

Learn to *Re-Write*

Why finishing the manuscript is only a place to start.

As artists, we fall in love with our stories. We live vicariously through our characters and their journeys. And the more we lose ourselves in the worlds we create, the more magical the journey becomes for our readers, right? I mean, isn't writing at its heart an organic process, not to be messed with by analytical things like planning, editing, and rewriting?

Okay, that's a nice Calgon, take-me-away moment. But eventually everyone's got to emerge from the bubbles. So, let's get down to it.

As a writer, you're a craftsman. You strap on your tool belt every day to hammer out the next page or the next chapter. And what you do is so much more than simply channeling your muse. Creativity is your gift, yes. I'll go so far as to say it's a privilege that few in this world enjoy. But hard work is demanded of every creative writer, and the work you do is storytelling. Let me say that again--delivering a story that will touch a reader's heart is a job. A hard-working, digging deeper until you get it right, you're going to need to learn how to work with a team, job.

A team? Where does teamwork fit into the solitude of a writer's life? Nowhere, really, unless your goal is to be a *published* writer of creative fiction. In which case, get used to the idea of achieving your final product through a collaborative effort. To do just about anything but self-pub, you must first pitch a story to an editor who's agreeable to buying it (once you find one), then gain editorial approval of the completed project, *then* revise the work until the publisher is ready to begin production. Because without the publisher's money and marketing savvy, your story's reading audience would dwindle to the circle of friends and family who already think everything you write is genius. Fortunately, your editor will see the world through a wider lens, and her job is to help you produce books that will entertain (and be bought by) the masses.

So, from this perspective, let's embrace the scary concept of revision. Let's accept, for the sake of argument, that rewriting *is* going to happen. Then let's talk about how to work *with* your editors, rather than dreading, or worse fighting, their feedback. The process is really the same for both the aspiring and the published writer. Almost no one becomes a successful author on her own--no matter how talented she is. We all need help if we're going to make it, and that help generally comes in the form of constructive criticism from our colleagues in the publishing world. Accept the inevitability of this, and you're miles ahead of the competition.

Resistance is futile. Okay, maybe it's not. But you *will* rewrite practically every project that makes it to print, and you'll most likely revise each of them more than once. So you can resist it all you want, or you can embrace this critical piece of the writing process and give it your whole-hearted best effort. Editorial revision doesn't have to be something unappealing you're *forced* to do after you've finished a project. If producing a sellable book is your goal, then add rewriting to your tool belt and look beyond the work you do at home, alone, in your comfy office.

I've learned that having a fresh pair of eyes tell you what's not working is the best thing that could happen to a manuscript. Better to recognize a problem early on, rather than after a book hits the shelves and you can't understand why readers aren't responding. And if you're not published yet, an editor's suggestion to rethink *this* or *that* is a nugget of gold you can't afford to toss aside. More importantly, an unpublished writer's message to an editor should always be that she's wide open and eager to embrace feedback. In the team-focused world of publishing, you don't want to cultivate a reputation of being squeamish when it's time to cranking out revisions.

I'm convinced that rewriting and taking constructive criticism is all about attitude. Editorial feedback is a vital tool that helps you shape, refine, and hone your stories. That's the bottom line. All sensitive, creative emotions aside, working with your editor will be your job for as long as you publish. Make a mess of this relationship because your feelings are hurt or your self-esteem can't take it, and you're making a mess of your professional writing career. And if you've yet to publish, do yourself a favor and get really good at listening, rethinking, and being flexible about change now. Because that's the heart of the business you're getting yourself into.

Over the last few years, I've submitted, revised, and received rejections for two different manuscripts. I finally sold a third, which in turn went through more revisions and two cycles of editorial changes after the magical *call*--working all the time with the same editors. The revisions that came my way, some of them years before I sold, challenged me emotionally and professionally. They made me dive back into my stories and understand better what I was trying to accomplish. I had to learn to let go of what I could, and stand up for what I couldn't. I had to embrace my budding editorial relationships and learn that an editor's guidance is part of the business, not a personal attack on my creative skill.

Revisions aren't personal at all, as it turns out. They're not about you or your editor's feelings about your work. Revisions are about what sells. Bottom line. And if you want to be a *selling* writer, rewriting needs to become something you're very good at.

Your artist's love for your stories and characters is key. Editors depend on your unique voice and storytelling skill to create the next great read, just as you'll depend on your editor to help shape the end result. Aspiring and published author alike, our job is to temper editorial feedback with the vision we alone possess for our work. We have to be able to look beyond our creative need to maintain total control over a project. We have to see publishing for the team effort it becomes once we mail the manuscript off.

Finishing a book is a marvelous accomplishment, whether it's your first or your twentieth manuscript. But *selling* a story that a reader can't put down is every writer's dream. And editorial input is vital to achieving that goal.

So my best advice is to learn to *re-write*--then stand back and watch your stories thrive.