

# Revise Your Writing: Where to Begin

## The Comprehensive Checklist

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This checklist comes from a 1-week online course that helps you determine exactly where to begin your revision in the way that works best for you. Get immediately to work on polishing your draft, using a revision checklist designed uniquely for you. Learn more at:

<http://www.joandempsey.com/revise-your-writing>

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Note: The word “character” below refers to both fictional characters and to real people in non-fiction manuscripts.

### The Big Picture - Macro Issues

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NOTE: These big picture/macro issues are *extraordinarily* complex, and this checklist barely scratches the surface of the issues that arise in each of these. Should any of these areas feel unfamiliar to you, you can learn more on my website, at this link: [http://www.joandempsey.com/writing-resources/ - anchor-12](http://www.joandempsey.com/writing-resources/-anchor-12)

#### ☐ Character

*Characters - whether in fiction or non-fiction - need to be fully human. Ask yourself these questions (your answer to each should be “yes”):*

- *Do your characters experience life with all of their senses?*
- *Do they inhabit their bodies, and have basic human desires and needs?*
- *Is their dialogue unique to them, helping to reveal who they are?*
- *Do you know more about them than your reader does (you should!)?*
- *Do your characters sufficiently differ from each other (are they unique) or could you easily interchange them?*

#### ☐ Plot

*Your plot should move along nicely, and engage the reader.*

- *Are there places where the reader gets bored or bogged down, and wants to skip ahead? If so, attend to those places to see if they’re necessary - if they’re not, delete them. If they are, what can you change to make them more compelling?*
- *Does the plot feel forced or unnatural, as if the author’s manipulating things for her own benefit rather than allowing the plot to naturally*

*unfold? If so, note those places and ask yourself what your characters would really do in those scenes, not what you want them to do.*

- *Is there a satisfying subplot in place if you have one? Does it mesh well with the main plot? If you don't have one, should you? Subplots often enrich the larger plot.*
- *Does your plot fit well with the conventions of your genre without being derivative or clichéd?*
- *Does the manuscript open with a compelling first line, one that will entice the reader to keep reading?*
- *Do you immediately put your reader into the middle of things, or is there too much exposition and scene-setting? Don't do too much "throat clearing" - just put your character straight into a scene.*

### ❑ Structure

*Structure is the architecture on which your story gets built. There are endless structural possibilities. Study your own and make sure you honor its intentions so your structure will be sound.*

- *If your structure is chronological, does the story move forward predictably through time?*
- *If you go back and forth in time, are the transitions clear?*
- *If you alternate chapters between characters, do you honor that structure throughout the book?*
- *Is your book broken into sections? Is it clear why that's the case?*

### ❑ Point of View

*Staying consistent with your point of view is crucial.*

- *Is your point of view consistent in every scene, or do you violate it at times? If you violate it, go back and make sure you're consistent, true to your chosen point of view.*

### ❑ Voice

- *Are there any sections of the book in which the voice changes? Often the "sound" (read it out loud!) of one section might be breezy, while another feels stilted. Aim for consistency throughout.*
- *Sometimes what you wrote in the early chapters can sound different than the more recent work (since you continue to get better over time) - again, aim for consistency.*

### ❑ Description

- *Do your settings come to life for the reader?*
- *Have you used specific, unique details to describe places and people, rather than generic details?*
- *Have you considered all five senses to paint vivid scenes and people?*

- *Do your descriptions help convey the tone and mood in addition to simply being descriptive?*

#### ☐ Dialogue

*Dialogue needs to do one of two things: move forward the story, or reveal character.*

- *Is your dialogue compelling, or dull?*
- *Do the characters sound distinctive? Do they each have their own voice?*
- *Does everything being said have a purpose, or is it just filler?*
- *Did you sparingly use dialogue tags (said and asked) or did you get too fancy (hissed or giggled)?*

#### ☐ Theme

*Every good book has at its heart a theme or themes that originate from what's going on for the characters. The theme is the underlying meaning of a story, things like greed, injustice, lost love, and the like.*

- *Do you know what your theme is? If you don't, find it - your book should have something meaningful going on beyond the basic plot. Look to your characters to see what they're struggling with - often you can find it there.*
- *Are the symbols you're using reflective of the theme? They should be.*

## The Sentence Level - Micro Issues

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Note: What follows is an adapted checklist from my online course *Revision Essentials: 15 Self-Editing Skills Every Creative Writer Needs to Master*.

If you want to truly master the art of revision, I hope you'll consider enrolling. Learn More and Enroll: <http://www.joandempsey.com/improve-your-writing/>

### Cut the Clutter

#### ☐ Resist Those Tempting Qualifiers

*Don't be "sort of" bold. Be bold! Watch out for unnecessary qualifiers like rather, really, kind of, etc.*

#### ☐ Is 'That' Necessary?

*If the sentence makes sense without the word 'that,' get rid of it!*

#### ☐ Simplify Dialogue Tags

*Stick with 'said' and 'asked.' Avoid said-bookisms (words like 'hissed,' 'sang' and 'chortled').*

- ☐ **Cut Out Dull Dialogue**  
*Dialogue should advance the plot or reveal character (or both).*
- ☐ **Weak Repetition, Effective Repetition**  
*Use repetition only to accomplish a specific effect. Beware repetition otherwise.*
- ☐ **Only Vivid Modifiers**  
*Limit your use of adverbs and adjectives to the vividly necessary.*
- ☐ **Scrutinize 'To Be'**  
*Use forms of 'to be' only when necessary. Watch out for overuse.*

## Don't State the Obvious

- ☐ **That's Implicit, Get Rid of It**  
*Don't make explicit what's already implicit. Don't insult your reader's intelligence.*
- ☐ **Just Don't Simultaneously Show AND Tell**  
*Showing and telling each have their place - just don't show us something and then also tell us!*
- ☐ **Beware Redundancy**  
*Don't tell readers the same thing more than once.*
- ☐ **Avoid Filtering**  
*Don't tell the reader the character is seeing something, just directly show the reader what the character sees. You also don't need to tell the reader you're transitioning into flashback - just go there.*

## Apply Commas Properly

- ☐ **Essential and Nonessential Clauses**  
*Essential clauses don't need commas, nonessential clauses do.*
- ☐ **Compound Sentences & Predicates**  
*Use commas with compound sentences (Two independent clauses joined by a conjunction), but not with compound predicates (single subject with two verb clauses, separated by a conjunction).*
- ☐ **Coordinate Adjectives**

*When you write two or more adjectives that modify the same noun, if you can substitute "and" for where the comma would be, or you can reverse the two adjectives and the sentence reads properly, the comma is necessary.*

## Write Terrific Sentences

### ☐ Take Care When Using 'It' as Subject

*Beware overusing the word 'it' - especially repetitive uses in close proximity.*

### ☐ Short and Long Sentences

*Be mindful of varying your sentence length to avoid boring prose. Whether long or short, make sure every word is necessary.*

### ☐ Perfect Opening Sentences

*As Stephen King says, "An opening line should invite the reader to begin the story. It should say: Listen. Come in here. You want to know about this."*

Note: What follows is adapted from *Grammar Girl's Editing Checklist*, which can be found at <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/>.

### ☐ Wrong Word

*affect/effect, lay/lie, sit/set, who/whom, toward/towards, etc.*

### ☐ Vague Pronoun Reference

**Confusing:** Bob annoyed Larry, but that didn't stop *him* from asking for a meeting.

**Clear:** Bob annoyed Larry, but that didn't stop Larry from asking for a meeting.

### ☐ Lack of Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

**Frequently Disparaged:** Everyone withdrew their money.

**Uncontroversial:** Everyone withdrew his or her money.

**Uncontroversial:** People withdrew their money.

### ☐ Missing or Unnecessary Capitalization

Capitalize proper nouns—the names of things such as the *Golden Gate Bridge*.

Lowercase common nouns—descriptions such as *that famous bridge*.

### ☐ Unnecessary Shift in Verb Tense

**Wrong:** John Wilkes Booth *barricaded* the door while Lincoln *is* watching the play.

### ☐ Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments aren't always wrong, but don't use them accidentally.  
**Fragments:** Because she was late. And I held the door.

☐ **Monotonous Sentence Structure**

**Monotonous:** We were late. I called the office. Bob answered the phone. Bob told Sue. Sue stalled the investors.

**Better:** I called the office because we were late. Bob answered the phone and told Sue, who stalled the investors.

☐ **Adjective Drift**

**Confusing:** The property has seasonal creeks and trail access.

**Clear:** The property has trail access and seasonal creeks.

☐ **Unnecessary Adverbs and Prepositions**

**Bloated:** I was *very* angry that Bob sat *down* on the wet paint.

**Better:** I was furious that Bob sat on the wet paint.

☐ **Parallelism Errors**

**Not Parallel:** Kids like singing, chatting, and *check* their phones.

**Parallel:** Kids like singing, chatting, and checking their phones.

☐ **Passive Voice**

Passive voice isn't wrong, but active sentences are often better.

**Passive:** The bell was rung by zombies.

**Active:** Zombies rang the bell.

☐ **"There Are" Sentences**

You can often improve on sentences that start with *There are*.

**OK:** There are usually 54 cards in a deck.

**Better:** A deck usually has 54 cards.

☐ **Missing Comma After Introductory Element**

**Right:** In the past, we bought vinyl records.

☐ **Unnecessary Comma**

**Wrong:** Bob likes pandas, and visits the zoo often.

**Right:** Bob likes pandas and visits the zoo often.

☐ **Comma Splice**

**Wrong:** I ate cake, I played games.

**Right:** I ate cake, and I played games.

**Right:** I ate cake and played games.

☐ **Run-On Sentence**

**Wrong:** I ate cake I played games.

**Right:** I ate cake, and I played games.

**Right:** I ate cake and played games.

☐ **Missing Comma in a Compound Sentence**

**Wrong:** All my friends came over for my birthday Tuesday and Bobby visited me the next day.

**Right:** All my friends came over for my birthday Tuesday, and Bobby visited me the next day.

☐ **Missing Comma with a Nonrestrictive Element**

**Wrong:** Shoes which are worn on your feet come in many styles.

**Right:** Shoes, which are worn on your feet, come in many styles.

☐ **Mechanical Problems with Quotations**

In the US, periods and commas go inside the closing quotation mark. Semicolons, colons, and dashes go outside the closing quotation mark. The position of question marks and exclamation points varies: They stay with their question or exclamation. Correct: She yelled, "Help!" I won a copy of "Wrecking Ball"! She asked, "Are you hungry?" Did he just ask, "Are we in Hungary?"

☐ **Quotation Marks for Emphasis**

**Wrong:** "Free" soda on Saturdays.

**Right:** Free soda on Saturdays.

☐ **Apostrophe Errors**

Nouns take apostrophes to become possessive. Pronouns don't. *It's* means "it is" or "it has." *Its* is the possessive form of *it*. Acronyms, initialisms, and years don't take apostrophes to become plural (*CDs*, *1980s*).

☐ **Unnecessary or Missing Hyphen**

Don't hyphenate phrasal verbs.

**Wrong:** Log-in to your account.

**Right:** Log in to your account.

Do hyphenate compound adjectives. These mean different things: *silver jewelry cart* and *silver-jewelry cart*.

☐ **Spelling Errors**

Remember to run a spellcheck. It's obvious but easy to forget.