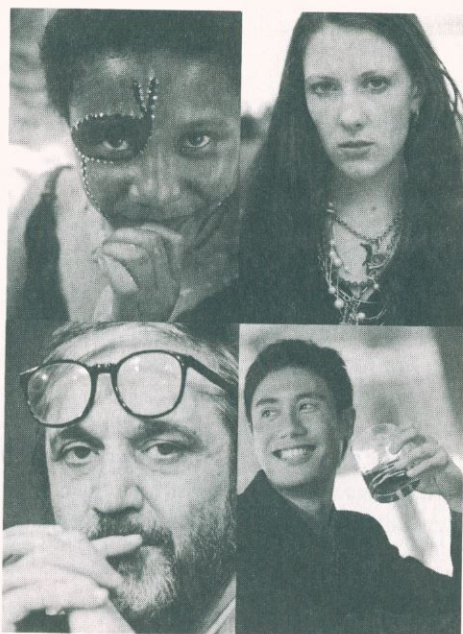


Development and Revision

- *Developing a Draft*
- *Structuring*
- *Research*
- *Revision*
- *Editing*
- *The Workshop*

Ultimately my hope is to amaze myself.

Jerry Uelsmann



(clockwise from top left) Macduff Everton/Corbis; Chris Carroll/ Corbis; Ken Seef/Corbis; William Karel/Sygma/Corbis

WARM-UP

One of these people is a respected, accomplished, and successful writer; you decide which one. Write a brief description of the sort of thing he or she writes. Visualize him or her wherever that writing takes place—desk, table, plane, park. What does it feel like to be this person, in this place, writing? Now: somewhere in your journal is a piece you care about, but you don't know how to develop or enrich it; you don't know where it's going. Hand it over to this person. For the next fifteen minutes she or he is going to write it for you.

IMAGINATIVE WRITING HAS ITS SOURCE IN DREAM, RISK, mystery, and play. But if you are to be a good—and perhaps a professional—writer, you will need discipline, care, and ultimately even an obsessive perfectionism. As poet Paul Engle famously said, “Writing is rewriting what you have rewritten.”

Just as a good metaphor must be both apt and surprising, so every piece of literary work must have both unity and variety, both craft and risk, both form and invention. Having dreamt and played a possibility into being, you will need to sharpen and refine it in action, character, and language, in a continual process of development and revision. You may need both to research and to re-dream. This will involve both disciplined work and further play, but it won't always be that easy to tell one from the other. Alice Munro describes the duality of a process in which seeking order remains both mysterious and a struggle:

So when I write a story, I want to make a certain kind of structure, and I know the feeling I want to get from being inside that structure. . . . There is no blueprint for this structure. . . . It seems to be already there, and some unlikely clue, such as a shop window or a bit of conversation, makes me aware of it. Then I start accumulating the material and putting it together. Some of the material I may have lying around already, in memories and observations, and some I invent, and some I have to go diligently looking for (factual details), while some is dumped in my lap (anecdotes, bits of speech). I see how this material might go together to make the shape I need, and I try it. I keep trying and seeing where I went wrong and trying again. . . . I feel a part that's wrong, like a soggy weight; then I pay attention to the story, as if it were happening somewhere.

The concept of “development” seems to contain the notion of making something longer and fuller, whereas that of “revision” suggests mere changing or polishing. But in fact both terms are part of a continual process toward making the piece the best that it can be, and it isn't always easy to say which comes first or even which is which. Sometimes adding a paragraph to a character description will suggest a whole new theme or structure; sometimes a single word change proves a clue to a core meaning. Once when I had a fictional character describing her sister, she said, “She needs to be important,” and for no reason but the rhythm I added, “especially if it means being dangerous.” I didn't at once know what I meant, but I'm afraid that small addition led, two hundred pages later, to the sister's death. Much of development and revision, especially in the early stages, relies on your being receptive to the small interior voice that nudges you in this direction or feels vaguely unsatisfied with that paragraph.

Developing a Draft

Your journal is now a warehouse of possibilities, and you probably already have a sense of the direction in which many of its entries might be developed. Consider the following suggestions as you choose the form best suited to bring out the strengths of your journal work.

- If you wrote of a memory or an event that seems to you to contain a point or to lead toward reflection, if you came up with ideas that mattered to you and that you wanted both to illustrate and to state, then you probably have creative nonfiction, perhaps a memoir or personal essay in the works.
- If a journal entry has a strong setting, with characters who engage each other in action and dialogue, whose thoughts and desires may lead them into conflict and toward change, perhaps a short story is brewing.
- If the sound and rhythm of the language seem integral to the thought, if the images seem dense and urgent, if the idea clusters around imagery and sound rather than playing itself out in a sequence of events, then a poem is probably forming.
- If you have characters who confront each other in dialogue, especially if they are concealing things that they sometimes betray in word or action, and if they face discovery and decision that will lead to change in one or more of their lives, then you very likely have a play.

TRY THIS 7.1

Go quickly through your journal and identify the passages that seem to you on first sight to belong to the genres of creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama. Star those that interest you most. What is it about each of those pieces that seems worth more development? Make notes to yourself in the margin; circle or highlight ideas, images, connections you might want to pursue.

Chapters 8 through 11 of this book will discuss the techniques peculiar to each of the four forms—creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama—and you'll want to look at those chapters as you work toward a finished draft. In the meantime, there are a number of ways to develop your ideas in order to find your direction. Some of these are repetitions or adaptations of ideas you have already used for play.

TRY THIS 7.2

Take a journal entry you like and highlight any word that seems particularly evocative, that seems to capture the spirit of the whole. Free-associate around that word. Freewrite a paragraph on the subject.

And:

Pick another journal piece. Read it over, set it aside, and begin writing, starting every sentence with the words, "It's like... It's like... It's like..." Sometimes the sentence will evoke colors, sometimes memories, sometimes metaphors, and so forth. Keep writing, fast, until you're moderately tired.

Or:

Pick a journal entry that does not depend on setting, and give it a setting; describe the place and atmosphere in detail. Think of "setting" loosely. Perhaps the setting of a piece is someone's face. Perhaps the weather is internal.

When I was eight or nine, my brother, who was four years older, made up wonderful stories with which he used to pass the hot boring afternoons of Arizona summer. I would whine and beg for another episode. At some point he got tired of it and decided I should make up stories on my own. Then he would drill me by rapping out three nouns. "Oleanders, wastebasket, cocker spaniel!" "Factory, monkey bars, chop suey!" I was supposed to start talking immediately, making up as I went along a story about a dog who used to scrounge around in the garbage until one day he made the mistake of eating a poison flower... or a tool and die worker who went to a Chinese restaurant and left his son on the playground.... My brother was the expert writer (and eventually went on to become an editor at the *Los Angeles Times*). I myself had not considered storytelling—I wrote ill-advised love letters and inspirational verse—and was amazed that I could—almost always—think of some way to include his three arbitrary things in a tale of mystery, disaster, or romance.

Neither of us knew that my brother had stumbled on a principle of literary invention, which is that creativity occurs when things not usually connected are seen as connected. It is the *unexpected* juxtaposition that generates literature. A more sophisticated version of this game is used in film writing. Screenwriter Claudia Johnson tells me that she and collaborator Pam Ball once went to a restaurant to celebrate the finishing of a film script. They had no idea what they were going to write next and decided to test the nimbleness of their plotting by outlining a film based on the next three things they overheard. The three conversations turned out to concern a cigarette, a suicide in Chicago, and origami. By the time they had their coffee they had a treatment for the next film.

Novelist Margaret Drabble describes the same process as organic and largely unconscious. "It's an accumulation of ideas. Things that have been in the back of my mind suddenly start to swim together and to stick together, and I think, 'Ah, that's a novel beginning.'"

TRY THIS 7.3

Pick, without too much thought about it—random would be fine—three entries in your journal. Take one element from each (a character, an image, a theme, or a line of dialogue perhaps) and write a new passage that combines these three elements. Does it suggest any way that the three entries might in fact be fused into a single piece and be enriched by the fusion?

Or:

Take one of your journal entries and rewrite it in the form of one of the following: an instruction pamphlet, a letter to the complaints department, a newspaper item, a television ad, a love song. Does the new juxtaposition of form and content offer any way to enrich your idea?

Structuring

Once you've identified a piece you want to develop, there are basically two ways to go about structuring the finished work—though they are always in some way used in combination.

Outlining

At one extreme is the **outline**. You think through the sequence of events of a story or drama, the points of an essay, the movement of a poem. Then when you have an outline roughly in mind (or written down in detail), you start at the beginning and write through to the end of a draft.

Do not underestimate the power and usefulness of this method. However amorphous the vision of the whole may be, most writers begin with the first sentence and proceed to the last. Though fiction writer/essayist Charles Baxter has mourned the “tyranny of narrative,” his stories and novels show the most careful attention to narrative sequence. (That one of them, *First Light*, presents its events in reverse order makes precise sequencing all the more necessary.) E. M. Forster spoke of writing a novel as moving toward some imagined event that loomed as a distant mountain. Eudora Welty advised a story writer to take walks pondering the story until it seemed whole, and then to try to write the first draft at one sitting. Though playwrights may first envision a climactic event and poets may start with the gift of a line that ends up last in the finished poem, still, the pull is strong to write from left to right and top to bottom.

TRY THIS 7.4

Take a pack of 3×5 cards and jot down, only a few words per card, any images, scenes, reflections you have in mind for a particular piece. Arrange them in a possible sequence. What's missing? Dream or freewrite or ponder what might be needed. Put each of these possible additions on a card and place them in sequence. Now you

have a rough outline. You may want to write it down in outline or list form or you may not. Perhaps the cards, which can be reshuffled as you and the piece evolve, are what you need.

Quilting

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the outline is *quilting*, or “piece work,” in which you carry on writing without attention to shape or structure. To use this method, you decide that this paragraph or verse or incident is the kernel of the thing you’re going to write, and you continue to doodle and noodle around it, seeing what will emerge. You freewrite a dialogue passage, sketch in a description of the setting, try it in this character’s voice and then as an omniscient narrator, let yourself go with a cascade of images. Two or three times a day, sit down and dash out a potential section of such a piece—a few lines, a paragraph, a monologue, images, a character sketch. Talk to yourself in your journal about what theme or idea matters to you, what you’d like to accomplish, what you fear will go wrong. If you do this for several days, you will have roughed out a sizeable portion of your project.

When you have a small mountain of material (I like to write or copy it into a single computer file I label a “ruff,” then identify each paragraph by page number so I can find it easily), you print it, chop it into sections, spread it out on a large surface, and start moving pieces around till you seem to have a composition. Tape the sections together and make notes on them, discarding what seems extraneous, indicating what’s missing, what needs rewriting, where a transition is in order, and so forth. Then cut and paste on the computer to put them in that order, noting the needed changes. When you print out this version, you have a rough shape of your piece.

TRY THIS 7.5

Doodle a series of lists—of the characteristics of someone you have written about, or of phrases and idioms that character would use; or of objects associated with a person, place, profession, or memory you have written about. Generate, rapidly, a list of metaphors for some central object in a piece you want to develop.

This jot-cut-and-sort system can work for any genre, and it’s worth getting used to the process. However, sometimes it works better than others, and sometimes it just isn’t the best way. The advantages of the outline method tend to be clarity, unity, and drive; of the cut-and-paste method, richness, originality, and surprise. The problem with writing from an outline is that the piece may seem thin and contrived; the trouble with piece work is that it can end up formless, diffuse, and dull.

You will already have a sense of which method is your natural tendency, and I'd urge you, whichever it is, to work in the opposite direction. The methods are not mutually exclusive, and each can benefit from the particular discipline of the other.

If you start with a clear sense of direction, a determination to follow a plan, then detour from time to time. Too tight a rein on the author's part, too rigid a control of where the imagery is headed, what the protagonist will do next, how the remembered event exactly happened—any of these can squeeze the life out of the work. When you feel the action or the language becoming mechanical, stop and freewrite a monologue, a list of images, an exploration of character, or conflict, or the weather. One freeing trick, if you find your piece flat, is to go through and put some arbitrary line or sentence in each paragraph or verse, something that absolutely does not belong and that you would never put there. Then go away from it for a while, and when you go back, see if there's anything in the nonsense that might in fact improve the sense.

If, on the other hand, you can generate lovely stuff but have trouble finding a through-line for it, if you find yourself in successive drafts generating new possibilities and never settling on a form or sequence, then you probably need to focus on a plan and push yourself through one draft based on it. Set your quilt aside and consider the questions of unity and shape: What is the heart of this piece? What is its emotional core? What, in one word, is it *about*? How can I focus on that, make each part illuminate it, raise the intensity, and get rid of the extraneous?

And don't give up. "The big secret," says fiction writer Ron Carlson, "is the ability to stay in the room. The writer is the person who stays in the room. ... People have accused me... 'You're talking Zen here.' And I just say, 'Zen this: The secret is to stay in the room.'"

TRY THIS 7.6

Practice in brief form each of the methods described. Pick an entry in your journal—not one you intend to make into a finished work. Before lunch, write an outline of a piece based on that entry. In late afternoon or evening, take *no more than one hour* to write a draft of the piece that covers the whole outline. Your work will have holes, cracks, and sloppy writing. Never mind; get through to the end. Leave it for a day or two, then make marginal notes on what you would want to do in the next draft.

Pick another entry and over the next two or three days, freewrite something or other about it every four hours. Print, cut, and arrange into a sequence or shape. Print out the result and make marginal notes on what the next draft would need.

Discuss in class what you learned from the two methods. Which would suit you best when you come to write an essay, a story, a poem, a play?

Research

Any piece of writing, to be convincing and rich with detail, needs solid knowledge of its subject matter. Nothing more undermines a reader's trust than to be told a character is a doctor when it's clear he doesn't know a stethoscope from a stegosaurus. For any genre of writing there will come a time when you need to research through library, interview, Internet, or some other way.

But research for imaginative writing has a rather different nature and purpose than the research you've been taught. Whereas the "research paper" has as its first requirement a rigorous attention to both facts and sources, the watchword of imaginative research is *immersion*. Depending on the kind of piece you're writing, you may need accuracy, and you may need to credit or quote someone, but you certainly need the flavor, the imagery, and the atmosphere of whatever you seek to know. If you make yourself wholly available to whatever information you seek, what you need will be there when you come to write about it.

I once had the luck, just as I was starting on a novel set in Mexico and Arizona in 1914, to hear a lecture by the great novelist Mary Lee Settle. She offered three rules for historical fiction research:

- Don't read *about* the period; read *in* the period. Read letters, journals, newspapers, magazines, books written at the time. You will in this way learn the cadences, the turn of mind and phrase, the obsessions and quirks of the period.
- Don't take notes. If you save everything that interests you, you'll be tempted to use it whether it fits or not, and your fiction will smell of research. Immerse yourself and trust that what you need will be there.
- Don't research beyond the period you're writing about. If you know too much about the future, your characters will inevitably know it too.

Now, these rules are particular to historical fiction, but I think the spirit of them is applicable to any sort of imaginative research.

You may need to interview someone in order to write a piece about your family, and you may want to quote exactly. But don't take down everything, and don't think you have to use everything. Much more important than notes is to listen with an absolutely open mind. Hear the rhythms and the images of the particular voice. Sponge up the sounds and the peculiarities.

For any genre of imaginative work, you may need to search the library or the Internet for information on an object, a profession, a region, a building, a kind of clothing, and so forth. Read ravenously. Reread, read a second book or site. Look into a third that suggests something vaguely connected. But understand that you are reshaping the information into something that is not primarily information, and the crucial thing is to absorb it, toss it on the compost of your imagination, and let it feed your piece, not devour it.

TRY THIS 7.7

Bring your research skills to your imaginative work. Identify something in a piece that you aren't sure about. You don't know the facts, don't understand the process or the equipment, aren't clear on the history or the statistics, don't know the definition. Find out. Consult books, reference works, newspapers, the Internet; interview someone, email someone, ask the experts.

Revision

Interviewer: Was there some technical problem? What was it that had stumped you?

Hemingway: Getting the words right.

Most people dread revision and put it off; and most find it the most satisfying part of writing once they are engaged in it and engaged by it. The vague feelings of self-dissatisfaction and distress that accompany an imperfect draft are smoothed away as the pleasure of small perfections and improvements comes.

To write your first draft, you banished the internal critic. Now make the critic welcome. The first round of rewrites is probably a matter of letting your misgivings surface. Revision is a holistic process, unique to each piece of writing, and though this chapter includes questions you might use as a guide, there is no substitute for your own receptivity and concentration. What do you think is needed here? What are you sure of, and where are you dissatisfied?

Focus for a while on what seems awkward, overlong, undeveloped, flat, or flowery. Tinker. Tighten. Sharpen. Let that small unease surface and look at it squarely. More important at this stage than finishing any given page or phrase is that you're getting to know your piece in order to open it to new possibilities. Novelist Rosellen Brown says, "What I love about being in the revision stage is that it means you've got it. It's basically there. And so then you've got to chip away at it, you've got to move things around, you've got to smooth it down. But the fact of the matter is, you've got it in hand."

It is when you have a draft "in hand" that you will experience development and revision as a continuum of invention and improvement, re-seeing and chiseling. Sometimes the mere altering of punctuation will flash forth a necessary insight. Sometimes inspiration will necessitate a change of tense or person. To find the best way of proceeding, you may have to "see again" more than once. The process involves external and internal insight; you'll need your conscious critic, your creative instinct, and readers you trust. You may need each of them several times, not necessarily in that order. Writing gets better not just by polishing and refurbishing, not only by improving a word choice here and image there, but by taking risks with the structure, re-envisioning, being open to new meaning itself. Sometimes, Annie Dillard advises in *The Writing Life*, what you must do is knock out "a bearing wall." "The part you jettison," she says, "is not only the best written part; it is also, oddly, that part which was to have

been the very point. It is the original key passage, the passage on which the rest was to hang, and from which you yourself drew the courage to begin.”

There are many kinds of work and play that go under the name of “revision.” It would be useful to go back to the film metaphor—long shot, middle shot, close-up—in order to think of ways of re-visioning your work. You will at some point early or late need to step back and view the project as a whole, its structure and composition, the panorama of its tones: Does it need fundamental change, reversal of parts, a different shape or a different sweep? At some point you will be working in obsessive close-up, changing a word to alter the coloration of a mood, finding a fresher metaphor or a more exact verb, even changing a comma to a semicolon and changing it back again. Often you’ll be working in middle shot, moving this paragraph from page one to page three, chopping out an unnecessary line or verse, adding a passage of dialogue to intensify the atmosphere. Read each draft of your piece aloud and listen for rhythm, word choice, unintended repetition. You’ll move many times back and forth among these methods, also walking away from the piece in order to come back to it with fresh eyes.

TRY THIS 7.8

Choose a character in one of your journal pieces and make a list of things this character fears. Try arranging the fears from the least to the largest; does that suggest a story shape? Now play with the arrangement and language of the list toward making a poem.

Or:

Show a character doing something genuinely dangerous. But the character or persona is not afraid. Why not?

If you feel stuck on a project, put it away. Don’t look at it for a matter of days or weeks, until you feel fresh again. In addition to getting some distance on your work, you’re mailing it to your unconscious. You may even discover that in the course of developing a piece, you have mistaken its nature. I once spent a year writing a screenplay—which I suppose I thought was the right form because the story was set in an Arizona cow town in 1914—finally to realize that I couldn’t even *find out* what the story was until I got inside the characters’ heads. Once I understood this, that story became a novel.

As you plan your revisions and as you rewrite, you will know (and your critics will tell you) what problems are unique to your piece. You may also be able to focus your own critique by asking yourself these questions:

What is this piece about? The answer may be different according to the genre, may involve a person, an emotion, an action, or a realization rather than an idea. But centering your consciousness on what the piece is about will help to center the piece itself.

TRY THIS 7.9

State your central subject or idea in a single sentence. Reduce it to a word. Express it in an image. Express it in a line of dialogue that one of your characters might say. Probably none of these things will appear in your finished piece, but they will help you focus. Are you clear about what you're writing about? Does it need thinking and feeling through again?

Is the language fresh? Have you used concrete imagery, the active voice to make the language vivid? Are these abstractions necessary? Does your opening line or sentence make the reader want to read on?

TRY THIS 7.10

Go through your work and highlight generalizations in one color, abstractions in another, clichés in a third. Replace each of them with something specific, wild, inappropriate, far-fetched. Go back later to see if any of these work. Replace the others, working toward the specific, the precise, and the concrete.

Is it clear? Do we know who, what, where, when, what's happening? Can we see the characters, keep their names straight, follow the action?

TRY THIS 7.11

Go through your manuscript and highlight the answers to these questions: *Where are we? When are we? Who are they? How do things look? What period, time of year, day or night is it? What's the weather? What's happening?* If you can't find the answers in your text, the reader won't find them either. Not all of this information may be necessary, but you need to be aware of what's left out.

Where is it too long? The teacher William Strunk, long revered for his little book *The Elements of Style*, used to bark at his students, "Omit unnecessary words!" Do so. Are there too many adjectives, adverbs, flowery descriptions, explanations—as perhaps there are in this sentence, since you've already got the point?

TRY THIS 7.12

Carefully save the current draft of your piece. Then copy it into a new document on which you play a cutting game—make your own rules in advance. Cut all the adjectives and adverbs. Or remove one line from every verse of a poem. Delete a minor character. Fuse two scenes into one. Cut half of every line of dialogue. Or simply require yourself to shorten it somehow by a third. You will have some sense of what tightening might improve your work. Compare the two drafts. Does the shortened version have any virtues that the longer one does not?

Where is it underdeveloped? This question may simply involve the clarity of the piece: What necessary information is in your head that has not made it to the page, and so to the mind of the reader? But underdevelopment may also involve depth or significance, what memoirist Patricia Foster calls “the vertical drop...when an essay drops deeper—into character, into intimacy, into some sense of the hidden story.”

TRY THIS 7.13

In any first, second, or third draft of a manuscript there are likely to be necessary lines, images, or passages that you have skipped or left skeletal. Make notes in your margins wherever you feel your piece is underdeveloped. Then go back and quickly freewrite each missing piece. At this point, just paste the freewrites in. Then read over the manuscript (long shot) to get a feel for how these additions change, add, or distort. Are some unnecessary after all? Do some need still fuller expanding? Should this or that one be reduced to a sentence or image? Do some suggest a new direction?

Does it end? The ending of a piece is its most powerful point in terms of its impact on the reader (the beginning is the second most important). So it matters that it should have the effect you want. Does the character change? Does the essay reveal? Does the poem offer a turn or twist on its image? Does the drama move? (Actually, any of these questions might apply to any genre.) This is not to say that the piece should clunk closed with a moral or a stated idea. Novelist Elizabeth Dewberry puts it this way: “When you get to the end you want to have a sense that you understand for the first time—and by *you* I mean the writer and the reader and even the characters—for the first time, how the whole story fits together.”

TRY THIS 7.14

As an experiment only, end your piece with a poetic line, a line of dialogue, or a paragraph that is the direct opposite of the meaning or effect you want. You might try ending by repeating the opening (which can, in fact, turn out to be effective if the line or paragraph takes on a new and changed meaning). Consider the impact of what you have done. Does it help to clarify what the ending should be?

Editing

Just as there is no clear line between development and revision, so revision and editing are part of the same process, helping the piece to be as good as it can possibly be. Editing addresses such areas as clarity, precision, continuity, and flow. One way to see the distinction is that editing can be done by an editor, someone other than the author, whereas revision is usually turned back to the author. (For example, noting a lack of transition from the last section to this one,

my editor has just asked, “Can you insert a short paragraph here explaining the relationship between revision and editing, and the difference between editing and line editing?”) Line editing is the last in the care-and-feeding process of the manuscript, a line-by-line check that spelling, grammar, and punctuation—including agreement, comma placement, quotation marks, modifiers, and so forth—are accurate (and perhaps in the “style” of the publication or press). Although these jobs can be invaluablely done by an editor and copyeditor, and many a genius has been saved from embarrassment by their intervention, it’s also true that the more carefully you edit and **line edit** your own manuscript the more professional you will appear, and that “clean copy” is most likely to be given serious consideration. Appendix B looks more closely at line editing.

Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are a kind of magic; their purpose is to be invisible. If the sleight of hand works, we will not notice a comma or a quotation mark but will translate each instantly into a pause or an awareness of voice; we will not focus on the individual letters of a word but extract its sense whole. When the mechanics are incorrectly used, the trick is revealed and the magic fails; the reader’s focus is shifted from the story to its surface. The reader is irritated at the author, and of all the emotions the reader is willing to experience, irritation at the author is not one.

There is no intrinsic virtue in standardized mechanics, and you can depart from them whenever you produce an effect that adequately compensates for the attention called to the surface. But only then. Unlike the techniques of narrative, the rules of spelling, grammar, and punctuation can be coldly learned anywhere in the English-speaking world—and they should be learned by anyone who aspires to write.

No one really has an eagle eye for his/her own writing. It’s harder to keep your attention on the mechanics of your own words than any other’s—for which reason a friend or a copyeditor with the skill is invaluable. In the meantime, however, try to become a good surface editor of your work. Reading aloud always helps.

TRY THIS 7.15

Particularly frequent problems in grammar and punctuation are these: dangling modifiers, unclear antecedents of pronouns, the use of the comma in compound sentences, the use of *lay* and *lie*. If you’re unsure of yourself with regard to any of these giveaway errors, look them up in a standard grammar text. Spend the time to learn them—the effort will repay itself a hundredfold throughout your writing life.

Then:

What follows is a passage with at least three punctuation mistakes, three spelling mistakes, one dangling modifier, four typos, two awkward repetitions, one unclear antecedent, two misused words, and a cliché (though some may fit more than one category and a few may cause disagreement—that is the nature of proofreading). Spot and correct them. Make any necessary judgment calls.

Together, Lisel and Drakov wondered through Spartanvilles noisy, squalid streets. Goats clogged the noisy streets and the venders cursed them. Walking hand in hand, the factory generator seemed to send its roar overhead at the level of a low plane.

A homeless man leared up at them crazy as a cuckoo. They were astonished to see the the local police had put up a barrier at the end of Main Street, plus the government were making random passport checks at the barrier.

"What could they be looking for on a georgeous day like this?" Lisel wondered. Drakov said, "Us, Maybe."

Then:

Your manuscript, as you present it to your workshop, an agent, or an editor, is dressed for interview. If it's sloppy it'll be hard to see how brilliant it really is. Groom it. Consult the end of each genre chapter for the traditional and professional formats.

Line Edit: Check through for faulty grammar, inconsistent tenses, unintended repetitions of words, awkwardness. Consult Appendix B.

Proofread: Run a spell check (but don't rely on it entirely). Read through for typos, punctuation errors, any of those goblins that slip into a manuscript. If you are in doubt about the spelling or meaning of a word, look it up.

The Workshop

Whatever can't be taught, there is a great deal that can, and must, be learned.

Mary Oliver

Once you have a draft of a piece and have worked on it to the best of your ability, someone else's eyes can help refresh the vision of your own. That's where the workshop can help. Professionals rely on their editors and agents in this process, and as Kurt Vonnegut has pointed out, "A creative writing course provides experienced editors for inspired amateurs. What could be simpler or more dignified?"

In preparation for the workshop, each class member should read the piece twice, once for its content, a second time with pen in hand to make marginal comments, observations, suggestions. A summarizing end note is usual and helpful. This should be done with the understanding that the work at hand is *by definition* a work in progress. If it were finished then there would be no reason to bring it into the workshop.

Keep in mind that the goal of the workshop is to make the piece under consideration *the best that it can be*. The group should continue to deal, first, in neutral and inquiring ways with each piece before going on to discuss what does and doesn't "work." It's often a good idea to begin with a detailed summary of what the poetry, story, essay, or drama actually says—useful because if class members understand the characters or events differently, find the imagery confusing, or miss an irony, this is important information for the author, a signal that she has not revealed what, or all, she meant. The exploratory questions

suggested in the introduction may still be useful. In addition, the class might address such questions as:

- What kind of piece is this?
- What other works does it remind you of?
- How is it structured?
- What is it about?
- What does it say about what it is about?
- What degree of identification does it invite?
- How does its imagery relate to its theme?
- How is persona or point of view employed?
- What effect on the reader does it seem to want to produce?

Only then should the critique begin to deal with whether the work under consideration is successful in its effects: *Is the language fresh, the action clear, the point of view consistent, the rhythm interesting, the characters fully drawn, the imagery vivid?* Now and again it is well to pause and return to more substantive matters: *What's the spirit of this piece, what is it trying to say, what does it make me feel?* Take another look also at the suggestions for workshop etiquette on pages 11 and 12 of Chapter 1, "Invitation to the Writer." Your workshop leader will also have ground rules for the conducting of the workshop.

If the process is respectfully and attentively addressed, it can be of genuine value not only to the writer but to the writer-critics, who can learn, through the articulation of their own and others' responses, what "works" and what doesn't, and how to face similar authorial problems. In workshop discussion, disagreements are often as instructive as consensus; lack of clarity often teaches what clarity is.

For the writer, the process is emotionally strenuous, because the piece under discussion is a sort of baby on the block. Its parent may have a strong impulse to explain and plead. Most of us feel not only committed to what we have put on the page, but also defensive on its behalf—wanting, really, only to be told that it is a work of genius or, failing that, to find out that we have gotten away with it. We may even want to blame the reader. If the criticism is: *this isn't clear*, it's hard not to feel: *you didn't read it right*—even if you understand that although the workshop members have an obligation to read with special care, it is not up to them to "get it" but up to the author to be clear. If the complaint is: *this isn't credible*, it's very hard not to respond: *but it really happened!*—even though you know perfectly well that credibility is a different sort of fish than fact. There is also a self-preservative impulse to keep from changing the core of what you've done: *Why should I put in all that effort?*

The most important part of being a writer in a workshop is to learn this: Be still, be greedy for suggestions, take everything in, and don't defend. The trick to making good use of criticism is to be utterly selfish about it. Ultimately you are the laborer, the arbiter, and the boss in any dispute about your story, so you can afford to consider any problem and any solution. Therefore, the first step toward successful revision is learning to hear, absorb, and accept criticism.

It is difficult. But only the effort of complete receptivity will make the workshop work for you. The chances are that your draft really does not say the most meaningful thing inherent in it, and that most meaningful thing may announce itself sideways, in a detail, a parenthesis, an afterthought, a slip. Somebody else may spot it before you do. Sometimes the best advice comes from the most surprising source. The thing you resist the hardest may be exactly what you need.

After the workshop, the writer's obligation alters slightly. It's important to take the written critiques and take them seriously, let them sink in with as good a will as you brought to workshop. But part of the need is also not to let them sink in too far. Reject without regret whatever seems on reflection wrong-headed, dull, destructive, or irrelevant to your vision. Resist the impulse to write "for the workshop" what you think your peers or teacher will praise. It's just as important to be able to discriminate between helpful and unhelpful criticism as it is to be able to write. It is in fact the same thing as being able to write. So listen to everything and receive all criticism as if it is golden. Then listen to yourself and toss the dross.

More to Read

- Bell, Susan. *The Artful Edit: On the practice of editing yourself*. New York: Norton, 2007. Print.
- Carlson, Ron. *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1997. Print.
- Fiske, Robert Hartwell and Laura Cherry. *Poem, Revised*. Oak Park, Illinois: Marion St. Press, 2007. Print.
- Strunk, William, Jr., and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*, Fourth Edition. New York: Longman, 2000. Print.

And to Watch

- Burroway, Janet. *So Is It Done? Navigating the Revision Process*. Chicago: Elephant Rock Productions, 2005. DVD.

EXAMPLES

What follows in this chapter are several examples of revision, four of them with a narrative by the author explaining what changes were made in the manuscripts and why. Most are poems that change their forms; one is the opening of a novel.

Elizabeth Bishop: First and Final Drafts of "One Art"

The first and final drafts of Elizabeth Bishop's poem "One Art" show an evolution from a focused freewrite toward the very intricate poetic form of a **villanelle**, in which the first and third lines are repeated at the end of alternating successive verses and as a couplet at the end. In spite of this very demanding scheme, the

finished version is about half the length of the freewrite. Notice how the ideas are increasingly simply stated, the tone of the final version calm and detached until the burst of emotion in the last line. In these two drafts, Bishop plays with various points of view, trying "one" and "I" and "you" before settling on the final combination of instruction and confession. The title, too, works toward simplicity, from "How to Lose Things," "The Gift of Losing Things," and "The Art of Losing Things" to the most concise and understated "One Art."

THE FIRST DRAFT

HOW TO LOSE THINGS / ? / THE GIFT OF LOSING THINGS?

lost *cut*
[Draft 1]

One might begin by losing one's reading glasses
oh 2 or 3 times a day - or one's favorite pen.

THE ART OF LOSING THINGS

The thing to do is to begin by "mislaying".

Mostly, one begins by "mislaying":
keys, reading-glasses, fountain pens
- these are almost too easy to be mentioned,
and "mislaying" means that they usually turn up
in the most obvious place, although when one
is making progress, the places grow more unlikely
- This is by way of introduction. I really
want to introduce myself - I am such a
fantastic lly good at losing things
I think everyone shd. profit from my experiences.

loose
sway
bliss
intelligible
my

You may find it hard to believe, but I have actually lost
I mean lost, and forever two whole houses,
one a very big one. A third house, also big, is
at present, I think, "misaid" - but
maybe it's lost, too. I won't know for sure for some time.
I have lost one/ ~~the~~ peninsula and one island.
I have lost - it can never be has never been found -
a small-sized town on that same island.
I've lost smaller bits of geography, like and many smaller bits of geography or scenery:
a splendid beach, and a good-sized bay.
Two whole cities, two of the
world's biggest cities (two of the most beautiful
although that's beside the point)
A piece of one continent -
and one entire continent. All gone, gone forever and ever..

One might think this would have prepared me
for losing one average-sized not especially----- exceptionally
beautiful or dazzlingly intelligent person
(except for blue eyes) (only the eyes were exceptionally beautiful and
But it doesn't seem to have, at all... the hands looked intelligent)
the fine hands

a good piece of one continent
and another continent - the whole damned thing!
He who loseth his life, etc. - but he who
loses his love - neever, no never never never again -

A
x
B

a
b
a

small
intellig

gorge
depth
to

my
my
for
my

6 (6)

(intellig) *made* *(but)*
(cont) *(eye)*

THE FINAL DRAFT

ELIZABETH BISHOP

One Art

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

A detailed comparison of the many drafts of this poem appears in the fine essay "A Moment's Thought" in Ellen Bryant Voigt's, The Flexible Lyric (Athens and London, The University of Georgia Press, 1999).

Notice also that "One Art" is a "list poem" or "catalogue poem," built on a list of things that can be lost. It's almost impossible to overstate the importance of the list in literature. You can use lists of images to build a description or a portrait, extend a metaphor by listing the aspects of a comparison, or structure an essay as a list of ways to look at your subject. (Margaret Atwood's "The Female Body," on page 250, is structured in such a way.) It could even be argued that a story is based on a list of events one after the other.

TRY THIS 7.16

Choose one of the lists in your journal and play around with it, extending each item on the list into a sentence or two, adding an image, an idea, a memory. When you

(continued)

(Try This 7.16 continued)

have a page or so, look it over and see what repeated images or ideas emerge. What do the parts have in common? What do you seem to be saying? Can you give it a title? If so, you may have a theme. Try arranging the parts into lines. Now try cutting whatever seems extraneous to your theme. Are you partway to a poem?

PATTY SEYBURN

Anatomy of Disorder

This is the first thorough draft of the poem:

12:19 a.m.

Open your primers to Shape, the fourth chapter
in the Anatomy of Disorder, writ yore,
and you'll find a daguerrotype of my eyelids—
beneath, fibers capable of exponential
5 reproduction, renegade begetting, vanishing

their trellis, as should good vines.

Don't get me wrong—I know the minions
of the Angel of Death crouch beneath my drapes,
eager to filch my soul from my animate
10 frame, should my breath hesitate. I know

that longing listens to the surf report:
("Don't bother. No waves. But there's hope
on the northwest horizon") and burrows its head
in Psyche's sand, emerging as a castle with turrets,
15 drawbridge and moat, subject to fits of mutability.

Remember: Capability Brown reshaped
the English Garden from contrivance
to the articulated wild. In his perfect hermitage,
he was overheard chiding a local child:
20 "You can't escape landscape."

I always loved the reiteration of lilac
and city block, pastel stock and power line,
thistle and used car lot with chrome hopes.
A triangle implies. Stairs have convictions;
25 the oval, qualities. When a trapezoid is present,

one can make predictions. The valentine has graciously
figured the human heart into a bi-valve container
with angles and curves for the furies
to tour with rhyming guidebooks, and there you are
30 on the back road to beauty and the sublime,

where the service is terrible—they have no
work ethic, those two, always Me Me Me.
We said: pipe down, you're nothing special
but they keep emerging—bedraggled, buoyant
with threat and decree. When Virginia Woolf

35

put stones like literature in her pockets
to weigh down her corpus, and took a constitutional
into the waves that broke and broke
and broke, each stone had its own shape,
its own responsibility—complicit,
along with the sea.

40

This poem began as a much longer poem—that's often the trajectory of a poem, for me. I write an original draft that goes on expanding for a while, at which time it hits critical mass and I realize that I've added one too many appositions, one too many clauses, dragged out a sentence as long as it can possibly go. In the case of this poem, it started as part of a series of poems with times for titles. I feel like these poems are obliquely about parenting, mostly because I wrote them when I had insomnia during pregnancy, and odd images related to parturition and my physical condition would sneak into the poems. I also figured that I would not be awake if I weren't pregnant, so there had to be some psychic connection between my child and the poem; of course, poems are children, I think, both in that we parent them and they have the charm and indiscretion we wish we could display as adults (and get away with).

So I was looking around my bedroom—I tended to think that if I actually got out of bed, I'd never get back to sleep, so I kept a pen and pad on the dresser, and would reach up and scribble, nearly illegibly, in the dark. Sometimes the accidents of my penmanship were fortuitous (such as my student who wrote, "There is no escaping the inedible"). In this case, I lie awake looking at the various shapes in my room, and so thought this poem would be a diatribe on those: the shape of things, of ideas, and how they shift.

What I came to realize was that the shapes were, to use Richard Hugo's idea of "the triggering town," triggers for the real subject of the poem, which would seem to be something about... I'm really not sure. Perhaps about the tentative imposition of order on chaos, the impossibility of doing so, and/or the notion that we must take control of our own internal disorder, or else it will win out. Not to sound like a "cop-out," but I have gained some comfort with Keats's "Negative Capability," which is to say, I'm okay with not knowing everything about what I write. In any case, I found out that the first two stanzas of the poem were functioning as "warm-up," which makes them initially useful and ultimately dispensable—necessarily so, to make the poem "go." To find the "final" beginning of the poem, I looked for the line that I thought was most alive, and being a new Californian, originally a Detroit, that would seem to be