

# Revision Plan

From *Beginnings, Middles, and Endings* by Nancy Kress  
(Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1993)

## I. Becoming the Reader

- A. **After finishing your first draft, take a break for at least a month.**
- B. **Read the draft as if you've never read it before.**
  - 1. As you read, jot quick notes in the margin:
    - a) Where does it drag?
    - b) What's unclear (if you didn't know the ending)?
    - c) Are the protagonist and others sufficiently characterized early on?
    - d) Do any scenes go by too quickly?
    - e) Are you telling when you should be showing? Even in flashbacks?
    - f) What would you think about the story if you'd never read it before?  
Write down *every* reaction and comment.

## II. Tracing the Promise

- A. **Read the first few pages—the beginning.**
  - 1. What kind of experience do they promise the reader?
  - 2. Formulate one or two sentences that accurately describe what the story promises.
- B. **Read the middle.**
  - 1. Does it develop those forces promised in the beginning?
  - 2. *List* the forces the middle develops.
  - 3. Do these forces move into opposition with each other so that the middle promises an interesting confrontation at the climax?
- C. **Read the ending.**
  - 1. Does it fulfill the promise made at the beginning?
  - 2. Do the forces meet in a satisfying clash at the climax?
  - 3. Does the denouement account for everything that needs to be accounted for?
  - 4. Are the expectations raised in the beginning satisfied by the end?

### III. Analyzing Scenes

A. For every chapter, make a scene chart:

Scene	Place	Event	POV
1	Home	Tom and Melanie argue	Melanie
2	Office	Tom asks for a raise	Tom

B. Are there any scenes that can be cut? Combined?

Every scene should: 1) Deepen understanding of character, and 2) advance the plot.

### IV. Major Rewriting

A. Revise in order: beginning, middle, ending.

1. Address your margin notes.
2. Address scene analysis changes.

### V. Perfecting Image Patterns

A. Shelve your corrected draft for a week.

B. Read and choose an image from the beginning.

- A physical prop (baby)
- An aspect of setting (stars)
- A symbol from culture (nativity)

### VI. Polishing Your Prose

A. Read for sentence-level mechanics

- Diction: Did you use the right word?
- Sentence clarity
- Spelling and punctuation
- Check facts (age, hair color...)
- Cut excess words as much as possible

## Revision Plan

From *Revision* by David Michael Kaplan  
(Cincinnati, OH: Story Press, 1997)

### I. Style Considerations

#### A. The opening of your story:

1. Identifies characters
2. Determines time and place
3. Establishes point of view
4. Signals readers as to what kind of story they are reading

#### B. When reading your story for revision, ask yourself:

1. Is it doing what I want it to do?
2. If not, why?
3. Have I said exactly what I mean?
4. What can I do to make my story do what I want it to do?

#### C. Questions to ask about style:

1. Am I saying what I mean?
  - Grammar
  - Construction
2. Are my word choices working for me?
  - Is the writing fresh (avoid clichés)
  - Are you using too many adjectives?
  - Are you using the right word correctly?
  - Can you be more specific?
3. Are your sentences varied?
  - Long/short variety
  - Start/end variety
4. Are there any run-on sentences?
5. Are any paragraphs too long?
6. Do you sound like the latest writer you read?
7. Make word or phrase cuts to tighten your prose.

### II. Character and Detail

#### A. Questions to ask about your opening:

1. Does my story really begin here? Begin in medias res.
2. Is the opening too long for what it does? Check scene by scene.
3. Is my opening too long in proportion to the rest of the story?
4. Is the opening interesting and engaging?
5. Does the opening imply action?
6. Is the opening clear and understandable?
7. Is the flashiness of the opening compromising the continuity of the rest of the story?
8. Once you know how the story ends, is the opening right for the ending?
9. Does the rest of the story measure up to the opening?
10. Are all the clues planted in the first scene solved by the end?

#### B. Questions to ask about character:

1. Is my character complete?
2. Is my character believable?
3. Is my character consistent?
4. Is my character distinctive?
5. Does this character function in this story?
6. Is this character a stereotype?

#### C. Questions to ask about detail:

1. Have I used enough detail?
2. Have I used too much detail?
3. Can I be more specific?
4. Do the details I've chosen enhance meaning?

### III. Dialogue

#### A. Questions to ask about dialogue:

1. Is something happening in this scene?
2. Will what's happening be clear to readers through what the characters say?
3. Can I draw a dramatic line through a scene, demonstrating that they've moved emotionally from point A to point B?
4. Is this dialogue going to benefit from judicious cutting?

5. Do these speeches make it clear what's going on in the scene, or do I need to clarify or further develop by adding a few lines?
6. Have I overloaded my speeches by trying to sneak in expository details?
7. Is it clear who's speaking in each case?
8. Are my attributions klunky and unnatural or are they unobtrusive?
9. When I read aloud, do these people sound like real people?
10. Do they sound like each other or do they sound like individuals?
11. Can I intensify or sharpen what they're saying to each other by making a stronger or more individual choice of words?
12. Have I set down the terms of a transaction in this scene:
  - By letting my characters set down their own terms?
  - By showing where they diverge?

#### **IV. Point of View and Showing v. Telling**

##### **A. Questions to ask about point of view:**

1. Is my narrative told from a definite point of view?
2. Am I consistent with that point of view?
3. Am I playing according to the rules?
4. Is this piece of fiction long enough to support more than one narrative point of view?
5. Is this piece of fiction strong enough to support more than one narrative point of view?
6. If I alternate viewpoints, am I signaling the reader where the narrative is located after each shift?

##### **B. Questions to ask about showing v. telling:**

1. Am I describing too much of the action instead of letting it happen in fully rendered scenes?
2. If I'm telling too much, can I let some of it emerge in dialogue exchanges between characters, or by putting my characters in action in some other way?
3. If I'm telling more than is necessary, do I need to cut back?
4. Get rid of passages between scenes where the character gets up, dresses, goes to work. Jump to the place where the next scene actually takes place.

#### **V. Story and Structure**

##### **A. Questions to ask about story and structure:]**

1. Action

## Revision Plan

- a) Is it a story?
  - (1) Is there something going on here?
  - (2) Have I dramatized this for the reader in scenes?
  - (3) Is it clear what's at stake here?
  - (4) Have I made clear what my characters care about—what each of them wants and how far they're willing to go to get it?
  - (5) Does my reader have a stake in the outcome?
- b) Does my setup lead to a payoff?
- c) Have I given enough information so my reader can see what I see?
2. Consistency
  - a) How about the time scheme?
    - (1) Does my story begin at the beginning?
    - (2) Does a complex time scheme help or hurt the story?
    - (3) Can I cut down on the number of shifts?
    - (4) Am I shifting in time at the right point?
    - (5) Am I making it clear when time shifts occur?
    - (6) Is the chronology clear?
  - b) What about tone?
3. Completeness
  - a) Is my story all there?
  - b) Have I skimmed on exposition?
  - c) Have I left too much to my reader's imagination?
  - d) Have I skipped key scenes?
4. Pacing
  - a) The chapter hook: Does my chapter end raising a question about what's going to happen next?
  - b) The larger narrative question: What's going to happen at the end of the book?
5. Length
  - a) Is it boring?
  - b) Does too much detail in once section ruin the proportion?
  - c) Does this section function in the story?
6. Organization: Is everything in the right order?

## VI. Line Editing and Proofreading

## Revision Checklist

From *The Complete Guide to Editing Your Fiction* by Michael Seidman  
(Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2000)

- Is your novel right for the market to which you want to sell it?
- If you're taking risks, have you maintained the form of the category, even if you're ignoring the formula?
- Is the language appropriate to your market?
- Have you created minor characters and subplots?
- Do you spend too much time on them, distracting the reader from the main story?
- Do you spend too little time on them? If they're not important to the story, should they be removed?
- Are you showing, and not telling?
- Do your characters express their feelings, or do you tell us what they are?
- Do you let your characters and their actions tell the story, or are you stopping to bring the reader up to speed?
- Are your characters as clear to the reader as they are to you? Have you maintained their character in dialogue and in actions?
- Are all the motivations clear to the reader, or are things happening because you need them to?
- Have you spent too much time giving the reader the characters' biographies? At the same time, does the reader know *enough* about the characters?
- Are characters telling each other stories simply as a way of giving the reader information? (If a character says to another, "Well, you know Billy did this...", the conversation shouldn't be taking place.)
- Do character descriptions come naturally, in the course of dialogue or action?
- Are you describing people in terms of icons or idols? Will enough of your readers know what Michael Stipe looks like?

## Revision Checklist

- Have you offered full descriptions (naturally) of your major players? There's nothing more aggravating than having a series of characters through the novel introduced by one or two features. It might work once, but by the time we get to the third or fourth "he was a tall man with reddish hair and a brusque voice," it becomes an annoying pattern.
- Speaking of iconic descriptions, does your manuscript read like the advertising pages of a magazine, with a product plug on every page? Does it matter that the stereo's an Aiwa rather than a Sony? (It does matter if it's one of the really high priced systems: It tells us something about the character.) Same with most cars, clothes, and other products. Unless the brand is a telling detail, leave it out.
- Is interior monologue realistic? Are they thoughts the character would actually have?
- What point of view have you chosen? Why?
- Have you maintained the point of view throughout each scene, or jumped into another character's head in the middle of events?
- If you're writing in first person, is this someone the reader will want to spend time with?
- Unless you're writing in an omniscient point of view, have you made sure you're first-person character does not learn things in the course of the story that the reader didn't become aware of at the same time. (This refers to information; interpretation of the information does not have to be revealed until you're ready.)
- Is your point-of-view character clear from the beginning? If there are shifts, do you make the new point of view obvious soon enough?
- Is narrative in each scene true to the character seeing it? A man and a woman won't see the same room in the same way; they'll describe people differently.
- Have you avoided editorializing, commenting on events in your voice rather than that of the characters?
- Does your dialogue say what you want it to say?
- Are your conversations serving any purpose at all? Are they serving more than one purpose: describing things, adding to character development, expressing ideas important to the story?

## Revision Checklist

- Does your dialogue stand on its own? If you cut explanations, dialogue tags, and anything else used as a crutch to support the words, does the conversation still hold up, saying what you want it to? If not, change the dialogue, not the tags.
- Do adverbs follow quotation marks? This means dialogue or the scene does not express what you want said.
- Does your punctuation work as part of conversation? A dash represents an interruption; an ellipsis, a pause or gap.
- Is there any action interspersed through the conversations, or is the dialogue, unnaturally, only words?
- Are your characters giving speeches or actually talking to each other?
- Have you used dialogue to show off your research, allowing characters to give detailed explanations of things that do not make a difference to the story? (We don't need the principles of rocketry to accept space flight.)
- Do the conversations sound natural? Read your work aloud; even better, have someone else read it to you. Does the exposition flow easily or does the reader have to stop, either to catch her breath or figure out pronunciation?
- Have you used contractions, slang, idioms and regionalisms both to ease reading and to give a sense of character and place?
- Does your dialect disrupt the reading? Can you achieve the sense of place without "creative" spelling?
- What does your manuscript *look* like? Are there unrelieved blocks of text? Can any of your paragraphs be broken into shorter ones? Long paragraphs can also be broken up with dialogue. It helps the pace and also makes the manuscript (and the printed page in the book) easier to read. As in life, sometimes we're judged by how we look; if a page appears intimidating, the reader is going to be intimidated.
- Does your dialogue look like long paragraphs? Can the talk be broken up by action?
- Are you repeating words, phrases, bits of business because you like them too much or because it was easier to just go with what you know rather than create something new?
- Have you looked at every word, making certain it is the only right word?

## Revision Checklist

- Have you checked for anachronisms, words that weren't in use at the time the novel is set, products and events that are out of time, if not out of place?
- Have you used adverbs and adjectives sparingly? Like italics and exclamation points, these modifiers are fine seasonings and have to be used delicately.
- Are you using trendy words for effect... or through habit?
- Have you used "which" incorrectly? Go on a "which" hunt. Nine times out of ten, the would should be "that."
- Have you turned to the dictionary to check spelling and definitions, or simply trusted instinct and a computer program?
- Is your thesaurus near you as your work? Is it well thumbed?
- Did you chart your characters and storylines to be certain that neither disappears inexplicably?
- Are details all the same at the end of the manuscript as they were at the beginning? Continuity counts, whether it concerns eye color, clothing or reaction to events. If you're working on a series, continuity still counts. Has your character been injured, had an epiphany, take a lover? Anything that's happened has an effect on the character in the next adventure.
- Have you done your fact checking? If you're writing with freedom, you're going to have some details wrong: distances, historical facts, a multitude of problems. With the work finished, and research no longer something to be done to avoid writing, check. Get the details you may have missed: many fine points can be added in the third or fourth draft. No one has to know how much research was done.
- Did you make notes as you read, marking the manuscript, so that when you begin to retype, you know what you have to do? Are you going to do it? When?