

COOLING DOWN—REVISING

Never think of revising as fixing something that is wrong. That starts you off in a negative frame of mind. Rather think of it as an opportunity to improve something you already love.

—MARION DANE BAUER

Writing is demanding work. We learn from trial and error, from analyzing mistakes, and from what Samuel Beckett described as “failing better.” I am one of those writers whose work is very bad until it isn’t. I plod through dozens of rough drafts, embarrassed by their quality, until, one day, I am not ashamed anymore. This means that I spend about ninety-five percent of my writing time revising. Even after my books are published, I edit them every time I read them at a signing.

Many writers focus on their first drafts, and consider revising dull and painful. Nothing could be further from my experience. To use a gardening analogy, for beginners, planting is generally more fun than weeding or pruning. But for seasoned gardeners, pruning and weeding are creative processes. A few minutes of careful culling can transform a scraggly patch into a bouquet of startling colors. A snip here,

a dig and toss there, and an unruly bed bursts into an impressionistic work of art. This is especially true when we are trimming down our favorite writing. Anyone can cut poor writing, but only a serious writer can excise excellent writing that is neither apt nor necessary.

Pause and Rest

When we present emotional, controversial, and complicated material to already harried and stressed readers, we want to make our work brief, eloquent, and inspirational. Writing while in the grip of passion is a fine idea, but revising and sending out our writing should be left to calmer moments. Sometimes, we may feel like scrapping a piece that after a day or two might look more salvageable. More often, when we write in the heat of the moment, we can feel an adrenaline rush that gives us false confidence.

Both time and space give us perspective, and allow us to reflect on how others might react to our writing. A vacation, or a week of other projects, will enable us to see our work with clearer eyes. Even when we are past a deadline, we should pause for lunch or a walk around the block. Then we can return clearheaded to read our piece one last time. Eventually, we learn to resist the “I just want to get this over with” impulse.

Pausing in our work can be compared to allowing fields to lie fallow. Our thinking is underground, but still critical and creative. A good rule of thumb is, The longer the piece, the longer the wait should be. There are exceptions, of course. Some great writing was done in the heat of the moment. I think of Jon Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air*. The author felt he had rushed it, and that he had been too close to the events on Mount Everest to do them justice. However, readers

disagreed, and instead responded to his intense feelings about the expeditions. At a time when many readers were curious to know what happened, Krakauer could provide an account by a participant. We could almost feel the wind and snow as we turned the pages.

Read Your Work Aloud

One summer, when my daughter Sara was home from college, I read her my manuscript for *Another Country*. As I read, I found myself embarrassed by some sections and bored by others. I caught myself sounding pretentious or out of touch. I heard the clunky, the hyperbolic, the repetitious, and the gassy opining. I noticed what caused Sara to space out and what caused her to attend carefully.

Writers benefit from reading aloud to people who do not think as we do. We can see the psychological effects of our work on them; not only can we hear their opinions after we read, but we’ll also have a sense for what they may not be able to tell us. We also can notice what their physical reactions are to our work. Do they tense up, frown, or nod in agreement as we read?

If readers have strong negative reactions, we do not have to change our writing, but we will have more information about our effects on others. It is too bad that most of us don’t have access to a speaker’s corner, with its instant visual and verbal feedback. However, we can read to our writers’ workshops, book clubs, church groups, or PTA meetings.

Brevity

The Buddhist rule for right speech—“Speak only words that are kind, useful, and true”—is a good rule for writers as well. As we revise, we can also ask, Am I economical in the service of great ideas? Am I in relationship to my readers and connecting them to something important?

Our goal as writers is to convey to readers the greatest meaning with the most precise images and the fewest words. With many kinds of writing, such as newsletters, book reviews, or op-ed pieces, we don't have much space in which to explain complex issues. Readers scan hundreds of messages that compete for their limited time. They won't bother reading wordy, overwritten material.

Most of us learned to write by doing school assignments, with length a primary requirement. We tried to fill up the most paper possible. We must jettison that habit. We want to avoid trendy and trite phrases, and to be cautious about words that offer readers merely empty padding. We do not need vague such modifiers as “very,” “kind of,” “in general,” and especially “I think.” The entire piece is what we think. We want to erase “Tom Swiftly,” so named because of all the dopey adverbs in the Swift books: “He hung onto the cliff heroically,” or “Hungrily, he made his way to the dinner table.”

My personal pet peeve is the misuse of the word “frankly” to establish a pretend intimacy. If you use “frankly” or “to be frank,” please say something frank. “Frank” means not only are you speaking honestly, you are risking that your listeners will dislike what you say or judge you harshly. Do not say, “Frankly, I have always wanted to raft the Colorado River.” Where is the risk-taking self-disclosure in that sentence? A frank statement could be something like this: “Frankly, I myself have committed all of the seven deadly sins.”

Use Your Audience to Help You Focus

A Mormon friend once told me that almost no one is converted by the young missionaries sent by the church all over the world. Rather naively, I asked her, “Then why does the church send thousands of young men abroad?” She smiled, and said, “After two years of trying to convince others, the missionaries become true believers and never leave the church. This is our way of keeping our young people in the faith.” Unlike effective change writers, these missionaries converted no one. But they did become clearer about and more deeply committed to their own messages. Audience was a focusing force.

When we write, we dive down into an intensely individual process, but when we revise we surface to think about our readers. We ask, Who are we trying to influence, and what do we want our influence to be? As we picture our audience, we organize and edit our thoughts. When we write for people who think as we do, we want to keep them focused and committed to our mutual goals. When we write for readers who are neither true believers nor total naysayers, we are hoping to open minds and encourage fresh thinking. Depending on our audience, we will revise our writing in certain ways.

PREACHING TO THE CHOIR

The truth is, most preaching *is* to the choir. Choirs produce almost all the important social action in our world. The people most likely to read us are people who think like we do. And readers generally seek reinforcement of their beliefs, not arguments or challenges. When writing for compatriots, we hope to energize and sustain them. We want to deliver new thoughts and information to them,

strengthen their beliefs, and mobilize them to action. Often, we will cite common history and heroes, and employ shared, meaning-laden metaphors. This kind of “to the barricades” writing enjoins communities of believers to make things happen.

WRITING FOR THE UNCONVINCED

Sometimes, the goal is to win over people who do not think as we do. This category may well include family, friends, and most of the people we know. In fact, unless we are writing for a targeted, narrow group, we can assume that people have experienced their lives in ways that have led them to conclusions quite different from our own.

Recently, on a writers’ camping trip, one of our members shocked us by confessing that she was a Republican. She was from a military family, and was married to a deeply conservative man. She had camped with us for years before she trusted us enough to out herself as a conservative. Before the Iraq war, she had been invited many times to read something at Poets Against the War rallies. She said ruefully, “It never occurred to anyone that a poet might support the war.”

Writing for the unconvinced, we want to be respectful and enticing. We need to invite them into our world and establish commonality. All humans yearn to be happy and free of suffering. All want to be useful, safe, loved, and understood. Furthermore, almost all of us wish all people could be safe, well educated, healthy, and free. We just have very different ideas about how to achieve these goals.

To avoid resistance, it’s best to focus on common needs and problems. Readers should be nodding their heads in agreement, and, later, when we discuss solutions, we want them thinking, I want to follow these suggestions and help out.

It can be counterproductive to identify ourselves as a member of

an established group. Words such as “liberal,” “feminist,” “pro-life,” or “evangelical” push certain buttons in many people. We want readers to think about our ideas, not fly off into their own trance of a thousand voices.

I am proud to call myself an environmentalist. However, many Americans—and certainly a majority of those who actually make their living farming, logging, and fishing—dislike environmentalists. With these groups, I might want to discuss my ideas without using a word that calls forth such an intense reaction. For the most part, people who label environmentalists “tree huggers” do not dislike parks where they can enjoy the outdoors with their families. I can appeal to our mutual love of these things. They also like fresh air, clean water, and green vistas. They too enjoy watching birds and animals, and want their children to grow up with some connection to nature. They would agree with the general idea that we need to protect the earth for future generations, including their own great-great-grandchildren. And, most likely, they have happy memories of times out of doors. As I generate this list, I can envision many ways into a discussion of environmental issues without using any labels.

On the other hand, sometimes I want to use our cultural labels. I think that if I, a feminist and a human rights activist, do not claim these words, then I leave their use to those who use them to mock and denigrate. I do not want others to define me, and I resist ceding my language to those who dislike my causes. I want to remind people that decent people identify themselves proudly with certain causes. So the question of labels is a complex one, as is almost every other question that involves persuasion. The question is, Do we risk relationship to promote our causes? The answer: It depends.

Readers

I share all my work with friends or family before I present it, dressed up in its Sunday best for all to see. My friend Pam generally reads my first messy manuscript. After she reads it, I buy her lunch, and we talk through the ideas in the book. She is kind and optimistic, and she points me toward the most promising material. She carefully shows me simplistic, confusing, or contradictory passages. Still, she always ends these feedback sessions with: "I can't wait to read this book when it's finished."

The trick for finding honest readers is being appreciative of their time, and respectful and relaxed about their criticisms. Friends and associates will not want to be negative about our work, but if we show them we can handle criticism gracefully and gratefully they will speak forthrightly. Many writers pay for this service, and that's fine too. Whoever we work with is giving us the gift of their time and attention.

I often send out as many as fifteen manuscripts in progress to a diverse group of readers: some English majors, a journalist, an academic or two with relevant expertise, and a host of ordinary Joes and Joettes. I also want to know what my cousins, my favorite convenience store clerk, and my neighbors think.

Especially with dozens of critics looking at a manuscript, feedback can be intense and difficult to decipher. Sometimes, readers have opposite reactions. "Lose this section" can refer to something that another reader labeled "My favorite part." In the end, I make my own judgments.

Here is a copy of the letter I sent with my manuscript of *The Middle of Everywhere*. It gives you a sense of my expectations of them.

Dear readers,

Let me begin by thanking you for your time. I know every one of you is busy, and I am grateful for the gift of your lovely precious hours. Please be honest. I much prefer to hear criticism from my friends, while I can still correct problems, than to read criticism in reviews. You are doing me a great favor by telling me the truth. Don't hold back.

Please help me cull any tired language, repetition, or psychologese. Help me eliminate awkward phrases, puffed-up language, and ten-dollar words. I can be preachy, and I want you to tell me when I sound shrill or soap-boxy.

Let me know where you doubt my credibility, find yourself arguing with me, or think my language is sloppy. Please keep these questions in mind:

What do you find fresh and intriguing?

Where do you find yourself drifting?

What can be cut? Include whole essays if you think they are dull or repetitive.

What is trite, dull, academic, or too abstract?

Where do you want more stories?

What do you think of the order of essays? Any awkward segues?

What did I leave out that you would like to know? Again, include whole essay ideas if you want.

Finally, how can I make it better in the broadest sense?

This is a lot of work for you. I deeply appreciate your help. I will send you a book when it is out. Please, share *all* your thoughts. Thanks, dear friends.

The Perfect Title

With titles, we set up expectations and deliver information about the content and themes of our work. Good titles are also how we find readers. There is a fine line between catchy and cutesy, however. While titles with multiple meanings can be powerful, easy puns grow tiresome. There are too many articles entitled “Family Matters,” “Sage Advice for Cooking Thyme,” and “Fiddling Around.” The following book titles grabbed my attention: *The Americanization of Sex* (Edwin Schur), *Full Catastrophe Living* (Jon Kabat-Zinn), *Fast Food Nation* (Eric Schlosser), *The Global Soul* (Pico Iyer), *A Distant Mirror* (Barbara Tuchman), *Jihad vs. McWorld* (Benjamin Barber), *Silicon Snake Oil* (Clifford Stoll), and *Born to Buy* (Juliet Schor). These titles promise a new way of understanding the world and piqued my curiosity about what the authors had to say.

As we grow into our topics, we may change titles many times. The best titles have a way of hitting us on the head as they fall from the sky. Titles both can be epiphanies, and can induce epiphanies in others. A great title will elicit an “Aha” from us when we discover it, and later from our readers when they make the connection between the title and the meaning of our work. With a title, shoot for perfect, go for broke.

Beginnings and Endings

Nobody reads a book to get to the middle.

—MICKEY SPILLANE

We want bang-up beginnings and endings for paragraphs, sections, and chapters, and for the whole work. Great beginnings connect with something deep inside us and make us want to read on. Great endings strike us as slightly surprising yet inevitable. Perfect endings strike us as just what we wanted, but we didn’t know it.

Let me warn you about endings. In many books and articles, writers run out of gas before they finish the race. They pour all their energy into the first part, then, suddenly, sputter to a stop. You may have noted that toward the end of a book, writing is often wordier and sloppier. That is because writers, every time we correct a manuscript, tend to read it from beginning to end, so that the first part is read many more times than the later part. Watch out for that. Vary the ways you end a piece.

Finally, to leave you even more burdened with suggestions, don’t forget the middle, where books often sag. In short, every part of the book is difficult.

Think About Readers One More Time

We are trying to woo a very hard-to-win date. Often, our favorite writing just won’t do and has to go. People who think the same as we do might be impressed by our most impassioned passages, but

others will find them too incendiary. Our quest is to be persuasive without watering down our core ideas. That takes lots of experimentation and effort.

We want to scan our writing for whiffs of condescension, and ask ourselves, Is it clear and reader-friendly? Where are readers likely to resist? Am I accidentally using code or hot-button words that carry more meanings than I intend? (For example, while the phrase “government spending” is not upsetting to some, with others it can cause a visceral reaction.)

In *Reviving Ophelia*, I was careful to never compare the suffering of girls to that of boys. First of all, social scientists cannot prove that the one group suffers more than the other. Second, I had noticed that when people suggested that girls had more trouble than boys, they found themselves immediately in an argument. So I steered clear. I wrote that I had a son and a daughter whom I loved equally, and that I was opining about girls not because I felt girls were needier or more valuable than boys but because I had been a girl once and because I was a therapist for girls.

In my book, I tried not to pick on anyone. I selected a diverse group of girls, family types, and problems. I was careful to use PG-rated language. Some of my favorite writers use swear words. That does not offend me, but it does offend others, and it limits their audience. Many college campuses will not allow books that have the F-word.

Still, no matter how careful we are, as change agents we will have our detractors. We must be prepared for controversy. When vested interests challenge our authority, we want our facts and logic to be in order. However, in our writing, and when defending our writing, we need not know everything. We only need to be honest about what we know and what we do not know.

Crying Uncle

By the time I call a manuscript finished, I have revised it forty to fifty times. Toward the end, I feel as if the book is my significant other. Especially in the last months, I think more about the writing than I do about real people. How do I know when to stop?

One writer said he stops when he spends all morning taking out a comma and all afternoon putting it back in. I stop when I become blind to the manuscript, when I have more or less memorized it, and when my attempts to improve it make it worse.

Toward the end of revising, I will often wake up in the middle of the night, visualizing, in red ink, a specific sentence from my manuscript. I can see the entire page, and I know the page number. Red means I need to rewrite that sentence. When I wake up like that, I know I am approaching the end. I stop obsessing about the book, and wonder if my husband would like to go for a walk.

Defining Success

Success is not a numbers game. Quality is not quantity. Certain books have sold relatively few copies, but they have aided the progress of humankind. Editorials in small newspapers have swung elections. Scholarly articles that originally were ignored have changed the course of history. Most of us will not influence world history. However, we succeed if we move things along by just one of Baldwin’s millimeters.

Life is much too extraordinary to be completely captured in

words, even beautiful and carefully selected ones. We must train ourselves to be compassionate about our failures. It is not our fault that we don't have IQs of 300, that we live near a noisy Amtrak line, or that our mother just had hip replacement surgery and needs our attention. We all work within constraints that define us, hinder us, and teach us what we need to know.

Success means we have done our best. We have not squandered our gifts or ignored our responsibilities. We have given our time and talents to help others. We have used our freedom to free someone else. Success is not fame or awards; it is having our ideas discussed by other people.

Our work is about something much bigger and more important than we are. In the long run, success means we secure a place in the centuries-old pantheon of people who care about ideas. We find our chair at the tired, tormented yet joyous old table of humankind. If we are really lucky, we even manage to make room for others there.

With success, the muse whispers in our ears, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."