

Visions and Revisions

Is it better to revise your first draft, or junk it and start over?

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In the late 80s, I got a contract for a book. It was a work-for-hire project, kind of like intellectual prostitution. I had to write a biography on demand.

I had done all the research and was almost finished with a complete first draft when something happened to my computer. The screen went funky. And then, nothing. The files were gone.

Naturally I hadn't backed anything up, hadn't made copies, hadn't even printed out any versions of what I had written so far.

There was screaming and crying. There was wailing and railing against technology. There was a husband (at that time) who soothed and cooed, reminded me that no one had died, and then tried to find a way to recapture what had been lost. But to no avail. Gone, baby, gone.

I was up against a deadline. There was a word count and a due date, neither of which could be changed. I was dehydrated from crying and had a gigantic headache. I tried to remember what I'd written. The fact was, I couldn't. I had to start all over. From the beginning. With a blank document. So I wrote new versions of the first few chapters and what I came up with the second time was not only better, it was much better.

And I learned an important, if excruciating, lesson. I tell my students that I have only one real piece of advice for them about writing. It's the simplest idea in the world, and perhaps the hardest to follow:

Write your draft. Write as good a first draft as you can. If you get stuck, just keep going. Get it all out there.

And then, I say, put it away. Don't throw it out, just close the file and go out for a run. Or watch *The Simpsons*. Or cuddle with your pet rat. The next day, open a new document. And start all over.

That is the hard part at which my students usually gasp.

Even in the worst first drafts, there's usually a sentence or two that sings. There's often an explanation that you find particularly lucid. You don't want to lose those bits, so the impulse is to cut and paste. You think: I'll never write a sentence that good again. But you're wrong.

In that first draft, you've done all the thinking. You've written yourself to a place where you can see the ways in which the ideas have twisted and turned from what you originally thought you thought. If you read it closely, you will see that you now know where you were trying to go. Look at it again and you might see where the piece actually starts, which is often not where you started it.

Perhaps the hardest part of writing, and the most important, is revision. Most of us writers know, if you press us, which sections of an essay or book aren't working. They're the parts we've wrestled with (and that have sometimes ended up pinning us). We work on them as much as we are able to, but at some point, either fatigue or wishful thinking sets in. We tell ourselves that those passages are OK. They're working. Maybe our editor (or teacher or dissertation committee) won't notice. Maybe we're being too hard on ourselves.

That's rarely the case. If you suspect it's not working, it generally isn't. So why send it out just to have someone else make the same point? Better, instead, to fix it. But reopening the first draft, and mucking around, can make things worse. At that point, it's time to open a new document.

When I was working on my last book, I would get chapters back from Susan, my agent, who would write, simply, "It's not working, Rachel." I knew that instead of diving into the wreck, I had to start over. I did not like doing that. There was nothing fun about seeing 25 pages of prose that I had, in fact, polished, go into the "old versions" folder. It was painful and disheartening. Sometimes I (silently) cursed Susan. Most of the time, I realized that she was right and felt lucky that I had her as a reader.

Always, always, when I wrote the second version, it had a clear arc. The information was presented in a way that made sense. There was a through line to keep the reader going. And almost always, the prose was better.

Sometimes, when I'm writing a shorter piece, I get it right the first time. But often, especially if I haven't done a lot of thinking about it before I sit down with my first cup of decaf, the first draft is full of holes and creaky connections. I've done this enough to know that the next morning when I get back to work, I need to read it through and then put it in the "old versions" folder and start again.

I've heard from more than one novelist that they approach revision the same way. They write a complete draft and then start again from the beginning. It takes a lot of guts and confidence to do that. In some ways, it seems like more work. But ultimately, I think it's a timesaver. You're not going over and over the same bad passages — or chapters — making small corrections that aren't really getting to the heart of the problem. You're trusting your own thinking and allowing it to carry you through the next draft.

The problem is that cutting and pasting is so easy. But if you do that, you don't get the momentum of doing a wholesale revision — of benefiting from the thinking in your previous drafts and putting it to better, and often more coherent, use.

You don't have a real re-vision, a seeing again, and more clearly, what you've got and where you want to go.

Because it is painful to start over, I know that I tend to try to convince myself that my first draft is not awful but merely mediocre, and that I don't need to start again. Sometimes that is true, but more often, it's just laziness and pain aversion that is keeping me from doing what I know is the right thing.

So here is what will happen the first time you set aside a first draft and start over: You will sit there for a while in front of a blank, unsaved document and think that maybe it would be really fun to drive a UPS truck. You will think about all the audiobooks you could be listening to, and how cute you'd look in those brown shorts. Scooping ice cream: Now that would be a fun job. Especially if it were at Ben & Jerry's and you could have unlimited access to Cherry Garcia.

Or, maybe, wouldn't it be great to break your leg or something — nothing too painful — and have to be hospitalized for a short time and, well, how could you be expected to —

Then you will breathe deeply, type out the title, and save it. You will have a new document. And then you will get down to work.

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