

Editing: Greater Reductions

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In his excellent treatise on revision and editing, *Getting the Words Right*, Theodore Cheney states that “Seventy-five percent of all revision is eliminating words already written; the remaining twenty-five percent is improving the words that remain.” This week we’re taking the macro view of revision by reduction: greater revisions that shorten or remove whole chapters, scenes, and paragraphs that don’t further the story or contribute to the plot.

You’ve worked hard under your writer’s hat and may be loath to delete what you’ve created. But true professionalism lies in excising all that detracts from the clear telling of a story.

Once you have a complete draft before you, write on a card in dark ink the following guiding question for your edit:

DOES IT MOVE THE STORY FORWARD?

You can make macro edits by analyzing scenes; eliminating characters; and revising flashbacks, description, and dialogue.

Analyzing Scenes

A vital revision exercise is to read through your draft and make a chart of every scene, noting what new information is revealed. Each scene must, at a minimum, answer: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?

Debra Dixon in *GMC: Goal, Motivation & Conflict* insists that each scene must have three reasons for existing. One of them must be goal, motivation, or conflict. The remaining two should do things such as: introduce a suspect, discover clues, increase sexual tension, offer comic relief, provide foreshadowing, reveal secrets, speed pacing, or establish or betray trust between characters. If your scenes don’t pull their weight, either beef them up or cut them, moving any vital information they provide to other scenes.

Eliminating Characters

Another macro reduction technique is to eliminate characters—not in the sense of making them murder victims, but removing them from the story entirely.

Every character should have at least one narrative function. In the interest of tightening your story, if you have a minor character with only a single function, consider giving that job to another character and eliminating the first. If you choose to edit out a character, simply searching for and deleting the character's name won't do; you'll need to review your entire manuscript for references to that character's actions and any relationships with other story people.

Revising Flashbacks, Description, and Dialogue

According to Jordan Rosenfeld, a flashback contains all the elements of a scene—setting, action, characters, plot information, dramatic tension—but differs from a full scene in that it takes place in the past (*Make A Scene*). Use flashback scenes judiciously and sparingly and, if you keep them, make them fast-paced, cutting back on setting and sensory details, which slow the pace.

You can take a machete to long descriptive passages. If you have one good sentence of telling description in a paragraph, scrutinize the others for possible cutting.

Is all your dialogue serving a purpose? Again, look at the card you made. If your dialogue is flabby, reduce it. Consider converting some passages to summary if they're not performing double duty in advancing the plot and expanding characters.

Next week, we'll investigate making lesser reductions to your fiction.

—Lee Allen Howard

Sources: Cheney, Theodore A. Rees. *Getting the Words Right: How to Rewrite, Edit & Revise*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1983. Dixon, Debra. *GMC: Goal, Motivation & Conflict: The Building Blocks of Good Fiction*. Memphis, TN: Gryphon Books for Writers, 1996. Rosenfeld, Jordan. *Make a Scene: Crafting a Powerful Story One Scene at a Time*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2008.