

Writing As Rewriting  
By Reed Farrel Coleman

It's been said that Mozart could simply jot down whole pieces of music without going back over his score to correct and refine it. Well, I've met a lot of writers in my time, many of them supremely talented and disciplined. None of them had Mozart's knack. If editing and rewriting was good enough for William Shakespeare, Dante, T.S. Eliot, the Bronte sisters, Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler et al, it is good enough for you. In fact, editing, rewriting, and tweaking are often the things that salvage a manuscript from the slush pile.

In my writing classes at Hofstra University and during my class at MWA U, I put a lot of emphasis on the importance of editing. Why? I've found that the biggest problem new or inexperienced writers have is that they are too wedded to what they have written. They cling too dearly to the words they have put to paper. What I try to get across to my students is that what they have written are just words on a page or on a screen, not revealed knowledge from the gods. To this end, I've come up with some basic mantras they can repeat to themselves when they get tense about rewriting.

**The Three Mantras:**

**There is no such thing as wasted writing.**

The only way to get better at anything is to do a lot of it. So even when your work isn't great, it helps you to get to where you want to go. Besides, you can always save what you've done and cannibalize it for later use. Some hold that you have to write 1,000,000 words before you really get good. Others, like Malcolm Gladwell, believe you have to put 10,000 hours into something before you are competent.

**Fall in love with writing, not with what you've written.**

If you're waiting to spend your millions or to have roses thrown at your feet, pick a different profession. Writing is difficult, isolating, and tiring. If you expect the rewards to be the reinforcement, you're in for disappointment. However, if you learn to let the process of writing be your reinforcement, you have a chance at success. In any case, never become too attached to your work. As I once said to an editor, "I have my work and I have my children. I try never to get them confused." Words are not your darlings or your babies. They are just words.

**Editing makes weak writing stronger, fair writing good, and good writing great.**

That's pretty self-explanatory, no?

**Spewer vs. Write-itor:**

Just as writers usually break down into two categories—Pantzers (writers who work without an outline) and Outliners—there is a similar phenomenon when it comes to editing. There are Spewers (writers who must get the entire manuscript written before looking back to edit) and Write-itors (writers who write-edit-write-edit-write and so on). Just as with the Outliner/Pantzer dichotomy, there are advantages to both the Spewer and Write-itor approaches. Spewing allows the writer to get his or work out there and done with. In other words, they don't let roadblocks or bad days or anything else get in their way. They feel compelled to move forward with their project. This makes for great momentum and helps the writer avoid all those nasty mental games we play with ourselves.

I'm a Write-itor. I write a certain number of pages in the morning, reread and edit them in the afternoon, and do the same thing in the evening. The next day, I begin the day by rereading the edited work I did the previous day. It's like getting a running start. It helps with continuity and to establish a very strong base for the project I'm working on. It is said that Hemingway reread whatever he was working on from page one every single day. I know that Daniel Woodrell (*Winter's Bone*) does this as well. It helps the writer become extremely familiar with his or her work. Not only does it help with continuity, but it helps with pacing, and rhythm as well. I do a limited version of the Hemingway/Woodrell method. Until I get to page fifty, I reread the project from page one every day. Once I get to page fifty, I feel I have a solid base. Then I reread only the previous day's edited writing. I have published fourteen novels and usually do one draft. Of course the catch is that that one draft has been edited hundreds of times.

Whatever method you choose, whatever process or routine, the important thing is that editing and rewriting must be an important part of it.

### **Editorial Aids:**

- 1) Read the work aloud to yourself. Moving your lips while you read and listening to your internal voice does not count. Aloud means aloud. You will spot all awkward, arrhythmic, and clunky language. You will spot grammatical mistakes, incorrect punctuation, and sentence fragments.
- 2) Read aloud to someone else. Dogs, cats, iguanas and other household pets do not count. It is preferable that this other person have some familiarity with the genre or sub-genre you are working in. If you can't find someone, record yourself reading your work and listen to the playback.
- 3) Find two or three trusted readers. In this case trust does not mean someone you trust with your kids. It means someone you trust to tell you the truth or to give their opinion honestly. Your mom should not be one of your readers. It will help you learn to deal with criticism and to learn how to listen to what kernels of wisdom come within these criticisms. No one likes it, but it's part of the process.
- 4) Don't be so quick to change a manuscript based upon a single criticism. Follow my Rule of Threes. If you get the same specific criticism—*Your protagonist isn't likeable. The plot doesn't hang together. The villain is one dimensional*—from three people, you might then consider revisiting an issue. If you change your manuscript every time someone has a complaint, you'll never get it done.

### **What To Edit For**

- 1) Entertainment Value  
Genre writing means you are in the story telling and entertainment business. Anything that keeps the reader from turning the pages or makes the reader stop and turn back is a bad for business.
- 2) Clunky and Awkward Language  
Not all writing has to be poetry, but it shouldn't be so jumbled that it slows down or confuses the reader. Short declarative sentences are usually best. When in doubt choose comprehension over art.

3) Confusing Plot Twists

It is one thing to mislead the reader, but never mistake misleading for confusing. No plot twist is so clever that it is worth making the reader put the book down.

4) Run-on Sentences and Fragments, Punctuation

Particularly important for new and/or unpublished writers. Agents and editors are overwhelmed with submissions. There are many more people empowered to say no than yes. A manuscript full of grammatical errors is more likely to get the boot.

5) Overwriting

It is one thing to try and write the great American novel. It is another to try to write the great American sentence ... every sentence. Limit your imagery, metaphors, similes, descriptions, and uses of adverbs. Less is more.

6) Inconsistencies in Plot and Character

Not a good idea to have contradictions about events in the novel. If on page 2, X happens on Tuesday, March 1<sup>st</sup>, but on page 252 X happens on Wednesday, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, that's a problem. The same is true for characters. Your protagonist cannot have blue eyes on page 20 and green eyes on page 200. He or she cannot act consistently one way for most of the book and then have them do a complete about-face near the end unless you've set the stage for such a shift.

7) Inconsistencies in Setting

Please, don't set a novel in 2011 and have the plot turn on finding a payphone. Setting is more than time and place. It includes the clothing worn, the technology, the language.

8) Inconsistencies in Tone

There's a reason there are no pie fights in *Heart of Darkness*. Mood, tone, atmosphere must always be taken into account along with what is unfolding within the novel.

9) Dialogue

Make sure your characters don't all sound alike or like the author. Check for attribution and try not to use synonyms for he said or she answered. Avoid adverbs. Beware of using dialogue for info dumps.

10) Beware of Slow Pacing

Make sure to include action and movement. Too many scenes and/or chapters with characters internal musings, exposition, or pure dialogue can be death to a manuscript.

11) Research

Make sure of your facts. Is the building where you say it is? Does the gun your murderer uses shoot five or six bullets? It is important for the author to know more than the reader about his research. Avoid the temptation to dump all you've researched into the manuscript.

12) Emotional and Thematic Resonance.

Is the book about what you wanted it to be about when you began? Does it have the emotional impact you intended it to have?

If you take some or all of the steps I have outlined above, it cannot help but make you a better, more polished writer.