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SEVEN LAYERS TO REVISING YOUR NOVEL

By Meredith Sue Willis

Most people know about inspiration. You wouldn't be writing a novel if you didn't have it. Also, most people who write have some skill at editing and polishing. We've all heard of writers who do 15 drafts and then make corrections in the printed copies of their books. What we don't usually hear about are the many, many ways to get from that first inspiration to the editing and polishing.

I call these draft steps "layers," and each offers a unique way to go deeper and make a book better. Some take only a few hours as you dash through the manuscript looking at one element.

Some are leisurely and probably similar to your natural process of writing. Changing speed and moving farther from or closer to the manuscript will give you perspective and highlight various aspects of the book.

Keep in mind that writing and revising don't have to be linear processes. Each draft need not be approached in the same mood or frame of mind. You might spend a week on your final chapter but only a few hours polishing up a scene that has been almost right from the start. The goal is to engage all the parts of our creative self: the wild, try-anything part and also the methodical, hard worker.

EXERCISES FOR NOVEL STRUCTURE

As a supplement to outlining, here are some useful questions to answer about your novel that may help you improve its structure.

What is the genre? Fictional autobiography? Mystery? Futuristic? Fantasy? Steampunk?

What will it be when you are finished: a slim volume or a big chunky door stopper?

Who is your typical reader?
Age? Gender?

When you picture that typical reader, where is he or she reading, and in what format? In an airport lounge with brand new trade paperback with a dramatic cover? A library hardcover in coffee shop? A Kindle or Nook in bed at night?

If someone went to a bookstore looking for a book to read, to what writer would the salesperson compare *your* book? "If you like so-and-so, you're going to love [your name here]."

What does the main character of your novel want?

LAYER ONE: From the middle-

The first layer of revision goes from the middle to the end. You'll do this

revision at more or less your usual speed. Much of what you'll do is add.

It is my experience with my own novels and working with the novels of others that we tend to run out of steam somewhere in the middle and make a mad dash to finish. This is not terrible. A complete draft, however rough, is an excellent accomplishment that helps you get a sense of the shape of your novel. But coming to the end isn't always finishing. Layer one starts in the middle and goes to the end.

Try revising from the center of your story. Work forward at your natural speed, looking for elements you didn't carry through: an idea you dropped or a scene that ended too soon. A minor character may need more development. Look for what's missing and write new passages. Make sure you have at least a tentative ending, even if you don't like it much. Layer One offers a solid base to work on.

LAYER TWO: Quick cuts

The second layer of revision changes gears completely. This time, start at the beginning, but go through the whole book as *quickly as you can*, cutting anything that doesn't seem necessary. Cut

repetitions, cut boring scenes, cut all but the very sharpest adjectives – and save them in another file. If something doesn't engage you, cut it! This is one of the hardest things for a novelist to do. If you could do short, you'd write haiku.

Remember: Cuts are not mistakes. All those extra words were part of the process of drafting. They may have led you to a plot twist or a new character. But now you need to take down the scaffolding. Meandering passages lose readers. And agents and editors are looking for excuses to stop reading. Don't comply!

Read your manuscript rapidly, and if you find your mind wandering or your eye skimming, something probably needs to go. It might be a few words, but it might be the entire scene. Read passages aloud. Anything that catches your tongue is likely to have too many words. When it comes to long scenes or chapters that you love but feel you should jettison, reserve the outtakes for a short story, poem or a personal essay.



LAYER THREE: Structure

Go over the novel quickly again, this time paying attention to the general structure of the work. Read for pacing. Are all the best scenes clumped together in the first half? Or, conversely, is there a huge crisis scene and then an abrupt end? That can be effective, but you might want more space for characters to reflect or some foreshadowing of the future – a denouement. There is no single right way here: What is important is looking at the Big Picture.

Keep your distance, though. Above all, don't get sucked into your own story, and don't start tinkering with the adjectives. This is a layer for your rational, critical brain. Does the story build? If you're writing a thriller, did you up the ante and increase the tension chapter by chapter? If someone gets murdered in Chapter One, is the main character threatened in Chapter Two? Then attacked in Chapter Four? Do they kidnap his little daughter in Chapter Seven? Regardless of genre: Sharpen and deepen the conflict.

Try making a one-page outline. Even if you've already outlined, make a new one that captures *what is in the book now*. List the chapters or sections and note settings, characters who appear, events that occur. Note scenes that are climactic, either because of physical action (clipping the wires on the bomb) or because of emotional content (she realizes he has betrayed her). You want to get control of your story line. Don't depend on someone else to make the arc of your story peak in the right place. Is all the funny stuff in Chapter Fourteen? Are there too many murders? Too little sex? Does the love story lack conflict?

I can't stress strongly enough that this kind of thinking – this manipulation of materials, this attempt to guide the reader's experience of your story – comes long after you've experienced the work yourself. Create your first draft just as it comes to you. Add and deepen and cut. Once you've got it all out there, *then* start thinking about the reader's experience of your work.



LAYER FOUR: Search for details

This is one of my favorite layers. Don't read the whole manuscript this time. Using the search function on your word processor, go through the entire novel reading all the passages that mention *one* character other than the main character. Read *only* the scenes where your chosen character appears. Look for simple consistency. Look for repetitions. Did you describe the character in identical language three times? Is there a way you can spread out the physical description so that you get the person's height the first time he appears, but his bad breath later on?

More important, does the character change or is something revealed during the course of the novel? This is an excellent way to check how and where your character revelations are being made: Did the villain twirl his moustache and chuckle maniacally the very first time he appeared? Might it be better if his evil qualities appeared more gradually?

Housekeeping Chores: A Glossary

Anachronism: Watch out for cell phones in a Regency romance. An anachronism is something out of its correct time or chronology. For maximum realism, avoid it.

Grounding: Make sure you have the facts of your world straight. Is the World Trade Center still standing? What are people watching on television? How often is mail delivered?

Heinleining: A technique named for science-fiction writer Robert Heinlein, who was famous for slipping information into the story without calling attention to it.

Info-Dump: The opposite of Heinleining. Avoid it: "Frank, as you know, you are my husband, and we have three daughters ages 12, 9 and 3. This morning our youngest, Jocelyn, who has red hair and freckles, swallowed her goldfish, Goldfinger." If all else fails, narrate: "Jane and Frank DeVille had three daughters."

Proper names: Make sure they work for you. Do all your male characters have similar names? Ted, Tod, Tim and Tad might work as a group of interchangeable preppy gangsters, but for a serious psychological novel, think again. Do you want ethnic names (María Sánchez), or do you want your hero to have a name with intriguing dissonance (Giuseppe O'Brien)?

Quotidian Objects: Adding More to the Middle

If you are blocked, or if the middle of your manuscript sags, you can add an object that might appear in almost any novel, and it will restart you or give you more material. Choose an object, then think of a spot where the object might reasonably appear in your novel. Describe and keep writing to see where it takes you.

- A drawer
- New shoes
- A musical instrument
- A book
- An apple
- A bird
- A roasted bird
- A feast or celebration
- Someone's hands
- Someone's feet

Make your own list.

This layer should not take more than a couple of hours, but it might be useful to try it on several characters or even on places that reappear in the novel. This is another good time to watch for passages that aren't really necessary.

LAYER FIVE: Housekeeping

At the end of a film, you often see a credit for continuity: This is the crew member who makes sure that, during the various takes, the flower vase always has three rosebuds and not three roses in full bloom or half a dozen orchids. The goal is a final cut that is accurately consistent. Do this for your novel, too. Look for over-used words and phrases: Do a search for how many times you've used "scathing glance." Do the

beloved's eyes stay chocolate brown or suddenly turn blue? Don't let your reader be jarred out of the story.

An alternative approach is to make lemonade out of your lemons and use your discrepancies. Does the heroine fear that her beloved is the masked man who just kidnaped her? Maybe she suddenly remembers his eyes are chocolate brown, not icy blue, so he can't be the bad guy.

Another aspect of this housekeeping layer is fact-checking. Look for mistakes. Is the chronology of events reasonable? Watch for anachronisms like nylon stockings in 1910. How about seasons? Did characters go swimming at the Jersey shore in January? If you really want that January swim, it had better be a drunken wager.

LAYER SIX: Reader's pace

Go through the manuscript at a reader's pace. This layer is easy to describe, but takes discipline to do. Print out your manuscript so that it looks as much like a finished book as possible. You might even format it single-spaced with full justification and margins that make it look like a book. Or, if you are an e-reader fan, send it to your e-reader. The goal is to get a sense of your book as it will appear to a reader. Write comments, but only at some natural break in the reading. Note what you like, where the story lags, if some character or plot thread has disappeared. Is the second half better than the first? Are you finding you feel sympathy for the bad guy? Is that OK?

After doing this reading, fix whatever needs fixing, then take a deep breath.

AN EXERCISE FOR THE ENDING: LAST CHARACTER STANDING

As rapidly as possible, write the final paragraph of your novel.

Who is on the scene thinking about events or facing the future? Which man or woman (or bald eagle or angel) is surveying the terrain of the novel, mulling over the past, predicting the future? This is not the final action or climax. This is a brief overview, a creative summary. Where is this last character standing? What is the character thinking or doing? You may or may not choose to use this passage, but it can help you get a sense of how your novel ends.

LAYER SEVEN: Forget about it

Lay your manuscript aside for at least a week. A month is better.

Think about *anything* except your book. Run a marathon. Plant a garden. Go visit your great aunt. After the break, go over the book one more time, from the beginning, at whatever speed is most comfortable to you. Change anything that strikes you.

When you've finished layer seven, you've reached the time when outside eyes are useful. You have created your world and developed your characters and woven your plot. Now you can profit from comments from other people. Note down any critiques or suggestions, *but don't make changes right away*. Lay the book aside again for a while before finally polishing.

No one said writing a novel would be easy – or fast! But there is nothing like the satisfaction you feel when all the layers support each other and come together as a single piece, greater than its parts. **W**

Meredith Sue Willis is the author of 18 books of fiction and nonfiction, most recently *Ten Strategies to Write Your Novel* and *Re-Visions: Stories from Stories*.