

# How Writers Write Fiction 2014

CLASS EIGHT • Video Transcript

-Professional writers know that the real joy of writing comes from rewriting. When we first start out, all the joy seems to come from that first draft, which may, in fact, be the final draft. But the older you get the more you realize that the real pleasure comes from turning sentences around, recasting paragraphs, looking at it from a different point of view, seeing if you can't discern the deeper meanings that only come with that reflection born of revision. That's the theme of this week's session, the craft talk by Anthony Marra.

-Anthony Marra is the author of the novel, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*. He is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, a recent Stegner Fellow, and now the Jones Lecturer in Fiction at Stanford University.

-Hi, my name is Anthony Marra and I am here in the International Writing Program office at the University of Iowa and I'm going to talk a little bit about revising...what do you do when you finish that first draft of story or a novel, how do you go back to the material you've already written and really try to deepen it, to distill the fiction to its essence. There are a variety of ways people do it and I think it's one of those things where there's no right answer, but one thing that I've found really useful has been retyping, so I'm going to talk a little bit about that.

One of the first things I did when I finished the first draft of my novel was I went through with a red pen and I marked it up and I saw places where the language was sloppy, where the characterizations just didn't feel right, places where the fiction diverged from the world that I had built in my imagination. And I went through and I plugged in all of these changes I had made on the manuscript in red pen into the word document. As I was reading back through it, I felt that there was something artificial about these changes, these revisions, that I was superimposing these alterations from the outside and that they didn't emerge organically from the book itself. And to figure out a way of making the revisions feel as if they were organic to the book I decided to retype the first draft, from the first word, and I did this about four or five times...every time I would finish a draft I would print it out and retype it from the beginning.

It's a more labor intensive means of revision but I really think that it forces you to slow down, and you have to read your book word by word and letter by letter as you're retyping it. I think that by slowing down to that glacial pace you're able to live inside the sentences again, you're able to tap into whatever creative cave the fiction first emerged from...and by mimicking that initial act of creation you're able to take the book in directions that may not be obvious just simply from reading it and writing out changes in red pen.

For instance, with my novel, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*, I found that each time I did a new draft I became more and more interested in the minor characters, and I would write out just a sentence here and there just sort of focusing on these minor, trivial characters who would only pop up for a moment or two in the novel. And in early drafts of the book the point of view was really stapled to the shoulder of each character...it was a very narrowly focused point of view. As I was retyping and doing these successive drafts the narrator began to expand and began to become this



almost hyper-omniscient narrator that could look into the future and foretell the lives of characters years down the line. It would jump into the heads of these minor characters who only appeared in the novel for a space of a few sentences, and it quickly became apparent that I was writing a book in which there was no minor character, in which every character had at least a sentence in the spotlight, and it really changed the entire tone of my novel. This is something that I never would have figured out had I not forced myself to retype the book at each stage and each draft. It was one of those changes that really came about from inside the book rather than from outside.

One of the challenges to revision is simply getting to the stage where you have to revise. The hardest part of beginning a novel is getting to the end of it. I think that there are similar...as retyping is almost an organizational and structural, habitual strategy to getting the most out of a revision I think there are ways you can similarly structure the first draft to ensure that you'll reach the end. So for me, what I've found useful is using a word count log...every day when I was writing the first draft of this book I would write down on a calendar how many words I had written that day. My goal was 1,000 words...anytime I wrote more than 1,000 words I would mark it in black pen, anytime it was less than 1,000 I marked it in red pen. And I grew up in a Catholic family and I have a healthy amount of good old-fashioned Catholic shame, so by keeping this ledger where the red numbers would sort of stare back at me, I was finally putting this sense of shame to good purpose. But it was just a small little strategy that kept me honest.

I know other writers who use time limits as a way to keep them on schedule...writing three hours a day, six days a week, keeping their cellphones off, their internet turned off as they sort of sanctify those three hours every day. I have a friend who, during the American presidential race in 2012, wrote out a check to Mitt Romney and gave it to another friend of his and if he didn't produce a certain amount of writing each week and send it to the friend, the friend was obligated to send this check to Mitt Romney's presidential campaign. So that was a strategy he used to keep himself on track.

And the fact is that if you just write a little bit every day, it's just a matter of stacking those days together and turning them into weeks, and turning those weeks into months. And by the end of a year if you're writing 300 words a day you'll have a first draft, and you can begin the stage of retyping and revising.

One of the challenges you'll eventually come to in the revision stage is knowing when a book is complete and when it is finished—when are the revisions sort of backtracking on themselves and becoming unnecessary? And I think there's never a stage where the revision is absolutely done...there are always changes to be made and when I was working on this book, I continued making changes to it really up until a couple months before publication. And I realized as I was doing it that I had reached a point where I was making changes that nobody would ever notice but me...I was switching one word for another, and then I was substituting the previous word back, and my revisions had begun to sort of backtrack on themselves and I was revising to earlier drafts and I realized I had reached this point where it was just about as good as I could get it. And it dawned on me that language is this imperfect technology that we have, and the vision that you have in your imagination, the fictive world that you dream up, will never completely correspond to the words on the page. But at some point those revisions get you as close as you can and that's the point, I think, when it's time to call it a day and move on because the encircling of these revisions can sort of become this whirlpool that you can't escape from.

I sort of felt that a little bit towards the end of this work on this novel, where I wasn't able to move

on to a new project, I wasn't able to start a new story or a new book because I was continually switching this word for that, making this sentence just a little better, and at some point it's time to let go. So that's a little bit about my process of revision and suggestions that may help you in your writing life. Thank you.

-In our final exercise on revision we'd like you to choose an exercise that you completed at any stage of this course, we want to give you the freedom to choose something that's dear to you, that's continuing to trouble you, but you feel the need to go back to it. We want you to embrace revision as discovery, as a process of opening up an old piece. Anthony Marra spoke of retyping as one of his key methods for revision. So get back in there, approach something not just in the spirit of editing and fine-tuning, but really seeing the new in what you've already done. This is also an opportunity for you to see what we've been doing along the way as not just exercises, but as the start of your own creative processes. So convert this from an exercise you wrote last week, three weeks ago, and now make it something that you want to own. Just a technical point: please post the original with your revision so that all readers will have access to both.

-And if you haven't posted anything thus far, it's not too late. If you've been doing the exercises—you have one that you still feel strongly about, you're drawn to it, you're confused by it—do the revision, post both of them, be a part of the conversation.