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The Importance of Editing and Revision

It's virtually impossible to overemphasize the importance of editing and revision to authors, whether they're published or not. The proliferation of personal home pages and blogs online in recent years has resulted in countless creative outlets for the aspiring writer, but these pages all too often can be filled with sloppy writing. Good editing and a thorough revision process are generally what separate those writers who have the ability to earn money from their craft from those who don't. I always stress this to both students and adult writers during my school visits, author in residence programs and writing workshops. Even if you only check your story once, it never gets any worse and nearly always improves.

Reading and Revising

For *The Alchemist's Portrait*, my first novel, there are over twenty versions of the manuscript, with the earliest one bearing little resemblance to the finished novel. I take both of these documents, the initial submission to the publisher, and the final one, containing the editor's comments and suggestions, along with my notes, to all my school visits to show teachers, students and indeed writers at conferences and those who attend my adult workshops, just how much work actually goes into getting the story into print. Is reading through your work over and over again, checking for errors, making amendments or additions or correcting typos, maddeningly tedious and frustrating? Yes, at times it undoubtedly is, but without the editing and revision process, you're unlikely to attract the attention of a publishing house.

Whether you're an established writer or just starting out in your career, there are no right and wrong ways to revise your work. Some people do revisions and edit as they go along, while others insist on finishing the entire piece before they even start to look at any alterations. *The Alchemist's Portrait* went through over twenty versions before it was finally ready, the other novels between five and ten each, I think. However, it isn't strictly a revision process for me. I don't just sit down and write the novel from the beginning and work through to the end, although this is what many authors do.

Outlines and Planning

Since writing *The Alchemist's Portrait*, I've spent a lot of time on the outlines for my subsequent novels, ensuring the plot is just right before I even start writing the actual book. I spend perhaps six months working on the detailed outline to the story. This outline usually comprises at least one paragraph for each chapter of the book and can be as much as ten thousand words in length. Sometimes during the process, a piece of dialogue or an action sequence begs to be written, because it is rattling around in my head

and so I do write that right away, since I can always move it around in the story later on the computer. Planning your book out in this way isn't for everyone, but I find it works well for me.

I spend a fair amount of time on the outline for a novel. Once I actually start writing the book, I usually edit at least a little as I go. Sometimes this involves checking over just one chapter, sometimes two or three, once they are done, if I want to assess how it's all going, if everything flows properly or if a section doesn't feel right in some way, before I move on to the next part. I'm able to do this because I know what will happen next in the plot. In some ways, I am almost merely expanding on the outline I created, filling in details, adding description, dialogue, action and so on.

Does the outline change as I progress? Absolutely, although usually not too dramatically. There will invariably be parts of the story that may not work as well as you thought they would, new ideas that emerge as you write or you may simply have a new take on a situation you've already created. However, the outlines always serve as a valuable guide and ensure that the general flow of the story is well mapped out. You may, of course, still change your mind about certain aspects of the story as it is written, but hopefully you can avoid the situation where you have produced ten chapters, then decide to scrap everything you have written, because you've have a great new idea. This new inspiration, however, might actually be part of another book altogether and be ill suited to your current project. Pre-planning may not be for everyone, but it will often help you maintain your focus, enabling you to get your book to the finish line.

A Lengthy Process

No matter how experienced you are as a writer, it's always tough to edit your own work, because this is your baby and you are biased, even if you don't think you are. You have to have a thick skin to be able to handle the rejections which come to all of us and you have to be hard on yourself before you even send it out in the first place to publishers. Once the actual novel is done, I always read through it as many times as I feel is necessary, making fewer and fewer changes as I go through the text. I also find that reading the novel aloud helps as well, since this is the closest you can actually get to experiencing another person's point of view.

How do you know when to stop editing? Well, there are no hard and fast rules on that, but at some point you will know. At that time, you have to take a deep breath and finally get someone else to read your masterpiece, whether this is a publisher or just someone you hire to evaluate your manuscript. Is it then ready to send out? Again, there are no set procedures, but eventually, you have to make a decision. The fear of rejection is a very strong emotion and holds many people back, but at some point it has to be submitted. Just make sure it is ready, doing whatever you need to do and taking as much time as you feel is necessary. Never rush things or take short cuts, because you'll most likely regret it.