

THE TWELVE COMMANDMENTS OF EFFECTIVE REVISION OR THE END IS JUST THE BEGINNING

By Prudy Taylor Board, Author of *Murder a la Carte*

© 2006. All Rights Reserved.

To a writer, the two most beautiful words in the English language are unquestionably “The End” (Not “I Do” as some romance writers would have you believe!). Unfortunately, with few exceptions, typing “The End” is just *The Beginning* of the final process, and the first step in that final process is painful.

Before even beginning the final revision process, you must establish emotional distance. Celebrate the completion of your work, and then, as hard as it may be, put the manuscript away. Keep it out of sight and out of mind for at least two weeks. This is one of the hardest thing you’ll ever have to do as a writer. You’re so thrilled to have the thing done, you want to get it in the mail. However, only when you can look at your book objectively, as a product not as a great American novel or a work of literary art, only then can you begin the revision process. Once you’ve reached that stage, the following 12 commandments will enable you to whip your “product” into a commercially viable commodity:

1. Thou shalt eschew typographical and grammatical errors.

Think about it: Chances are good you will never ever meet the editors and agents face-to-face. As a result, your manuscript represents you. If your manuscript is sloppily prepared and presented, why should that editor or agent trust that you are a professional he or she can depend on to produce quality work? This is one place where family and friends can be of inestimable help. Let them help by reading your work specifically for typographical, spelling, and grammatical errors.

2. Thou shalt check thy verbs and nouns.

Read through your manuscript paying special attention to every single verb and noun. Make sure each is as colorful and precise as possible. Nothing kills a manuscript quicker than constant repetition of “walk,” “sit,” and look.” If a character must cross a room, let him stumble, stagger, run, or amble. A character doesn’t live in a house. Drag out your thesaurus. (I love *Rodale’s Synonym Finder*.) Is it a bungalow? A mansion? A cottage? A chateau? A split level?

3. Thou shalt check the consistency of thy descriptions.

If your heroine has blue eyes in Chapter 3, make sure her eyes aren’t brown in Chapter 17. Usually, when you introduce a character, you include physical description. So take a sheet of paper or create a file on your computer and every time a character is introduced for the

first time, make a note of the page and chapter number for easy reference. Then when you are doing your final revisions, you can use this cast of characters as a checklist. Same thing for cars and clothes. If your hero drives a white SUV in Chapter 5, make sure he's driving the same car with the same license plate in Chapter 12—unless he's been in an accident. In that case, you'll have made note of his new automobile.

4. Thou shalt make a map.

Consistency is one of the foundations of good fiction. That's because of the unwritten contract you, the party of the first part, a/k/a the writer, enter into with the party of the second part, a/k/a the reader. The reader's contract is to provide you with his or her "willing suspension of disbelief" as first expressed by Samuel Coleridge Taylor. This means the reader doesn't necessarily believe the fictional world you create, he just doesn't *dis*believe it. Your part of the contract is to write so credibly that he actually comes to accept it as fact during the time he is reading your novel. Consistency is a vital part of the process, but consistency can easily be destroyed. When your character goes to the First National Bank on First Street in one scene and journeys to the same bank now located on Temple Avenue—you've blown it. And your reader *will* notice. The way to avoid this is to build a map on paper as you build your book, pinpointing all the places where scenes take place so that they will stay where they should be and so that your characters will get there the same way every time.

5. Thou shalt create a calendar.

One of the most useful pieces of advice I ever received came from an agent who was rejecting my first novel (which later sold to Leisure Books). In essence, she explained that my book occurred in limbo. The reader had no sense of time nor of time passing. If you take a moment to consider how important time is in our world today, you will appreciate that it is equally as important in our fictional worlds. Why? For the answer, we must hearken back to the previous commandment. You know what the reader's terms of the contract are, now you must consider yours, the writer's: Namely, to make your fictional world as believable as possible, to make it easy for the reader to suspend and maintain suspension of his normal disbelief. Time is of the essence of the contract and of your fictional world. So create a calendar when you build your book and then make sure that there is a definite timeline, that you know what it is, and the action of the book always moves forward. Yes, you can have flashbacks, but they should be brief. If not brief, they must be structured so that the reader clearly understands that they are flashbacks.

6. Thou shalt read thy dialogue aloud and make it sing.

Remember always that dialogue must not duplicate human conversation—we are an incredibly boring lot. (If you doubt this, just casually turn on a recorder and tape 15 or 20 minutes of real conversation, then try to type or even listen to it. Yawn. Big gaping yawn.)

To avoid this, read your dialogue aloud so that you can hear it. Then check for unnecessary words. And see if you can make it more relevant to the individual characters by adding an expression to more clearly delineate that character's background. A TV reporter, for example, will refer to B-roll, establishing shots, etc.

7. Thou shalt economize on characters wherever possible.

This commandment is most appropriately used in connection with secondary or tertiary characters. For example, if you have two or three waitresses—especially if they have dialogue—at the same restaurant, why not just combine them into one? That way you can develop her character more fully and make her a person instead of a piece of scenery. Do the same for postmen, police officers, store clerks, etc.

8. Thou shalt eschew obfuscation.

Never confuse thy best friend (No, not your dog—your reader!). Reread your manuscript and make sure everything is clear. Any time the reader has to stop and figure something out whether it's garbled dialogue, or a too abrupt transition, or differentiate between characters with similar-sounding names, you jar the reader out of your fictional world. Not only is it difficult to draw the reader back in, this is an excellent place for the reader to put your book down to finish another day. You never want that to happen. Your goal should be to write a book so seamless, so well-paced, with characters so finely drawn that the reader will stay up all night if necessary to reach your denouement.

9. Thou shalt make haste wisely.

As Shakespeare once wrote, “To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, To the last syllable of recorded time...” Shakespeare was, however, referring to the “petty pace” of real life, not life on the fictional page. Your book can't afford to creep; however, you must also avoid predictability and monotony. Variety is the spice of both life and fiction and it's at this point in the revision process that you take measure of your book's pace to ensure variety. First, make each scene merit inclusion in your book. If it doesn't reveal vital information and move the story forward, dump it. (Think of unnecessary scenes as breeding on a prime piece of filet mignon. Ugh! So be brutal.) Next, be aware that each scene has a tone. It's either physical with lots of action, cerebral with lots of thinking, emotional, or chatty with lots of talk. You ensure variety when you make sure that you don't have too many scenes of similar tone lumped together. Follow an action scene with a cerebral or chatty scene, an emotional scene with a cerebral scene, a chatty scene with an action scene. And, finally, be careful not to fall into the rhythm, for example, of action, emotional, cerebral, chatty, action, emotional, cerebral, chatty. You get the point.

10. Thou shalt eschew excess verbiage.

Life is filled with repetition; fiction can't afford it. Again, be brutal and think of breaching that fine piece of meat. Excess verbiage weakens the strength of your writing. Common villains include but, just, very, some, so. Look for repetition. Also avoid qualifiers such as somewhat, seems, perhaps, slightly.

11. Thou shalt begin and end once again.

As Mickey Spillane once said, "Nobody reads a mystery to get to the middle. They read it to get to the end. If it's a letdown, they won't buy anymore. The first page sells that book. The last page sells your next book." And that is precisely why you should now, even at this late date, take one last look at both your beginning and your ending. Is each as dynamic, intriguing, engaging as possible? If it isn't, do it over.

Also to the point, this interchange between a interviewer for the *Paris Review* and Ernest Hemingway:

Paris Review: How much rewriting do you do?

Hemingway: It depends. I rewrote the ending to *A Farewell To Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.

Paris Review: Was there some technical problem there? What was it that stumped you?

Hemingway: Getting the words right.

12. If in doubt, thou shalt not send it out.

Another excellent lesson I learned from a pro was contained in Sue Grafton's keynote speech at *Sleuthfest* in Fort Lauderdale several years ago. Ms. Grafton explained that perhaps the worst mistake writers of all ages (and we're speaking of writing experience not chronological years) make is to send out material before it's ready. Once sent, you must live with the consequences. Take your time and make sure your work is as perfect as possible because you may never have an opportunity to again darken that editor or agent's door.