

The GREAT REVISION Pyramid

When it comes time to revise your fiction, attempting to address all story elements at once can leave you in frustration and your manuscript in shambles. Try this layer-by-layer approach for a smoother revision and a stronger final draft.

BY GABRIELA PEREIRA

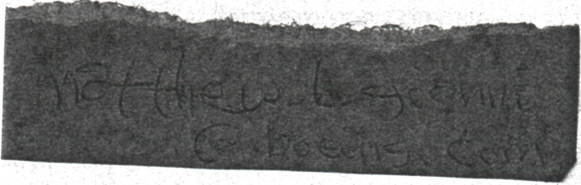
Nonwriters believe revision is something you do in an afternoon, manuscript and red pen in hand. They picture this as a cosmetic process, choosing one word over another, or transplanting a paragraph to a different page. They think once that first draft is written, the book is practically finished.

They're wrong.

Writers know better. They know that a jumbled draft can be even more terrifying than a blank page. They know that there is a lot more to revision than a few red marks on the manuscript. And they know that the first draft is simply the raw material that they must shape, carve and polish into a masterful story.

Revision is work. It's not nearly as much fun as writing with abandon, with all the adrenaline that comes from drafting a story for the first time. Revision requires perseverance. It's no wonder that so many writers get stuck in a dangerous cycle of producing one first draft after another, but never following through to the finish line.

No writer wants to send out mediocre work. We all want to put our best foot forward, but the process of cleaning up a manuscript can get confusing. It's hard to see a middle ground between marking up your book line by line and doing a complete rewrite. It's also hard to know what to fix in revision, and even harder to know when that process is finished.


Fear not. There is a solution. It's called Layered Revision. Layered Revision is inspired by psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow theorized that humans pursued the higher needs (e.g. satisfaction) only after the more basic needs (e.g. survival) were met. This concept translates poignantly to revision. You need to address your book's most fundamental needs first, before turning your attention to less crucial aspects of the revision process.

Many writers try to juggle everything at once when they revise. They go through the manuscript looking at all the different aspects of their story side by side. They work to improve character development and story structure, all the while being distracted by weaknesses in their setting, dialogue and theme. This process can become so overwhelming that it's not uncommon to give up, in spite of all the countless hours that have already been expended in crafting that rough (by definition) draft.

With Layered Revision, on the other hand, you make several passes through your manuscript, but each time you focus on only one key element. You might zero in on your protagonist in one pass, your villain in the next, then plot or world-building in a later round. This layered approach means that each individual pass goes much faster than if you were to try to revise everything at once. The work feels more doable, one step at a time. And it's more effective, too, because you are more likely to spot problems—and fix them—when your attention is focused systematically.

Just as Maslow's hierarchy places basic needs at the base of his pyramid and higher-order needs up top, you want to address the fundamental elements of a story first, because changes to these areas will have a broader impact on your manuscript. You also want to resist the urge to make small, superficial changes early on; since you might end up deleting entire chapters later, that work could go to waste. Start at the bottom of the revision pyramid (illustrated on Page 30) and work your way up.

The beauty of Layered Revision is that not only will you avoid unnecessarily reworking pages that will end up on the cutting room floor, but your editing process will

go faster with each subsequent layer. As you strengthen your story at each level of the pyramid, you will also solve problems further up because you have addressed the root cause behind those problems. Finally, with each pass through your manuscript, you will feel more confident and motivated, making you less likely to give up and more likely to finish your revisions—all the way to a polished final draft.

Let's look at the pyramid layer by layer.

LAYER 1: THE NARRATION

Narration—the way you choose to tell your story—includes the point of view of your story, as well as the voice of your narrator. This is one of the most important decisions a writer makes in drafting a story, and often you make it without even realizing it. In most cases, the process of writing draft zero forces you to home in on your voice and POV, as you test out different approaches and make adjustments as you write.

Sometimes, though, that almost inevitable experimentation with finding your narrator's voice can leave your first draft's narration or POV feeling scattered and unfocused.

The first step of any revision, of course, is to reread your work and make some overall notes on what you do and don't think is working in the story as it stands. Once you have decided which type of narration you want, you will likely need to "reboot" the scenes that depart from that style or POV so that everything is consistent. Read over each scene in question, then set the original aside and rewrite it from memory in the newly defined voice or POV. When you write a scene from memory, your brain holds on to the parts that work but lets go of the rest. This allows you to give that scene a fresh voice—as opposed to tweaking or tinkering with the writing until you break it.

Altering voice and POV might seem minor compared to revisiting characters or changing plot points. Don't be fooled. Narration is, in fact, the most important component of your story, because it affects *how the reader experiences it*. In reworking the narration, you are refocusing the

reader's lens for viewing your story, and that can have a domino effect on all other elements of your book.

LAYER 2: THE CHARACTERS

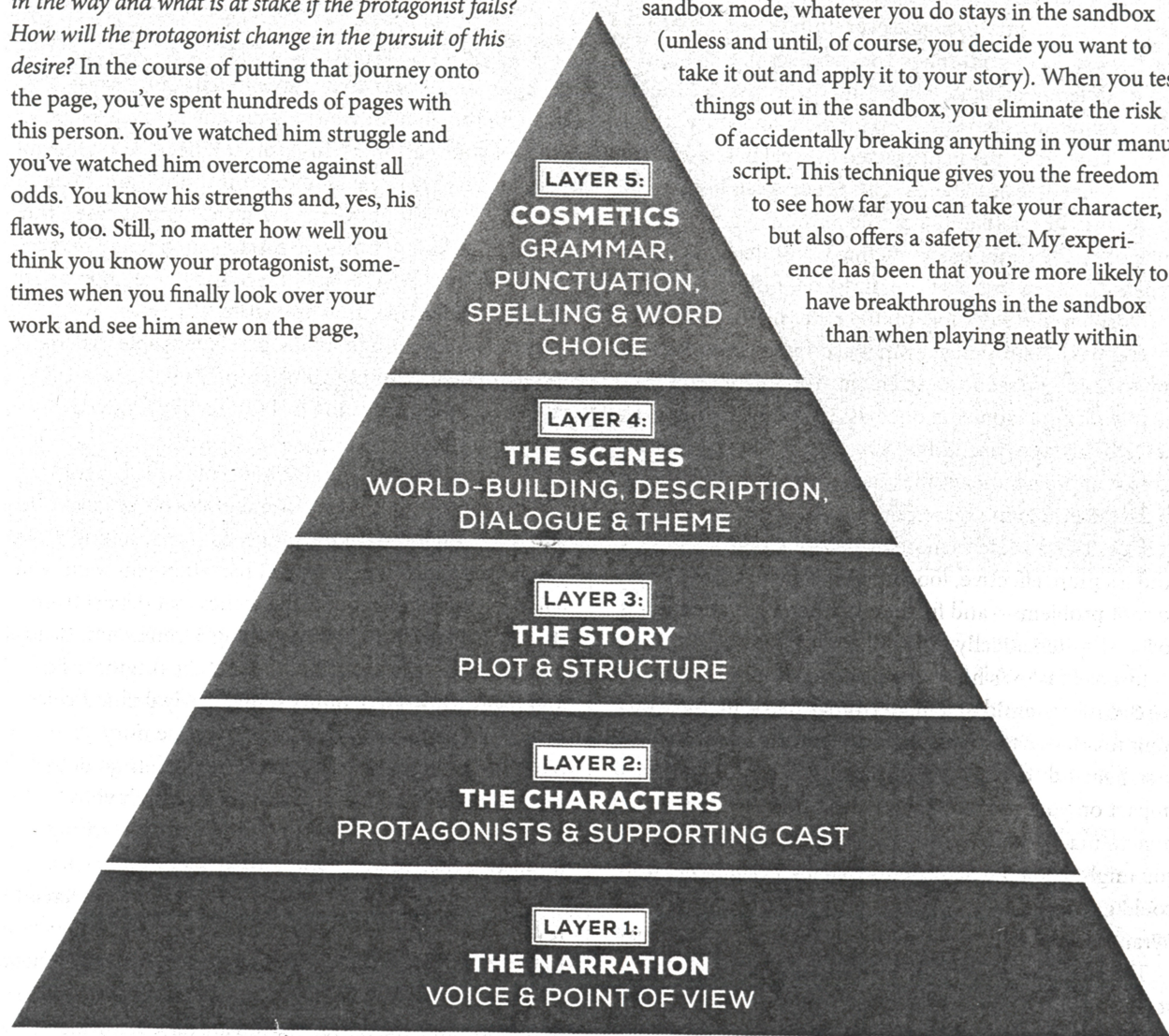
The next layer in this revision process is character—the heart and soul of your story. Your characters give your readers someone to root for (or against) and they give your story meaning. Without characters, a book is nothing more than a series of random events. Characters make us care about the events of your story; they make those events matter.

By now you should know your protagonist almost as well as you know yourself. In crafting the first draft, you likely answered the three central questions that drive our main characters: *What does this character want and to what lengths will he go to get it? What obstacles stand in the way and what is at stake if the protagonist fails? How will the protagonist change in the pursuit of this desire?* In the course of putting that journey onto the page, you've spent hundreds of pages with this person. You've watched him struggle and you've watched him overcome against all odds. You know his strengths and, yes, his flaws, too. Still, no matter how well you think you know your protagonist, sometimes when you finally look over your work and see him anew on the page,

suddenly he feels ... flat. Unmotivated, even, though you know the motivations are there. When this happens, I recommend using what I call the "sandbox" technique.

Take your character out of the story and put her in a different situation. If your story takes place in her hometown, send her on a road trip. If the story takes place during the school year, transport her to a summer's day. The key is to remove your character from her comfort zone or the "normal" world of your story, to experiment and write a few scenes that take place in a different context.

Open a blank document or clean page; label it "sandbox." Here, you can play and make a mess. The reason for this approach is twofold: First, you're more likely to discover something new about your protagonist by seeing him in an unfamiliar environment. Second—and more important—when you experiment with your character in sandbox mode, whatever you do stays in the sandbox (unless and until, of course, you decide you want to take it out and apply it to your story). When you test things out in the sandbox, you eliminate the risk of accidentally breaking anything in your manuscript. This technique gives you the freedom to see how far you can take your character, but also offers a safety net. My experience has been that you're more likely to have breakthroughs in the sandbox than when playing neatly within



the confines of your story. And when you return to your completed draft with those breakthroughs in hand, suddenly ways to bring your character more vividly to life will become clear.

Of course, revision isn't confined to your protagonist. One of the big challenges with supporting characters is to portray enough depth that they resonate with readers, but not so much that they steal the show. Naturally, we want our supporting cast to feel fleshed out instead of one-dimensional. All characters, if we have developed them well, believe they are the heroes of their own lives. As you revise, however, remember that the primary function of each supporting character is to *support* the development of the protagonist.

Ask yourself what necessary role each character plays in the story. If two or more serve the same function, consider eliminating one or merging them together. Then, watch out for characters who behave or sound the same. You don't want your supporting players to blur together in the reader's mind.

If, in spite of your best efforts, you find that your characters still sound similar on the page, I recommend a process called "method writing." Like method acting—where an actor steps into a character's skin and "becomes" that character—you need to get inside the mind of the character you want to understand. Imagine you *are* that character. Feel what he feels, see what he sees, think what he thinks. Write a few paragraphs or pages from that character's POV. Once you have truly stepped into that character's mindset, the rest will fall into place.

LAYER 3: THE STORY

The next level is the story. By this point you should have a firm grasp on who your characters are and what motivates them, and these insights will drive the events of the story forward.

When it comes to plot, all you have to remember is: $3 + 2 = 1$. No, we are not bending the rules of mathematics. In traditional story structure—from picture books to grand epics—you have three acts and two crucial decisions made by the protagonist. These decisions fall at the end of Act 1 and Act 2, respectively. Together, the acts and decisions yield a universal story that has been used ever since humans began telling stories in the first place.

One of the biggest mistakes writers make in revision is tackling plot and story structure too early in the process. They go through their mental list of plot

Archetypal Help for Layers 2 & 3

Protagonists usually fall into one of two archetypes: the "Ordinary Guy" (or "Ordinary Girl") and the "Chosen One." The "Ordinary Guy" archetype is a regular character who is thrust into circumstances that seem insurmountable. With the "Chosen One," on the other hand, you have a character who is larger than life, almost invincible or perfect, and is destined to do great things.

Both archetypes have one fundamental thing in common: The writer must show that the character has the potential to be the opposite of what he is. This means that an "Ordinary Guy" protagonist needs to demonstrate the potential to be extraordinary and overcome obstacles against all odds. The "Chosen One" needs to show some vulnerability and human weakness.

As you revise first for character and then for story, don't get so wrapped up in adding nuance that you forget to check and make sure you've achieved the basics. Ask yourself: Have I hinted strongly enough at those opposite traits? Have I built in the potential for my protagonist to change? Are there untapped opportunities for me to do so even more effectively?

elements, filling them in like they're painting by numbers. Inciting incident? Check. Point of no return? Check. Denouement? Check.

The danger with this approach is that it forgets that *characters* are the driving force in your story. When you fixate on a rigid plot structure, you leave character by the wayside. But your story exists *because* of decisions your character makes.

Whenever I see a writer struggling to plug up holes in the plot, that's usually a telltale sign that something is amiss on a more fundamental level, usually with the characters. The best plots are often the simplest ones, so if you find yourself overcomplicating things in order to make the story work, that may be a sign that you need to step back to the character layer and get a better handle on who your players are and what motivates them.

If your characters are sound and the plot still isn't working, try this: Regardless of whether or not you drew up an outline before you wrote your first draft, extract an outline now from the manuscript you have written. Do it scene by scene; for each one list which characters

are present, what happens and why that scene is important. The latter is critical, because if you can't think of a good reason for including a particular scene in your story, it may be redundant or extraneous. Breaking your story

A well-crafted scene should be like a house of cards where if you remove one piece, the whole thing comes crashing down.

down in this way can help you see more clearly where you still need to revise to make the plot cohesive and strong, with a logical flow and high notes hit in all the right places.

LAYER 4: THE SCENES

Now it's time to look even more closely at those scenes, one at a time, and zero in on elements such as world-building, description, dialogue and theme.

First, examine the world of your story. Does it feel real, or do you throw a lot of information at the reader but fail to show the world in action? Remember also that depending on the POV you have chosen, your narrator's state of mind may affect your description of that world. If a character is terrified and fearing for her life she will see the world around her with a much darker perspective than if she's giddy with puppy love. This is another reason why understanding your voice, POV and characters early in the revision process can help you with description and world-building later on.

Next, it's time to look at the dialogue driving your scenes. There are two keys to strong dialogue: understanding your characters, and recognizing that written dialogue is not real-life dialogue. By this stage of the revision, you should instinctively know how each character speaks. In any scenes where those conversations aren't coming easily, return to the "method writing" technique from Layer 2. If your dialogue still doesn't ring true, often you need to tighten what's being said. Remember that in reality, people hem and haw, they talk in circles and take forever to get to the point—but none of that works on the page. Trim your dialogue to the

barest minimum that still captures the essence of each scene.

That minimalist approach will serve you well with other elements at this layer, too. When it comes to making your scenes sing, keep your reader on a need-to-know basis. Give the least amount of information necessary to understand what's happening. We've all had the old adage "show, don't tell" hammered into our brains, and so often our response is to overload our scenes with useless details. Instead, show just enough to keep your reader "in the know," and elsewhere, use exposition—the "tell" part of the equation—to cut to the point. A well-crafted scene should be like a house of cards where if you remove one piece, the whole thing comes crashing down.

Finally, when it comes to theme, by this point you likely have a good idea of what your theme is and how it fits into your story. Now it's simply a question of making sure that every scene you've written relates to that overall theme. You don't have to wallop your reader over the head with it, but if you find a scene that has no relation to your theme whatsoever, that's a hint that you might have a bit more work to do.

When this layer is complete, and only then, is the time to tackle Layer 5: Cosmetics—proofreading and editing at line level. [Editor's Note: For a complete primer in copy editing and proofreading, turn to Page 52.] We've reached the top of the pyramid.

ACCIDENT-FREE FINAL DRAFTS

Whether you write something that comes out beautifully or make a mess of your manuscript, the last thing you want is to have done it by accident. After all, you don't want to leave your story in shambles if there's still room to make it better, and if you wrote something that works well you want to understand how you did it so you can do it again in the future.

The purpose of Layered Revision isn't to follow a set of rules or check items off a list. Your goal is to write the best book possible. In the end, this is *your* book, and you get to decide what to eliminate and what to keep. These should be active choices, not decisions by default. Every character, every scene, every word in your story should be there because you intended it. Know the rules so when you break them, you do it on purpose and do it with panache. **WD**

Gabriela Pereira (DIYMFA.com) is the creative director and instigator of DIY MFA, a do-it-yourself alternative to a master's degree in writing.