

## Denise Berry Transcript

>> I came to the creative writing arena from a journalism background, and so my writing style is a little bit different, my approach is a little different than maybe a normal creative writer. Particularly as a broadcast journalist, writing was always very purposeful. You had a few minutes that you had to create a story, 30 seconds, a minute or two. So you had to choose words carefully. You had to make sure that you had the essence of the story in place. You had to really make sure that you were paying attention to the consistency of your material.

So I think it's really interesting to discuss editing because that's one of the things that as journalists, we do a lot. We do a lot of editing. Trying to make sure that that 30 seconds is packed and has the best possible information, has the best wording, whatever it is that we need to tell our audience. So I guess I want to approach this craft talk on editing and revision from a more personal perspective because in my opinion, good writing is not a talent that you have to be born with; it really is a talent that you could learn.

Many novice writers say to me that the area of writing that sucks the most for them is revision and editing. And I always chuckle when they say this because for me, the most exciting part of the writing is revision and editing.

Why do they hate it? Going over the same material doesn't have the same excitement as first writing it. Sometimes it doesn't seem like you're making the kind of progress you might want to make. Especially when you're looking toward a 70,000 to 100,000 word manuscript, it feels like you need to just keep writing, keep moving forward, so editing slows you down, kind of even brings you to a stop when it comes to the creative writing process.

But I argue that that's the wrong way to look at revision or editing. I believe that rewriting is the key to good writing because each rewrite will improve your manuscript. Every time I edit a piece, it gets better, it gets tighter, it gets closer to being polished and publishable.

I want to cover a number of issues related to editing that come up often when I'm talking with novice writers. The first question I get a lot is whether or not editing on the computer versus editing on like the hard copy paper makes a difference. And I would argue that it really depends on you. Sometimes I don't want to look at a computer screen. I get tired of sitting in front of the computer, so I'll print out a manuscript or I'll print out a chapter, and I'll work on a hard copy. Other times I'm in a hurry, I can't afford the extra step of taking the edits from the paper to the computer, so I'll work directly on the computer. And I would just suggest that you try both and see what works for you. And sometimes I work on the computer; sometimes I don't. Sometimes I use hard copy; sometimes I don't. Whatever works best for you, I think, is important.

Another editing issue to consider is reading out loud. I know that sounds real simplistic, but in broadcasting, we always read our copy out loud because that's how we were going to be presenting it in front of the camera. And so, when we wrote it down it kinda had one flow or it had one design. But when you're reading it, there's a very different need in relation to flow in relation to rhythm or structure. And so I think reading out loud, it helps you to catch problems in your manuscript. It can help you to identify words that don't work quite right or sentences that don't flow well. It enables you not only to read the words, but hear the words. And I think that makes a difference in editing. When you read quietly in your head, sometimes your mind will make corrections automatically, and you'll miss things. So, I think reading in your head also tends to be more distracting. I have a tendency to kind of drift off and start thinking about something else, whereas, if I'm reading out loud, it's a more active process and I stay more engaged.

Of course finding one or two people who can help you edit is really an important element, and it can't be friends and family, people who are going to tell you it's wonderful. I know you've heard this before, but it really does help to have fresh eyes look at your work and let you know critically what's going on, people who can help you find mistakes, people who can point out character problems or who can recognize plot gaps and other issues and help you to kind of tighten and strengthen those problems.

Criticism is always a good thing. And, unfortunately many of us don't take criticism well. But you want to know when a scene is confusing or a plot line breaks down or a character does something that the reader is not going to understand, or not going to believe that they would do normally. So if you don't already have the ability to see criticisms from a positive perspective, then you need to start developing that ability if you want to be a writer because criticism is a constant experience in a writer's life. You never get past it.

It's always fascinating to me that if I look on Amazon right now for any of my books, there will be a review that says, "Oh, it's a wonderful book; I loved it. Venise Berry is a great writer!" And then right up under that one would be: "This was a horrible book. I can't stand it. Venise Berry is not a good writer. I don't know how she got published." So you always have to be able to deal with criticism, because it's there.

And, actually like I said, you really want criticism. You want people to tell you, "Well you know, I really didn't understand this character." Or, you know, "You dropped this plot, sub plot. It didn't follow through, and it really upset me." So you want people to let you know if there are problems when they're reading.

I often keep checklists or reference sheets when I'm writing. And it helps me immensely in my editing. For each character, I'll have a checklist or reference sheet for the major plot, for the different subplots, and it just helps me to make sure my writing is consistent throughout. For example, you start off with a character who has brown hair. And then in the middle of the manuscript suddenly the same character now has red hair. But there's no mention of a trip to a stylist or a do-it-yourself home coloring kit that was used. So that could confuse your audience, and those small, tiny kinds of things are things that a reference sheet can help you to catch.

Or maybe there's a subplot that you introduce in the second chapter and then you drop it, and you never resolve it. Again, those are things that your reference sheets or your checklist can help you to

identify or recognize.

When you're editing, of course, this is also a really simple one: correct formatting. I am amazed at the number of novice writers who turn in something that has just the basic formatting of a novel wrong. Single spaced, margins incorrect, fancy typeface.

Editors and agents figure if you can't get the basics right, you're not someone that they're really going to have time to work with because time is money. For example, the simple stuff, you need to basically make sure you know and follow: double spaces, one inch margins all around, average typeface such as Times 12 or 14. It may say boring to you, but it says professional to people in the industry.

It's important to let some time pass between each edit. I suggest a minimum of one week, or longer if you can. And, it's okay to think about a problem in your writing or to mull over some possible changes that you might want to make during this time while you're staying away from your manuscript. But don't sit down to officially start revision until you've been away from the piece long enough so that you can come at it with a fresh perspective. That's very important.

Often times, as you continue to go over it and over it again, you get really comfortable with the wording and comfortable with the phrasing. And you don't see the problems that you might see if you stepped away for a week or two weeks or a month, things that just kinda jump out at you at that point because you haven't seen it in a while.

When you're editing you sometimes remove chapters or sections or characters, and I know this sounds crazy, but I always tell people, don't throw anything away. You'd be surprised how many people just cut it out and delete it, get rid of it. I suggest that you create a separate file, and you put that kind of material into it because you never know when you're going to be able to use it later. A lot of times, people can come back--a scene that didn't work for one chapter might be perfect in another. Or a character that was unnecessary at first, may come back later on, and you may say, oh,

you know what, that character would be really helpful right here. So you've already got portions of it written. And you can just kinda revise it and drop it into the chapter. So, I really think it's important that you don't cut and just delete material.

My mother is an artist, and I get on her about this all the time because she'll be working on a piece, and she'll get upset with it. And she'll tear it up. And I'm always like, "No, no, no! Just put it to the side and you can work on it later."

So I feel that way about writing as well. Do not delete it. Do not get rid of it.

Just like you can edit too little, you can also edit too much. And so, I really caution people, especially new writers, too, about over editing.

There comes a time when you really do have to finish the editing process, and unfortunately novice writers often stop too soon.

And then, a lot of times, writers who have written a few pieces, or who have had success in publication, such as myself, I over edit. I can edit from now until, and even after the book comes out in print, I'm still reading through it and finding sentences that could have been more rhythmically effective, or a word that I could have used something different that would have been a better word to use.

So, I'm constantly editing, and I have to fight that battle myself. But be careful about over editing. There's no perfect time to stop, but if you feel like you're no longer making progress though your editing, then you should probably stop. If you seem to be encountering the same issues over and over without a successful solution, you should probably stop. And if you find yourself editing because you're really afraid to submit your work and get it out there and have somebody evaluate it, you should definitely stop.

"Writing, revising, and editing is overwhelming." I hear that all the time from new writers. "How do I do it all?" And I don't have any magical answers. I love the caveat, that: "How do you eat a elephant? One bite at a time." I feel the same way about writing. Or in this case, it's one step at a time. You just start writing chapter by chapter or scene by scene. But, the first step I think is to get the basic story down on paper.

And, actually, when I start writing my novels, that's my first goal. My first goal is simply to get it on paper. Before I start writing, I've already completed anywhere from three to six months of research on the topic. Usually I've created a story arc and written a chapter outline. And I probably have developed descriptions for my two or three major characters. So in the first draft, my goal is to simply get this information out on paper. Get it out of my head; get it into the computer. I don't worry about every little detail at that point.

And then I do something that I really--and for me I guess, labeling it differently makes a difference--instead of editing I call it layering. But it really is editing.

For me, I like to do a series of revisions that I call layering. I define layering as taking a basic sentence, or paragraph, or scene, or chapter, and building it into something more. So it's a real simple definition, and it's really not a difficult process.

For example, after I get a complete draft of the novel written, and then I'm ready to start layering, what I do is each layer will focus on one or two specific areas. So I use kind of a narrow focus for each of my revisions because it allows me to spend more time on each distinct element.

So, what do I mean by that? Okay. After I get the basic draft down on paper, my first revision, my first layering revision might simply be to correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, wording problems. I mean, that might be my first one. I might do something else. But then, after I finish that, I will go back through it again to do a second revision. And this time I might read through the draft, looking specifically for places where I can add more action, or I can replace a passive sentence with active

one, or scenes that I can show instead of tell.

I might do a third layer, where I look for places where I can improve the dialogue, or the description, or maybe I can begin to pay attention to repetition and start to eliminate repetitive elements.

In another layer, I might focus on improving the clarity, the consistency, the flow, the rhythm, just on and on. You can do as many as you want, but the point is, when you focus, you really give yourself a chance to strengthen each individual element, rather than reading through and trying to look for everything all at the same time. I just think it's more efficient. Your editing moves more quickly, and it's more effective, in my opinion.

So whether you call it revision or layering, it doesn't matter, as long as your manuscript continues to improve each time you do it. And that's what I found is that each time I revise, each time I layer, each time I edit, the manuscript gets better, and that's what you're looking for. You're looking for the best possible draft that you can have before you send it to an agent or an editor.

So here's a more specific example that I wanted to give you of layering. So okay, you've got the story down on paper. And you're ready to start your layers. And so, an example would be in starting my first draft, I might just write: "She walked into the room." Okay, at that point, the first draft, that's all I need. I just need to get her into the room. So I'm not trying to do anything fancy or special. I'm just getting it out of my head, getting it down on paper.

But I can add to that in a layering process. And maybe the next line when I layer it I could say: "She slowly walked into the darkened room, afraid of what was waiting for her inside." Now, the second version of course tells us a lot more than the first version. She's walking slowly. The room is dark. She's afraid of something that's inside that room. It gives us a lot more information about what's going on.

So let's say I go through, and I give it another layer. "After grabbing her husband's gun from the closet, Constance slowly walked into the darkened room, afraid of what was waiting for her inside." Now with this additional information, when we know she has the husband's gun, then the scene gets even more serious. When we give her a name, we help the reader to really connect to Constance as a character. And so now it's not just she; it's an actual person that we are understanding. There's something going on in this woman's life, and we're kind of in the middle of it.

Adding another layer, we can maybe specifically clarify some of the words, just really kind of give the reader a clearer idea of what's going on. So it might read: After grabbing her husband's small silver pistol from the hall closet, Constance slowly limped up the stairs and into the darkened bedroom, afraid of what was waiting for her inside." Okay, now we've given some addition details that help your reader get a more powerful picture what's going on. We've changed some more general words like "gun" to "small silver pistol." And, therefore, your reader can actually envision this pistol in their mind. Instead of walking, she's actually limping up the stairs, which gives us another element on what's going on in relation to her situation. Clarifying places like the hall closet, and she's going up the stairs, and it's the bedroom she's going into, not just any room. All of those help the reader to really pay more attention and be able to envision the action from a stronger perspective.

Okay, and so then we're going to add one last layer. And that reads: "After grabbing her husband's small silver pistol from the hall closet, Constance slowly limped up the stairs and into the darkened bedroom, afraid of what was waiting for her inside. Despite his constant abuse, the sadness suddenly overwhelmed her. Fourteen years of marriage was over."

Now this final layer gives us even more depth to what's going on in this situation. When we go into her head, we begin to understand what she's about to do. We begin to understand why. We begin to really have emotion in relation to her situation, because we know that it's a domestic violence situation. So again, and this is not just--I mean if I could sit down and write that last paragraph, just write it off the top of my head, I would be a genius. But I can't do it.

But the difference between what I started with, "She walked into the room," and what I ended with, is so powerful that I think layering really is a way to help you build and develop your writing, and really give yourself some skills and use it as a strategy to really help you build your skills.

Try this exercise yourself. Choose a couple sentences from your own story or from your own writing. Particularly, sentences that read a little thin, that are pretty simple and easy. And then, add as much relevant information and depth as possible. Just begin to build it and really see where it takes you. It's a really interesting and exciting exercise.

In closing, Ernest Hemingway believed that the only kind of writing is rewriting. And in a 1956 interview in a Paris review, Hemingway admits that he rewrote the ending of his classic, Farewell to Arms about 40 times before he was satisfied. His reason? He wanted to make sure it was right. Hemingway believed that revision is the key to good writing. I want you to believe it as well.

Thank you.