

Susan Taylor Chehak Transcript

>> So I'm going to talk a little bit about revision in fiction. Revision, it literally means re-visioned, literally seeing it again.

We have two hurdles when you start writing your novel or your story. And the first hurdle is at the blank page. You have a page you need to fill, and we have all kinds of strategies for that that we're familiar with: prompts, exercises, games, assignments, outlines, sketches, whatever it is that gets you going so that you start to fill the page up with something so that you have something to work with. The second hurdle, of course, is that full page. Now you've got a page full of words, and you want to be able to work with them. And you have to fix that page because it's not going to be right the first time. Sometimes it is, but very rarely is it right the first time it comes out.

The good news is that writing is not a performance art, so you have the opportunity to go back and redo it. You're not trying to do the perfect high dive, one chance, get a ten from the judges. You have a chance to go back and work on what you have put on the page, and work on it for as long as you want to, until you finally think that it's right and ready to pass on to somebody else to decide what's wrong with it, ask you to go back and edit it some more. But that's not the revision process we're talking about now.

To revise the work, you go back and you do it again. You make it right before anybody else sees it. Writing is revising. That's really the main part of what writing is, where you get it on the page and then reconsider what it is you've done.

Sometimes you'll want to throw it all out and start all over again, and that can feel like a sad thing, but actually it's just a part of the process. It's something you had to go through. You wouldn't have known unless you had tried it a certain way. And then you have a chance to throw it out and start all over because you knew that that one didn't work.

I think of writing as only the beginning; where the real work and the real fun of it comes is in the rewriting, when you get a chance to stop, to step back and look at it again. And sometimes there's a marvel in that where you look at it and you don't even recognize it. Who did that? How did that come up? I don't remember writing that. And that can be such a wonderful gift and a great thing to have happen to you. And the more it happens, the more fun it is.

What you're doing is you're creating a synergy between yourself and the text. It's sort of a secret relationship that you have with your book that nobody else knows, or your story, that no one else knows about. It's like a mother with an infant who is so excited because her baby turned over finally onto its back. And she wants to tell the world. But of course, the world doesn't care. Babies do this all the time. And the only one who really cares as much as she does is herself. That's the kind of relationship that you have with your work, with your story. No one else cares the way that you care. No one else is going to have the relationship or understand what it really is doing on the page before it's ready to be published and sent out into to the world.

For me, at about page 50 of a longer work, it happens. This synergy begins to happen when I make a choice, because of some reason that really doesn't have anything to do with what my larger plan was. I need to get my hero and heroine down the street so she can get on the bus, so she can meet the man that's going to change her life. But I've got to get her out of her house and down the street to the bus stop in order to do that. And along the way I maybe want to make it difficult for her, and so I add a neighbor with a dog and the dog get's in her way. She almost misses the bus. It almost doesn't happen. We know she's about to meet the man that's going to change her life, but if this dog would get out of the way.

Well that's all great and it works really well, and she does get on the bus and everything goes on to the next scene, but in the meantime I've created a neighbor and a dog that will probably have to show up later, or not even have to, I'll get to use them later when I need them, because I've created them now.

That sort of thing begins to happen after you have a few pages down. And even though you may have planned it all out, these things show up. And what happens is, then, it's as if you're touching the text, and then it touches you back, and it makes you decide something else. And then you touch it again, and it touches you back. And you've created this relationship where you're affecting the text, and the text is affecting you right back.

This process of revising is really more like revisiting the text. You're going back to it again and again. You don't really know what you have until you read it through as a reader. Some of those things you will have made up on the fly and won't even remember that you did it until you step back and see it new for the first time.

Because I'm a story teller, I'm going to tell you a story about an ape named Sultan, and a bunch of out of reach bananas. Wolfgang Kohler was a psychologist working in the Canary Islands on problem solving experiments with apes that could be applied to humans in the 1940's. What he would do, is he would construct different problems for the apes to get to a bunch of bananas that would be hanging out of reach somewhere in the cage they were in. For example, there would be one hanging too high, and there might be a box in the cage with it, and a stick in the cage with it. But what the ape is first concentrating on is the bananas he wants to get.

There'd be many attempts. The way that the experiments would go is many attempts would be done. There'd be a level of frustration. He might jump for it and not be able to get it. Whatever he came up with of how to get the bananas, gaze at them longingly and wished them to fall on his head, something like that, and it wouldn't happen. And he'd have an acting out, a raging.

I'm going to reference Sesame Street, a character on Sesame Street. If you haven't seen it, you can look at it, and it's funny. It's Don Music, he's writing songs, composing songs. He's inspired by Beethoven. He's got hair sticking out all over. He's at the piano, and he's writing, "Mary had a little . . . sheep. No, that's not right! No, no. Mary had a little . . . goat. No, that's not right either." And he tears his hair out: "Mary . . . I'll never get it! I'll never get it!"

And that's what the ape feels like when he can't get those bananas down. And there's this raging that goes on, and then he gets tired and stops and rests and looks at it again and, suddenly, a solution will come to him. And it's a moment of insight that seems to come out of nowhere. Kohler called it insight. And he defined it as restructuring the ape's view of the situation, seeing it again as a whole. So now he sees the whole picture: the stick, the box, and the bananas. And he realizes, "Oh, if I bring the box over, and I pick up the stick, I can climb on the box, reach up with the stick, knock the bananas down, and have my meal."

This isn't the same as a rat in a maze who's trying to work his way through to the end and get his piece of cheese at the end, which is what we might think of revision at first, that that's what we do. We write a little bit and then we work on it, we go back, we write again, we come back and forth. This is actually not a trial and error. It's seeing it as a whole rather than seeing just the bits and pieces along the way.

If the rat for some magic way could rise above the whole maze and see it from above, look down on it. He would know how to get a cheese without bumping into walls along the way. So what we want to do is find ways to step back, see the problem as a whole, and see where the walls are that would otherwise knock us off track.

Once you have the whole (you have to have the whole first) once you have that whole, then you can go back and see it again, and see things like how the end relates to the beginning, or how the middle moves on to the second half, those kinds of things.

Another thing about the ape experiments is that there's no immediate gratification in the bunch of banana problems. The problem is solved before the reward is delivered. He sees the solution, then executes the solution, and then experiences the reward after having executed the solution.

Rats in mazes get the reward the moment the maze is solved. And, as they go along the way the reward is, the smaller reward, is they're not bumping into walls. They figured out the first half, and

so they're not slamming into walls anymore.

For us as fiction writers, the reward is the writing process itself. It's not the bananas that come at the end. It's not the being published and sitting in a bookstore and having everybody admire you. It's the problem solving itself, and that comes with revision, with the act of revision.

And that also turns out to be the path to mastery. When you solve one problem, and this was true of the apes as well, when they would solve one problem of how to get the bananas, then they would bring that solution to the next problem. And in that way, they became really good at getting bananas down from high places.

In the same way when you solve one problem in one area, you bring that knowledge that you've learned to the next problem and apply the solutions modified for other problems that come up. The act of revision then turns out to be the road to mastery in and of itself. More than just producing a perfect manuscript, what you're doing is, it's you becoming the master of your art by going through the process of solving the problems that have come up when you made that big mess on the page that you did in the beginning and you're trying to fix it.

Failure leads to mastery. The more problems you have to solve, the better you get at solving them. I'm going to talk a little bit about first draft approaches, that may or may not involve revising because that's a part of revision--getting that first draft out there--and start from out here, into close, starting with free writing where you have no plan at all, or a minimal plan for what you want to do.

Pouring it out, whatever it is. There's no organizing. It's just dumping it on the page. Composing very rapidly, as fast as you can think; you get it down on the page. You don't even know what you're thinking, your next thought, because you're just right there in the moment typing it or writing it. From that, a voice will emerge that may be very strong. And, you will get very unexpected results because you're not thinking about it and things are coming from places you didn't even know you had in your head.

The second way is a rough draft, which maybe you'll be using outlines. There will be some planning but not really reviewing much along the way, or even maybe not at all, producing text that's ragged, but you know you're going to go back later and fix it.

And, then finally, there's the polished draft way of writing, where you revise as you go, attempting to produce, when you're done, a polished draft. It won't be the final polish of a draft, but it may be in better shape than the other two that I've mentioned. If you revise as you go, and many writers do this, famous writers do this, they'll leave a little bit at the end and then the next day, they'll go back to it and revise what they've done. And then that'll give them the momentum to move forward. All three of these ways are ways of revising within the text as you're composing, and you probably will do all of them if you're composing a long piece, and maybe even a shorter piece.

Whatever approach you use, they all have advantages and disadvantages, and it's just going to be a matter of how you're working best. But, what happens when you're done, you get to the end, what you do is you leave it. Part of the writing is not writing. You put it away so you can go back to it again and read it as a reader. And then you have to, you create the distance from it so that you can find some things you didn't even know you had, that you don't remember. You let it reset so that you can forget it and come back to it new.

Then, you have revision strategies. When you've come back to it new. You've read it all the way through again, you see a little bit of what you've got.

The big one for me is reading it out loud. I think there's nothing more important than reading your own work out loud. When you do that, you focus word by word, where if you're reading your own writing, it's hard to pay attention sometimes because you've already did it and it's not brand new. But if you're reading out loud you have to actually say every word. And you'll find the sounds and the rhythms and the awkward places, the repeated words. You'll notice when change what's actually on the page. You say something else, and you'll make note of that. Because probably what you're

saying is better than what's on the page. You'll notice when your tongue gets tied, when you trip over words, and you'll see that you've got some awkward syntax that needs to be fixed.

Another way to go about revision is to get notes from workshops, mentors or writing groups. These may be line notes, that are just fixing things in the lines, but they might also be global notes. You want to be careful about what you pay attention to when you're getting feedback from colleagues, or other writers, or even mentors, and what you're going to ignore. You need to know what people have other agendas, what they're really thinking about, whether they're talking about you or talking about themselves when they don't like something you've done.

I know that I myself when I'm working with my students, I always go right to point of view, and I will constantly get on point of view because that's my thing. That's what I'm interested in, and that's what I work on. So I may object to someone's point of view. It probably has nothing to do with them; it's all about me. We tend to be that way.

One thing to be aware of when you're getting feedback from editors or colleagues, other students, workshops is that if you start to hear the same thing over and over again, that's a really good way to find validity in whatever anybody's saying. So even though I may have a point of view thing that I'm always on, and I don't like the first person present tense very much, so I might jump on that. And I will know that, usually when I do that, I say that, "By the way, I don't care for that very much. I think it's really hard to manage." And so I'll I'll qualify, whatever, my reaction is.

But other people might not do that, and you might be getting that and wondering, well, is this about this writer who never does that or is it about my work? Well, if three or four or five people all say the same thing, it may not be that it's first person present point of view is a problem, but you may not be handling it as well as you possibly could. So you want to look at that and think about, well, if everyone's in agreement, maybe I should go back. But, the last thing you want to do is get stubborn about it, "my way or the highway," because the gift you're getting is other people's responses to your work.

Another way to go and revise your work is to change the point of view, and I do this all the time. It's really a matter of changing the pronouns all the way through. So, I might go from a third person point of view, where it's close on the character, and change it to the first person and see what happens. You could always change it back. You can't do a global thing; you have to actually go in sentence by sentence and change the pronouns. But just doing that will give you a sense of where your character is in the scene: what she's seeing, what she's doing. And then you can change it back if you want to, or you may find that you want to leave it there. It'll give you a different angle on the character, the scene, and the voice.

Same with tense. You can change the tense, and go through and change it from past tense to present, from present to past. Again, you're changing the verbs. That's all you're doing, not the content, nothing like that. So now you're changing the relationship with the story to time, and that gives you another perspective, a way of looking at the whole, and how it's all working together. And finally, a really important way to do it is to outline what you have. I call this a retrospective outline rather than a prospective outline, where instead of outlining what you wanted to have, now you're outlining what you actually have.

I have a friend who's an artist, and she makes these huge sculptures of porcelain with little pieces that she goes and takes and presses in to different things like grass or gravel and puts impressions, and then she paints them. She bolts them to a board, a giant board in her studio, and she crawls around on top and puts them where they're supposed to be. Well she can't see the whole thing, so she doesn't really know whether the upper right hand corner is working with the lower left hand corner or not. And she was having a problem with that because she couldn't put it on the wall. She just couldn't get back far enough to see it. When it's actually done and it's put on the wall, it's always in a great big space where people can stand back from it.

So what she did is she cut a hole in the ceiling of her studio, got a ladder, put it through the hole, and climbed up to the top of the ladder so she could look down on the piece and see the whole

thing. That's what an outline does for you, it gives you a chance to see what you have on the page, and the whole of it, within a couple of pages so you can really get a sense of how the whole story is working.

There are two kinds of outlines you will work with: a chronological outline which tells how everything happened in time from whatever your first date is, hour, minute, to the very end, and that's one outline. The other is the narrative outline, which is how the story is told, how the chapters play. So you may have something happening in 1965 that comes in chapter one, and then flashback to 1940 in chapter two. Well, instead of putting it chronologically, obviously, you would just be doing chapter one, chapter two. And that gives you a chance to see how the incidents are relating to each other, and whether they're building the way you want them to build, toward whatever end you have in mind.

And finally the last thing you do, once you've done all of this work, and you've worked on it, you've put it together, you've made the changes line by line, as much as you feel that you can before you don't want to look at it anymore, or you just can't have it in front of you anymore. Then you let it go. And, that's a really important thing to be able to do.

Most important, the work of revision invites you to engage in a process of letting go. You may find that some parts of your work don't work; they might be better discarded. You can feel hurt about that. I always save everything because I might be able to use it later, and I like to keep scraps around. You might try to deny this. You might decide, no I really like this chapter. I think it works fine nobody's going to notice that. They'll like it so much, as I do, that they're not going to notice that it interrupts the story or slows things down. But like all genuine revelations, it's likely to be illuminating and cleansing if you go with what you know is true and be totally honest about it and let it go, and see what happens next. Well, my experience, every time I've done that, what has happened is I've seen a whole fresh new thing and I haven't really mourned, too much, the pieces that had to be removed.

How do you know what doesn't serve? You have to see it again, and that's re-vision, seeing it again. I'm going to give you seven steps to revision. First, you have to be willing to change the way you see. You have to drop all your opinions, judgments, and beliefs. You have to step back and look for the bigger picture. You have to relax. You have to activate your intuition. You have to invite higher ideas, and you want to allow your new vision to emerge. You relax your eyes, and you look again. And if you want to rage and throw stuff around for a while in the process you can, like Kohler's apes, you can do that. But eventually you'll want to step back and let go and see what's there, and you'll find it's a gift. You'll be surprised at how amazing what you have is when you do that. Joyce Carol Oats says this, "This principle, in any case, we must hold if we are to survive as writers, deluded or otherwise. Even when all evidence is to the contrary, we are steadily improving.

Whatever we are working on at the present time is the best thing we have ever done, and the next book will be even better."

Thank you.

>> So now you have some ways to think about revision. One thing I think about when confronted with a sentence or a paragraph or a passage that doesn't seem to be working, is however frustrating that may feel in the beginning, I also recognize that it's usually an opportunity. This is a place where I haven't yet found the language that I need to make that come to life, and how ever hard I have to work on it, that's productive work. It will get me to a place that I think this piece wants to go.

>> That reminds me of, I took a few pottery classes before, and when you have to put things in the fire. You have to put them in the kiln, sometimes more than once before they get that beautiful luster, that whatever effect you want at the end. And no one necessarily wants to hear about the boring parts, but in those different steps there are ways that you're still creating and you're still able to change what's going to be the outcome when it comes out of the fire. I think that people are so afraid of the fire sometimes that they forget that it's an opportunity to make something even prettier on the other side of it.

>> That's a great way to think about it, that the fire is an opportunity.

>> Mm-hm.

>> Onward.