

go, see what they see, do what they do, and through this vicarious action the reader should be allowed to proceed unfettered by your overt manipulation.

So, keep your hands off the readers. Leave them alone. Don't worry about theme. Just tell a good story and theme will take care of itself.

NOTES FOR SELECTED READINGS

Note the resonant ending in Louise Erdrich's "The Red Convertible."

Exercise

1. When you have finished a story, complete the following sentence:
This story means . . . Have friends and classmates read your story and have them complete the same sentence. It is not important that all the answers be the same, of course, but they should be in the same ballpark. For example, it would be disconcerting to the author of a story about lost childhood if one person wrote "This story means the transition from childhood to adulthood is difficult at best" and another person wrote "This story means that choosing a major is difficult and counselors should be more helpful."

CHAPTER

23

REVISION

The word *revise*, along with the word *visit*, came to English from the Latin *videre*, meaning *to see*, and the Latin *visitare*, meaning *to go to see*. In that context, then, to revise a story is to go back to visit it and see it again. I mention this because all too often we think of revision as changing something when we must first realize that to revise is to pay another visit to the story wherein we will see it again, and in that sense it is entirely and literally possible that we could revise an entire draft without changing a single word.

The key to writing, any writing, is revision. Certainly, writing that first draft is an exhilarating process, but it is just the beginning of a much longer process. A first draft is only the first leg of the journey. If our destination is a story as finely polished as we can possibly make it, then each draft we write is a step toward that destination.

When I was much younger, I loved writing first drafts to the exclusion of revising them. Thus, I started many journeys, but I never arrived anywhere. Several years later I learned to love revision as well; it is an entirely different process, but when you realize how playful a process it can be, then you will enjoy it as well.

It has been said that time is a luxury, and it is, but in writing it is also a necessity. One must take

*Perhaps if writers
enjoyed a fuller
experience of the
private gratifications
of artmaking, we
would be less
intimidated by the
rigors of revision.*

Valerie Miner

time off between drafts. If I finish a first draft on Tuesday and try to revise it on Wednesday, I will make a muddle of things; I cannot "re-see" my story so soon after having written that first draft because it is still in my head as well as on the page. If, however, I take a week away from the story, perhaps working on another project, then when I revisit the story I will see it with fresh eyes and with those new eyes I will see areas that are unclear. Thus, leave a draft alone for at least a few days before going back to revise.

Whenever I do a public reading, whether a reading of a published or an unpublished piece of fiction, I can hear areas that need to be revised. Reading my work aloud alone, however, is less effective because there is some connection between the audience and me that allows me to hear the work with new ears; it is almost as if I am hearing the work for the first time with *their* ears, seeing it for the first time with *their* eyes. If you have no one to read your work to, try reading before a mirror with pencil in hand. For some reason, that also seems to work. Be sure to make plenty of eye contact with that face staring you in the eyes; besides helping you hear your story—where it rings true and where it hits a sour note—reading aloud before a mirror is good practice for reading before an audience. Words are meant to be heard, after all, and when you have composed particularly beautiful sentences and paragraphs, reading them aloud allows you the full pleasure they afford as the words roll off your tongue to be retrieved by your ears. Reading silently is something akin to standing in the kitchen of Maxim's in Paris with your nostrils pinched shut.

Rewriting a story without a specific sense of direction can get you lost in the woods. You may not know where to go, but if you go into a new draft knowing that you are only going to rewrite for one thing—temperature, for example—then you will avoid the pitfalls of trying to do everything at once. For example, if you are writing a story set in Alaska in midwinter, you may devote an entire draft to lowering the temperature wherever possible. That's what Ron Carlson did in his story "Blazo." If you are in Phoenix, Arizona, some hot August afternoon, reading this story will ice you down.

You might write another draft focusing on the dialogue of one particular character, and another focusing on a heightened sense of setting, and another on tone, and another on language. Gustave Flaubert coined the term *Le mot juste*, meaning the exact word, and in rewriting for the exact, the precise, word, you may spend countless—yet enjoyable—hours. There is the story of Flaubert having met a friend at lunch who asked him how he had spent his morning. Flaubert told him he spent the entire morning trying to decide whether to keep or delete a comma. The friend asked what he finally decided, and Flaubert told him that he took the comma out. Later that evening, they met for dinner and this same friend asked Flaubert how he had spent the afternoon. Flaubert asked him if he remembered that comma he had taken out in the morning and the friend said yes, he did. "Well," Flaubert said. "I decided to put it back in."

Apocryphal or not, the story illustrates how careful we need be as writers. It sounds daunting, but if you enjoy the process of writing, this slow and painstaking revision is great fun. And as you can see, it is no surprise that a writer may go through twenty or thirty drafts before he feels he has arrived at the destination he sought from the beginning: the polished story.

As writers, we use different mediums: some of us use pencils and yellow legal pads, some of us use pens, others use typewriters, and still others of us use computers, as do I. Before I begin a revision, I always print a hard copy on which I can take notes as I read. In this first reading, I am not revising for anything specific such as temperature; rather, I am looking for any problems in any element of the story. Maybe I have changed a character's name in one area but not in another; maybe I have the time of day wrong in another area; maybe I have a character say something she need not say. In this first step of revision, I use black ink with which to make marginalia, on the second reading I use red ink, and the third I use green ink. In this fashion, I can see how my decisions have been changed with subsequent readings. Next, I go back to the computer, and as I refer to my hard copy and all the notes I have made in three different colors of ink, I begin to make changes. Once I have done this I print another hard copy and take the story before the mirror where I read it aloud with pen in hand, making changes on the manuscript as I read.

After making any changes on the hard copy during my "public reading," I go back to the computer and type those changes in, and then I begin the process of rewriting for a single aspect of the story I feel is weak. For example, I may feel that I have not quite clarified an individual character, so I go back through the hard copy and make notes where I feel I can heighten that character. Once I am done, I go back to the computer and type in the new changes. Next, I print another hard copy and begin the process again, this time focusing on a different element.

As one can see, I am probably going to make more changes in the earlier drafts. By the time I am on the fifteenth draft, it is not unusual that I may be making only one or two changes before I feel the story is as polished as I can make it. Then I leave the story alone for a week, print a new hard copy, and read it again. If I still feel the story is as polished as I can make it, then I consider it done.

Once I am at this stage, I give the story to friends and colleagues whose opinions I value. In the event that they suggest changes, and I agree with them, I go back and do another draft.

Finally, I *think* that I am done with the story, but the fact of the matter is that I may not be done. At this point I'll submit the story to a magazine. It may be that the editor will suggest changes, and again, if I agree with him, I will make the changes. If the editor accepts the story, he accepts it because I am done. If the editor rejects the story, I'll send it somewhere else until some other editor does accept it—or until I realize the need to revisit the story and see it again through fresh eyes.

The process I have outlined may or may not work for you. If it does not, fine; you will come up with your own. What is important is that you have your own process of revision. And I promise you this: If you don't already, you will learn to love the art of revision.

Exercises

1. Read your most recent story aloud before a mirror as if you were reading it before an audience. As you read, circle words, phrases, and clauses that do not sound as pleasing as they might. When you are finished, go back and rewrite those areas that sounded "off" and repeat the process.
2. Read your most recent story just before going to bed. Make sure it is the last thing you do before turning off the lights. This exercise will allow your subconscious to "work" on the story as you sleep. If there were an area in the story where you were stuck, this exercise will often help you come up with new ideas during your writing session the following day.
3. To revise for sentence level problems such as faulty grammar, poor punctuation, and spelling errors, read your story backwards starting with the last sentence, continuing with the penultimate sentence, and working all the way to the beginning of the story. The reason this works is because, when reading the story from front to back, your brain is considering content as well as grammar, punctuation, and spelling. This exercise allows the brain to focus on the sentence level without being concerned with meaning.

CHAPTER

24

PARTICIPATING IN THE WORKSHOP

There are many ways to orchestrate a writing workshop, but no matter how the instructor handles it, it can be quite daunting for the student writer the first time she is "on the block"—a rather disheartening metaphor for having your story critiqued by your instructor and fellow students. If the class meets weekly, you have provided enough copies of your story to the instructor, who then distributes them to the other students; they take them home and read them and write critiques of them. The next week you walk into class both excited and horrified: excited that your instructor and your fellow student writers will have loved your story; horrified that they will have hated it.

However, if the instructor has prepared the students in the proper decorum of the workshop, it does not have to be this way. In this chapter, I will explain how I conduct a workshop and what I expect from the student writers.

First of all, I explain that every story we workshop had better have some problems, because if the stories are perfect, then the student writers should be teaching the class and I should be out playing golf. When we go to the doctor because of an ache in the knee, we expect a diagnosis of what is wrong with suggestions of how to fix it.

People ask you for criticism, but they only want praise.

W. Somerset
Maugham