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Kill Your Darlings: The Art of Revision

Promo blurb:

Larry Edwards will present "Kill Your Darlings: The Art of Revision" at the SDWEG meeting on May 20, 2019. This presentation on self-editing is not just for new writers; it's also designed as a refresher for experienced writers, as well as those who participate in read-and-critique groups, and those who self-publish.

Drawing on his years of experience as an editor, Edwards will discuss structure, plot, content, narrative voice, characters, point of view, and how to "kill your darlings" as it applies to fiction as well as memoir and narrative nonfiction. By applying the principles and techniques he presents, writers will move closer toward their goal of publishing short stories, novels, memoirs, and narrative nonfiction worthy of merit and recognition, if not financial reward.

Edwards is an award-winning investigative journalist, author, editor, and publisher, and a lifetime member of the Guild. He has worked in the publishing industry for 35 years. In addition to writing fiction and nonfiction, he works as a freelance book editor and publishing consultant.

Questions:

- How many of you consider yourselves new or beginning writers?
- How many of you consider yourselves experienced writers?
- How many of you have had a book published by a traditional book publisher?
  I.e., were you were paid for the rights to your book.
- How many of you have more than one book published by a traditional book publisher?
- How many of you have been on the New York Times best-seller list?
- How many of you have self-published an ebook?
- How many of you have self-published a print book?
- How many of you have had an article published in a major newspaper or magazine?
- How many of you have worked for a newspaper or magazine?
- How many of you are in read-and-critique books?
- How many of you have a one-page synopsis for your book or books?
- How many of you have a tagline or logline for your book or books?

Primary Principles of Today's Presentation:

- Clarity, not confusion
- What's the story reason?
- Kill your darlings
- Show, don't tell
- Active voice
- You don't know what you don't know
- Kill your darlings

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Presentation . . .

Purpose: Clarity, not confusion. To provide principles and techniques for improving writers' ability to edit themselves. This does not—and should not—preclude them from working with a professional editor to improve and polish their work. But this process will take writers farther along the journey toward their goal—publishing short stories, memoirs, and novels worthy of merit and recognition, if not financial reward.

Who will benefit: All writers, new and experienced. The eyes of new writers will be opened to the realities of the writing and publishing world, and the notion that "writing is rewriting." For experienced writers, this will serve as a refresher, or offer new perspectives on the art of revision. It will also benefit those who participate in read-and-critique groups by providing specifics on what to look for in the work of others, as well as those who self-publish.

What I will cover today: This is about self-editing, and I will touch on big-picture items: structure, content, plot, narrative voice, narrative mode, characters, point of view, and how to "kill your darlings."

Why? Isn't your job as an editor to find typos and missing words, and correct my grammar, spelling, usage, and punctuation? Yes, it is. However, almost every manuscript I see needs more than that: I find problems with the structure, plot holes, needless content, passive voice, head-hopping POV shifts, and author intrusion.

That is the genesis of this presentation.

Keep in mind that what I present to you today are guidelines, not hard-and-fast rules—all rules are arbitrary; however, these guidelines/rules are based established industry norms. If you go outside these norms, tread carefully. As the saying goes, if you're going to break the rules, know the rules you are breaking. For beginning or unpublished authors seeking a traditional publishing deal, this is particularly true. Remember: You don't know what you don't know.

We don't have a lot of time, so this will be blitzkrieg; I hope to be doing a series of workshops later this year in which I will go into greater depth on each of these items. Please save your questions until the end.

What I will not cover today: Editorial style—the mechanics of writing and editing; i.e., the nit-picky stuff: grammar, spelling, usage, and punctuation. I have written a 10-part blog series called **From the Editor's Eye: The 10 Most Common Errors Made by Writers**. It is available online, and it is self-explanatory, and self-guiding. I urge all of you to take a look at it, on your own time. The links to it and other material related to writing, editing, publishing, and marketing are on the Resources page of my website: http://www.larryedwards.com/resources.html

Key Elements of the Art of Revision:

- **Structure:** How is your story organized, or not? Restructuring for clarity of story arcs and character arcs.

  By structure I mean how the book is organized.
  - Where does the story begin?
  - When does the "hook" come in?
  - Where do the chapter breaks occur? Where do the scene breaks occur? Can/should the scene breaks be chapter breaks or vice versa?
  - Do the chapters get shorter toward the end of the book?
  - Which characters get Points of View (POV) in the chapters and scenes?
  - Do I need a prologue?
  - Do I use a linear story line with flashbacks or non-linear story line?

  All stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. However, I often start reading a manuscript (or reading a published book) and find that the story—as envisioned by the author—would be better if it began with paragraph two, or page two, or even chapter two. The preceding material is either irrelevant or it would be better served by being introduced later as a flashback or background that has contextual relevance; for example, character bios.

  How do I know the author's vision? Typically, I request a tagline/logline and a synopsis from the author. This tells me what the author believes his/her story is about. Then I read the manuscript and often see that the two are not in sync, particularly the beginning. Or the author's vision is eventually revealed within the story, and the asynchronous elements become apparent.

  If you don't have a tagline/logline for your book, write one. If you don't have a one-page (single-spaced) synopsis for your book, write one. This does not have to be set in stone; it can change.

  These tools will help you with your structure. Ask yourself: Does my story fulfill the promise made in the tagline/logline, and in the synopsis?

  Common problem: Beginning with background information on the setting, or a character, which, at that point, has no context for the reader, so the reader skims it or skips it, or reads it without comprehension; e.g., **"It was a dark and stormy night."**

  Solution: Jump straight into a scene with some kind of action—even if that "action" is a character seated on the roof a skyscraper, contemplating her navel. This engages the reader—draws the reader in—so the reader wants to continue reading and not have to wade through a geography lesson or history lesson—or a weather report.

  Example from *The Death of Mrs. Westaway* by Ruth Ware, who could have begun with:
  It was now a dark and stormy night, and she was now afraid—very, very afraid.

That is *TELLING* in passive voice (and "now" is self-evident and unnecessary, never mind ungrammatical).

Instead, Ware *SHOWS* using active voice. Notice the verbs she uses:

> The girl leaned, rather than walked, into the wind, clutching the damp package of fish and chips grimly under one arm even as the gale plucked at the paper, trying to unravel the parcel and send the contents skittering away down the seafront for the seagulls to claim.
>
> As she crossed the road, her hand closed over the crumpled note in her pocket, and she glanced over her shoulder, checking the long dark stretch of pavement behind her for a shadowy figure, but there was no one there. No one she could see, anyway.

The author, through "showing" rather than "telling," introduces a female character on her way home with dinner, struggling against a strong wind, and fearful that she is being followed. The author paints a picture that the reader can easily envision in her or his mind. Fifteen verbs, and only one of them "was." (Mind you, she could have done without the adverb "grimly.") More on this in Narrative Voice.

What does this have to do with structure? It's an excellent example of how to begin your story, on Page 1. Begin the book, chapters, and scenes with showing/active voice. That's the way to engage your readers. As Mary Karr says, "Be carnal."

You ask: How can I comprehend the structure of my book? It's 150,000 words long.
Answer: Create a chapter-by-chapter outline of the entire book. Include in that outline a few words that tell you what happens in that chapter, character POV, page number of the first page of the chapter, and the number of pages (and words) in the chapter.

This is the beauty of it: You can create the outline AFTER—as Anne Lamont puts it—you write your "shitty first draft." With the outline in front of you, you can analyze the structure as it exists.

Writing a book is not like building a house. You don't have do it in a strict order or progression. You can write the ending first, if you want. Just get words on paper. Then create the outline so you can see what you've done. On what page do I have the hook? Where is the first turning point that changes the direction of the story? Where do the story arcs begin and end? With that laid out in front of you, you can begin restructuring, reorganizing it into a coherent, cohesive story line.

I did this for one of the authors I work with. It opened her eyes. She had wanted one scene, one chapter, and pretty much stuck to it. But the near the end of the book, as the action approached its climax, she had a long chapter with five scenes. Just the opposite of what she should be doing. So I recommended splitting it up and reorganizing the chapter and scene breaks, as well as deleting some of it.

The outline also showed her where she gave characters POV, including minor characters that had small roles in the story, meanwhile not giving POV to the primary characters. It also showed her that she had given way too much POV to a secondary antagonist, while diminishing the role of the primary antagonist. She rewrote those chapters from a different POV and made the story that much better.

The outline will give you a road map and highlight problem areas in the structure, plot, and character POV.

I recommend that writers join a read & critique group, preferably where you are the least experienced writer. However, a weakness of read-and-critique groups is that they tend to focus on one chapter at a time, or even a partial chapter. It may take a year or more to get through a book-length manuscript, and the participants lose sight of the big picture. Authors have this same problem of myopia. A chapter outline will help bring it into focus; hiring a developmental editor will help even more. E.g., San Diego author Alan Russell, for his first novel, hired a development editor ($4000) and rewrote the story based on the editor's recommendations. He has never looked back, and has sold hundreds of thousands of books.

The Prologue Question: To P or not to P? Short answer: Not.
I have written a blog about this—**On Writing: The Primrose Path to Prologue**—so I will not belabor the issue here. I have a link to the blog on the aforementioned Resources page.

Suffice to say that (1) most readers skip the prologue, and (2) a prologue is a red flag to literary agents, especially for unpublished writers (or, using a new-age euphemism, "prepublished" writers).

In my experience, so-called prologues either are not prologues, or they are unnecessary, or they could (should) be Chapter 1. Or they contain background information that could (should) be disclosed later, in a context within the story that is more meaningful to the reader. A prime example of this, IMHO, is Richard Russo's *Empire Falls*.

In one instance of a manuscript I edited, the author had a prologue, then Chapter One opened with: *Three years earlier.* Huh? How can the prologue be a prologue if it occurs three years after the beginning of the story? Answer: It can't.

Does the same apply to Epilogue? Often times, yes. An epilogue is used to tie up loose ends, after the action comes to an end. But not every story needs this.

Can I have an epilogue even if I don't have a prologue? Yes.

If I have a prologue, do I need an epilogue? No.

Linear v. non-linear structure/story line: Does my story line have to be linear and chronological? Or can I do as Quentin Tarantino did in *Pulp Fiction* and have a (at times confusing) non-linear story line, but a linear theme line?

No, and yes. But make sure you don't confuse the reader when you make the transitions back and forth. It should be clear. Clarity, not confusion.

A common non-linear storyline is to begin the story in the present, or near the present, then the main character reminisces or recalls what got her to this current situation or dilemma. So the bulk of the story is actually a flashback.

One problem with a non-linear story line I often see is *backtracking*: An author writes a scene from one character's point of view and moves the story from point A to point C. Then the author backtracks to point B using a secondary character's point of view, but reveals nothing new to the reader; it just rehashes what the reader already knows. What's the point? If it doesn't have a story reason, leave it out.

You say: But Quentin Tarantino did it in Pulp Fiction, so why can't I?

I reply: Are you Quentin Tarantino? Seriously, though, Tarantino had a specific story reason for doing that and made it work, because while it may not have moved the story line forward, it reinforced his theme line. There's an excellent analysis of this online and why it worked for him.

If you want to go this route, give it a great deal of thought. It also raises the question: Just because it worked in a movie script, will it work in a book?

If you want to go this route, give it a great deal of thought. It also raises the question: Just because it worked in a movie script, will it work in a book?

You ask: But aren't flashbacks non-linear?

Answer: Yes and no. Strictly speaking, yes, they are non-linear. However, they are triggered by a character recalling a previous event or experience, so the flashbacks have contextual relevance to the story line, and the transitions into and out of the flashbacks are (or should be) clear to the reader.

More on structure in the sections on Narrative Mode and Point of View.

- **Content:** All content and characters should have a ***story reason*** for being included in the book. If it doesn't have a story reason, then delete it. Otherwise, it's a needless distraction for the reader.

  As Elmore Leonard famously advises in his *10 Rules of Writing,* leave out the parts that readers tend to skip. His novel *Hombre* is an excellent example of this. If you haven't read it, whether you like Westerns or not, this book offers a delightful example of tight writing, among other important aspects of storytelling. (Note: The Paul Newman movie leaves out the final chapter of the book.)

  Extraneous information, either background or description:
  - Yuck: Pleased to see Lovejoy's green truck parked in front of the tan stucco building with brown trim and a metal roof, Mattie pulled up and parked beside it.
    —begins sentence with a 21-word dependent clause (not recommended); 28 words total

What's the story reason for "green" truck and "tan stucco building with brown trim and a metal roof"? Answer: None. Those details had zero relevance to the story; they never come up again.

- Fix: Mattie spotted Lovejoy's truck and parked beside it.
  —8 words

I digress for a moment: Why spelling is important—"Mattie notices movement at the doorway. Cole peeked around the jam . . ."

The next sentence contains "blueberry."

My diabolical mind envisioned a guy eating blueberry door jam. It yanked me out of the scene as if I'd been lassoed from a horse. Making it worse, this came just six pages from the end of the book, as the story approached its climax. You want your readers laughing with you, not at you.

Chapter titles: Should I give my chapters titles?

Not unless you're writing a textbook or a how-to book, or something similar.

Says you: But I want to give titles to my chapters!
Says I: OK, do it. But don't use titles that are spoilers, that give away what the chapter is about. The whole point of fiction and memoir, and some narrative nonfiction, is to withhold certain facts from the reader as long as possible. That's what keeps the reader turning pages: What's going to happen next?

You're not writing news copy for the Associated Press, or *How to Murder Your Mother-in-Law . . . and Get Away With It*.

If you do use titles, have them create an air of mystery or suspense to increase the curiosity of the reader. As they say in the comedy business, don't deliver the punch line before the setup. If you want working titles to help remind yourself what each chapter is about, that's fine, but change or delete them from your final draft.

Length: How long (or short) should my book be? Typical novel or memoir = 75,000 – 85,000 words, or roughly 250–300 manuscript pages. As G.M. Ford says, I get paid the same whether I write 75,000 words or a 100,000 words.

Rule of thumb: Fewer than 100,000 words. Historical and science fiction tend to be longer because of "world building," but even then try to keep it under 100,000. Especially if you want a traditional publishing deal.

I will address the subject of content in greater detail in the last part of this presentation: Kill Your Darlings.

- **Narrative Voice:** Show, don't tell—use active voice, not passive.

I know you hear this all the time, but it doesn't seem to sink in. Or, maybe some writers don't fully comprehend what that means.

Active voice "shows" the reader the story in a dramatic sense; it is particularly important when dealing with a character's emotions.

Passive voice "tells" the reader something happened—it is the voice of history books, academia, and journalism, and the fiction of the 19th and early to mid-20th century.

Active voice/showing/revealing engages the reader—draws the reader toward the characters and into the action of the story.

Passive voice/telling distances the reader—it tugs the reader away from the characters and the action.

It's about the verbs: Minimize your use of the verb "was" and instead use a descriptive verb that conveys the action in the scene. Recall the earlier example from Ruth Ware's book in the Structure section.

> The girl leaned, rather than walked, into the wind, clutching the damp package of fish and chips grimly under one arm even as the gale plucked at the paper, trying to unravel the parcel and send the contents skittering away down the seafront for the seagulls to claim.
>
> As she crossed the road, her hand closed over the crumpled note in her pocket, and she glanced over her shoulder, checking the long dark stretch of pavement behind her for a shadowy figure, but there was no one there. No one she could see, anyway.

More examples:

Passive voice/telling:

- The ball was hit.
- A sound was heard.
- There was a line of sweat on his upper lip. His drink was a martini with a lemon twist, no ice. He was drinking it in swift gulps.

Yes, the verb "was" serves a purpose, and sometimes it is the best option. But it doesn't have to the primary verb in your entire book.

Active voice/showing:

- John swung the bat and whacked the knuckleball over the outfield fence.
- Joe heard a twig snap and flinched.
- A line of sweat glistened his upper lip. He picked up his drink—a martini with a lemon twist, no ice—and drained the glass in three gulps. ["swift" deleted: A gulp is swift by definition.)

Use active voice when conveying the emotions of your characters. Don't *tell* the reader what emotion the character is feeling. *Show* the reader how the character acts and reacts; then the reader will know the emotional state of the character without being told. (More of this in POV.)

Passive voice/telling:

- She was worried.
- She was totally infuriated.

Active voice/showing:

- Jane frowned. Or Jane furrowed her brow. Or Jane pursed her lips and scratched her head.
- Jane kicked him in the balls, then walloped him on the head with a frying pan.

Keep the use of the verb "to be"—"is," "was," "were" and "would"—to a minimum by using descriptive verb forms. The use of "to be" distances the reader, dilutes the effect, takes the punch out of your prose, gives your writing the "wuzzies."

I said earlier the "show, don't tell" principle applies to fiction, memoir, and narrative nonfiction, while passive voice is the voice of nonfiction, history books, academia, journalism, and Dullsville. But even in those latter instances, it doesn't have to be passive. Narrative nonfiction is now used extensively in journalism, and many universities include it in their journalism curricula. Examples of it being used in works of history include: *Astoria*, *Undaunted Courage*, *They Must Be Monsters*—the book I mentioned about the McMartin Preschool scandal—and other works of a historical nature.

You ask: How do I achieve this?

Answer: You do it with scenes, where characters interact and speak to one another. Yes, in nonfiction it may involve some creative license, but it is based on letters, journals, diaries, interviews, police reports, and news reports, or the author recreates how a scene may have played out when the specifics are unclear, but without altering the known or accepted facts.

Corollary to show, don't tell—reveal, don't tell

What's the difference? Reveal is "big picture": through a character's words, deeds, and internal thoughts, the author reveals aspects of that character's personality, proclivities, and background, rather than through a disembodied narrative voice.

For example:

- Telling: She was angry.

  Followed by narrative BS (back story): . . . as a child, nothing she did was ever good enough for her father, who berated her over every little misstep, and that tainted her relationships with men. Or, as an eleven-year-old, she was sexually abused by her older sister's boyfriend, and that left her distrustful of men.

  Telling = passive verb: was.
- Showing: "You jerk," she shouted, then kicked him in the shins and whacked him over the head with a cast-iron skillet.

  Showing = descriptive verbs: kicked, whacked.
- Revealing emotion and motivation behind a character's words or actions:

  Showing and revealing can occur simultaneously. In the previous example, we see that not only is this character angry, she's willing to be violent, and what

that may portend for future situations or confrontations. The reader wonders why is this character so angry? What happened to her?

However, the answer doesn't have to come immediately, although it could. For example, while the guy is lying unconscious, she could slide down the wall and sit on the floor, knees up, hands to her face, tears streaking her cheeks, thinking, *My god, what have I done? When I attacked Bill, I didn't see him. I saw my father.* Or: *My god, when I attacked Bill, I didn't see him. I saw my sister's boyfriend.*

Or the character could reveal this later, in a conversation with a friend or psychotherapist or a stranger on a plane . . . she confesses to what she had done and what lies behind the outburst of emotion—her overbearing father: *Nothing I did was ever good enough for him. He berated me over every little misstep.* Or her sister's pedophile boyfriend. *He abused me when I was a vulnerable eleven-year-old.*

This way the character reveals the information, rather than having an information dump on the part of the author. This engages the reader, and draws the reader deeper into the story through the characters, rather than distancing the reader, as if he or she were reading an article in a newspaper.

These techniques can apply to narrative/creative nonfiction as well. For example, the nonfiction book *Astoria* by Peter Stark. He's not a historian; he's a journalist. And by drawing on letters, diaries, and historical accounts, he brought this 200-year-old story of fur trappers to life by applying techniques that are generally employed in writing literature/ fiction—creating scenes, and showing rather than telling. Stephen Ambrose, who is a historian, also did this, although to a lesser degree, in *Undaunted Courage*, a well-written and captivating book about the Lewis and Clark expedition.

- **Narrative Mode:** first person, second person, third person.
  - Most fiction is written in third-person (he said, she said), but not all.
  - Narrative nonfiction is generally written in third-person, with the exception of memoir.
  - Memoirs and autobiographies are written in first-person (I said).
  - Second-person narrative mode is rarely used (you said); e.g., Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*. If you are going to use second-person, set the stage immediately so the reader is clear. For example: You don't know me, but by the time you finish reading this, you will wish we'd never met.

    Some authors lapse into second-person while writing in first-person, generally without realizing it or intending to. Is this wrong? As I said earlier, if you're going to break the rules, better to know the rules you're breaking. All too often, however, when an author does this, it is in the middle of a paragraph where the narrator has been referring to himself/herself in first person (I, me, myself) and shifts to second-person (you), when the narrator is actually still referring to herself/himself . I see this a lot in memoir—not recommended. . . . It's distancing . . . it takes the reader out of the story.

Anytime you find yourself using the pronouns you or your in a first-person or third person narrative, stop and ask yourself: What's the story reason for this?

Question: Is it OK to mix first- and third-person in the same story?

Answer: Yes, but tread lightly, because it can jar and confuse the reader with an unexpected shift in point of view, and if you are seeking a traditional publishing deal, this is a red flag to agents and acquisition editors. A good example of how this can work is John Burnham Schwartz's *Reservation Road*, which has three main characters, one presented in first-person, the other two in third-person, and each chapter alternates: first-person, third-person, third-person, first-person, third-person, third-person, and so on. The structure remains consistent throughout the book, and the reader knows what to expect.

Cormac McCarthy in *No Country for Old Men* also uses this technique, with the sheriff's memoir written in first-person (and italicized), and the rest of the story is told in third-person (normal font), even when the sheriff is in the scene. It confused me at first, but once I got into the rhythm of it, it worked, because the structure remained consistent throughout the book.

G.M Ford in *Soul Survivor* uses this technique for one scene, written in third person, near the end of the book. It worked so seamlessly his editor didn't even comment on it.

However, Sue Grafton tried it in one of her later alphabet novels, which are written in first-person, and I argue that she did herself a disservice; I found it to be an unnecessary intrusion into the story; i.e., I could not find any story reason for introducing another character's POV. It did not add anything to the story; rather, it became a needless distraction.

. . . which leads us to Point of View . . .

- **Point of view:** POV confounds many writers, but it is critical to a story, so you as writers need to be cognizant of how you employ POV and how it impacts your stories:
    1. Single—the entire story is told from the main character's point of view, and it may be written in first-person. This is common in mysteries, from the POV of the detective or amateur sleuth, and the reader is two steps behind the protagonist, which creates the mystery.
    2. Limited omniscient—single POV within a scene, but multiple POV within the story. This is typical of a thriller or suspense story, where the good guy and the bad guy each have a POV, and the reader is two steps ahead of the good guy due to the bad guy's POV, and that creates the suspense.
    3. Fully omniscient—multiple POV within scenes; "old school," common in 19th and early to mid-20th century; no longer in fashion; a red flag to literary agents and publishers, who pejoratively call it "head hopping."
       E.g., Somerset Maugham, and Louis L'Amour, who in a scene in *Keylock Man* gave a POV to six men—and a horse. In a manuscript I edited, the author gave brief POV to a dog.

       Do animals merit a POV? They can, but it needs to part of the story; maybe the animal is the main character. What's the story reason?

The first two are considered the "rule of thumb" for today's writing, while fully omniscient is considered to be old school and amateurish.

You may ask: How is POV established? POV is determined by what a specific character senses or thinks; i.e., what that character sees, hears, smells, tastes, and touches, and that character's internal thoughts.

The most critical element is internal thought—what a character is thinking at any given moment. In fully omniscient POV, the author may divulge the internal thoughts and motivations of two or more characters within a scene. In limited omniscient and single POV, the author limits the internal thoughts to one character per scene. What the non-POV characters think or feel is revealed by what they say or what they do, but NOT through internal thought, which would be "head hopping."

Ask yourself: What POV do I need to tell this story effectively? How does a single POV limit my options? How does multiple POV complicate my options?

How do writers get confused by POV? True story: A writer had been to a workshop and was told by a well-known literary agent that if she wanted her book to be acquired by a New York publisher, she had to have multiple points of view. So, she wrote scenes from one character's POV, then rewrote the same scenes from another character's POV. If the second scene had introduced new information, or revealed aspects of the character not apparent in the first scene, then that technique might have worked; but this author merely repeated the information revealed to the reader in the first scene, and therefore it served no purpose. I had no trouble killing that darling.

Important points to ponder:

POV sends a message to the reader: It says "this character is important to the story, so pay attention." However, I see manuscripts in which minor, throwaway characters are not only given a POV, they get paragraphs or even pages of background, while more important characters get short changed.

There are consequences for head hopping: rejection by agents and publishers, as well as reader confusion over who the most important characters are and whether the reader should care about or empathize with those characters. If a reader gets confused, he or she may put the book down and pick up another.

Only give POV to a few important characters. Clarity, not confusion.

Example: I edited a rehash of the Robin Hood legend. It began with a long prologue from the POV of Robin Hood's sidekick, Little John, in which Little John saves Robin from drowning when the ship they were on during their return to England began to sink. I thought, *This is great—a fresh retelling of the legend of Robin Hood from Little John's POV.* But in Chapter One, the POV shifts to Robin Hood and Little John never gets a POV again. So, the author had set my expectations with the prologue—which should have been Chapter One—then dashed those expectations. This novel came out of a prestigious writers' workshop, and, don't get me wrong, that prologue was beautifully written, and it no doubt received high marks in the workshop. But not only did the POV throw me off, the prologue was not necessary for the story. I recommended that she kill that darling.

You ask: How do I convey to the reader what a character is thinking or a character's emotional state without going into that character's POV?

Answer: Show, don't tell: Show the character's thoughts and emotions through that character's words and/or actions, rather than telling:

- Telling/head hopping POV shift: She was pissed off.
- Showing/no head hopping: "To hell with you," she muttered and punched him on the nose.

Recommendation: Create a POV outline. This is similar to a chapter outline, but it's limited to identifying each character that has a POV in each chapter and each scene within a chapter. You will see at a glance how much, or how little, weight you have given to each character.

If you find that you have given POV to multiple characters in a chapter or, more importantly, in a scene, then you ask yourself, is this necessary? What's the story reason? Why is this character so important that he or she merits a POV?

You ask: Can I have multiple points of view in a story that's written in first-person? Yes, as covered previously in Narrative Mode.

Murder mysteries often have a single POV—the detective, PI, or amateur sleuth—and often are written in first-person. So nothing happens in the story that is not through the eyes and ears of the main character.

Thrillers and suspense, by nature, require at least two POV—protagonist and antagonist—and may have a third or fourth, depending on the needs of the story.

But if you find that you have five, six, seven characters with POV, ask yourself why. Why do I need all of these characters' POV? Why is this so critical? How can I write it differently so the POV remains with my two or three most important characters?

- **Characters:** Create three-dimensional characters; avoid stereotypes and cartoon characters.

I know this may seem self-evident, but all too often I see the latter—characters that are caricatures, rather than portrayed as believable individuals; this is especially true when it comes to cops and robbers; don't turn it into Loony Tunes or the Keystone cops, or *Father Brown*, unless that is your intent from page 1—as a spoof, or satire, or humor.

Have your characters reveal who they are through their words and deeds. Show and reveal, don't tell.

How many primary characters do I need/should I have? A literary agent told me: There are two or three important characters to a story—all the rest are furniture. That may be oversimplified, but keep that in mind.

How many secondary or minor characters do I need/should I have, even if they don't get a POV? What is the story reason for including a specific character? If you

have no justifiable story reason, take that character out. At the very least, do not give that character a POV.

Example: A number of secondary characters are introduced at the beginning, along with lengthy backgrounds, then are never heard from again. Meanwhile, characters with much larger roles get short shrift. If you do this, you are doing a disservice to your readers, and they may set your book aside.

The amount of words you devote to a character should be directly proportional to the role that character plays. The smaller the role, the fewer the words.

- **Plot:** This, too, may seem self-evident, but I assure you, for some authors it is not: A plot should be logical, even in the wildest fantasy or sci-fi novel. Is the conflict contrived, unbelievable? Beware of plot holes: something missing from the story line that leaves the reader confused or, even worse, shaking her head in disbelief and laying the book aside. You want your readers laughing with you, not at you.

  For example: Four characters are stranded in the post-apocalyptic Arizona desert and struggle to survive while being chased by bad guys intent on killing them; then, just when they are about to escape, without any suspicion or foreshadowing, one character betrays them. It feels contrived and implausible.

  Example: Midway through the story, the primary POV shifts from the protagonist to a private investigator and a group of cartoonish cops, reading is if it were two different stories.

  Rules to write by:
  - If you write genre fiction, use the "formula" as a skeleton, not a full-body suit.
  - The Hero's Journey is tried and true; study it, then mold your own story, with a twist.
  - Avoid contrived scenarios that merely drag out the story without contributing to the story's theme, message, or ultimate objective.
  - Keep the focus and POV on your primary characters.
  - Avoid *deus ex machina* endings (implausible or unbelievable).

- **Logistics:** Watch for places where a character does things that don't make sense or seem implausible, or the characters are repositioned without a transition.

  For example:
  - A character is in Coronado, but the author writes: He left the car and sought solace in the rocking arms of Mission Bay.
  - A character picks up a gun in his left hand, and two paragraphs later he picks up a second gun with his left hand, and he intends to use the gun.
  - Two detectives get out of a car, but in the previous paragraph they were in the police station. This might work in a movie, where the viewer has visual cues, but not in a book.
  - It's nighttime and dark, but the characters can see details as if it were full daylight.
  - The cell phone won't work in a remote area, but 100 pages later, it does work.

- A character in a post-apocalyptic hospital cuts all the electrical power to the building. Two pages later, she turns on lights and uses electrical equipment.

In science fiction and paranormal, you can create a new world, but the actions and situations still need to be plausible within the boundaries of that world.

- **Information Dumps**
  - **Reader feeder**: This typically occurs in dialogue when one character tells another character things that other character already knows, or should know. The author inserts these details to "feed" information (exposition) to the reader. But it makes for unnatural, even unbelievable, dialogue between characters.

    For example, Jill says:

    > "One set of prints here. Male as well. The lady who hired us described her friend, John Dodd, as five foot-ten and around a hundred eighty pounds. The depth of the print and length of the stride matches her description." (40 words)

    This is not how Jill would speak to her partner, Jack. I changed it to:

    > "One set of prints. Male. Carol described her friend as five-foot-ten and around a hundred eighty pounds. The depth of the print and length of stride matches that." (28 words = 30 percent reduction)

    The phrase *the lady who hired us* is reader feeder because Jack already knows this. Find another way to convey that information to the reader.

    Fifteen pages later, Jill says:

    > "It's time to go see the woman who hired us to look for Dodd and give her the bad news." (20 words)

    The phrase *the woman who hired us to look for Dodd* is reader feeder and repetitive. I changed it to:

    > "Time to go see Carol and give her the bad news." (11 words = 45 percent reduction)

    This is not only more realistic, it tightens it up and improves the pace.

  - **Too much BS (back story)**, either in inappropriate places (bringing the story to a halt), or without context for the reader, so it ends up having no meaning to reader—e.g., someone asks for the time of day, and you tell her how a watch is made—and the reader skips it.

    Back story and character bios that have little or no relevance to the story. I see a lot of manuscripts that go into great detail about a place or person that play minor roles in the story. Save it for the characters that matter.

Again, ask yourself, what's the story reason? Is this the appropriate place in the story to put it? Does this information have to be introduced all at once or can it be dribbled in over a number of scenes or chapters, within a relevant context? I recommend the latter.

- **Author intrusion:** unnecessary or repetitious narrative that describes the action that follows, or explains a character's motivation when the character's action makes this clear to the reader. These are intrusive and slow the pace of the story.

  Examples: A character makes a sarcastic comment to another character, and the author writes: The day's ball busting had begun. My comment to the author: Self-evident; delete. Or, put those words into a character's mouth, not your narrative.

  If you show, you don't need to tell. If you reveal, you don't need to tell. You can tighten up your narrative and improve the pace of the story by killing these darlings.

  If you, as the author, writing in third person, want to be part of the story, then you need to make that clear from the outset. Otherwise, write it in first person.

  The same applies to adverbs, those "-ly" words. Dump them, especially in dialogue attribution. E.g., "Be careful," she said warningly. Or "I hate you," she shouted angrily.

  Adverbs are a lazy way out. . . . Metaphors are more fun.
  —Carolyn Wheat

  Using adverbs is a mortal sin.
  —Elmore Leonard

  An exception would be if you are writing tongue in cheek and intentionally using "Tom Swifties," which are a special type of pun.

- **Kill your darlings:** This does not mean you have to kill off your favorite characters (although it may). This refers to the fact that writers fall in love with what they have written and cannot bear the thought of deleting it, even if those passages are not needed to tell the story.

  Ask yourself, what's the ***story reason*** for including this in the book? Does it provide a plot point, an inciting incident? Does it reveal important information to the reader? Does it reveal character? Does it reveal place or purpose? If you have no good reason other than "I love it," then kill it.

  The most common instances I see are extraneous descriptions or character bios; e.g., the tan stucco building, or character backgrounds that read like obituaries; also, author asides: the author either explains what just happened or comments on what just happened, as I described in Author Intrusion.

  Example: Joe punched a hole in the wall with his fist. He was very angry.

And my thought, as an editor, is: *No shit.* Then I kill that darling: ~~He was very angry.~~

My typical responses to this are:

- Self-evident; the reader is way ahead of you; delete. Or: Redundant; delete. Or: Repetitious; delete.
- Show, don't tell.
- Reveal, don't tell.

The author could have another character say: "Joe, why are you so angry? Did something happen?" Then Joe reveals what's bothering him.

Another common instance is an author trying to tidy things up at the end of a chapter , as if it were a standalone short story. However, this all too often deflates or dilutes the suspense or tension of the final action or dialogue in that scene or chapter. My most common response to this is: *Unnecessary; author intrusion; delete.* Think "cliffhanger."

Research: Some writers try to include most, if not all, of the research material they uncovered. Don't. Rule of thumb: leave out 90 percent. Yes, you learned some interesting facts while researching an event or place or historical figure, but it should be relevant to the story; only include what's necessary for moving the story forward.

Every book I see can be tightened up. An early draft of my memoir totaled 150,000 words. I cut it by more than a third to 95,000 words. I also rewrote the first chapter 36 times. As the saying goes: ***Writing is rewriting.***

Jennifer Redmond, former editor-in-chief at Sunbelt Publications, told me that she, on average, cut 10 percent out of most of the books she edited.

I worked with two co-authors writing a narrative nonfiction account of a criminal investigation; their first draft totaled 225,000 words. Through a lot of painful cutting and rewriting (over a period of four years) we reduced that by more than half to 110,000 words.

Their problem: They included all of their research, much of which was redundant or irrelevant to their story; i.e., they had no story reason for including that information. Nor could they kill their darlings—so I did the killing for them.

I see the same issue in historical fiction. You probably don't need to spend 20 pages describing how to render whale blubber.

- **Time and Distance:** Do you give yourself time away from your work—do you give yourself distance—before rereading, revising, and rewriting?

In terms of self-editing, the best thing you can do is take a break.

I don't mean a day or two. I mean weeks—or even better, months—so when you go back to it, you have fresh eyes.

With my memoir, after working on it almost every day for two years, I got so frustrated that I quit. I set it aside, saying: "Screw it. This sucks, and I don't know how to fix it." Two months later, after friends and family encouraged me not to give up, I

dusted it off and reread it—with fresh eyes. I felt as if I were reading someone else's book. I could be much more objective and critical—the way I am when I put on my green eyeshade and dive into a manuscript that just showed up in my inbox.

Time and distance—it is a critical component in the art of revision.

Then, after you take that break, you pick up a #2 pencil (with a new eraser), read your manuscript with fresh eyes (I recommend hard copy, not on the screen), and keep in mind these Key Elements of the Art of Revision—then be ready to kill your darlings.

Don't rush it! Better to do it well than have regrets.

- **Formatting:** Like or not, Microsoft Word is the default word processor in the writing/publishing world. Most professional editors use Word. Therefore, learn how to use its features, especially Styles and Track Changes. If you prefer some other software, such as Pages, Google docs, or OpenOffice, more often than not you will have compatibility issues when working with an editor who uses Word, unless you become technologically savvy.

Finals Words:

- Clarity, not confusion.
- What's the story reason?
- Kill your darlings.
- An editor has the same goal as you—to make your book even better than it is.

Recommended Reading for Writers:

- Resources for Writers webpage
  - Presentation to SDW/EG: Kill Your Darlings: The Art of Revision (blog series)
  - From the Editor's Eye: The 10 Most Common Errors Made by Writers
  - On Writing: The Primrose Path to Prologue
  - 21 Rules for Improving Your Writing
- *Self-Editing for Writers*, Renni Browne & Dave King
- *How to Write Killer Fiction*, Carolyn Wheat
- *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr
- *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Ann Lamott
- *78 Reasons why your book may never be published & 14 Reasons why it just might be*, Pat Walsh
- Elmore Leonard's *10 Rules of Writing*

Bio:

Larry Edwards is an award-winning investigative journalist, author, editor, and publisher, and a lifetime member of the San Diego Writers & Editors Guild. He has worked in the publishing industry for 35 years. He is the author of the award-winning and top-selling *Dare I Call It Murder?: A Memoir of Violent Loss* as well as the *Official Netscape Internet Business Starter Kit* and *Food & Provisions of the Mountain Men*. He has written thousands of newspaper and magazine articles, and he served as Business Editor for *San Diego Magazine*. He is a three-time winner in the San Diego Book Awards and a four-time winner of Best of Show honors from the San Diego Press Club, among other honors. He is the editor and publisher of the Benjamin Franklin Award-winner *Murder Survivor's Handbook: Real-Life Stories, Tips & Resources*. In addition to writing fiction and nonfiction, he works as a freelance book editor and publishing consultant. Outside of writing and editing, Edwards plays the fiddle in old-time music and bluegrass bands, and, being married to Janis Cadwallader—a serious birder—he has become an avid bird photographer.

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