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Revision for the Obsessive Writer

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I've always loved those old photographs of the great writers of fiction sitting at their desks. Nabokov with his index cards. Fitzgerald at his typewriter. Flannery O'Connor in bed with a lap desk on her knees. But I've always wondered where The Piles were: the unscalable mountains of interview transcripts, articles torn from magazines and newspapers, the notes jotted on napkins, the first, second, third, and fifteenth drafts. Maybe I've never seen The Piles in the photographs of the great fiction writers because the sort of dross found on, in, and around the desks of nonfiction writers is the exclusive detritus of their genre. It is the residue, the inevitable footprint of the writer who aims to tell a true story. Even if we are as spare as mendicant monks in our personal lives, most of us nonfiction writers are, in our writing lives at least, pack rats.

It's not just our desks that are prone to hoarding. In the course of all that research or all that self-examination, many of us become besotted with our material. We've all read those works of history, narrative journalism, and memoir that say too much. They go off on uninteresting tangents. They slip in impressive but irrelevant statistics. They take us through an old curiosity shop of whimsical

asides. The only remedy for this kind of literary caching is revision. Ruthless and methodical revision. In fact, revision is really the only effective self-help for a nonfiction writer.

EXERCISE

Before beginning, choose a topic, using an existing scrap or sketch that you've saved, or open up a piece you've already been working on.

1. Get it all down. All of it. Quality is not the utmost concern here. Hemingway said: "The first draft of anything is shit." Embrace this sentiment. Don't self-censor, don't worry about going off on tangents. There will be time to fix things later, but you can't fix what is not there. This stage could take days or weeks.

2. Let the piece **cool off**. Unless you are on deadline, leave it alone for at least two weeks. *This is essential.* Don't even peek. If ideas, words, thoughts, possible angles come to you in the interim, write them down in a journal, but avoid the temptation to integrate these into your existing manuscript.

3. Revisit your piece. After two weeks away, you will see your work with fresh eyes. Now is the time for **Big Revision**. This round of revision addresses major issues. Leave the line editing and word editing for the next stage. Of course, if you see grammatical mistakes and a misused word—or a place where a better word could be used—change them. But don't concentrate on these sorts of edits at this stage. Look at the Big Picture. Do I have an angle? Do I have too many? Which one is the most compelling? Is the structure clear and does it serve my material well? The answer to this latter question is

likely a big no. You wrote with abandon. You indulged. Your structure probably doesn't exist yet. So now is the time to begin ordering your material. Do you have enough background material? Do you have too much? Is there enough human interest in the story—i.e., are there enough people? Are there too many? Is there anything you need to expand, to deepen with more research?

Give yourself at least two days between steps 3 and 4 in which you do not look at the material.

4. Now is the time to begin **The Cuts**. Armed with a better perspective on the work, thanks to your earlier revisions, you will be well prepared to identify "extraneous material." Cuts are so important in streamlining a piece of writing. We writers are undeniably self-indulgent in our work: we ramble, we follow uninteresting tangents and expect our readers to follow. That's part of our charm. But at the end of the day, revision requires the excruciating process of cutting chunks of good writing, of pet topics. Ask yourself here: Am I telling a good story? Have I in mind a specific point? Begin making decisions on these key points and implement them.

5. Now comes **The Middle Draft**. Examine the smaller things, like your opening. Do you have the best possible opening? As an editor, I invariably found that the true beginnings of my writers' work was found in the third, fourth, or fifth paragraph. Never the first. I called this the "clearing the throat" effect. Search your manuscript for a better opening. A stark line. A poetic sentence. Even a quote from one of your "characters." How are the transitions? Are there paragraphs that seem unlinked or tenuously linked? Are there non sequiturs

(this is extremely common in early drafts)? Do your points and paragraphs build on one another? How is your pacing? Are you moving too fast in some parts, sluggish in others? Is there too much research integrated into the piece? Is there more research needed to solidify a point?

Note: While working, keep in mind that while this exercise outlines revision in a series of steps, drafts are not static stages, they are elements of a work in progress. They are fluid documents. So if you have to go back and rework the structure even though you have reached the Middle Draft step, do it with no hesitation.

6. Print out your work for **The Line Edit**. Treat the manuscript like an editor would. Look for grammatical mistakes and misspellings. *Do not rely on your Word program's spell-check.* While it will catch egregious misspellings, it will not correct "diving" if you meant to write "divining." After checking for grammar, begin editing line by line. How can you improve each sentence? Are you writing in passive voice too often? Are your sentences convoluted? Have you mixed any metaphors? If you are on assignment, watch word count. Don't leave it to your editor to trim for you.

7. Finally, **read your work aloud**. At this point, a strange thing happens. After having worked with the material for so long, you become blind to errors on the page. This is a phenomenon I've seen in myself, as well as in the authors I've edited. A trick I've learned for combating this Revision Blindness is to read the piece aloud. It is remarkable how many mistakes your ear will catch that your eyes did not. Typos that you missed on the page will be obvious when you hear the words aloud. Clumsy or dull sections will become glaringly obvious.

Should you seek outside advice during revision? It depends on the way you work. As a rule, I do not show my work to others until I've completed my Middle Draft. Other writers have a reader for every draft. This is a personal decision. However, be aware that an extra set of eyes and the advice that goes along with it can complicate matters during the early stages of revision. You may be unduly influenced by one person's opinion early in your revision process. Also, be careful about who you ask to read your work. Friends and family will rarely give you an honest opinion—not because they're bad people, but because they're good people. They don't want to hurt your feelings. Overly polite people are useless to a writer. Overly negative people are similarly useless. The best arrangement is usually a swap with a fellow writer: you read her work and she reads yours.

And then, finally, how do I know when I'm done? It's a tough question, perhaps the ultimate question for a writer. In truth, we are never done; the pieces we write never leave us entirely. But there is a point in the revision process when the changes become minor, almost fussy. Stop short of fussy. Don't tinker (tinkering is the act of changing things for the hell of it). Trust your judgment as a writer. When the work has reached the point of clarity, of transparency, then chances are you have completed your work. Now, step away from the keyboard.