Chapter Seven

The role of editing and redrafting, and how to do both

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Take a deep breath. This may come as something of a shock. That short story you're writing, that novel in the cardboard box under the bed. It'll never be finished or complete. Period. Even when you think you've cracked it, even when you think you couldn't improve a single word or phrase, your writing will remain incomplete. Imperfect.

Apologies if this comes as a shock. This isn't to say that your novel or short story isn't very good. That it isn't ground-breaking and an international best-seller. Rather, it's recognising that anything you write does not have a predetermined 'perfect' state. That 'completion' is something you have to decide yourself, as the writer. What you thought was finished one day becomes incomplete the next. It is this *subjectivity* of editing and revision, the *subjectivity* that surrounds ideas of completion and incompletion, that are at the heart of this chapter.

It's never over till it's over, or the myth of the finished story

Go into a library and pick up any novel or poetry or short story collection. Look at the name on the front, then flick through the pages. I can see you reading the odd

sentence, looking again at the front cover. You want to sit down and read it, disappear into its world. Yet the book you've chosen is something else as well. It's the end product of countless drafts and revisions, a hidden, forgotten process that perhaps took place over many months or even years. Not that you'd know that from the book in your hand. Like a bad dream, the agony of redrafting has been exorcised. All we've got as readers is the final polished text. So, here's our first problem: revision and editing tends to be invisible; the creative practice that 'dare not speak its name'.

Some famous authors whose work was heavily edited include:

- James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922)
- J. R. R. Tolkien, *The hobbit* (1937)
- Raymond Carver, *What we talk about when we talk about love* (1981)

Writers tend to keep quiet about the amount of editing and revising they do, as though it's an admission of weakness that their novel or short story didn't come in one blinding flash of inspiration. It's this romanticised notion of writing that is the problem here. We still like to project the idea that our work comes from some secret creative spring, ready-made and fully formed. The concept that writing needs to be crafted, and then edited, and then edited again, that the creative journey involves cul-de-sacs and dead ends, is out of kilter with how we like to project ourselves as writers.

The reality of writing, however, is this: a novel or short story can go through hundreds, if not thousands, of edits

and redrafts. Charles Dickens edited his work, as did James Joyce. We know because we still have the original manuscripts where we can actually see their pen-written deletions and insertions. Even writers whose works have been published find themselves returning to their manuscript, tinkering, or even making dramatic changes. A good example is J. R. R. Tolkien. As he began work on *The lord of the rings* (1954), Tolkien realised he needed to make some significant changes to the original version of *The hobbit* (1937), in particular altering Gollum's relationship to the One Ring. This second edition was published in 1951; a third edition, with further edits, was published in 1966.

Even if you're happy with the text, you may find that an editor still insists on changes. This was the case with the short story writer Raymond Carver whose early work was heavily revised by his editor at Alfred A. Knopf. It's now possible to read both the published *and* manuscript versions of his collection, *What we talk about when we talk about love* (1981), in *Collected stories* (2009).

There seems to be a clear message here. If revision and editing are good enough for Dickens, Joyce, Tolkien and Carver, some of the most influential and successful writers in the English language, perhaps we should look more closely at what editing and revision can give us. We've already seen that, unlike a building which is constructed with clear plans, costs and prior agreements, your own writing is open-ended. Calling it 'finished' is your shout, a subjective one, sometimes based more on pragmatic issues such as time and exhaustion than on any instinct you might have about the completeness of the work. James Joyce famously gave himself just such a pragmatic completion date for *Ulysses*: 2 February 1922, his fortieth

birthday. Without it he could easily have spent a lifetime lost in the labyrinth of one of literature's most complicated novels. But don't panic. This chapter is all about how you can come to terms with this phenomenon and about the techniques you can use to make editing and redrafting work for you.

Here we go again: editing and redrafting, the key techniques

One of the most important things to take away from this chapter is that editing is an *integral* part of the creative writing process. It certainly should not be seen as something separate from it, a voluntary activity for the deluded, that you can take or leave, depending on how much time and energy you have.

Remember, a good author doesn't just write. They are:

- writer
- reader
- editor

all rolled into one. And they make the tea.

Successful writers tend to be those who recognise the importance of revision. For them, the penny has dropped that creative writing isn't limited to the first raw draft but instead percolates down through subsequent revisions. A good analogy is that of the film director: the film isn't made by the raw footage shot in the studio but is instead created in the darkness of the editing suite, long after the actors have gone, when the hundreds of feet of film are cut and spliced together to create a story. You may not have

thought of it before but, when you're editing your writing, you're Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino.

In particular, editing is vital to short story, poetry and flash-fiction writing. In these forms, when space and technique are at a premium, editing your work becomes even more important. In the longer form of novels, editing is needed to ensure the consistency of the story. In these instances, editing should be seen as just another part of the writing process.

If you want to be a consistent writer of high-quality fiction, then it simply won't be good enough to be a great writer of amazing first drafts. As this section has argued, you'll need two other skills as well: you will need to be a good, *critical* reader of your own work and you will need to be a confident, and brave, editor of your work, a writer who's not afraid to roll up their sleeves and undertake sometimes significant and, let's be honest, painful, redrafting.

In summary then, a good author is these three things: *writer*, *reader*, *editor*, all rolled into one. And it is these skills that form that basis of good editing and revision.

So, who exactly does this editing?

This might seem a silly question. Surely it's the writer, *you*, who edits. And, of course, that's true. Up to a point. After all, it'll be you who'll be reading and editing your work as you write. It'll be you with that film director's cap on, controlling and manipulating the text. Yet it's also important to bear in mind that, at key moments in the writing process, people other than you *could* be involved. The creative act itself is very often a private, personal affair.

A process cut off from the outside world. And that's fine. Yet, when it comes to editing what you've written, different rules apply. Editing can be understood far more as a *shared* activity, one in which the writer might even take the back seat. To the benefit of the text.

So, who are these people?

A FRIEND OR 'TRUSTED READER'

OK, this is the situation. You've just finished a complete first draft of your short story or novel. You're really pleased with it. Who wouldn't be? But what should you do next? Should you send it to an agent, a publisher? Hide it under the bed and start something new? The answer is none of these. Instead, the best advice to a writer at this point, when they have a good first draft in their hands, is that it's time to hand it over to someone else to read. A second pair of eyes, but, most importantly, a pair you can *trust*.

The word *trust* is important. The person you select should be someone you think will be fair and as unbiased in their assessment of your work as possible. This may seem easy, but actually it's often a bit more difficult than it looks. For example, a close friend might seem a good choice. Perhaps they've read some of your writing before. And they owe you a favour or two. But think again. Will they be too keen to shower you with compliments rather than engage *critically* with the writing? They're your friend after all, of course they're going to say that they love your writing. Aren't they?

What you're really looking for is someone you can trust to say when things are good but also someone who will have the confidence to voice any concerns they have

fairly, perhaps about the plot, or your characterisation, for example. As a writer, someone who is perhaps exposing their work for the first time, you need to be able to trust that these critical comments are being made honestly and in good faith and not because the person you've asked holds a personal grudge against you.

So, who can you ask? Well, only you can answer that. But here are a few basic ground rules which will certainly help you:

Checklist for a friend or trusted reader

1. Are they as close as possible to your 'intended reader'?
2. Have you thought about which parts of your novel or story to give them?
3. Have you specific questions you'd like your reader to answer?

The first thing to consider is that the person you pick should be as close as possible to the *ideal* or *intended* reader for your work as possible. What this means is that if you're writing a chick-lit novel, one that will have particular appeal to young single women, for example, the person you ask to read your draft should represent your intended readership. Your brother, uncle or dad, for example, might not be best placed to offer their views, no matter how well intentioned they are. If your writing doesn't have an easily identifiable reader, you should pick someone who enjoys reading, whom you could imagine buying your work if it were for sale in a bookshop.

The second point refers specifically to those who have written a novel. Do not give your trusted reader the

entire manuscript. More than likely it will overwhelm them, and they'll just skim through it. So, instead, offer them just the first three chapters or some other manageable portion from the beginning of the novel. And when they've read that, ask them if they would like a few more chapters. And after that, a few more, and so on. That way, you won't overwhelm them. Importantly, however, it will still allow you to ask their opinions as they're progressing through the story, section by section. If you're clever you can then capture their views at key stages of the narrative. From the writer's perspective, this might be important in terms of understanding if the reader has grasped plot or character development, for instance. It will also indicate whether or not your readers want to continue reading it.

Whether you're writing a novel or a short story, it can sometimes be useful to give your 'trusted reader' a number of specific questions you want them to address or comment on. This can be very useful for a number of reasons. First, it offers your reader a framework. Without it, they may feel rather lost. Just telling them to read your story, saying whether they like it or not, might leave them floundering. What are they actually meant to say? At best, the feedback you get will be unfocused and overgeneralised; at worst, it will be practically valueless.

Instead, give your reader three or four areas you'd like them to comment on explicitly. For example, you might ask them about the plot. Perhaps you might also ask them for comments on a particular character. These questions could be very general, or you might ask something with a very specific focus: 'What was your reaction to the murder of character X?' 'Did you find the ending of Chapter 5

believable?' And so on. But don't give your trusted reader *too* many questions. I would suggest five at most. And make sure they're the questions that you really want to ask. This means you need to sit down and think carefully about them before you start handing out your work for comment. Where are you unsure about the writing, where would a second pair of eyes really help?

An editor or agent

It's important to bear in mind that even when you think the novel or short story you're writing is as finished and complete as it can be, it may well be required to go through a *further* stage of editing and redrafting. For example, if an agent accepts your manuscript, he or she may well do so on condition that you make a number of revisions and changes to the text. The agent is doing this because they think that your manuscript will be more marketable to a publisher with those changes. These edits could be uncontroversial and something you're willing to do. But they could also be more significant. Perhaps the agent wishes to change the ending, or to cut out key chapters. In this instance, you'll need to discuss the edits carefully with the agent. You might be persuaded that the edits are for the best, or you might seek to negotiate a compromise. There's no hard and fast rule here I'm afraid. However, I would say that if your relationship with an agent is going to succeed it must be based on trust. Rejecting an agent's suggestions out of hand might be the correct decision. Or, more plausibly, it might indicate a writer who has become too blinkered and 'precious' about their own writing.

The same applies to an editor. When your work is finally accepted by a publisher, an editor could very well insist on

further edits and revisions before publication. We've seen this already with Raymond Carver, for instance. Another example is *Lord of the flies* (1954), William Golding's first novel. The editor, Charles Monteith, pruned a number of sections, and he didn't like Golding's original title either, *Strangers from within*. The rest, as they say, is history.

Editing that you can do

Having looked at using friends as editors, and the role of professional agents and editors, it's time we returned to the one person who will be doing the vast majority of the editing on your work: you. As the writer, the editing will be your primary responsibility. A lot of the editing you'll undertake will be done before anyone else gets a chance to look at the text.

From the writer's perspective, there are two basic types of editing: what I will term *ongoing editing* and *summative editing*.

Ongoing editing

Ongoing editing is editing as you write.

Focus on

- spelling
- vocabulary
- syntax (sentence structure)

You might not realise it, but as you write, word by word, sentence by sentence, you are constantly editing your work. As you finish a sentence, for example, it's

almost impossible not to quickly read it through, changing the odd word perhaps, adding a comma or two, before moving on to the next sentence. Word processors make this *ongoing* editing easier than it used to be. With pen and paper, any edits had to be written alongside the existing sentence, perhaps in the margin, or else the entire sentence or paragraph would have to be laboriously rewritten. You can see this on the handwritten manuscripts of many famous novels. It's something all writers do instinctively. It's almost a reflex action, so intimately connected with the writing process that you hardly realise you're doing it.

The key things to concentrate on at this stage are threefold:

1. **Spelling**. Never, ever, submit a manuscript to an agent or publisher that has not been vigorously checked and rechecked for mistakes. Although some recommend leaving spelling mistakes until the final draft, I would recommend that you correct misspellings as you go along, right from the first draft. This will make work simpler in the long run. Trying to correct misspellings in a completed story is far harder and requires lots more concentration that doing it as you go along. Believe me.
2. **Vocabulary**. Think carefully about your vocabulary as you are writing. Often we use the first words we think of, plucked from a small pool of words we feel comfortable with. Stretch yourself, use a thesaurus, especially with adjectives and adverbs. And, the golden rule, avoid clichés. Nothing switches a reader off quicker.

3. **Syntax**. Deciding on appropriate syntax, or sentence structure, is a key part of writing. The first time we write a sentence, we might not get the syntax right.

SYNTAX

First version

The man opened the door and walked into the room he didn't really know what to expect.

Second version

The man opened the door and walked into the room. He didn't really know what to expect.

Third version

The man opened the door. He didn't know what to expect. He walked cautiously into the room.

In the example here we can see that in the first version the writer hasn't got the syntax right at all. The second version corrects this, making the final clause a separate sentence (a comma would have been another option). However, in the third version, the writer has been more ambitious, breaking the original line into three separate sentences and then changing their order (adding the adverb 'cautiously' as he did so). Hopefully you can see that one of the most important aspects of syntax is *rhythm*, how the sentences 'sound' when you read them. The rhythm of those short punchy sentences in version three really heightens the anticipation, drawing the reader into the action.

Let's look a bit more closely at an example of ongoing editing.

ONGOING EDITING: AN EXAMPLE

First draft

She shook her head, she was being silly. Gossip is just what the grown-ups do when they are bored.

She held her breath when she pushed open the door and peered within. It was dark, but he had always liked it like that, it was more fun so she tiptoed through.

Second draft (with changes marked)

She shook her head, she was being silly. Gossiping is just what the grown-ups do when ~~they are~~ bored, everyone knew that.

Still, she held her breath when she pushed open the door ~~and peered within~~. Inside ~~It~~ was dark, but he'd ~~had~~ always liked it like that, it was more fun ~~so~~. She tiptoed through.

Final draft

She shook her head, she was being silly. Gossiping is just what grown-ups do when bored, everyone knew that.

Still, she held her breath when she pushed open the door. Inside was dark, but he'd always liked it like that, it was more fun. She tiptoed through.

Notice the difference in the writer's work, from the first draft to the 'final' version. The writer is using *free indirect style*, not an easy technique. Reading back her sentences immediately after writing them, she's spotted a few inconsistencies, particularly in syntax. She's slightly overwritten

some of the sentences, but she also decides to add 'everyone knew that', to help with the free indirect style. Finally she restructures the second paragraph to help with the rhythm of the piece, before moving on with the rest of her writing.

Summative editing

The strength of ongoing editing is that it's barely separate from the creative process itself. However, this is also a weakness. A form of editing that is so reflexive, so piecemeal in its approach, means that a more substantial, prolonged and deeper review of the text is necessary at key moments in the lifespan of your writing. Crucially, you need to be able to identify when this more sustained approach to editing is necessary. For this reason, I've called this *summative* editing (editing that occurs at the end of a longer period of writing).

There are two basic modes of summative editing:

1. the 'short and sweet' mode
2. the 'long and hard' mode.

The 'short and sweet' mode

In this mode, a few minutes are set aside to read a preceding chapter, or several pages or paragraphs.

Focus on

- recent plot developments
- dialogue
- pace
- tone

This technique is useful in terms of familiarising yourself with recent plot developments, dialogue, pace and tone. It is often used just before you begin writing for the day, helping you to remember what has been written the day before, thereby maintaining continuity of story, style and pace.

The 'long and hard' mode

In this mode you set aside several hours, perhaps even whole days in the case of a novel, to read the complete work as it currently stands. This is done at key times during the writing, perhaps after the completion of a section or a significant chapter. In this mode, it is important to go right back to the beginning of the story and read everything.

Why do you need to do this? Well, often your own understanding of what has happened in your story loses clarity as you write. Over a period of weeks, months, even years, you can forget scenes and drop ideas or even characters. The writing can also lose tone and consistency of theme. Rereading your writing from the very beginning, whether it's a short story or novel, will help you avoid all of these things.

But be warned. This longer form of editing is the hardest to do, yet it is the most important. To help, here are some tips to make it work for you.

1. Summative editing works best when you can achieve a 'critical distance' from your own writing. Leaving your writing for a few days (or even weeks) is a useful tip here, allowing you to see your writing with 'fresh eyes'.

2. You should be prepared to undertake a close, critical reading of your work. Do not read your work too quickly or superficially. Listen to your instincts as you're reading. They're often right. A sentence which seems a bit too complex probably is and should be changed. A description over which you keep pausing should be changed.
3. However, beware. This sort of critical reading requires high levels of concentration and energy. You should be at your best. A hangover is not a good idea.
4. Always save earlier versions of your work. Never put yourself in a position where you've irrevocably lost any of your writing. You never know when you might need it further down the line. Remember, editing is not just about removing text, it can also be about restoring text which was removed by an earlier edit. If you don't save earlier versions, you won't be able to do this.
5. It can often be useful to set out clear criteria for your summative editing before you begin. Perhaps you recognise a need to concentrate specifically on the plot of your story, or the dialogue of your characters. Or perhaps it's something else. But being truthful and honest about possible weaknesses in your writing, and then using summative editing to help decide whether those weaknesses actually exist (and then removing them) is one excellent way to make editing work for you.
6. Lastly, *be brave*. Be prepared to make those big decisions. As William Faulkner famously said, be prepared to 'kill your darlings'. In other words, every writer should be ready to remove the most dearly loved section of their writing. Cutting large chunks of writing can be painful but is a key part of self-editing. Be ready to see the plot undergo dramatic change.

Stylistic changes, such as altering the perspective from third to first person, as in the case of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's children* (1981), might be a hard but ultimately correct decision. Being able to face these editorial challenges head on and have your writing come through even stronger and more confident at the end is a key part of the creative process.

Things to remember:

- Get a 'critical distance'
- Listen to your instincts
- Maintain high energy levels
- Save all versions
- Establish criteria
- Be brave

Here's an example of some summative editing.

SUMMATIVE EDITING: AN EXAMPLE

First draft

She shook her head, she was being silly. Gossiping is just what grown-ups do when bored, everyone knew that.

Still, she held her breath when she pushed open the door. Inside was dark, but he'd always liked it like that, it was more fun. She tiptoed through.

Final draft

I shook my head. I knew I was being stupid. Gossiping is just what grown-ups do when bored, everyone knew that. Even Jamie.

> Even so, I couldn't help holding my breath when I finally found the courage to open the door. Inside was dark, but Jamie had always liked it like that. It was more fun, he said. I tiptoed forwards, quietly calling out his name.

Notice how the writer has now made some quite drastic changes. Having finished the story, she's finally realised that free indirect style is not appropriate. So she's changed the entire piece to *first person*. The focus of the scene is now far more about the narrator's relationship with the character called Jamie, a consequence of the writer being aware of what the story is and how it will progress. The darkened room is clearly a powerful metaphor in terms of this relationship and the story's underlying theme. The writing maintains a level of suspense that draws the reader into the scene.

Conclusion

Hopefully what you've learned from this chapter is that editing and revision are an integral part of creative writing. I've suggested a number of key approaches you can use when editing your work. Most of all, I hope this chapter has convinced you that quality writing is made in the editing process and that the best writers are often the bravest when it comes to looking again at their work.