



SUSAN DENNARD'S
WRITING ACADEMY

A Beginner's Guide to Revising a Novel

by

Susan Dennard

Dear Writer,

Thanks for being part of the Academy! I'm so glad you're here.

Please don't share this PDF. It's exclusively for you, as a member of the Susan Dennard Writing Academy.

I

hope you find what I have to say helpful, and remember: this is meant to be only a *guide*—not a rulebook. In other words, take what you like, discard the rest. My aim here is to break down the process of revising into simple, bite-sized pieces so that over time and with practice, all the steps become intuitive.

We all create stories in our own unique ways, and we all edit and revise them in our own unique ways. But I learned long ago how daunting it can be to not only fix an entire novel, but first to find what's broken! So I hope that the steps I offer here can aid you.

Thank you again, fellow writer, and may you find yourself faced with a "[Perfect Book](#)" at the end of this journey!

- Sooz

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Lesson 1

An Introduction to Revising

Getting Started

You've written a novel! Congratulations! Erm...now what? You know you're supposed to "revise" before you start seeking an agent or sell your book online, but what does that actually mean?

Never fear, dear writer. I am here to assist you. (Cue: super hero music.) As daunting as revisions can be, they don't have to be. In fact, I love revisions. They're my favorite part of the press and always have been!

For some people, it's a skill that comes naturally. For others, it requires lots of practice, lots of determination, and oftentimes, outside help too. I'm here to be part of that outside help—as well as give you a scaffolding for practice.

How am I going to do that? By breaking down the different things you need to consider when you revise: plot, character, setting, and beyond. Once these components of story are cut into bite-size pieces, then you can feel less overwhelmed about the task before you.

In other words, you are going to go into your revisions with:

- 1 A very clear, specific end goal in mind. This is your "perfect book" target.
- 2 And a means for breaking your entire novel into small, manageable chunks.

So let's get started, shall we?

Lost in Translation

Maggie Stiefvater teaches an excellent workshop for writers in which she describes writing as “an act of translation.”

In other words, we are translating the “perfect book” that is in our head onto the page. No translation is perfect; it’s impossible to capture all the nuances of a language when you translate it into another—and it’s just as impossible to capture all the nuances of your story.

However, as authors, we can revise our books until we get them as close to that “perfect book in our heads” as possible.

Rarely does a book come out even close to perfect on the first try. And for some of us (🙋 me!) it can take many, many revisions before we reach the “almost perfect state” that we’re aiming for.

Of course, you can’t know what to aim for if you don’t have a clear target. This is why I always—always, always, even now many years into this whole publishing career—come up with a vision for my perfect book.

Your Perfect Book

There are a few things that go into imagining the Perfect Book. And your criteria might be totally different than my own. It also might take you several rounds of revisions or several books before you really settle on the criteria you need for defining your Perfect Book.

But here is what I do to establish mine:

- 1 **I imagine a book cover for the finished product.** I don’t make one (though you’re welcome to, if it will help you!), but I do jot down the general image and style I’m imagining.
- 2 **I decide on the overall vibe I want the book to have.** The general mood, the sensations the reader takes away, the final message they have when they close the book—I can just feel all of that in my chest. So the goal is to translate that feeling onto the page.
- 3 **I decide what my genre is.** There are genre conventions that are required

(yes, I said required) in order to satisfy different audiences. A cozy mystery has a vastly different shape than a noir detective thriller, and readers of those genres will pick up books with expectations. If you don't meet those expectations, then you're basically missing the point of writing in that genre—and you're probably going to leave readers dissatisfied.

- 4 **I decide who my target age group is.** Similar to genre, if I'm writing for a middle grade reader, then the book will be vastly different than if I'm targeting an adult reader. This is both from a content standpoint as well as a voice standpoint.

Here's an example I wrote recently for my longtime Work In Progress, *Screechers*. This is literally taken from my notebook!

1. **Book cover** = This is a dense book. We're talking a thin paged, mass market paperback with a very traditional soft cover. I see it almost like the old Dune covers where we have a desert and a figure, and the colors are all sandy, umber, ochre.
2. **Vibe** = It is rich and moving and possibly even award winning. It has mystery, romance, and this epic, sweeping feeling. It blows through and by you, whispering its story on the wind. It's very character driven and very dependent on their arcs. The setting is a character, possibly more so than any other book I've written. It is ultimately hopeful and shows how humanity can be good, even when there is so much work to do.
3. **Genre** = Epic fantasy
4. **Target reading age** = Adult with some crossover into YA potential

Small Goals, Bite-size Pieces

I don't know about you all, but I get easily overwhelmed by big projects. Spring cleaning, training for a marathon, raking all the leaves in my yard every fall...

So I always break things down into smaller pieces. I don't clean the entire house at once; I go room by room. I don't run 26 miles; I slowly add miles over time. I don't rake all the leaves in one go; I make smaller piles all around the yard.

And when I'm revising a book, I don't tackle everything at once. I instead look at each individual component of story: **plot, character, setting, pacing + scene level conflict, and line edits.**

Of course, all of these things are ultimately inseparable (character creates plot, and world creates character), but it's helpful when revising to try to tease them apart as best I can. That makes the actual act of making changes to the text more manageable.

And hey, **it lets us color code!** Who doesn't love using highlighters and post-its and pens to stay organized? (I mean, probably some of you don't. But hey, you also don't have to color code. I just like to because I find it helpful for my own brain.)

Tools and Supplies

To get ready for the next lesson, there are a few things you're going to need. Now obviously it's up to you if you want to get as "physical" with everything as I do, but I do think there's something extremely beneficial for our brains when we work with our hands.

We process the information differently than when we work on a screen.

But again, if you'd rather try to do every step that follows in a Word doc or Scrivener or a PDF on your iPad, that's totally okay. Do what works best for you!

But if you do want to follow the next lessons exactly as I lay them out, you're going to need the following:

- A printed copy of your manuscript

- Index cards
- Pens or pencils in four different colors
- Post-its in four different colors
- Print-outs of the upcoming worksheets in Lesson 2
- A notebook or extra paper (or an empty digital document works too)

Again, it's all optional. Work in whatever way you like best, **though I do urge you to try working entirely by hand at least once, if you've never done it before.** It can unlock a totally different part of your creative brain!

That's the end of our introduction, and you can click onward to learn how we will take stock of what we've written in our pursuit of a "perfect translation."

Lesson 2

What the heck did I write?

Prepping for the Read

As mentioned in Lesson 1, you're going to need some supplies. For this lesson, I want you to grab:

- Your printed manuscript
 - It helps if your manuscript is double spaced and the pages are numbered.
- Enough index cards to have one card per scene in your book
 - If you don't know how many scenes you have, just get a big stack.
- The worksheets below, printed out
 - You can also just use a notebook or some blank paper, if that's easier for you
- Pens in four different colors
 - I like blue, purple, green, and orange.

Also, **make sure you have time to read.** While I don't expect you to read your entire book in one sitting (though you certainly can!), I do want you to try to work in chunks of time that are not interrupted by huge gaps.

Basically, the point of reading the entire book is to get a fresh, clear picture of the story as it currently stands. The more time away from the read, the fuzzier our memory and understanding will be. So if you're forced to wait days—or worse,

weeks—between readings, then it will be harder to keep track of everything you've written and what isn't working.

That said, you will also be taking notes and using those index cards. So if you do need lots of time between reading sessions, **don't fret**. If you take good notes, then it won't be a problem!

Reading the Book

For me, this is always the hardest part. I find it impossible not to make edits as I read—and that's fine. Sure, it might all get cut or rewritten, but some of us just can't leave a typo or awkward sentence. 😊

Do what you have to do!

Now, as you read, I want you to take notes. The worksheets below are here to help you take those notes and sort out what you have in your book as it currently stands.

Be honest! Be brutal! It's better to make note of every little problem, even if you ultimately decide it's not a problem. Later You will be glad you were thorough!
Trust me!

The Worksheets

These are old worksheets, so please forgive the quality. I first made them in 2011! I do plan to update them (with all that time I have, you know?), but for now, they will do. They still serve the exact purpose I need them to serve, even if they're not the prettiest to look at.

- 1 [Plot Problems Worksheet](#) (Click the link or go to the end of this PDF!)
- 2 [Character Problems Worksheet](#) (Click the link or go to the end of this PDF!)
- 3 [Setting Problems Worksheet](#) (Click the link or go to the end of this PDF!)

4 [Other Problems Worksheet](#) (Click the link or go to the end of this PDF!)

For each worksheet, I use a different color pen. This just makes it easier when I'm later assessing my overall issues. So, I use blue pens for plot issues, purple pens for character, green for world, and orange for everything else.

You can choose what makes the most sense to you, or hey, don't color code at all.



How to Use the Worksheets

First: Start reading your printed manuscript. Then, as you read and notice problems, simply mark the margin of your manuscript with a number. Then go to the corresponding worksheet and explain the issue you have found.

So for example: Let's say you find a gaping plot hole on page 13 of your first chapter. It's the third plot problem you've spotted so far. On page 13 of your manuscript, you'll use **a blue pen (for plot)** to write **P – 3 in the margin**.

Then on your Plot Worksheet, you'll write the page number in the left column (**p.13** in this instance). And in the right column, you'll write the problem # (**P-3**, in this instance).

Lastly, you'll describe the problem you found in your plot.

BUT HOW DO I KNOW WHAT'S BROKEN, SOOZ?

I fear this question is way, way beyond the scope of this course. However, I do go into significant detail in my [How I Write a Novel Course](#) (Coming soon!) on the various parts of a story, as well as in my many [blog posts](#) (Coming soon!) and [newsletters](#) (Coming soon!) from the past 14+ years. And of course, I continue to put out content in my [Substack](#) on plot, character, setting, and beyond.

If you really want a deep dive on revising, I highly recommend

[Holly Lisle's How to Revise Your Novel course](#). It's quite expensive, but it taught me more than any other course on craft when I was a beginner. In fact, I used it for my novel *Something Strange & Deadly*, and I transformed that book from a total mess into a book that got me an agent and my first book deal!

Some example issues that you might see are:

- A character acting out of character or making choices for the sake of the plot.
- A character whose goal doesn't feel real or desperate enough to propel their choices.
- A plot twist that isn't foreshadowed enough—or is signaled too strongly!
- Too much telling, not enough showing and deep POV.
- Confusing action or pacing that is too slow/quick.
- And beyond! (So...so much beyond!)

Here's a visual example to show you what I mean with the worksheets and manuscript. First is the manuscript, then the worksheet:

Screechers 2017 - 2/26/23, 8:22 AM / 4

Herself, that she would make it right.

D-4

Then, on the fourth day, someone came to Blessing.

As before, she heard the caravan before she saw it. The wind that morning was fickle, changing direction with no warning. Left, right, up, down, it clattered the beads and refused to let Echo be. She had just feasted on a hard melon for lunch, when a gust hurled through the kitchen window and slapped her hair onto the burn. She flung her fork down.

C-1

“Scorch it,” she swore, shoving the unripened fruit away. She wasn’t hungry anyway. She only ate because she had to. She pushed to her feet...Then paused.

D-5

An engine purred on the wind. Sand crunched.

A cold sweat broke out on on her hands, and the melon in her stomach knocked around. She knew she would have to go see. Go check who it was, yet she found herself stuck in place. Maybe it was the soldiers again. *Probably* it was the soldiers again.

Or what if it's merchants?

The wind lashed through the window again, and Echo knew by the sounds—or lack of them—that it wasn’t the merchants. Nor the soldiers, and somehow, the unknown seemed much worse.

She stretched her fingers taut. Then bunched them into fists. Twice more, she flexed and squeezed, as if pumping courage to her heart, until at last she launched into a jog, through the Blessing streets and toward the locked gate. There was a parapet along the wall—nothing more than a strip of clay beside the gate. A rickety metal stairwell led up to it, and by the time Echo reached it, the caravan was growling just beyond the wall.

She bounded up the steps and, crouching low, peered outside.

OTHER PROBLEMS

Page #	Problem Description (be detailed)
p.4, chapt. 11	4- TOO MUCH TELLING!!! Deepen POV 5- engine? Should be sunstone power now or animal-drawn

An example of the corresponding explanation on the Other worksheet for the manuscript page above

Creating Your “Outline”

The next thing you're going to do as you read through your book is create an “outline.” I put “outline” in quotes because most people think of an outline as something you create before you write the book.

And fine. Sure. That's a thing many writers do.

But here, we're creating a scene-by-scene outline of the book we have written—again, as it currently stands.

To do this, you're going to take out your index cards. Each scene gets a card, and on the card, you will write out:

- The page numbers for the scene

- The scene's # in the book (so the first scene is #1, the tenth is #10, etc.)
- A one-line descriptor for the scene
- A more detailed explanation, including the characters that appear

That's it. That's all you need, and the level of detail beyond this is up to you. I like to be as spare as possible because it's faster and easier for me, but really: **the level of detail is up to you.**

If you know there might be big time gaps between your reading and revising sessions, a detailed description might be helpful! That way, if you forget what you've read, you've got a reminder on the each index card.

Here's an example:

14: Starter arrives at the outpost. p.89-100

Echo's POV → she is barely surviving when an unknown caravan arrives.

When you finish reading, you'll have a nice stack of index cards that summarize your book all right there! It's easy, convenient, and it will help you stay organized as we tackle making actual changes in future lessons.

Edit as you go...or don't

If this is your first time ever revising a novel, I urge you to try to restrain yourself

from making changes as you read.

I get it: it's hard. I always say I won't make changes when I sit down to read my books (and yes, this is still the first step of my revisions process every time!), but then I always end up editing prose or fixing typos.

It's fine. Sure, it's sometimes wasted effort because I cut the whole scene or gut it completely. But sometimes it's less stressful for us to just scratch through a typo or add in a comma than it is to ignore it.

But really: if it's your first time revising a novel, I do urge you not to make any bigger changes on the page. Not yet! I promise we will get to that, but for now we're really just taking stock of what we have.

Don't forget your Perfect Book

One last thing: **don't forget that list of criteria you made that define your perfect book!**

I even keep that list somewhere I can see as I'm writing. It helps me remember what I'm shooting for and search for the spots where I'm not hitting the mark...

Sometimes, I'm way off from the mark. Sometimes, it's more subtle. **But as mentioned above, I write down everything I see that sits wrong with me.** No matter how small, I make note. And sure, sometimes I don't end up changing anything. But it's still helpful to know every little area I'm uncertain about.

—

I realize that while this lesson isn't that long...the task itself is quite immense. But that's why we're breaking it all down! **Plot, character, setting, other.** Bite-sized chunks so you can assess your book as it currently stands and we can start aiming for our Perfect Book in future lessons.

Lesson 3

Creating Your Master List

Let's Get Organized

By the end of this course, you are going to be so sick of me telling you to “get organized.” But it's in the organization that we break the enormity of revising a book into manageable pieces.

And now that you have read the entire manuscript + taken copious notes on what isn't working, we've got to take all that information and convert it into something useful.

Enter stage left: **the Master List of Problems.**

I won't pretend this lesson is the most fun, creatively speaking, but you'll be glad later that you took the time here to...yes, that's right: get organized.

Create a Master List

Now, because we have already separated out each story issue by plot, character, setting, and other, we are already halfway through the “organizing step” of creating our Master List.

Now it's simply a matter of combing through those worksheets in search of the broad themes.

I want you to get a notebook or some blank sheets of paper or open a new document or even grab a stack of index cards. Use whatever you're most comfortable with! I personally like to do all of this in a Word document that I can print out later as an actual physical checklist to work through.

Now beginning with your plot worksheet, go through your list of issues and make note of where they overlap, where they are part of a broader “umbrella” issue, and where it’s really just a localized scene problem.

Then move to Character, then Setting, then Other. (And note: you can totally break down the “other” section into more granular levels if you want! A “pacing” section or a “scene conflict” section, for example. Totally up to you!)

Remember that list of possible issues I shared in Lesson 2? Let’s pull from that for a moment and say you have the following issues show up in every scene:

- A character acting out of character.
- A character whose goal doesn’t feel real or desperate enough in each scene.

Those two issues might be a sign that your main character is making choices for the sake of the plot instead of based on who they are as a person and what they desperately desire.

So on my Character Master List, I would write:

- Character X’s main desire isn’t desperate enough, and so they are making choices that don’t make sense to who they are.

WHAT IF I’M TOTALLY NEW TO THIS CRAFT STUFF, SOOZ, AND HAVE NO IDEA WHAT’S CONNECTED AND WHAT ISN’T?

That is okay! As mentioned in the last lesson, teaching you about the nuts and bolts of craft is beyond the scope of this course. But as I also mentioned then, I have the following resources that might help you learn your craft:

- [How I Write a Novel Course](#) (Coming soon!)
- [The Free Archives of old blog posts](#) (Coming soon!)

- [The Member Archives of newsletters](#) (Coming soon!)
- [And my ongoing Substack](#)

But do keep in mind that you knew enough about craft to write a novel! So it's very likely you will know enough here to get organized—and eventually find solutions to the issues too!



It's highly possible that as you get deeper and deeper into the worksheets, you will find more and more overlap. You'll sense where, Oh this plot problem might actually be a character problem. Or you'll see how by deepening the world over here, that will ultimately affect your character's arc too.

It's for this reason that I prefer working in a Word document—it's easier for changing things as I go. When I realize that two seemingly separate problems are actually part of a broader issue, I can organize my document to show that.

But just remember: our goal in this lesson is to have a thorough but shorter list of all our problems. That way we can go into our next lesson, Finding Your Fixes, with a broad, macroscopic view of what is and isn't working in the story.

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As mentioned above, this might be your hardest lesson...or it might be your easiest. Neither way is “more virtuous” nor “more correct.” It's just a matter of how your brain is wired.

Now let's move on and get organized to actually revise!

Lesson 4

Finding Your Fixes

Where to start?

This lesson, Lesson 4, might be the hardest one in the whole course, depending on your skill and comfort with finding solutions to a broken story.

Or this might be the easiest, most fun lesson. I love finding solutions to problems! The twistier the better. But I have plenty of author friends who struggle with this.

It's okay if you struggle. It's okay if you find it fun. And it's okay to be somewhere in the middle.

I'm going to give few ideas that I hope will help you find fixes for your broken story elements.

Start with the Master List

Okay, so we've got our Master List. **Now it's time to find solutions for each problem.**

This can definitely be a challenge for people, and **full disclosure: sometimes I won't see the best solution until I'm actually in the act of revising.**

And that's fine! When that happens, I pause what I'm doing, go back and make the new changes, and continue from there.

So let's go back to the example from Lessons 2 + 3, and let's say two of your recurring Character Problems are:

- A character acting out of character.
- A character whose goal doesn't feel real or desperate enough in each scene.

To me, that looks like a problem with your character's initial desire being "too weak" and so you're letting the plot dictate what they do instead of their own deep motivations. **The stakes aren't high enough, so you need to raise them.** That way, their current story desire is so desperate they will make bad choices to get what they want/need.

So maybe a sister who was only missing you now make a kidnapped sister with a a time limit on her life. Or maybe a boy who wanted to get on the homecoming court because he wants to be popular..is now faced with a bully who will reveal all his most awful, tragic secrets if he can't get on that homecoming course. (I have no idea why a bully would do that, but you get my point about raising stakes! 😊)

ONE LAST TIME FOR THE PEOPLE IN THE BACK:

It is 100% okay if you do not have a strong enough grasp of craft yet to feel comfortable finding solutions. **You will learn as you go!!**

Let's say you can't find the solutions on your own—maybe because you're a beginner or maybe because you're just totally tapped dry from that toddler that never lets you sleep. No worries! I've got some tips below to help get your brainstorming muscles into gear.

Find a Trusted Brainstorm Buddy

My number one piece of advice for aspiring authors is to find a community. Easier said than done, I know. But having people you can talk to about the highs and lows of this business—and the highs and lows of the actual craft—will help in ways I cannot begin to describe.

Only other writers can truly understand why revising is hard or getting an agent is a

huge deal or how frustrating it is when you're stuck in your story.

Plus, when you need a friend to brainstorm with, then you've got options right there!

You can, **of course**, brainstorm with non-writers, but I've always found the input from writers who understand story significantly more valuable than the "everyday" people in my life.

That said, take what you can get! Outside input of any kind can be helpful!

While it might be helpful if your trusted friend can read the book for you, it is definitely not necessary.

I am personally not comfortable letting my friends read early drafts—it feels like a burden to offload what I know is a disaster onto them! But some people don't mind, and maybe your first drafts are cleaner than mine! 😊

But keep in mind, whether they read the book or you just give them the summary, you aren't looking for a solution.

"Wait, Sooz, I'm not?"

No, dear writer. Sure, it would be great if you come out of a brainstorming session with an answer! But it's also okay to only come out with only the first sparks of an idea.

Writing coach [Becca Syme](#) once told me to view it as "getting the ingredients for your elixir from your brainstorming" instead of "getting the whole elixir." That way, there's less pressure on the conversation to have an answer—less pressure for you and your writing friend!

You're just getting ingredients for your elixir; you're just letting your brain have

fresh ideas so it can churn and develop them on its own.

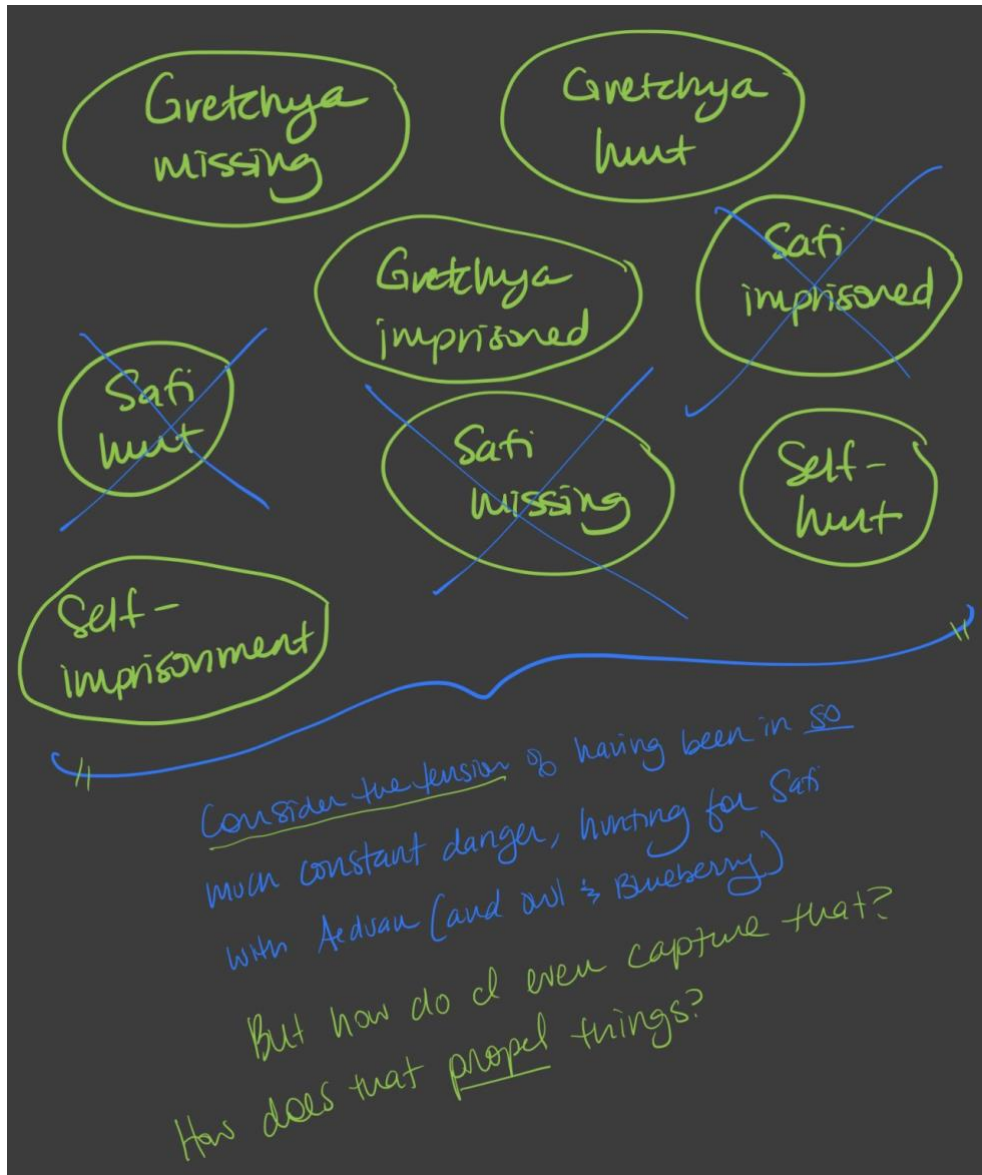
Mind map

I love me a mind map. I make them constantly in notebooks, on my whiteboard, with my iPad. That stream of conscious flow from one idea to the next is so helpful for my brain.

And the visual element of a mind map is so helpful too!

I use them both when brainstorming broken story solutions as well as simply brainstorming my first drafts when I get stuck. Heck, I use them to write lessons like this one!

The beauty of a mind map is that you can write down all your ideas without concern for connection or order. Then, once everything is down, you can start arranging and looking for how things connect.



An example of a mind map from my brainstorming for *Witchlight*

Go Back to Your Perfect Book

Don't forget your list of criteria from Lesson 1! It's very possible you will see right away where the gaps in "translation" are, but if not, then your Perfect Book list will help you remember what you're aiming for. In turn, that will help you come up with solutions for how to fix things.

Think of your Perfect Book as a compass throughout revisions.

Remember my example from Screechers in Lesson 1? I recently reread that book, and [I could immediately see where things broke down](#). In that newsletter (which is for paid subscribers; I apologize), I described both what was broken—my big plot, character, setting, and beyond problems—as well as offer some solutions to fix.

Here's one example:

- I know I don't like some of the world building. It has some dystopian elements that no longer jibe with the **sweeping, moving epic fantasy I see in my Perfect Book**. Worse, some of those elements end feeling colonialist, which is definitely not my story to tell!
- So how did I decide to fix that? I came up with a new arrangement in the world that had nothing to do with "outlanders arriving to help and then never leaving" and instead with a complex cultural and political arrangement across several cities in the same nation.
- That change also took the book from skewing more YA in tone and content to more **adult epic fantasy**.

Look at How Others Do It

And on that note, it can be really helpful to look at what others in your genre have done before! I'm not saying you should copy anyone or look at their homework...

But when you remember that story is all one big, collective consciousness built on millennia of first verbal stories, then written ones (and sung ones and danced ones and filmed ones and beyond!), then you can also remember that looking at how other people "make it work" is a great way to find solutions to your own problems.

If I know I want Screechers to be epic, sweeping fantasy then I can look at different epic, sweeping fantasy. Is there some genre convention I'm forgetting?

I'm not worried I'll copy anyone. Screechers has such a strong, unique atmosphere in my brain, with its dense political landscape and gritty desert wind practically blowing off the pages. So if I go look at one of my favorite fantasy

authors—let's say Robin Hobb, for example—I'm not worried I will copy her at all. None of her series are like what I imagine Screechers as. But they do all qualify as door-stopper mass market paperbacks with epic fantasy inside.

I'm also a big gamer, so I will frequently look to my favorite games to see how I can use what made me love that game in my own stories. I often relay how I learned so much while playing the Dragon Age franchise shortly after Truthwitch went off to the printers, so I made sure to use all that learning—specifically about how to incorporate foreshadowing directly into the physicality of the world—in the rest of the Witchlands series.

Trust Your Instincts

I mentioned this briefly above, but it bears repeating for all of you “intuitive” writers who prefer not to plan or outline.

It's okay to also trust your gut! You knew enough about craft instinctively to write an entire novel, so you will likely know enough to find story solutions as well.

And you know what? Even if you are a meticulous outliner and don't consider yourself “intuitive,” that's okay too! If you see an obvious solution right away, then trust it! It might work, it might not, but you'll never know if you don't keep track!

Create Your New Master List

This brings me to my last point which is: **record all your ideas somewhere!** In a notebook, in a scratch document on your computer, in a digital recorder—whatever works best for your brain, **keep track of all the ideas you come up with as potential fixes for your broken story.**

Then, once you have all those ideas, you can use them to create a new Master List. Basically, you will go through every problem on your List of Problems, write out a solution that will fix the problem...

And at the end, you will have a **Master List of Solutions** that we will refer to in the

next lesson.

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As mentioned above, this might be your hardest lesson...or it might be your easiest. Neither way is “more virtuous” nor “more correct.” It’s just a matter of how your brain is wired.

Now let’s move on and get organized to actually revise!

Lesson 5

Plan of Attack

Let's Dig In (Finally)

Now the real nitty-gritty work begins.

We are...yes, getting organized again. But this time, we're digging deep. Everything you do in this lesson is setting you up for seamless revisions. You'll be so organized, you'll just sail through each chapter's edits as if you were literally...I don't know. On a sailboat.

Either way, you'll be glad for all the organizing you did before this, and you'll be really glad you did all the steps in this Lesson once you get through.

Gather Your Tools

For this lesson, we're going to need:

- Our index card outline
- The Master List of Solutions
- Pens in four different colors
- Post-its in four different colors (if you have a lot of problems or one Master List)
- Your filled-in worksheets for Plot, Character, Setting, Other
- Your printed and marked-up manuscript

- Any extra notes you might want to have on hand

Basically, you need everything. So make sure you've got some space. I like to work at an empty desk or on a rug where my dogs and daughter cannot interfere.

You pick wherever feels most comfortable and creative for you. **But do know you'll be using all of these items, so having easy access and mobility is helpful!**

Make a Plan for Every Scene

This is where the process gets long, but I really promise—especially if you're new to revising—you will be glad you did this.

By the time you're done with this lesson, you will have such an intimate knowledge of what you need to change in your manuscript, you might be able to do it without even consulting the cards. (And that, my friends, is the first step toward internalizing this process and becoming an intuitive reviser like I now am!)

Let's start with your first index card that represents your first scene. **If you look at your manuscript + worksheets, you can see exactly what issues are in the scene.**

You can also see if the issue is Plot, Character, Setting, or Other—and pick which pen color (or post-it color) you want to use for each issue.

So let's go back to our ongoing examples, and follow them all the way from manuscript to index card.

1. Find the problem in the manuscript.

Let's say in scene 1 you have an issue on page 7 that you describe in your other worksheet as:

- This feels boring and slow. Pacing problem?

However, through the course of creating your Master List of Problems, **you decided that issue was actually tied to the lack of a desperate desire for your main**

character.

2. Consult the Master List of Solutions.

After brainstorming with a friend, **you came up with the solution to raise the stakes by adding a literal ticking bomb the main character, Hannah, desperately needs to rewire.**

Since a bomb is a story element (versus a character change or world building detail), then you consider this a “plot” solution on your Master List of Solutions.

3. Add the solutions to the scene card.

Now that you've found your solution, **you will write it in the corresponding color on your scene 1 index card:**

- Introduce the ticking bomb here!

Since I like to make plot blue, I would write that note in a blue pen!

Maybe you've also decided to add a sister that will die if the bomb goes off. You've put this on your Master List of Solutions as a Character fix. **So you add in (insert your color here—I like purple) to the index card:**

- Introduce the sister, Iris.

And hey, since you're really wanting to do a lot in this opening scene, you also decide to include a note on the card that says:

- Hint at complicated backstory between Hannah and Iris that will later explain why the main character is so angry her sister is in this position with the ticking bomb

That's a lot to write, so **why don't you get out a purple post-it and stick it on the scene card instead of cramming it on the card in purple pen?**

Now you've reached the end of your list of problems and solutions for scene #1,

so...

14: Starter arrives at the outpost. p.89-100

Echo's POV → she is barely surviving when an unknown caravan arrives.

+ Don't like Echo's distance — deepen POV
+ on that note, MORE SHOWING

An example of a scene card for *Screechers* with my Plan of Attack notes added

4. Move on to the next scene.

Take steps 1-3 and do them for every single scene in your index card stack. To remind you, the steps are:

- 1 Consult the manuscript and the worksheets for the problem.
- 2 Check your Master List of Solutions for the story fix.
- 3 Crite all the fixes needed for that scene in color-coded pens or post-its on the index card.

I am well aware that this doesn't sound particularly exciting, and yes, it's a long, long process. Especially if your book is a big one! **But going through every scene like this will allow you to know exactly what you must do to fix your story when you actually revise.**

You won't have to second guess in the next lesson. You'll be ready, organized, and intimately familiar with all the fixes your story needs.

Be Flexible

I realize this process seems to be the antithesis of flexible, but in fact, it allows you to be more flexible now than you might be later.

Isn't it better to start adding changes to your scene cards and realize NOW that a solution won't actually work? You can go ahead and start brainstorming new, better solutions instead.

Or even more exciting, you might find better solutions for your Master List as you go through each scene card.

There is no "wrong way" to do this. We're really just trying to get everything ready so we have an easier time later on when we make our actual changes to the manuscript.

Don't Forget to Add or Cut!

There is a very high chance you will discover scenes are missing. Maybe you realize you need some flashbacks between Hannah and her sister Iris...or an extra scene showing how bad the villain really is.

When this happens, make a new scene card and slide it into your outline deck! You don't need to write the scene now (unless you want to, of course).

Or it's possible, on the flip side, **you'll realize you need to cut scenes!** No problem. Just make note of that on the scene card. (But keep the card in your deck so you can remember to cut that scene when you get to it in revisions.)

And of course, **you might decide to combine scenes.** I do this frequently because I discover two scenes are filling the same role in the story, so I will take the most important pieces from each and weave them into something new.

Again, make note of that plan on the card, and write something like: **Combine this scene with scene #.**

—

At the end of this lesson, you should have a hefty stack of scene cards—possibly a taller stack than you started with!

And you're also ready now to finally get to the main event: actually revising and changing your manuscript.

Lesson 6

Revising

Finally, the Main Event

I know you're all thinking, Thank goodness, Sooz. Finally we get to do the thing you said we'd do from the start.

Thank you for your patience and hard work up until this point! All of that effort is now going to pay off as you take your newly updated scene cards—a.k.a. your Plan of Attack—and go through your printed manuscript.

Or if you'd rather work in a digital format, that is totally okay. I work faster by hand because that is how my brain is wired...but then that does mean I have to type in all of my changes at a later time.

If you don't know what you prefer, then I suggest starting out with your printed manuscript and some pens...and then shifting to a digital format if that really isn't feeling natural for you.

Start Making Changes

With your scene cards, go through the one by one. I would suggest you go chronologically, unless you know you work better in a different order.

I'm going to assume you're working from scene 1 to the end, though.

So we take our first card, we look at all the notes on it...and we start to make those changes.

Break It Down by Story Problem

There are now two ways you can go about actually making your changes. First: you can break it down by problem.

So for example, if I know I need to introduce the ticking bomb, then I will find a place in that first scene where I can insert some lines or paragraphs about it.

And of course, **because I'm introducing something new that will have ripple effects**, I will likely go through and make sure there is nowhere else in the scene where that newly introduced bomb needs to show up.

Then I will strike that off the scene card and move to the next problem.

Oh, I need to introduce Iris and the backstory now too? Okay, let's comb through the scene and find a place to do that—as well as any “ripples” that need to be added too.

Read through the scene and change

Alternatively, you could read through the scene and make edits as you go.

So keep your card nearby for constant consulting, then as you read, look for places to add any of the necessary changes and resulting ripples.

I'll be honest with you all that **sometimes I operate this way, sometimes I do the former. It really depends on how much I want to reread the entire manuscript again right now versus later on.**

If I don't want to reread it all again now, then I'll go with option one: just adding and changing according to problem. But I only do that with the knowledge that I will be rereading the whole book again later for polishing and fine-tuning.

Move to the Next Scene

When you finish scene 1, move onto scene 2...and then 3 and then 4...and you get the point after that.

I personally like to keep track of my “ripples” and add them later cards in the scene deck. So, in other words: if there are areas I know where I might want to reference an earlier change, I will make note of that on the index cards

For example, I remember adding into the second Luminaries book, *The Hunting Moon*, a metaphor about Pompeii I really liked. So I made a note to add that same metaphor at a later point in the story as well, where I felt it would again be relevant—and also add a nice resonance to Winnie’s story.

Keep Going Until You Reach the End

This step can take a long time. **Probably the longest time, since it’s the actual End Goal for revisions in the first place: changing the book to match your vision of perfection.**

Be patient with yourself, and take breaks if you have to. You’ve done the hard work of finding the problems and solutions. Now it’s just a matter of applying them.

Check Your Master List

When you finish resolving a story problem, make sure you tick it off on your Master List of Solutions! Nothing is more satisfying than watching that list get smaller and smaller.

It’s such a very clear sign of all your progress and improvements!

Save Everything

If you’re not working by hand, make sure you save all your earlier drafts and versions. You never know when you might need to add something...only to realize you wrote the perfect line in an earlier chapter you cut!

I love Scrivener’s Snapshot feature for this, or else Track Changes in Word.

And of course, since I personally and usually working on a printed manuscript, the original words are still right there! Nothing on my hard drive has actually been

changed yet.

Start Over If You Have To

I have said this before: **but if you have a better idea, then go ahead and make it.**

Don't stick to your Master List of Solutions simply because it's right there waiting to be checked off. If you find a better solution for a story problem, then go for it! Better go back and make the changes now than edit the entire manuscript wrong and have to start over again!

And if you're like me: **you will read through the book several times before you ever start typing in handwritten changes.**

Yes, I will do a full pass of the book. Then I will go back to the beginning and do a second pass in which I smooth out prose, blend in new additions better, make sure nothing is redundant, and generally just make the whole book stronger.

My ultimate goal is to get as close to a perfect translation as I can get! And if that means I have to do multiple passes to reach my vision, then so be it.

Type In the Changes

If you've handwritten your changes like I do, then now is the time to type all those changes in.

Look: this step is boring and slow and pretty mindless. BUT, it does afford you one more chance to make sure you like all the changes you've made to the story and to polish any prose you're not sure about.

I realize why many people prefer not to have to do this step—and why they therefore prefer to work directly on their manuscript digitally. And that's fine!

For me, my creativity is very tactile. I will always work more quickly, more comfortably, and more happily when I work by hand with a pen and paper. (It also keeps me from getting distracted by the internet!) **But if that's now how you feel your most creative, then that is okay.**

You do you.

And if you don't yet know, then I again urge you to at least try the handwritten route! For many people, it's a great way to lock up new creative centers in their brain!

—

And that, my dear writers, is the end of the Beginner's Guide to Revising. Assuming you're actually done revising now—and you have even typed in all the changes—**how are you feeling?**

Do you think you're close to the Perfect Book? Do you still sense there is a gap between your vision and the translation on the page?

It is okay if the answer is yes! I have been working on some of my manuscripts for over a decade because I just cannot get the story on the page to match what I see in my head. But I love the stories enough to keep trying, keep revising, keep coming back for more.

And sometimes, **we can't tell if our books are doing what we want them to do.** And in those instances, [we must turn to outside readers to help us along.](#) This is not a flaw in the system; it is a characteristic of it.

All writers need outside help and now that you've revised your book, you're in a position to ask for it!

Good luck, dear writer, and thank you for taking this course with me! **I hope you're proud of all the hard work you've done.** 

Worksheets