



INTRODUCTION

Do any of these sound familiar?

I've got a great idea for a book. Now what?

How do I create a fictional protagonist who readers will love and identify with?

I don't know when to stop writing, when to say my book is "done."

Maybe you've been writing for a while and you want to get to the next level:

I just finished a draft and I know the next step is editing. Ummm...how?

I want my manuscript to be polished enough to attract an agent.

I want to improve my feedback skills for myself and my writing group.

Maybe you've got a more existential problem in your book or your writing life:

I need help tapping into the universal—how do I address the “so what?” factor in my memoir?

How can I get helpful critique when my friends don’t want to hurt my feelings?

I’m having trouble getting my ass in gear. My project has stalled. My work is unfocused.

This book will help you with those. Any of them. All of them. Plus, it will help you dispel that lingering doubt about whether you’re really creating anything worthwhile. By the time you’ve gone through seven drafts, your manuscript will be in the best possible shape before querying, self-publishing, or hiring a professional editor. You’ll know, one way or the other, if it’s worth trying to publish your book.

That’s a little ominous, right? If you’re worried, that’s a good sign. The Dunning-Kruger effect helpfully covers this: the more competent someone is at a particular skill, the more self-critical they’re likely to be. The less someone knows about a skill, the better they think they are at doing it.

You’re going to raise your writing skill level no matter where you’re starting. Right now, you don’t know what level of craft you’re capable of—and that’s a great place to start.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

(with apologies to Bob Dylan)

How many drafts must a writer draft

Before you call it a book?

How many times must you read the text

Before your editor looks?

Yes, how many times should it be revised

To get a reader hooked?

The answer my friend is...seven.

As a freelance editor, I work with writers throughout their careers, from beginners with an idea to award-winning, full-time authors. I see many of the same challenges in everyone's essays, stories, memoirs and novels:

- Technical issues like wrongly formatted dialogue tags or overused words.
- Voice issues like stiff, unnatural narrative or characters who sound the same.
- Point-of-view issues like head-hopping or characters who see or understand things beyond their emotional range or physical ability.
- Structural issues like too many subplots, final acts without enough set-up, and stories that start too many pages into the book.

As an editor, I can identify these issues for authors who want to revise their own work, or address them myself for authors who prefer to throw money at the problems. But most of these writing missteps can be found and reworked by the writers themselves before spending money on professional editing or using up a “please give me feedback on my manuscript” favor. This work is time-consuming and thinking-intensive, but it's not a secret or a talent—it's a set of skills anyone willing to go through seven drafts can acquire.

The Seven Drafts are organized from big-picture elements of story and structure to narrower areas of line-by-line writing craft. If you're starting from a rough/first draft (or no draft at all!), go in order. Working on the big picture first helps keep story continuity through subsequent sentence-level tinkering—there's no point in fixing the spelling in a scene you discover isn't needed. If you're already in a third or

fourth draft, you may want to flip to the Self-Editing Checklist, which shows how you might group some of these tools.

If you're at the "I can't believe I even started this crazy project" stage, revive your enthusiasm by picking a smaller element from the Technical Draft, like dialogue tags or chapter endings. Work through those challenges to feel some progress and get back into the writing groove.

Whatever order you use, try to make it through a whole draft. One of the biggest challenges of writing a book is distraction. Committing to a series of steps and persevering through boredom, frustration, and shiny new ideas (write them down and get back to the current book!) will help you finish your manuscript and feel good about your creation.

1) The Vomit Draft

Get it out get it out! It doesn't matter if all the words are spelled rite. Don't worry about complete sentences because. Sure, there's a plot hole big enough to drive a truck through, and in the second-to-last chapter you realize you really do have to put in Aunt Ermintrude. Just finish. If you hit a creativity wall, put in a placeholder like "NEED SCENE WITH MOM HERE SOMETHING HUMOROUS," or "SWORDFIGHT RAKA WINS," or write *about* what belongs there:

Write scene about that time they were in the kitchen and Patricia just knew they were going to fall in love because of the way Malik's fingers wrapped around the saltshaker.

Then let your manuscript rest for at least a week. Don't let impatience or your drive to finish cut this resting time short—fresh eyes help us see issues that our enthusiasm sped past.

2) The Story Draft

Summarize your story with “In a World” format (described in Chapter 2), with a clear problem, protagonist/hero,¹ action, obstacle, stakes and goal. If you’re missing any of those elements, go back to the Vomit Draft and pour forth more words.

During this draft, fill in placeholders and discover any missing events, random extra scenes (why does my hero get a haircut?) or places where the plot doesn’t make sense. Raise the level of conflict in your novel. See if anyone cares about your memoir.

After the Story Draft, let your manuscript sit for another week.

3) The Character Draft

Does each character want specific things and work to get them? Are the protagonist’s actions and reactions motivated and urgent? You may discover that a character needs more on-page time or doesn’t belong at all.

In the Character Draft, make sure the bad guys have clear motivations that make sense to themselves and (eventually) the reader, even if they’re a mystery to the protagonist. Characters are treated fairly and the reader judges their actions and speech rather than being told who the “good guys” are (this is especially important in memoir).

Point of View (POV) gets a careful edit. Physically, a four-year-old child can’t see the top of the kitchen counter. Mentally, a character can guess at other

1 The protagonist is the character whose goal drives the plot. Usually that’s one person, and it’s the person who changes the most. In a memoir, that’s you. We’ll use “protagonist” and “hero” interchangeably.

people's thoughts but cannot omnisciently know them.²

Review the dialogue character by character. Make sure that each person sounds like themselves and that it's pretty clear who is speaking even without dialogue tags.

Examine your world-building. Is your setting clear in time and place? Is there a clear way of life, even if it's one the protagonist is defying or abandoning? Can the reader discover societal customs, history, technology and backstory from the action, without needing a lecture from the narrator? Do any elements feel anachronistic or out of place?

Revise; let sit. Waiting is key, so if you can't stand not writing for a week, draft an essay or a short story to clear your palate. If you write in multiple genres, work on a manuscript in another genre—pick a task that won't plunge you in so deeply you can't come back to this book.

4) The Technical Draft

Working chapter by chapter, ask:

Does each chapter start with a compelling action or image? Does each chapter end with both satisfaction and forward motion?

With each scene, have you gotten in as late as you can and still set the scene, and have you ended the scene as early as you can and still have it feel complete? Are the physical actions possible and in logical, realistic order? Are you showing more than telling, and choosing when telling is needed?

2 If your premise involves telepathy or deep empathy, set the rules of what those powers allow and observe your own world's limitations.

Check sentence structure. Have you carefully placed the strongest words? Do paragraphs end with strong sentences? Do chapters end with strong paragraphs?

Purely technical corrections happen at this stage: searching for -ly and removing unnecessary adverbs; eliminating most “was verb-ing” constructions; and removing or replacing overused words.

By now you know what you want to say—the Technical Draft refines how you say it.

Revise; let sit.

5) The Personal Copyedit

A nice, easy draft. This is a once-over for cleanliness.³ Run spellcheck with the grammar turned on. Print the manuscript and see what shows up when you’re turning a physical page. Read your book out loud or use a text-to-speech program to catch errors your eyes got used to.

The Personal Copyedit is the be-kind-to-your-reader draft. Yes, it’s still a work in progress, but you want reading your work to be a pleasant experience for the next step....

6) The Friend Read

Sometimes called a beta read. Exchange manuscripts with a writing buddy or call in favors from the people who keep offering to read your book. Arm your friends with specific questions: Did the story make sense? Where did your attention wander? Which character do you want to see more of? Try to get readers’ comments in writing, even if you’re taking notes while they talk. **Do not defend your book. Do**

³ A professional copyedit will catch things authors miss. The Personal Copyedit is free—and will make you better at spotting future errors.

not assume their lack of understanding means they missed something.⁴

Set the notes aside for a few days. When your feelings have cooled down, go back and see what rings true. Revise accordingly.

7) The Editor Read

This doesn't have to mean forking out cash. The Editor Read can be exchanging manuscripts with someone you know to be harsher or more technically demanding than the previous reader. Or this could be the first time you share your manuscript with your agent. And yes, it can mean hiring a professional editor or writing coach.

This draft is where it's worth paying to have just your first three chapters edited, then applying those changes throughout the rest of the book before getting any more full-manuscript reads. Chances are good that problems in the beginning are problems through the whole book.

Read your manuscript one more time before you send it out. Knowing that an Editor Read is imminent, you'll see more issues.



The Seven Drafts often take more than one revision each. You might repeat the Story Draft when a Character Draft uncovers a plot hole. A second Friend Read is useful after incorporating the first round of feedback. Some drafts take days, some take weeks or months. You might backtrack and revisit the Technical Draft after an on-paper Personal Copyedit.

⁴ You asked for their opinion. You won't agree with everything. Listen respectfully, or they won't read for you again. More on this in "How to Get Useful Feedback."

Let your book sit for a week or more between drafts.⁵ At least once, print out your pages; edit the manuscript by hand on sloppy, satisfying paper; and *retype the whole thing*⁶ so you can feel the flow.

I've found this method to work for everything from essays to memoirs, short stories to novels. Drop me an email or DM and let me know how it goes for you. And if you've got a different method or a variation, please tell me about it.

WHO AM I...

...and why am I telling you all this? How does someone get to proclaim, "Do it this way!"

As The Unkind Editor,⁷ I've spent ten years editing for money, and longer still editing for friends and classmates. I've worked on books published by Big Five publishers⁸ and small presses, self-published books and just-for-family-and-friends projects. I'm a published author myself (credits in the bio at the back of this book). As an editor, I'm thrilled to have contributed to some prestigious literary and commercial books. I'm prouder still of helping first-time authors go from the roughest of rough drafts to publication, while learning how to write a book.

I'm an editor by nature. As a seventh-grader writing bad middle-school poetry, I copied poems over and over by hand before inscribing final drafts in

5 "I have a life and it needs me" is also worth a break.

6 Every writer I have ever told to retype the whole thing has looked at me with horror. Every one of them has told me later, "Good grief, that's exactly what I needed to do." I dare you.

7 Why "Unkind"? Because praise makes you feel good, but direct and specific feedback makes your work better.

8 The "Big Five" traditional publishers are (as of 2021): Penguin/Random House, Hachette Book Group, Harper Collins, Simon & Schuster, and Macmillan.

a hardback journal.⁹ For each draft I asked, “Does every word belong?” The poems got shorter, and I learned to write with economy, to make every word the right word in the right place.

In college, I studied theatre and earned an MFA in playwriting. Ten years as an actor/director and ten more as a circus and street performer taught me how fast audiences get bored—how only genuine, meaningful connection keeps their attention.

Writing for live theatre showed me the challenges every editor must watch for and helped me develop skills every writer needs:

Playwrights write better dialogue. The audience doesn’t hear adverbs written in the stage directions and the writer doesn’t dictate how actors say their lines. If you want “angrily” or “joyfully,” the words out of actors’ mouths must take them there.

Scripts must show instead of telling. Onstage narration and voiceovers are rare. Information the audience needs must be in the scene. World-building happens as characters interact with their surroundings and embody their culture. Backstory (“exposition”) is death on stage. When one character tells another something they both already know, you can *feel* the audience start rustling.

The writing is actively questioned. Yes, we receive feedback in writing groups and workshops, but it’s a whole new level of pain/wonder to see your characters get up and act out the scene. This shows immediately which parts work on stage and which only make sense in your head.

Rehearsals mean fast revision. Maybe you hated the feedback. But there’s another rehearsal tomorrow night and unless you show up with new pages that

⁹ With a silver unicorn on the cover, of course.

solve the problem, the same actor will give the same exasperated look and sigh, “I still don’t know why my character is in this scene.”

But most of all...

Playwriting is about structure. Most plays have clear dramatic arcs. The protagonist has a problem or lives in an untenable situation. She takes actions toward a specific goal. She must change in order to reach the goal. She has specific internal and external obstacles. The audience knows if the protagonist has succeeded or failed. Every character has an arc, and there’s a person playing that character who is paying attention to whether it makes sense.

Spending so much time in dark rooms hearing people question my (and other playwrights’) work, watching them act out my words, seeing audiences fidget when they’re bored or confused, and focusing intensely on structure has given me specific tools and techniques for writing and editing. They’re precise. They’re detailed. And they are the foundation of all my work.

ABOUT EDITING

When I’m reading a good book, the story plays like a movie in my head. If a book drags or is poorly written, I become conscious of individual words, aware of sentences and paragraphs. Editing your manuscript streamlines the reader’s experience so they can read immersively instead of noticing words on the page. Unpolished writing yanks the reader out of the world of the book. They are not moving forward in the story. They’re seeing typos or noticing what they “should” be feeling. Or they’re just plain confused.

If you wish to publish, either independently or through a traditional publisher, editing marks your work as *finished*. Your book is sharply dressed and well-groomed, ready to make a good impression and engage the reader. Sloppy books—with incorrectly formatted dialogue or story continuity issues or a hero whose quest just doesn't pay off—insult the reader. Sloppy books say, "The author didn't care enough to make me great." They say, "I'm not ready... but I took your time and money anyway."

Your work deserves better than that.

When should you edit your manuscript?

Write your first draft without judgment. Fixing and cleaning a whole first draft is much easier than staring at the empty page silently mocking you, thinking, *Mom was right, I should have gotten a real job.*

After the story is fully on the page, go back and edit. Start with the big picture: story and structure. Move through character and dialogue. Refine the voice. Accentuate the themes. Then get picky about punctuation and spelling. Clean as much as you can before asking outside readers to spot the things you missed.

Why is it hard to edit your own work?

Because you already know what you want to say. The story, the characters, their voices, the personal truth of what happened (whether real or fictitious), *you were there*. Your brain naturally fills in gaps between the story you want to tell and what's actually on the page. You have turns of phrase, regionalisms, slang, and cultural knowledge about the world you're building, or the one you lived in.

The reader does not have that background. They need a careful mix of hand-holding, prodding, education,

mystery, and maddening deception. You must make the reader the detective who turns every page thinking, *I must find out what happened*, giving them just enough information to sustain that desire without satisfying them prematurely. So to speak.

But you can edit your own words with the reader's experience in mind. You can sidestep your own knowledge and focus on improving what's actually on the page. Each time you thoroughly overhaul a manuscript your craft will increase, and your next draft (and your next book!) will be better written and a little easier to finish. If you commission a professional edit, it will cover deeper issues and/or cost less, because manuscripts in better shape are less time-consuming to edit. When you've gotten your story as tight as you can, the editor can focus on more subtle elements.

Don't despair if you examine your manuscript and discover a great many issues you'd like to fix. Truly bad books are fast to edit because there's only so good they can get. When your book has potential, it takes more time. Why stop at "a quick proofread" when you could revise heavily and make your work really amazing?

But isn't editing just a bunch of stupid "rules" like in English class? Isn't creativity all about breaking the rules?

Nope, and yes but nope.

Editing isn't about getting an A from your teacher—it's about ushering the reader into a world where they can imagine with abandon, knowing they're in competent hands. The rules of writing¹⁰ make the

10 Yes, yes, James Joyce, Cormac McCarthy, William Faulkner, Jane Austen, etc. If you're that good, put this book down immediately and go finish your own.

words themselves invisible. Think about walking down a well-maintained sidewalk in a beautiful, pedestrian-friendly area, earbuds in, or having a conversation. You can look around, listen, and enjoy the journey. Smooth writing is that sidewalk, taking you someplace cool and exciting. Rough writing is like crossing the street to avoid construction, every half-block, against the light. You'll still get there, but the journey's no fun.

Sometimes the writing is an obstacle course on purpose, but even then, consistency allows the reader to feel the “rules” of that particular book. Going against the reader’s cultural expectations about the way stories work, and the ingrained rules of language, requires knowing the craft of writing and making deliberate choices. As in fashion, breaking “rules” through ignorance is not useful. Lady Gaga rocked that meat dress, and Björk made an amazing powder-puff swan. I, personally, could not pull off either of those looks. Nor do I write hundred-word sentences like James Joyce, move fluidly through points of view like Hilary Mantel or telescope time like Tayari Jones. That doesn’t mean you can’t—as long as you do it beautifully.

Editing is not bending your words to a generic form. Editing is wedding your passion, creativity, and imagination to technical tools so the reader connects deeply, personally, and viscerally with your story.

This book will stock your toolbox.

Every toolbox has a hammer and a screwdriver. You don’t have to use them, and they won’t be the right device every time, but you don’t want a pipe wrench to be your only tool. Writers spend their lives adding techniques and skills to their toolbox. Not every technique is right for every book. You’ll have tools

you prefer—maybe you’re a structure person, or a language person, or a myth-masking person. But the more tools you know, the easier writing gets, and the more options you have when a chunk of words isn’t responding to your usual process.

TYPES OF EDITING

Editors use different terminology, but there are four main types of editing:

Developmental/Structural/Substantive Editing

Big-picture commentary and analysis, focusing on story, structure, characterization, and continuity. The editor may note craft issues, writing habits, or grammar challenges appearing throughout the book. Sometimes this level of editing includes helping a memoirist focus their material, or assisting a narrative nonfiction writer’s research. A **manuscript evaluation** or a **read and respond** is a lighter version of developmental editing.

Loosely in this category, a **beta read** is a basic overview identifying major strengths and weaknesses, usually done for free by a fellow writer but also available from professionals. Beta readers respond from the perspective of a reader rather than an editor.

Developmental editing is an informed, professional opinion, but an opinion nonetheless. The editor isn’t looking for “bad writing,” but for what is and isn’t working in this book.

In the Seven Drafts, this editing happens in the Vomit, Story and Character Drafts.

Line Editing

Sentence by sentence, a line edit catches awkward phrasing, extra or missing words, clichés, too many

adverbs, overused words, and inconsistent voice. Editors have personal taste priorities when line editing—for example, I tend to suggest reframing sentences beginning with *It was* and *There were* constructions.

Line editing is strongly rooted in an understanding of the mechanics of language—how words work on the page. Again, this is not following arbitrary rules, but enhancing the reader’s experience. A good editor will pay attention to any nonstandard choices the writer has made and make sure the manuscript’s style is consistent rather than “correct.”

This work is in the Technical Draft.

Copyediting¹¹

Not an opinion. The copyeditor finds typos, missed words, and purely technical issues. Most publishers have a “style sheet” dictating their conventions. What country’s spelling is correct? What format for texts or letters? Do we spell out numerals up to ten? Up to one hundred? Are thoughts italicized?

Many freelance editors make a unique style sheet for each manuscript, including proper names, foreign words, variant spellings, and invented words. For fantasy, science fiction, and series books, the style sheet keeps continuity of names and terminology.¹²

You’ll do this work in the Personal Copyedit.

11 Yes, line editing is two words and copyediting is one. Only Benjamin Dreyer knows why.

12 Making your own style sheet as you go will help your eventual publisher, and remind you that Caileigh’s name changed to Caitlin and then Katelynn until you gave up and just called her Maude.

Proofreading

Errors and omissions: one last check for spelling, extra spaces, anything the printer has not copied exactly from the file they received. If you're self-publishing, proof-read a physical copy before putting your book on sale.

Enlist an editor or a sharp-eyed friend, because after seven drafts, it's hard to see the last few errors!



The next pages have examples of each type of editing demonstrated on Kathryn Rose's work-in-progress, *Ojas*.

Author's Note

Throughout this book, examples from published books are attributed. Selections from unpublished works are used with permission of the authors. Nonattributed text has been invented. URLs for many of the websites, resources, books and media are available at **www.sevendrafts.com**.

I am free with inclusive pronouns because we are all both readers and writers, and we're all in this together.

DEVELOPMENTAL: Focus on story and characters

Ojas had lived 13 harvests. It would be at least three more before he could be freed from sitting in school on a morning like this. From his favorite hiding place on the roof he could hear Preceptor Sera scold a young boy for running in the door. She would be ringing the first bell at any moment, and Ojas knew he should climb down to avoid being late. But from this spot he loved to watch the Sun find the mountain mist, and the mountain called to him, like a song in his bones, inviting him to climb.

Ojas knew learning was important. Nenna was very serious about his studies. Nena was the eldest person in the village. She was the mother of his mother's mother, and he had lived with her since his parents' death, before he could remember.

Nenna worked with Ojas after Sun rested each day, to renew his school lessons and to teach him other things. She sat with Ojas in meditation after Sun rested each day and told him the stories of Sun and Stars, of Sea and Stone and Wind. She had told him the stories for as long as he could remember, and no matter what other things might have happened in a day, there were always the stories. Ojas wondered if there was a story about the mountains song. He dared not ask, because Nenna might see in his heart the reason for his question and know he had left school to answer it.

Commented [AW1]: Start here? We can find out about the environment of school later when he goes inside

Commented [AW2]: Nice job setting up the voice at the beginning

Commented [AW3]: Needed? Maybe just the last sentence, start with "Nenna was"?

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Commented [AW4]: "Sun" or "the Sun" in this world?

Commented [AW5]: Needed?

Commented [AW6]: OK, so this implies he's run away from the schoolhouse but we haven't seen him take that action. What if this scene started with him sitting down with Nenna? Or he shows up at home with an excuse? Like, if he left school when he wasn't supposed to, wouldn't Nenna notice he's home early?

Or what if you started with him running away from school? We're getting the routine, and the voice is beautiful, but can you start the story with the break in the routine that kicks off the plot?

LINE EDITING: Focus on sentences and flow

Ojas had lived 13 harvests. It would be at least three more before he would be freed from sitting in school on a morning like this. From his favorite hiding place on the roof, he heard Preceptor Sera scold a young boy for running in the door. She would be ringing the first bell at any moment, and Ojas knew he should climb down to avoid being late. But from this spot he loved to watch Sun find the mountain mist, and the mountain called to him, like a song in his bones, inviting him to climb.

Nenna was very serious about Ojas' studies. The eldest person in the village, she was the mother of his mother's mother, and he had lived with Nenna since his parents' death, before he could remember.

After Sun rested each day, Nenna sat with him in meditation and told him the stories of Sun and Stars, of Sea and Stone and Wind. She had told him the stories for as long as he could remember, and no matter what other things might have happened in a day, there were always the stories. Ojas wondered if there was a story about the mountain's song. He dared not ask Nenna might see in his heart the reason for his question, and know he had left school to answer it.

Commented [AW7]: Removed extra spaces, not technically line editing but it's easy with find and replace so most line editors go ahead and do it.
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COPYEDITING: Errors and omissions, style sheet compliance, could include fact-checking

Ojas had lived thirteen harvests. It would be at least three more before he could be freed from sitting in school on a morning like this. From his favorite hiding place on the roof, he could hear Preceptor Serra scold a young boy for running in the door. She would be ringing the first bell at any moment, and Ojas knew he should climb down to avoid being late. But from this spot he loved to watch Sun find the mountain mist, and the mountain called to him, like a song in his bones, inviting him to climb.

Ojas knew learning was important. Nenna was very serious about his studies. Nenna was the eldest person in the village. She was the mother of his mother's mother, and he had lived with her since his parents' death, before he could remember.

Nenna worked with Ojas after Sun rested each day, to renew his school lessons and to teach him other things. She sat with him in meditation and told him the stories of Sun and Stars, of Sea and Stone and Wind. She had told him the stories for as long as he could remember, and no matter what other things might have happened in a day, there were always the stories. Ojas wondered if there was a story about the mountain's song. He dared not ask, because Nenna might see in his heart the reason for his question and know he had left school to answer it.

Commented [AW8]: Extra spaces removed

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Commented [AW9]: NOTE: Fixed all to "Serra"

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Commented [AW10]: Copyeditor did not add a comma here because it's not incorrect; the line editor thought it flowed better with a comma

PROOFREADING: Errors only

Ojas had lived thirteen harvests. It would be at least three more before he could be freed from sitting in school on a morning like this. From his favorite hiding place on the roof he could hear Preceptor Seria scold a young boy for running in the door. She would be ringing the first bell at any moment, and Ojas knew he should climb down to avoid being late. But from this spot he loved to watch Sun find the mountain mist, and the mountain called to him, like a song in his bones, inviting him to climb.

Ojas knew learning was important. Nenna was very serious about his studies. Nenna was the eldest person in the village. She was the mother of his mother's mother, and he had lived with her since his parents' death, before he could remember.

Nenna worked with Ojas after Sun rested each day, to renew his school lessons and to teach him other things. She sat with him in meditation and told him the stories of Sun and Stars, of Sea and Stone and Wind. She had told him the stories for as long as he could remember, and no matter what other things might have happened in a day, there were always the stories. Ojas wondered if there was a story about the mountain's song. He dared not ask, because Nenna might see in his heart the reason for his question and know he had left school to answer it.

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FOR SMARTASSES

Yes, this book has typos. All books do. An amazing copyeditor will be 95-98% accurate, because they're a human being. Even professional editing software misses errors. Please let us know and we'll fix them in the next edition.¹³

If you spot a typo and post a review (of the book! Not of the typo!), let us know. We'll send a free copy of *Seven Drafts* to your best writer friend.

13 CMOS; Merriam-Webster. Check <http://www.sevendrafts.com> for the style sheet and errors already found. We're pro-comma splices, and we've used the Oxford (serial) comma when it clarifies meaning, so don't @ me with the Stalin/Kennedy meme.



THE VOMIT DRAFT

You have an idea that sounds fun to write. Or you feel compelled to tell a particular story. Or you're a nonfiction writer or memoirist with hours of taped interviews, a pile of research, or powerful memories.

Maybe you're a "plotter" who has laboriously outlined scenes, drawn a map, filled out character information sheets and documented the history of your world.

Perhaps you're a "pantser,"¹⁴ staring at a blank page with only an idea.

Get the words out. Your first draft might be disorganized, poorly written, or missing information you still need to invent or corroborate. Your words might be meticulously planned, yet somehow still difficult to write.

What matters is words on the page.

The Vomit Draft isn't dainty, but it's a relief. Better out than in. Fixing a messy first draft is much easier than writing from scratch—you can't revise a blank page.

14 From "flying by the seat of their pants." Most writers don't fit neatly into either category, but it's useful to know which method speaks to you.

As a more delicate metaphor, Jenny Elder Moke, the author of *Hood*, tweeted a wonderful concept:

Y'all stop calling your first drafts garbage. Garbage is what you throw out when you're done with the meal. What you have there is a grocery run—a collection of items that will eventually make a cohesive meal once you figure out which flavors go together.

In this draft, the plotters went to the store with a list (ordered by aisle) and a wallet full of carefully trimmed coupons.¹⁵ The pantsers grabbed whatever was on sale, looked fresh, or had a free-sample tray. But they both *bought stuff*.

The first draft is putting your ingredients on the counter to see what they'll make.¹⁶

Writing a first draft involves a lot of realizing mid-way, *This isn't working*, then deciding to keep going and fix it later, or to go back and rewrite. Not everyone finishes a first draft before editing. Many writers edit yesterday's work to get into today's groove. I pants the beginning and end of a novel from an idea, then outline the middle. Whatever your process, get what you need on the page before poking at it.

This is easier said than done.

The idea of the shitty first draft has been around for many years. Ernest Hemingway told Arnold Samuelson, "The first draft of anything is shit."¹⁷

15 They used the pinking shears because they like the pretty edges.

16 If you really want to push the metaphor: Story Draft=cooking, Character Draft=side dishes, Technical Draft=seasoning, Personal Copyedit=plating and table-setting, Friend Read=family meal, Editor Read=restaurant critic arrives.

17 As Samuelson claims in *With Hemingway: A Year in Key West and Cuba*, a posthumously published book of memories. But hey, I'd probably remember if Hemingway said that to me forty years ago.

Maybe you know the concept from Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*:

Shitty first drafts. All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts.

...I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts.

But it's still hard to believe. Famous authors say they write shitty first drafts—but we don't see those pages, so it sounds like something they say to make crappy writers feel better about themselves. Like telling us to believe in Santa Claus.¹⁸

Before I was a writer, I was a circus performer. I spent hours in the gym falling into mats, watching people I respected and knew to be far more skilled than me also falling into mats. In a museum, I can see Picasso's sketches. Musicians hear each other's wrong notes in practice. But once out of school, writers rarely see the process of our peers.¹⁹ Writers, too, need to see how others work, and work near them. We need writing buddies to share shapeless early drafts with and reading partners who can encourage and critique.

Shitty first drafts aren't the only way to write. Some writers prefer revising as they go. Perhaps some writers think through their stories so thoroughly, or outline so precisely, that when they sit down, the right words come out in more or less the right order. But for most writers, the first draft is telling the story

¹⁸ There is *absolutely* a Santa Claus and your winter holiday of choice is in your heart.

¹⁹ If you're still in school, become better friends with the people whose writing you like now—they're your future critique partners.

to ourselves. Thinking on the page. Finding the heart of the story way down in Chapter Ten; a single beautiful sentence on page five; the perfect opening line in the final paragraph. Finding those words, the ones we really need, means writing a bunch more words we'll cut in the next draft. Even if you're a plotter, write first drafts of scenes with wild abandon. See what comes out unjudged.

The point is not that the first draft should be bad, but to not let fear of badness stop you from writing. A sloppy, disorganized first draft is not a failure, but a necessary first step. First drafts are barre exercises before ballet, scales before singing, charcoal on newsprint before oils on canvas. Taking the time to assemble the materials of events, characters, plot, and themes; letting the jumble show us what to say, trusting we can pull a shining thread of story from the mess.

Yes, Virginia, wherever there are writers, there are shitty first drafts. And just as presents and nibbled cookies prove Santa showed up in the night, the very existence of finished, glorious work means someone, somewhere, wrote a terrible first draft.

SHOULD YOU WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW?

Perhaps the most famous piece of writing advice ever: "Write what you know." A maxim right up there with "Don't quit your day job," and "Vampires are done."

But should you?

One of my favorite writers is Dick Francis (the when-he-was-alive version, not the posthumous-brand version). Francis wrote horse-racing mysteries and thrillers. Early in his career, they were about skullduggery around the track: doping, blackmail,

sabotage, family conflicts. All the things that happen when wealthy people get together for a competitive hobby. Francis knew that world. He'd been a jockey for many years. But as his books became more popular, they also became more diverse. He still set each one in the world of racing, but added a layer that drove the story. Racecourse catering (poison!); racecourse architecture and renovation (explosions!); glass-blowing for fancy race trophies (domestic abuse!). Francis did his research to build each new world, and readers got to discover that world as well as enjoy a gripping read.

Whole genres—fantasy, science fiction, romance ending Happily Ever After—are based on experiences we wish we could have or are excited to dream up, not “what we know.” Memoirists must piece together family history and speculate or investigate why people behaved as they did. For narrative nonfiction, writing what we don't already know is the whole point.

Writing what we *want* to know can be even more powerful than writing what we already know. Research beyond a novelist's experience opens doors for interesting characters and new plot twists. For memoirists, genuinely considering a question like *Why did my mother treat me like that?* can allow us to resolve the past as well as creating a complex, nuanced picture of our personal history.

Research is time-consuming, but it's not difficult. Libraries, the internet, and specialty podcasts are goldmines (verify your facts with multiple sources!). People often love to talk about their job or hobby to an eager listener taking notes. Older relatives are usually delighted to regale you with family stories; asking the right nonaggressive questions can dig out truths that make sense of your own life.

Even if your story springs from what you already know, examine your own assumptions and see what you can disprove. As you build the world of your book, notice where your curiosity draws you. What excites you to discover will also engage your reader.

CHOOSING WHAT TO WRITE

*The first, of gold, who this inscription bears,
“Who chooseth me shall gain what many men
desire;”*

*The second, silver, which this promise carries,
“Who chooseth me shall get as much as he
deserves;”*

*This third, dull lead, with warning all as blunt,
“Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he
hath.”*

How shall I know if I do choose the right?

The Merchant of Venice, Act II sc. VII

Last year, before NaNoWriMo²⁰, a writer friend was in agony. She had three ideas for novels but also wanted to write a memoir; should she pick something fun or something that felt more purposeful? And an acquaintance lamented in a Facebook group,

*How do y’all decide what project comes first? I
write freelance, blog, and am toying with two
memoir ideas. I love personal essays the most,
but I keep feeling there’s something I “should”
be doing instead. Do I forget blogging and pitch*

²⁰ National Novel Writing Month. In November, many writers take up the challenge to generate 50K words in 30 days. It’s an excellent exercise and some bestselling novels have emerged from NaNoWriMo projects. But remember that your 50K will need revision. Every December 1, literary agents brace for a flood of shitty first drafts. Don’t add to the pile.

magazine essays? Stop writing copy and finish a memoir? Write more copy and make more money to have time off?

I've felt this myself. It's pretty common to have a couple of half-finished or barely started projects jostling for attention in your head: that murder mystery twist you thought of in the bath; the Young Adult novel premise that came to you in the gym; that conversation with your grandmother about the craziest family story you've ever heard. Maybe one feels easier to finish and "get out of the way," but you're more excited about another idea. Or someone you'll need to interview is in ill health. Or a friend is writing in the same genre and you could talk through ideas together.

Like Portia's suitors in *The Merchant of Venice*, you're faced with (at least!) three caskets, all valuable, but one of which you're sure contains the prize.

How to choose which project deserves your focus today? For that matter, how to fill your precious, limited writing time, all the time?

As a freelance writer and editor who also speaks at conferences and online, teaches webinars and workshops, and leads retreats, I face that question a lot. Should I spend the day planning a future retreat or editing the manuscript in front of me? Coding a webpage or attending a literary event? Should I add a chapter to a novel that may never be published, or write a blog I can post tomorrow? Where does service to my literary community fit? I do work I love, work for prestige, and work for money, and while those things often overlap, they are rarely congruent.

I've also discovered I usually already know the answer—and I bet you do, too. You can think about which project gets you closer to a big life goal, or envision boarding a lifeboat, only allowed to bring one project. But if you look at your list, or your pile,

or your laptop, you probably know in your heart. Part of every artist loves to dither, loves to see infinite potential in every project (*Well, yeah, but if I work on that other thing, maybe...*) But that dithering part of us is basically a three-year-old negotiating between a sundress or their superhero suit for preschool today. Mother Creativity doesn't care, as long as we get out the door.

As long as we *get going*.

- Pick the project you're excited about, especially if it's your first book.
- If you make money as a writer and you need money now, pick what makes the most money the fastest.
- If you make money as a writer and you don't need money now, or if you write for fun but want to make money eventually, pick the one you're excited about, because you're going to get to the murky middle and a project you're half-hearted about won't inspire you to push through to the end.

Once you've chosen, your other ideas will spend a few days waving for your attention. This is normal. Your brain is afraid of a big commitment without guaranteed success, so it generates distractions. I am never so good at coming up with great new ideas as when it's time to focus on one project. Every potential writing-related job that I'd be good at (but don't actually want to do) pops up. Every project sounds more fun, more interesting, more exciting than sitting down and doing the work I've chosen.

Stay committed. Write down those shiny new ideas in a designated place. Maybe start a new page in your notebook for each book idea. Remind your brain those ideas will be safe until you get back to them.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the casket with Portia's offered prize isn't shiny gold or sparkling silver, it's (spoiler!) the casket of lead, inscribed not with a promise but a warning: "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." *Pick me if you're ready to go all in.*

Hazard all you have. Risk all your eggs in one basket. You will feel opportunity cost, as if you have given up something else valuable. That's OK. Choosing a project doesn't make it the last thing you'll ever write. Not choosing means not starting, or starting without full focus on the task at hand. Not choosing makes writing harder and slower.

Whichever casket Portia's suitors choose, the end result is the same: Shakespeare has written a play. Then he wrote more. Your choice doesn't actually matter. It only matters that you make a choice.

What are you going to write?

ORIGINALITY

It's common to be inspired with a fabulous, new, *original* idea for a book...and then see another book published with almost exactly the same premise. It happens in movies, too—remember *Antz* and *A Bug's Life*, released within six weeks of each other in 1998? *Friends with Benefits* and *No Strings Attached* in 2011?²¹

Many writers worry they don't have anything to say that hasn't already been said. What story can they offer that's new, different, *worth reading*? Who's going to buy their fantasy about thieves and magic in pseudo-Amsterdam after *Six of Crows*? As a memoirist, I've felt that sharp stab when seeing an essay gone viral, about an experience I've had, too. The feeling of *That should be mine*.

²¹ *No Strings Attached* was originally titled...*Friends with Benefits*.

At the literary website *The Millions*, Kaulie Lewis writes,

When we say, “all of my ideas have already been had,” what we’re expressing isn’t jealousy, it’s doubt in our own creativity, in our worthiness to write about anything at all. Never mind that originality in the broadest sense is hardly possible.... When we say “I should have written that,” what we mean is “How unjust, unfair, unkind that you were faster, smarter, and more fortunate than I. How terrible that I have nothing more to offer.”

But no one else can tell our particular, unique, specific story. It’s why showing is so much better than telling, why details are better than generalities.

There’s room for *Wild* and *A Walk in the Woods*. For *The Hunger Games* and *Battle Royale*. For *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*. It’s not originality that makes an idea compelling, but the specific expression of that idea. I went for a hike—why? I have to kill a bunch of my peers—how? My family won’t stop fighting so I can find love—swords or guns?

Traditional publishing’s long timeline means your book will not likely be in competition with another just like it that came out while you were writing. Nimble self-publishers can capitalize on similarity to a big-deal book because readers often want more of the same.

For memoirists it is not our story’s singularity, but the individuality of our voice that makes our work “original.” A truly one-of-a-kind story might not even resonate with readers; part of the value of memoir is seeing ourselves in someone else’s world. True stories show *you’re not alone. You’re not the only one*

who felt like that. You're not the only one that thing happened to.

Don't actively copy. Writing to the latest trend is only useful for self-publishers writing in specific, high-consumption genres like Category Romance. The books on today's bestseller lists were written, agented, and sold two or more years ago. But don't let knowing that a trend will pass stop you from writing what excites you. It's entirely possible we'll have cycled right through vampires, or books with *Girl* in the title, or working-class memoir, and come around to those books again by the time you finish, polish and publish.

Writers are seldom original. But we can always be rare. We must discover not only the general appeal of our work but also the nature of the story that is so personal, so intimate, it can only be told by one person.

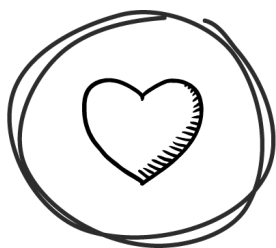
Cancer memoir but I'm the doctor!

Sword and sorcery but pseudo-Mayan!

M/M Romance but ninjas!

Here is an already-fascinating topic/genre/plotline, and here is a new way to think about it.

My way.



MEMOIR: FIRST DRAFT

Good memoir shares many elements with good fiction: a compelling protagonist, on an interesting journey past powerful obstacles and/or against a fully realized villain, who experiences permanent change within herself, while changing her world.²²

Yes, you're going to do all that on the page. I have faith in you.

As you work through the Seven Drafts, you will

- find distance from emotional trauma.
- be fair and truthful while honoring your own truth. Present the other people in your story honestly and without fear.
- create a dramatic arc using actual events and find greater meaning in what happened.
- know where and when to start and finish your story. Understand whether your story is “done” yet in real life.
- understand and address the So What Factor.

You're still going to write a wild, free first draft. Get your truth on the page before you fiddle with it for the reader's benefit.

²² If you're writing fiction, you can skip this and the other Memoir sections (I won't be mad). If you're writing a traumatized, first-person protagonist, you may want to read those sections anyway.

MEMOIR IS NOT THERAPY

...so you must find distance from emotional trauma while writing.

We've all been at *that* reading. The one where our fellow memoirist clears their throat, steps to the podium, and shares with us the graphic details of their sex life. Or molestation. Or domestic abuse.

We've all cringed that cringe. We've all felt, *I'm so sorry this happened to you, but maybe a roomful of strangers eating dubious cheese cubes is not the place.* We've all walked up after the reading and said, "Wow, that was so brave!"

And sometimes we've been that author. Possibly oblivious, or possibly aware that the room has gone quiet in a not-good way and only our workshop leader is making supportive, professional eye contact.

But sometimes that's the memoir you have to write.

How can an author approach "difficult material" in a way that engenders applause and a box-wine-fueled craft discussion at your book release party, instead of people hugging you and offering their therapist's number? Because "You were so brave!" is nice, but "That was amazing!" is better.

- Remember that therapy gets your feelings out and lets you process. Memoir brings out the *reader's* feelings and inspires them to personal growth.
- Ensure the dramatic arc of your story is made of actions and choices, not just the existence of a terrible situation.²³
- Include lighter scenes, even if your story is somber. You might use black humor or wry humor or

23 If this is your challenge, flip ahead and read the Drama section in the Story Draft.

cynical humor, but even a few reasonably funny sentences let the reader breathe.

- Polish your craft to give your story power on the page. Weak writing feels like a teary confession, or worse, listening to someone talk about their summer vacation. Strong writing finds meaning in the moments, ushers readers through your experience, and surprises them on the other side with passion, joy, tragedy or enlightenment.
- Make sure you're ready to tell this particular story. Time and physical separation between you and the problem lets you focus on your story instead of your pain. You can see a larger journey, beyond a series of "things that happened."

Memoirist Dani Shapiro described it beautifully in an interview at *The Millions*:

As memoirists, the ability to summon up the immediacy of our trauma without being sucked into it as we write is valuable. It's difficult to walk that edge of telling what happened vividly enough for the reader to be in the moment of happening, while maintaining enough remove to use our writing craft and sense of structure, but that edge is what divides memoir from therapy, what makes a story powerful and life-changing for the reader as well as the writer.

Reconsidering our trauma can indeed be cathartic. Writing it with confidence and purpose makes it worth reading.

Don't be "brave."

Be amazing.

TRUTH & FAIRNESS

How can we be faithful to our own truth while treating others in our book fairly?

By assuming we are part of a larger story and we're only able to see our part.

Imagine Protagonist-You is a character in a play. That character only knows the action of their scenes. A whole world of Hamlet happens behind Ophelia's back: Hamlet's dad's ghost just turned up to say the uncle murdered him and it's up to Hamlet to seek revenge, and now Hamlet's faking mental illness. All Ophelia knows is that her boyfriend's acting like a jerk.

To write a truthful memoir, we must speculate—or ask—what happened when we were offstage. We must seek out what we don't know. This means taking our family, friends, and antagonists seriously. Assuming there's method behind their madness. Make some phone calls. Get snoop. Ask, "Why did you behave that way? What made that your best choice at the time?" and don't judge the answer.

Don't tell them specifically what you're writing before you're ready. "Oh, I'm really into family history right now," is plenty. Write the book before negotiating the content with yourself or anyone else. First drafts are private. You can choose who to protect in the second draft.



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