sank deeper and deeper into his work, she wrote, "Evidently not seeing me, he began talking rapidly in a low voice." From time to time, he would jump up, still murmuring, and rush to a mirror, where he pulled a variety of weird faces. Then he would rush back to the desk to mumble some more. Charles Dickens was *muttering* his prose onto the page. In fact, even when the master was away from the desk, when he was "searching for some pictures I wanted to build upon," he would whisper the emerging cadences aloud, "his eyes looking straight before him, his lips slightly working, as they generally did when he sat thinking and writing."

Take it from the greatest: You will *bear* what's right and wrong on your page before you *see* it. This precept is of course crucial

for dialogue, but it is really true for everything. "My working rule with narrative prose," says John Braine, "is the same as for dialogue: If it can't be read aloud, it's no good." Once you've revised for structure, once you've done some basic cutting, it's useful to crown the whole process of revision by reading aloud. "You must learn to reread your own sentences," says Richard Bausch, "as a stranger might. And say everything aloud. Listen to how it *sounds*."

This work should go on behind closed doors. Your prose is not yet polished enough to be read aloud to anyone but yourself. An accomplished editor I know recalls, as an undergraduate, listening to his English professor read his papers aloud to him in private conference: "a very powerful way to get you to see what needs improving." You do not want to discover what needs improving in a performance.

REWRITE FROM MEMORY

Some bad prose is a tar baby. Touch it and you just sink deeper into tar. If your battle with some passage is leaving you bleary-eyed and frustrated, it's often best simply to return to your original inspiration and without so much as a backward glance, quickly write out the whole thing again, from scratch, and from memory. When you are mired in a manuscript, *rewrite from memory*. Scott Fitzgerald's notebooks are filled with this injunction. That is what, through dumb luck, I got my early student to do when she was mired in her impossible first draft. And it works for little things as well as big ones, as I learned many years ago from a wise magazine editor. I was doing a lot of work for her magazine, and so I often found myself in her office, trying to make something clear that, as we thrashed about, only became more snarled up. After a certain point in these discussions, the wise editor would lightly push the manuscript aside and calmly say, "Stephen, why don't you just tell me what you're saying here?" And I would

look up from the battered page. It was like breaking an evil spell. I would lean back in my chair, and I would tell her. "Okay," she'd answer. "That's clear. Let's say that." She would cross out the mess and write down what I had said. Simple. I didn't know I was rewriting from memory. But I was.

TRUST WHAT YOU HAVE

Cut, but don't cut out your heart. Don't banish something vital from your page just because after a few tries it is still unsatisfactory. When you first scribbled it down, it seemed so transporting, so superb. So . . . what happened? Well, maybe it just hasn't happened yet. Don't let your chagrin over the mess you've made make you forget that first excitement. Your job in revision is to recapture that first excitement and know it again, no longer as a promise but as a promise redeemed. From the very beginning, the definition of your job has been to trust your own excitement and make it pay off. It still is. Never condemn your own prose. Redeem it. If you do, the original excitement will come back, but it will come back fulfilled and alive with a power that will be new to you.