

After the

FIRST DRAFT

30 Fast, Easy Writing Tips for the Second Draft

from
DARCY PATTISON'S

Revision

Notes

I Believe in Your Story

www.darcypattison.com

I wrote a Novel.
Now what?



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Introduction

Congratulations! If you're reading this, it's probably because you've finished a first draft of a novel. So many begin; so few finish! You've done an astounding, amazing wonderful thing to have finished a first draft. You now know how to create a character, how to work with a story plot, how to write a book. You've done it. Congratulations.

First drafts. They embody such effort and such hope.

But first drafts never get published. Never.

It's time to figure out what you've done and work to make it better. This ebook is another step toward the ultimate goal of publication. Each writing tip asks you to look at a different aspect of your novel and rethink decisions you made, to write a second draft. Rethinking will lead to revision – and that's where you want to go next. A deep, comprehensive rethinking and revision of your story.

It's another long stretch of road, but you can do it. You've made it this far and there is no turning back now. Let me be the guide for a mile or two; just sit back and enjoy the scenery. I promise, you'll wind up even more filled with hope.

Darcy Pattison

Titles

Sol Stein, in his book, *Stein on Writing: A Master Editor of Some of the Most Successful Writers of Our Century Shares His Craft Techniques and Strategies*, emphasizes that titles are sales tools, an invitation to the world to enter your story. He recommends finding an apt metaphor for the story, preferably one in iambic pentameter.

Here are some original titles. See if you can match them to the well-known title below. (See answers at the end.)

1. The Mute?
2. Private Fleming, his Various Battles
3. To Climb the Wall

- A. The Red Badge of Courage
- B. The Blackboard Jungle
- C. The Heart is a Lonely Hunter

Which of these titles would you rather buy?

Diego Rivera

The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera

Titles look outward to the audience and tease. They lay a welcome mat before the threshold of the story. Write 20 different titles for your novel and then mix and match the words from the 20 until you have 20 new ones. Read them to friends or your writing group and ask which title makes them want to read the book. Anytime you're stuck on a revision, play with titles.

Ask for help. My daughter suggested the title for my teacher resource book on prewriting activities for students. She was thinking about brainstorming and storms and writing with pen and paper and came up with this: *Paper Lightning*. The editor loved it and the title stuck. Then we just had to find a great subtitle—which is the next writing tip.

Answers: 1C, 2A, 3B.

Subtitles

On the other hand, Aaron Shepard, in [Aiming At Amazon](#), recommends that you keep in mind the importance of subtitles. Subtitles aren't always used for a novel, but they have become increasingly important because of search engines. For non-fiction, authors try to pack the subtitle with every keyword for which a person might search.

For example, I have a children's picture book entitled, [19 Girls and Me](#). It's a story of friendship in a kindergarten class with 19 girls and one lone boy.

I wish I had named my picture book with this subtitle:
19 Girls and Me: A tale of kindergarten friendship.



That subtitle would have made it easier for kindergarten teachers to find the book for the beginning of the school year.

What subtitles would help readers find your novel?

Try the [Google Keyword Tool](#). Search for keywords dealing with your story's genre, theme, setting, or any other hook for which readers might search. It won't make it a better book, but it might make it easier for readers to find.

Chapter Divisions

How long are the chapters in your novel? How long is long enough or too long?

In his book, *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing: A Novelist Looks at His Craft*, action/adventure author, David Morrell (creator of the Rambo character, among others), says he tries to write short chapters, so that a reader can complete one chapter (or structural unit) at one sitting. He bases his ideas on two essays by Edgar Allen Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition" and "The Poetic Principle."

Part of this discussion is about pacing, because it's about keeping the reader's attention. Morrell says he keeps his structural units small in order to accommodate the reader's bladder, TV interruptions, phone calls, a neighbor who drops in, etc. [Poe's essay](#) is worth reading, as is Morrell's chapter on "The Tactics of Structure."

Of course—a chapter should be as long as it needs to be for your novel. Write what works. But consider shorter chapters which can be read at one sitting.

Character Names

A rose by any other name might smell as sweet, but do you really WANT to smell a swamp lily? Doesn't the name itself just put you off? Or consider that in early drafts Margaret Mitchell is supposed to have named her famous heroine Pansy, instead of Scarlett O'Hara. Do you believe that Pansy would have done the things that Scarlett did? Never!

Naming characters is important! Here are some things to consider when you create a character:

1. **Can you pronounce the name?** Especially for fantasies, beware of invented names which no one can pronounce. Remember how hard—and frustrating—it is to read all the begats of the Bible—and don't do that to your reader.
2. **Appropriate for the story.** If you're writing a contemporary or a modern history story, use appropriate names for that time period. Try looking at the Social Security Administration's list of [popular baby names by year](#).
3. **Think about the meaning of the names.** Look for baby name books that explain the meaning behind a name. Often when I'm in the early stages of writing a novel, I am more worried about the meanings, because I want it to represent something about the character. By the time the final draft is done, I've often forgotten what the name means, but the extra layer of meaning is still there.

Stronger Settings

In Peter Dunne's book, *Emotional Structure: Creating the Story Beneath the Plot*, he emphasizes the importance of matching the setting to the emotional layers of the story.

For example, the setting of *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*, is a New England coastal village, appropriate for several reasons. It's built on a solid cliff, like Turner's life is built on the solid foundation of family and church. Lizzie is physically separated from Turner's life because she lives on an island. And the coast is a place where a boy might row out far enough to come face to face with a whale, a place where a boy might look into the eye of a whale. It speaks of foundations and separations and inspiration and growth.

My particular pet peeve is school settings which are all generic. Yes, to an extent, if you've been in one school, you've been in them all. But teachers—and characterization of teachers is important—can create a micro-environment within a school. Do they have family pictures on their desk, or awards, or vacation pictures, or just generic posters? Likewise, hotels, gas stations, grocery stores, etc. should never be generic.

What is the emotional environment of your story? When you choose a setting, make it echo that story plot, that emotional environment! This could include the time period, the geographic location, the buildings, the clothing, the time of year, the weather, and the bit characters who populate this setting. Evaluate all these in light of the emotional journey your character is taking.

Does this sound too much like your English class trying to analyze a story? Well, it is. Another book that provokes me to think about this is *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines* by Thomas Foster. When is the weather not just the weather? When is a meal not just a meal?

Stronger Setting Details

Where does your story take place? If it's in Barrow, Alaska, then I'd better see the Arctic Ocean, the ice jutting up in sharp columns as it is pushed against the shore. If it's on a horse ranch, when you walk into the barn, I'd better smell that horse smell.

You can't just tell me that I'm in the back of a fast food restaurant. I'd better smell that stale grease, hear the sizzle of fries cooking and ignore the kid with a cold who wipes at his nose with the back of his hand just before he scoops up the fries for the next customer and the other kid who licks a finger, runs it through a line of spilled salt and licks it off and then reaches over to slap the thin patty onto the hamburger.

If real estate is all about location, location, location, then setting is all about details, details, details. Use every sense: hearing, seeing, tasting, feeling and smelling. Like other oft-repeated writing tips, this one has the potential to make a huge difference in your novel.

Details Make Boring Settings Emotional

My grandmother was in the hospital, dying from old age: she was 99 years old. But the situation was made more poignant by the details.

Her thin white hair wisped around her face, making her look like a wrinkled pixie who was lost in the white pillow. Crawling on the pillow, the wall, in the florescent light above her were hundreds of orange and black lady bugs. They seemed to respect her, staying around her, but never getting on her, as if even their fragile weight would be enough to send her into the next world.

The hospital staff said they had an infestation of lady bugs, which had somehow come in through the ER, and were slowly moving up from floor to floor. As a room became infested, the staff would empty the room, spray—which only managed to send the lady bugs through the ventilation up to the next floor.

When the lady bugs reached the top floor, I asked, would they find out way out and fly out and up toward heaven?

Create a Character That Counts

Stories are about characters who are involved with each other in conflict. Often in revising, it's important to look carefully at each character and ask hard questions:

- * Does this character contribute to the conflict and resolution?
- * What is this character's role in the story?
- * What is this character's function in the story?

If you find one or more weak characters, what do you do about them as you revise?

Dealing with Weak Characters

Cut:

Each character should contribute to the story in some way. Sometimes, characters are just fillers or place holders and don't really contribute. If you totally cut this character from the story, would it substantially change the story?

Combine:

Can you combine this character with another character? By putting more than one function/role into a character, it's possible to create a more interesting character. If you have two best friends, can you combine them into one?

Enrich: If the character's role and function are necessary to the story and you can't combine the character with another, you must enrich this character. It's back to the drawing board.

There's no right or wrong number of characters for a story. What you want are characters that count.

Take Your Character's Pulse

The emotional arc of a story is just as important as the narrative arc; it's just harder to see sometimes. One way to check this emotional or inner conflict arc is to consider scenes one at a time. First mark off one scene in your manuscript. Then, identify the emotional pulse of the scene.

Is there a question that needs an answer?

Is there an emotion underlying all the action?

Does the characters's emotional state differ at the beginning and end of the scene?

For example, this is the second and third paragraphs of the opening chapter of *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*:

"Turner Buckminster had lived in Phippsburg, Maine, for almost six whole hours. He didn't know how much longer he could stand it."

The emotional stakes are clear. He doesn't want to move to this town.

Often you can identify the exact place where the pulse of a scene quickens. Look for it and strengthen it. If a scene lacks a pulse, you'll have a better book if you can find a way to make the emotional arc stronger.

Connecting Emotional and Narrative Arcs

The emotional arc is the inner conflict; the narrative arc is the outer conflict. How do you get these two arcs to mesh?

Peter Dunne, in his book *Emotional Structure: Creating the Story Beneath the Plot* has one of the simplest writing tips. Dunne says to write the headline of a scene on an index card, and jot a few notes about the action being careful to only hit high points. Turn the card over and write a headline for the emotional content of this scene and jot a few notes about how the emotions change, being careful to only hit high points. I've been [plotting my scenes on a spreadsheet](#), so I just added a column for emotion— another way to work. This is hard! At least for me.

If Jamie watches his Dad beat Red in a bowling tournament, how does Jamie feel about Red? Is he sympathetic, picturing himself in the situation of a painful loss? Or is he scornful of Red for choking at an important moment?

Turning the card over(or filling in an extra column) forces me to consider what my character would really feel in this situation. And it connects the inner and outer conflict in a simple, yet, powerful way.

Unique Character Dialogue

When characters's speak, it should be distinctive. Yet, when I write, if I'm not concentrating carefully, I tend to have all characters talk like—well, talk like me. Not good.

One revision strategy or writing technique that seems to help is to cut and paste a character's dialogue into a separate file. Then read straight through that file and listen carefully for consistency, uniqueness, etc. Or compare two character's dialogue files and see if they are too similar.

Another good idea is to study dialects. When I'm looking for a unique voice, I often go and study dialects from various parts of the U.S. Often the dialect descriptions get lost in the way each sound is made, which would only result in funny spellings for words. Instead, I'm looking for syntactic differences, or how sentences are structured.

An example would be the use of the negative positive in Boston English: "Let's go see if we can't get your car fixed."

Of course, you can add the extra strange spelling: "Yoah cah." But I think the sentence structure alone goes a long way toward making the voice distinctive.

Character Description

I think that Sol Stein's book, *Stein on Writing: A Master Editor of Some of the Most Successful Writers of Our Century Shares His Craft Techniques and Strategies*, has one of the best sections on character descriptions. If you read his book, Stein—like every other person giving writing tips—mentions five ways to characterize (physical attributes, clothing, psychological mannerisms, actions, dialogue). But consider this description from his book:

“She always stood sideways so people could see how thin she was.”

What I like here is the way the description does double duty, letting the reader know something about the internal characteristics of the character. We see the character's attitudes, while at the same time, we learn how skinny she is.

Here's another from Stein:

“She bombarded them with questions nonstop as if their answers were irrelevant.”

I find this one less effective. We do know internal characteristics: the woman is self-centered and arrogant. However, I think it would have been more effective if some physical dimension of her voice had been included, too.

With a cigarette-hoarse voice, she bombarded them with questions nonstop as if their answers were irrelevant.

Try to make your character descriptions do the double duty of characterizing both internal and external characteristics in an economy of words.

Begin at the Beginning

When you write the first draft, you should jump in and get started – as you know. But when you revise your novel, you have a better chance of making the right choices.

- * **Connect the beginning and the end**

Make sure the beginning sets up the ending. If you set up the problem of a character wanting to make new friends, then the ending needs to reflect the resolution of that problem. If the set up and resolution don't match up, you can decide if you want to change the ending or the beginning; but they must match up.

- * **Set the tone**

Make sure the tone—the attitude displayed by the choice of vocabulary, sentence structure, genre, etc.—sets up the rest of the story.

- * **Consider beginning much later (or much earlier)**

Often, it takes writers a while to start the story plot. Open your mss to page 25. Consider starting your story here. Would you really miss anything from the first 25 pages?

Open to page 50. Would this be an even better place to start?

On the other, I always have to expand my stories, which means I usually need to start earlier and include a chapter of introduction of the characters and what is at stake. Whether you start too late or too early, be sure to check the beginning and make sure it starts in the right place.

Transitions

Readers today like fast-paced novels. Yet, too fast a pace confuses the reader. When you revise your novel, you can solve this by paying attention to transitions.

* **Where are we?**

The most important thing to do in a transition from one scene to the next is to re-orient the reader. Where are we? TV and movies do this easily with the visual details. In writing, we often need to put in indications of time (three hours later), setting (Later, in the living room), relationship to plot elements (after the argument), and emotion (Weeping at the loss of her dog).

I especially find that chapter beginnings need better orientation. For the writer, the scene follows logically from the previous. But the reader may have put the book down, gone to school, studied for a test, attended a football game and finally come back to your novel. Write enough details to re-orient the reader at each chapter opening.

* **Rapid Scene Cuts**

TV programs and movies practice rapid scene cuts. For example, watch the TV drama “CSI” for great scene cuts. Often, a detective will find a clue that could have important ramifications, depending on how the lab results turn out. Instead of tediously showing the lab work taking place each time, the writers assume the reader will understand that the lab work did indeed occur. So, the next scene shows the detective questioning the suspect.

In your story look for places where you can leave out tedious details and safely assume the audience will understand what happened between scenes.

(continued on next page)

* **Time for Reflection**

Sometimes the transition between scenes is a perfect place for the character to display their emotional reaction to the story events. The emotional reaction can be while they are alone, or it can include dialogue with someone else.

The emotional section can be short: Angrily, he left the room and. . . (next scene).

Or, it can take several pages in which the character considers many options for action. Keep the tension as high as possible and if the reflection is long, follow with an action-packed scene. Either way, the reflection should lead to a new decision about what to do next, which leads into a new scene and new action.

In all this, make sure you keep the reader oriented.

Take a Break

One of the most important things I do to improve my novel is to take a break sometimes.

"How important it is to take the time to read literature, to look at art, to go to concerts. If all parts of your brain aren't nourished, you become really limited – less sensitive. It's like food. You'd get pretty strange if you ate ice cream all the time." – Kent Nagano, orchestra conductor.

Pursue a different hobby.

Travel.

Spend time with friends.

Eat. Eat chocolate.

Make love.

Take a walk.

Take care of your own emotional needs and you'll find it easier to take care of your characters' needs.

Power Abs for Novels: Fixing the Sagging Middle of Your Novel

One of the hardest things about story plot is to keep the middle from sagging. The opening is full of action, and the ending brings all the plot elements together into a big scene. But that middle! What to do about it?

Peter Dunne proposes an unusual paradigm for the middle of a story in his book, *Emotional Structure: Creating the Story Beneath the Plot*. Written for screenwriters, the principles still hold for novelists. Dunne says that the beginning and ending are about plot, or the outer problem. The middle is about what he calls “story” but most of us would call the inner problem. Beginning and ending—action. Middle—character.

That’s an interesting premise. When you’re plotting, it means that you need to think of the character’s inner arc, their growth arc, what makes them change, how do they change. Write out six or more steps of that growth and specifically, what provokes each step. Then, go back to the outer problem, the plot, and slot in events to match the inner arc. The last step on the inner arc forces the character to make a decision which sends him/her into the last climactic scenes of the outer conflict.

In my current WIP revision project, I’m seeing some promise in the approach because it is focusing my plot in unexpected and exciting ways. It’s another option to add to your repertoire of writing techniques.

Angel Moments in Your Novel: Don't Write an Epiphany Like This

“As the light faded, Abigail smiled at the words from the angel. Suddenly, she realized that she needed to forgive that ruffian Juan for his cruelty.”

An epiphany is a high moment in a story, usually when a character realizes something important. In other words, it is a high point, or a turning point, or the climax of the inner character arc.

You can't approach this with the cliché of "suddenly, it all became clear." An angel rarely appears to deliver the lesson with golden lights and resonant words.

Plan an Epiphany That Works

Plan for an epiphany. Set up the changes that a character needs to make in order to take the next step in the story plot.

Consider using symbolism. In my novel, [The Wayfinder](#), I use a bone-white rock to indicate Win's grief over losing his sister. At the moment he resolves the grief, he realizes he can turn loose of the rock.

Win rose and helped Lady Kala climb onto the broad back of the eagle. When they were both seated, the eagle gave a mighty leap. Her wings spread majestically, and they sailed out over the Rift. Far below, the shiny ribbon of water was still in deep shadow. While his left hand held the waterskin upright, Win's right hand crept into his pocket and pulled out the white rock from Zanna's cairn. He had traveled through the depths of the Rift and fought his way to the top and across to the black sand of the Well of Life, then back across the prairie to the Rift again – and Zanna was in none of those places.

Instead, she was with him and in him. Later when there was time, he would tell Hazel and Eli his favorite memories of Zanna and listen to theirs. In the telling, Zanna would dazzle them once more with her smile. For as long as there were memories or words, Zanna would live. For a moment he hefted the bone-white stone in his hand, then reared back and threw it into the Rift, back into the depths from which it had come. It fell soundlessly, and he didn't know when or where it landed. The eagle caught an updraft and spiraled higher and higher. Win laid a hand on Lady Kala's warm back and turned toward G'il Rim and home.

Use action to indicate a heart-felt change. In Elaine Marie Alphin's novel, [Perfect Shot](#), her main character learns that team work and trust is important; it's at that point that he passes up a shot and gives the ball to a better shooter, who wins the game for them.

Look for other ways to deliver an epiphany—without the angel!

Powerful Endings

You've written a wonderful novel. The reader has stayed up late to finish it and they turn the page for the climax scene and read, "The next morning, after it was all over, Jeremiah mulled over his feelings."

What? You didn't write the climax?

It happens. A writer gets to the climax, to the scene of great emotional power and somehow the emotions that s/he must face to write that scene seem too overpowering. S/he skips the scene and goes directly to the aftermath.

No! Write the climax!

Some writing tips for revising the climax of your novel:

1. Consider setting. What settings have the most emotional power in your story? Can you set the climax there? One common element is to put the climax in a high place, like a bridge, top of a skyscraper, etc., symbolizing that this is the high point of the story and the scene with the most emotional danger. Is there a place like that anywhere in your story's world?

2. Consider length. The climax should be the most emotionally powerful scene and partly that means it should be one of the longest scenes in the novel. It should be extended with twists, surprises, or the mini-climaxes of sub-plots. Length doesn't necessarily equal emotional power, but done right, it can add to the suspense, tension, and emotions.

3. Consider the final confrontation. The climax should be the final confrontation between the antagonist and protagonist. Seems obvious, but it's so easy to slip up and make it between the protagonist and a minor character.

4. Consider the romantic subplot. If you have a romantic subplot, it is the only subplot that is typically resolved after the main conflict. After all the problems are taken care of, then the boy/man can get his girl/woman (or the girl/woman can get her boy/man).

The reader has stayed up for hours while you told your tale. Don't disappoint at the end.

Tie Up Loose Ends

I just finished reading a fantasy novel that left half of the subplots hanging. Yes, yes, I know. They are setting up for a second book. But it's aggravating.

Look over your novel once more. Are there any subplots left unresolved? Are there any questions about the characters that you brought up, but didn't answer?

I'm not saying that you have to totally solve everything for a character. Sometimes, a change comes in the character's attitude, and while the situation is still unresolved, the reader understands that the new attitude will carry the character through the coming days. That's fine.

But I do want to know if Uncle Joe proposed to Margie. I want to know if Kate's horse pulled up lame, or if she won that race. I want to know if Lucas passed that algebra test about graphing quadratic equations.

Play fair. Answer questions you set up, but don't be afraid to leave difficult situations for the protagonist to face with renewed hope.

Find Your Theme

The take-away, or the theme of a story, seems like a mysterious thing sometimes. I usually don't worry much about this in the first draft of a novel, but it's good to consciously address it in a revision.

Unfortunately, the problem with theme is that it can be stated in various ways. For example, in my current WIP, here are some ways you might state the theme:

- * J. rejects Dad's idea that hard work will pay off in the end; instead, he decides to run because he likes to run, not because of a pay off in competition.
- * Hard work doesn't lead to wins.
- * Please yourself first; then enter a competition.
- * How do you work hard and yet lose gracefully?
- * Work hard because you love the sport, not because you love to win.

Just trying to clearly and effectively state the theme for yourself is hard! I think the place to look for the theme is in the internal conflict of the main character. What is s/he struggling to understand? How does s/he change over the course of the story plot? If you took a scene from the beginning and one from the end, what differences define the character at the end?

Once you clearly state the theme, there are several things to look at, which I'll cover in the next writing tip.

Theme Affects Setting

Let's assume this is the theme for my novel:

Work hard because you love the sport, not because you love to win.

I'll need to think about settings in which my character lives. Does he care about winning? Then what posters are on his wall? Olympic medalists. What magazines does he read? Running magazines that emphasize competition.

Or, really, it's Dad who pushes the competition, so when you walk into Dad's study, his walls are covered with shelves of bowling trophies, pictures of Dad and famous men he's met in his work, framed certificates of appreciation from obscure places that most people would pitch a day after receiving, pictures of Dad crossing a finish line, of Dad wearing a high school basketball tournament, of Dad in sixth grade looking misshapen by huge football pads, of Dad in first grade with a skinny chest and toothy smile holding up a swim team medal. Oh, now we know where that competitive attitude comes from and what our character has to battle against. Before we even meet Dad, we know what he'll say to poor J.

Here, I found the emotional landscape of the story, the setting that underlies the theme, in the description of Dad's study.

You might find it in

- * the historical time period you choose for the story: a story about loneliness could have power if set in the pioneer prairies.
- * the weather: A windy coastline is a setting for a story about restlessness.
- * the clothing: Stuffy Victorian clothing with high collars, long sleeves, and long skirts tells of a repressed spirit.
- * the food: For a kid who feels smothered by his parents, feed him liver smothered in onions.

Your theme should be echoed in many of the choices you make about setting.

Theme Affects Characters and Actions

If the theme dictates much of the setting of a story, you should also consider it when you create a character or a story plot and you should revisit these decisions when you revise.

Remember, this is my theme:

Work hard because you love the sport, not because you love to win.

What actions are implied by that theme? A competition, probably several. Some, the character will win, and some, he'll lose.

OK. Good. That was easy. What else?

Well, we know from the setting that Dad is the competitive one (Remember his den, the shrine to a life of competition?), so we'll assume some scenes with Dad (and possibly Mom) about competitive attitudes. Perhaps the parents are pushing J. to enter a competition or train for a competition.

Anything else? Yes. If the parents represent the negative aspects of competition, then we need some character(s) to represent the positive aspects. Will the Positive Character have conflicts with the parents? Probably.

Look for places where these things occur in the current draft and work to deepen the conflicts and polarize the positions of each camp—and your theme will shine brighter.

Choosing Subplots

Picturebooks or short stories say one thing—emotionally.

Novels, on the other hand, comment on one thing from multiple perspectives and with side trips here and there. This means subplots. In a novel, you can take a side trip to act as a tour guide for a foreign land, to give extensive back story, or other reasons.

The subplot, though, isn't one of these side trips. Instead, it's a set of cohesive actions with its own main characters, goals, setbacks and resolutions.

Types of Subplots

- * Main character's secondary concerns and goals. The main character can have more than one goal, usually relating to the main goal in some way. Romantic subplots are common.

- * Secondary character's concern and goal. One of the other characters is the hero/ine of his/her own plot.

The key for all subplots is that they relate to the main plot and intersect with it in some way. For example, if the main plot is stopping a parent from smoking, subplots might be winning a stop-smoking poster contest, stopping single parent from dating someone who also smokes, and a romance with the son of the storeowner who sells Mom's favorite, expensive cigarettes.

A subplot lets you comment on a side issue, show a contrasting point of view, raise the stakes in the main plot, deepen characterization through variety or contrast, provide plot twists, etc. For a better book, consider adding one or more subplots.

How to Plot a Subplot

To plot a subplot, repeat the same steps as for the main story plot, except that the subplot will be simpler, with fewer steps between the conflict and resolution.

Subplots can be introduced and resolved in just a couple chapters. For example, a chase scene that extends over three chapters in the middle of the novel could be a red herring, but gives tension for that sagging middle.

Subplots can also be introduced in the first or second chapter and have threads throughout until the end. The common practice is to resolve all subplot before the main plot, with the exception of the romance subplot, which by convention is resolved last.

Don't let subplots be haphazard or under-developed. Give them the same thought and care you give to the main plot. Just keep them in scale to the main plot.

Knitting Subplots Together

You have three subplots. How do you keep them straight and all relevant to the main story plot? You knit them together!

It's a good idea to take time to build in connections. List the main characters, settings, emotions, and events of each plot (used here to mean plot or subplot), using a large sheet of paper and one column for each plot. Then look for ways you can connect the plots.

Each main characters is probably involved in at least two plots, maybe more. Can you reuse settings across plot lines? Can an event in the main plot have ramifications for the subplots? Are similar emotions displayed across plot lines? How can something in a subplot raise the stakes in the main plot? Build in as many connections as possible!

Then look at a list of scenes for the various plots and try to arrange them in the most dramatic way. Maybe one plot gets to a high point and you leave the reader hanging in suspense, while you cut to developments in another plot. Maybe you need a scene from this plot to raise the stakes in the that plot. Think hard about the suspense and tension created by the sequencing of scenes.

Feedback

Be careful who you ask for feedback, because there are a variety of critiquing styles. Besides a good writing group, or an editor you can “trust with a draft” (if you're lucky enough to be at that stage of your career), you can also use “naive” readers, or those who know nothing about the writing process.

For these readers, you have some simple instructions.

1. Read the story and enjoy it. But pay attention to how you are feeling as you read.
2. When you come to a place that is confusing to you, write a big C in the margin.
3. When you come to a place that is boring, write a big B in the margin.
4. When you come to something that you don't believe would happen in this story, put a big D in the margin.

That's it. You don't want their ideas on how to make it better. You don't want them to tell you how to write a novel. You don't want them to mark misspelled words or punctuation. Oh, OK, if they are obsessive and it makes them feel better—no, even then, that's not their job. Their only job is to pay attention to their feelings as they read.

Now, you can't argue with their opinion. Nor, can you ignore their opinion. It's simply how they felt as they read and you must consider if other readers will feel the same.

Critique group, trusted editor, or naive readers—each method of getting feedback has pros and cons. The important thing is to get feedback of some kind. Writing is communication and you must check how well your communication efforts are working.

Stay the Course

Revision can often be a long, drawn-out affair. Work, family, life crises—many things can interrupt the novel revision process. Expect it.

Some of you will have a car wreck. Some will have a major computer crash. Some will experience illness. Some will experience loss of a family member. Some will get married! Grief, love, despair, joy, vacations, trips, births, deaths, strange spaces of time, short spaces of time, crisis mode, maintenance mode. Life is short. Life is full. Never busy—full.

Your job as a novelist is, in the midst of your full life, to keep on coming back—somehow— to the novel revision process until you finish it.

Editors often say that the first chapter of a novel is superb, but the rest of the novel doesn't measure up. Writers tend to polish and polish that first chapter, but get distracted by a full life and don't polish the rest. Don't let that happen to your story. Write a better book.

Stay the course.

Revise Again

Uh-oh. You got those critiques and your readers didn't think your story was perfect.

I hear the groans and sighs. I see how tired you are and that you thought you were finished, but maybe—that little voice won't let go the idea—you need to do one more big change in story plot.

Yes. It happens. A major revision is a failure.

No. You mustn't think of it that way! The revision you just finished is a major step on the way to a novel that will proudly display your name as author!

How do you face another revision, right after you've just done a revision? Be a writer. Work with the same courage and determination you found for this revision. Most novels will go through three or four major revisions and some need much more than that. The key is to hold a standard in your mind and not be satisfied until you reach that. Be a writer. Don't give up.

What is your standard?

Then, think honestly about what your next step should be. Submission or revision?

The End

Does the revision process ever end?

Yes!

How do you know when your novel is ready to send off to a publisher?

You don't. This is all I know: I can't think of anything else to do that will make it better. None of my critiquers are sparking anything that raises niggling questions. I've done the best job I know how to do at this time. Unless I get feedback from someone that takes me in new directions, there's nothing more I know to do.

Then I send it off, unapologetically. Even if it gets rejections from everyone, I stand by what I said: I've done the best job on this novel that I know to do at this time of my life.

The New Beginning

In that funny, in-between time – you've finished one project, but haven't yet committed to the next – it's OK to feel empty, to expect nothing. Be curious. Live. Take a walk. Visit a relative. Live.

And read. Sometimes, in the heat of revision, I don't read other novels. But then, like a starving person, I gorge on novels. I take in words and story, so I can give out again.

Or, I read several books full of writing tips, review the basics of how to write a novel.

Or, I go back to another novel that's sitting forlorn, abandoned in my drawer, one that I didn't know how to revise, but I knew wasn't ready to be submitted, either. I re-read it, play around with sentences, phrases, here and there. Have I lived long enough to be ready to tackle this one again?

Or, I play with voices and language and ideas. Is this the start of a new story?

Mostly, I trust that writing is a cyclical process. I will write again. I will revise again. Right now? I'm just living that full life. Waiting for a new beginning, a project that will grab my heart and not let me go.

And every time that phone rings, hope makes my heart skip a beat. Maybe this time, it's an editor calling . . .

Darcy Pattison



In 1999, writer and writing teacher Darcy Pattison created the Novel Revision Retreat to meet the needs of struggling novelists. Since then, her passionate teaching has touched writers nationwide as she encouraged them, “I believe in your story.”

Her books include *Nineteen Girls and Me*, *Searching for Oliver K. Woodman*, *The Journey of Oliver K. Woodman*, *The Wayfinder* and *The River Dragon*, *Paper Lightning: Prewriting Activities to Spark Creativity and Help Students Write Better*, and *Novel Metamorphosis: Uncommon Ways to Revise*. Her books have been recognized for excellence by starred reviews in Kirkus and BCCB, *Child* magazine Best Books of the Year, *Nick Jr. Family Magazine* Best Books of the Year. She is the 2007 recipient of the Arkansas Governor's Arts Award for Individual Artist.

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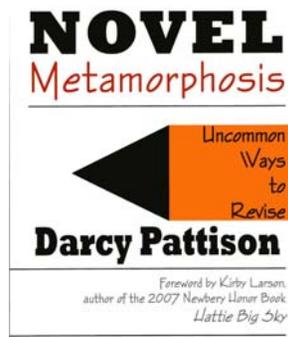
Read Darcy's blog, [Revision Notes](http://RevisionNotes.com): www.darcypattison.com

Second Draft to Third Draft and Beyond: Time to Go In-depth

“I didn't realize I didn't know the first thing about revising until I took Darcy’s Novel Revision Retreat. I finally “got it” that reworking a manuscript is not revising. To revise something means to re-vision it, to see it through a new lens. The workshop moved me from wordsmith to novel writer.”

– **Kirby Larson**, author of *Hattie Big Sky*, Newbery Honor Book., had been writing for nearly 20 years and had published four chapter books and a picture book before writing—and revising—*Hattie Big Sky*.

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