

The Delete Key: The Published Writer's Best Friend

In *On Writing*, Stephen King mentions an early rejection that was one of the best lessons he ever got. It wasn't an encouraging letter. It barely qualifies as a note. It was just a formula that some kind editor thought might make a difference:

Second draft = First draft – 10%

I'd even go so far as to say that 15% is worth shooting for, especially if you're prone to bouts of logorrhea. Either way, though, the payoff can mean the difference between publish and perish.

Once upon a time, I wrote a novel whose first trip out into the editorial marketplace met with not much love. I brought it back for another trip into the shop, where it sweated off an additional 15%. It's just how the math turned out, but seemed like a good omen, since 15% is an agent's typical commission.

Before long, the novel was the subject of a four-house auction and became the centerpiece of a six-figure year.

That I had a different agent by then undoubtedly factored in big. And maybe that I'd changed the original title, *Miles To Go Before I Weep*, to the punchier *Wild Horses* (a word savings of a whopping 66.6%). You can't isolate individual elements and know what made how much difference.

Still, the fact remains: It was the same novel, just sleeker.

Which dovetails with this fact: Most editors aren't going to put in the time and oversight necessary to help you turn a potentially meritorious work from a sumo wrestler into a sprinter. So they say no.

An agent might – *might* – but even then is likely to broad-stroke the advice: "Tighten this up, and I'll look at it again."

Beyond that, you're on your own.

We'll look for chopping-block candidates below, but first, it may be worthwhile to analyze your work habits and see if you're giving yourself surplus verbiage just because you can.

Do You Use The Technology, Or Abuse It?

If you weren't banging out words in the Typewriter Age, consider yourself lucky. Tweaking a finished manuscript meant using time-consuming tools like correction ribbons and Liquid Paper, which now seem about as sophisticated as medical care based on lunar phases and toad bladders. More substantial alterations might mean retyping an entire page.

Bottom line: If you wanted to change something, it had to be worth the effort. It could be tempting to let non-critical stuff slide.

For obvious reasons, word processing changed all that.

Except, for some writers, this was the worst possible tool to put in their hands. And remains so. As ever, technology is neutral. For good or for ill lies in the using.

There's a writer whose earlier works I loved, but who after a point became, to me, almost unreadable. I believe the key to this was found in an interview I read, in which she blew wet, sloppy kisses to the whole idea of word processing: Now there was no excuse. Everything could be just the way you wanted it. You could go back and tinker to your heart's bliss.

True enough. But this ease of redoing can break in two radically different directions.

(1) Subtractive. The writer treats early drafts like crude sculptures that still need bits chiseled away before they look right.

(2) Additive. The writer keeps pouring it on, building up words as if they were layer upon thick, blobby layer of oil paint.

One writer objectively looks for things to cut and places to condense. The other revels in how easy it is to maintain never-ending creation.

Now, #1 isn't necessarily a virtue when the material gets scraped from lean to downright sketchy.

And #2 isn't necessarily a vice if you're just giving yourself more raw material to reshape later. Kinda like taking six pairs of jeans into the dressing room to find the perfect one.

Just be aware. That's all. Awareness will eventually deepen into an instinctive

sense of balance between too little and too much.

9 Places To Start Whacking

There are no templates to follow, no rules beyond this: Remain true to the work and its needs. Uniform prose, kept equal by hatchet, axe, and saw, isn't the objective. Still, when bloat happens, here are several common places it settles.

(1) Saying the same thing three times when once will do. Often, we hammer points home to convince ourselves more than the reader. Don't worry. They'll get it.

(2) Scenes that go on past the point of the scene. Everybody's together, things are happening, people won't shut up ... it's like a party where the guests won't leave. Kick 'em out already.

(3) Laborious descriptions of scene-setting details. Try this: The next time you're captivated by a tale set in a place that's visually alive in your mind's eye, go back and see how many scenic cues there really were. There are probably fewer than you'd think. Trust your reader the way that writer trusted you.

(4) Exhaustive descriptions of characters' appearances. Again, a few well-defined strokes are all that's needed, and the reader will fill in the rest. Consider this self-portrait of John Lennon. How much more simplistic could it be? Yet who else *could* it be?

(5) The weather. I'm all for setting-as-character, but there's a big difference between mood and meteorology ... or just plain filler.

(6) Backstory that isn't germane to current events. Sure, coming up with it helped you know the character better. But is it equally illuminating to the reader, or is it now so reflected in the character's behavior that it goes without saying?

(7) Research whose only purpose is to show off how much research you did. You went to all that trouble to find it out. Seems a shame not to use it. Instead, look at it this way: You learned more than you needed so you could feel confident about what you left out.

(8) Passages that sounded good at the time but have absolutely no purpose

whatsoever. One rejection letter of an early novel of mine cited that it had “several jolly irrelevancies,” a phrase that stung at the time, but which I’ve adored ever since.

(9) Multiple endings. Yes, it can be difficult to let go. Thus, aftermath upon aftermath, denouement after denouement. May you instead know the startling satisfaction of thinking there’s more to go, then realizing, “Oh. It’s done. Right here.”

Yes, cutting can hurt. “Kill your darlings,” Faulkner advised, and sometimes we think we hear the darlings scream. But that high-pitched sound is just the hot air squeeing from overinflated prose.

Give those wounds a few days to heal. You’ll be amazed at what you can live without.