

On Rewrites.

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Shrinkwrapped: My First Fifty Years on the Couch

and

Coming to Terms with Aging: the secret to meaningful time.

Many writers think of revisions as a necessary chore. I relish rewriting and enjoy debating word choice, trimming baggage words and moving paragraphs around like sides of a Rubik's Cube.

I spend lots of time rewriting because I'm an inefficient writer who doesn't work from an outline. I wish outlining fit my writing process, but I don't know where a chapter is going until it gets there. I start with a rough idea, a thought that's been marinating and I fire away, blasting words at an empty page like a raw recruit with an Uzi. From there the idea goes on its own. If you're old enough to remember Werner Erhard, the creator of EST, I do as he suggested which is to ride the horse in the direction it's going. I cut a crude trail along the way which, after considerable editing, becomes a well worn path. I start clearing with a machete, but ultimately I work with pruning shears.

I've been writing long enough to know I should never have faith in a first draft, especially the ones I think are really good. Painful disappointment has taught me that when I pick up the piece several days later, I'll feel like I'm on a disappointing third date. All the blemishes appear and I wonder, "*How could I have thought this was any good?*" Putting drafts aside and returning to them days later is essential to the revision process.

Around the fourth or fifth draft, I force myself to read aloud what I've written. It's an effort, but as happens when you paint new drywall with a glossy color and the bumps stand out, reading aloud amplifies the imperfections you hadn't noticed. If I stumble over a sentence, I know the meter isn't crisp, or that the structure is awkward or the meaning is fuzzy.

Speaking of meter, I care as much about a sentence's music as its meaning. For me, both parts have to work for the piece to flow smoothly-- I want it liquid like a river. Every small edit changes the meter so after I alter something, I have to reconsider rhythm.

The focus of my rewrites varies by content. Humor is hard to do, but it's easy writing to evaluate. If a sentence makes readers laugh, it works. With an essay I worry about clarity, logic and insight. For poetry, it's images and word music. Revisions for fiction concentrate on plot and character. The story has to follow a consistent timeline and readers are unforgiving when story details don't match up. Characterization is, for me, the hardest rewriting. I have to ask myself, "Am I writing in 3D or is the

character a cardboard poster? Will the reader find the personality I created believable and will they relate to what motivates a character?" Hoping to achieve that result forces me to go deeper with each round of editing, on a hunt for a fresh description or for actions that reveal. The best way I know of to determine if I've succeeded is to enlist the help of a trusted reader or better yet, a writing group that provides feedback.

We all need sounding boards. A writer doing multiple rounds of revisions gets too close to his subject, and a skilled fellow writer or insightful reader brings fresh eyes to the task. Blunt critics are the most helpful.

I pay attention to the comments they give me, but I remind myself that ultimately I'm the one who has to decide which are valid and which I will discard. When I wrote my second book, Shrinkwrapped, the writing group of which I'm a member received my chapters in advance and took turns at our meetings offering suggestions. Often they were in agreement when my revisions succeeded. But just as often they disagreed. In the end, I had to choose: to alter or not to alter. That's the writer's responsibility. But determining when to accommodate critics and when to stand firm is tricky business.

I know if I ignore their criticism, I do so at my own peril. Years ago while conducting focus groups for corporate marketers, I learned that even if just one person in the room voiced a concern about a product or a commercial, that individual inevitably represented a segment of the population who would feel similarly. So if, for example, one reader is confused by my paragraph, I can be sure he or she won't be alone in scratching her head and wondering. On the other hand, it's equally dangerous to take all objections as gospel and rework them. I've seen writers water down a good piece by doing that.

I find editing completely engrossing. I can rewrite for hours and look up surprised that daylight has turned to twilight. It demands all my concentration especially if I'm working on either of two particularly challenging tasks, both of which have to be done really well if I hope to get published. I'm referring to the Herculean task of writing titles or query letters. Give me the Augean Stables any day.

I've written two books, but two hundred titles. When it comes to picking a title, there is no substitute for creating dozens of alternates, taping them to the wall, showing them around, viewing them over time, until you're confident you have a winner. Draft titles are called "the working title" for a reason: because you will still be working on them until the publisher screams ENOUGH. (This is eccentric perhaps, but I'm fond of short, one word titles with a subtitle when such a combination is possible. Single word titles offer graphic advantages--for example you can use larger, standout type for the book's cover. Single word titles are quickly read on a bookstore's shelves, and they can be startling and grab interest.)

Creating a captivating title is a hollow accomplishment if the publisher you send it to won't read your manuscript, a cold reality that brings us to the high art of the query letter. Unless a writer already has fame and publishing contacts, or a top literary agent, or the author is already on the New York Times Best Seller list, it will take an outstanding query letter to get a manuscript noticed. In the US alone 175,000 books are published a year and for every one published, thirty manuscripts get a thumbs down.

Let me further illustrate how tough this is for authors. In October of 2009, I shared a booth with my publisher at the New England Independent Booksellers Convention in Hartford, Connecticut. What an eye opener--every author should go to at least one such show. I entered a convention hall the size of a domed football-field, filled with rows of book booths, each manned by a different publisher. All the majors were there: Houghton Mifflin, Scholastic, Penguin, Scribner's, Kopf, Random House and many, many more. The mid-sized and specialty-publishing houses had booths too, stacked with titles, posters, and POP table tents. Everywhere I turned I saw famous books recently reviewed and praised by the New York Times. I saw thousands of books for dozens of specialties and for every genre: history, fiction, children's, politics. I spent two days at our own small booth, a little known author, hoping to attract attention, perhaps the way a single soprano sings amidst the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and dreams of recognition.

Given the challenge, it's little wonder that a query letter is the hardest single page, single spaced letter an author ever writes. It has to knock a jaded Junior Publishing Associate to attention. The first sentence has to leave her flopping like a hooked trout.

In one page the query has to define the book's market and convince the publisher, the dozing gatekeeper that holds the keys to the kingdom, that here is the book the market has been waiting for. The query has to ring the gong in their gut that tells them you are someone they simply have to talk to.

Here's a final consideration about writing and revisions. Let's assume a query letter worked and the publisher calls. They like the manuscript and they offer an advance. What follows? Next comes more revisions and this time they come at the request of the publisher's team.

I was lucky. My publisher, RDR Books, provided a great editor. We didn't always agree, but I respected my editor who knew publishing better than I did. So I made a pact with myself; that even when we didn't agree, I would try to do the rewrite as he or she suggested. I would try it his way and only then, if I felt a revision just didn't work, would I go back and make my case.

Specifically with my second book Shrinkwrapped, I cheerfully did as the publisher requested and moved chapter four to chapter eight, creating new chapter transitions to accomplish the move. I wrote an entirely new opening chapter because they asked me to. I did each and every proposed revision, refusing to cop an attitude that there was something so precious about my initial writing that it couldn't be changed. I kept open to their suggestions and as a result, I learned a lot about my writing from a top-notch editor. Remaining open-minded also prevented me from locking myself on a single way to write something. In the end our collaboration was effective as we shifted the sides of my Rubik's Cube into their proper place.