

# “THE END” is Only the Beginning: A Step-by-Step Guide to Refining Your Manuscript

by Anita L. Nolan

Even though you type “THE END” when you finish a first draft, your work is only beginning. Rewriting, revising, editing, and polishing your manuscript are still to come. But with so many things to consider and so many decisions to make during those stages, you might not want to start-- or ever think you’re finished.

There is a way, however, to methodically revise and improve your manuscript. By beginning with the big picture and methodically working to the smallest details, the process may not be pain-free, but it should be faster and easier.

As you write the first draft, keep a tablet at your side for notes. By the time the first draft is finished you’ll already have a long list of ideas to consider, and you can continue to add to it through the refining process. Keep a separate list of character and place names on the tablet you can check for spelling. You can note character traits, (like blue eyes or brown hair) as well.

I’ve broken the refining process into four steps, starting with the big picture and narrowing the focus with each step.

## Step One: Rewrite

Rewriting falls somewhere between first draft and revision. Rewrite when you’ve wandered off course while writing the first draft, or fill in the parts you skipped the first time through. Rewrite to strengthen character goals and motivations.

Once the story is as complete as you can make it, move on to--

## Step Two: Revisions

During revisions, fix the big problems. Make significant changes to plot, settings, characters, and conflicts. Search for weak scenes and dropped plot lines.

When revising, I outline the manuscript. This allows me to work on a macro level and not get caught up in the minutiae of the paragraphs, sentences and words (or the amazing beauty of my prose!) It’s easier to track the timeline on an outline, for instance, than monitor it as I read the manuscript.

I include the following in an outline:

- Chapter Numbers
- Scene Numbers (numbering each scene allows you to move them around without getting confused.)
- A list of plot points in the scene (I aim for at least three.)
- Starting and ending page numbers for the scene
- POV Character
- Setting
- Time Frame
- Number of Pages in the Scene
- If a turning point occurs in the scene, I note it

Once the outline is completed, I mainly work with it through the revision process, referring to the manuscript as little as possible. An outline reveals the holes in the plot, weak scenes, timeline errors, etc., much more readily than a read through the manuscript.

Working from the outline, I do the following:

- Check chapter and scene order. Do any scenes need to be moved so that the story is revealed in the proper order, or if you have more than one point of view, are secondary POV scenes appearing at regular intervals?
- Check for timeline inconsistencies. Does Scene 8 happen before Scene 7, either in time or in the sequence of events? Either way, make a note on the outline. You might use a calendar to help keep the timeline accurate. (Blank calendars for any year can be found at [timeanddate.com](http://timeanddate.com).)
- Highlight short scenes. (I consider a short scene to be four or fewer pages, but that can vary depending on what you write and your style.) Short scenes can make a book choppy and provide opportunities to stop reading.
- Make the easy decisions. If there's a scene where nothing happens to move the story forward, draw a big X through it on your outline. You can take it out of the manuscript later.
- Highlight scenes where little happens. These are the scenes to eliminate, add to, or combine with another scene. If a weak scene can be strengthened by combining it with another scene using a transitional sentence or two, make a note on the outline. Perhaps two short/weak scenes can be combined by changing the point of view in one. Or consider strengthening the scene by adding information or creating a new subplot. If you decide to add a subplot, note on the outline other scenes to which the new plot points should be added.
- Check scene locations. Could any be changed to someplace more interesting/unusual? Would changing the setting add tension to a scene? Check for repeated scene locations and vary if possible.
- Check plot lines. Do they follow all the way through the story, as necessary? Are they mentioned periodically? Do they have closure?
- Are all conflicts resolved?
- Look at the list of ideas you made on the tablet. Are any worth incorporating? If so, make a note on your outline.

Now you should have a lot of changes listed on the outline, and you haven't read the manuscript. Depending on how involved a manuscript is, I may make the changes, then outline again before moving on.

### **Step Three: Edit**

Next, I move to the manuscript and analyze technique and sentence structure and move paragraphs around for greatest impact. This is where I tighten verbiage, making sure I say what I mean.

Things to consider:

- RUE (resist the urge to explain.) Eliminate excessive or repetitive narrative. Say it once. Say it well. (Gee, I didn't RUE.)
- Eliminate/reduce/move backstory. This is particularly important at the beginning of the manuscript. I try to keep backstory to less than a paragraph in length, preferably no more than a sentence or two, particularly in the first 50 pages. There are exceptions (and I can point out a

number of books where pages of backstory near the front works well.) But in general, backstory is better left until after the reader is involved in the story and with the character. Backstory usually adds depth, but often slows the pace.

- Add emotion and tension.
- Eliminate redundancies. Don't have two best friends for your main character when one will do.
- Check character continuity and inconsistencies (this is where the list of character traits you've kept on the tablet comes in handy.) Make sure your blue-eyed protagonist has blue eyes throughout, and make sure you spelled those difficult to spell place names (like Monongahela) the same throughout.
- Look for places to strengthen the characters. Make sure their goals, motivations, and conflicts are strong and consistent.
- If you have more than one POV, you might read each character's POV scenes straight through, without reading the others. This helps deepen the voice and keep it consistent.
- Read straight through the main characters' dialogue passages one at a time. (Highlight each character's dialogue in a different color so that it stands out.) This helps keep the characters' voices and dialogue traits (expressions, slang, etc.) consistent throughout the book.
- Check for hooks at the beginning of each chapter, cliffhangers at the end. When the reader turns to a new chapter, you want it to draw them in and keep them reading, so strengthen the hooks. End each scene or chapter in a way that makes it hard to put the book down.
- Is there a balance between dialogue/action/introspection/description on every page? Highlight each with a different colored marker to see if there is balance throughout the manuscript.
- Last is most. Check the last sentence in every paragraph. It should be the most important. Check the final word in every sentence, and particularly the last word of the paragraph. The sentence should end with an important or strong word to pull readers forward. (This is tedious work, but becomes automatic the more you do it.)
- Check for contorting characters. Make sure your characters do what you say they do. Example: "She walked through the door as it opened." Ouch. You might say "She walked through after it opened."
- Look for sentences or paragraphs that stop story flow. Change or eliminate. It helps to read the story aloud (yes, even a novel) to find sentences, paragraphs, or word combinations you stumble over. If you have to read a sentence twice, revise to make it smoother.

## Step Four: Polish

Now we consider the smallest parts of the manuscript. Word choice, punctuation, spelling. Things to consider:

- Eliminate redundancies--again. This time we're looking for a different type of redundancy: word repetition. Check the first word in each paragraph on a page and the first word in each sentence of a paragraph. Avoid starting several consecutive paragraphs or sentences with the same word.
- Check for words that are repeated throughout a page. Eliminate the repetition if you can.
- Check for words that are frequently linked to weak sentence structure: As, when, was are a few to look for.
- Strengthen verbs. Don't have your character walk when he can amble or stride, don't have him laugh loudly when he can guffaw or chortle. Use your vocabulary, and if it's lacking, use a

thesaurus. Avoid weak verbs like was, went, get, got, have, had, make, give, go, take, do, and put.

- Look at the dialogue tags. Stick to “he/she said” for most tags. Use beats (actions) when possible to eliminate a tag. For example, instead of

“Shut the window!” she yelled.

Try

“Shut the window!” Her shrill voice ricocheted around the room.

Or:

“Shut the window!” She crossed the room and slammed it closed herself.

- Eliminate adverbs when possible. Search and destroy “-ly” words.
- Do a word find for your favorite words. Some common favorites are: Just, there, even, that, was, were, have, had. Some words, like “just,” can be eliminated without changing the sentence. Others, like “was” or “there was” (the beginning of a lot of poorly written sentences,) may require that the entire sentence be rewritten to eliminate it.

- Check for typos and grammatical errors. Run a spell check one last time.

Lastly, don’t discount your voice. Take what helps from my technique and ignore the rest.

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