



Revising and Polishing

Your piece of work is starting to take shape nicely. However, there is still some way to go, some polishing to do, to bring it to the highest possible standard. Here are some suggestions that you may find helpful during that revision process.

Focus very precisely on your subject

Keep a firm mental image of whatever it is you are writing about: whether it is a single object or the characters, setting and action of a narrative. The firmer and clearer your mental image, the more effective your writing is likely to be. Test the words you are using against that image: are they accurate? Or not?

Keep your readers in mind

Especially when writing a story, keep your prospective readers in mind. Some writers find it helpful to imagine them leaning over their shoulders. Would they be likely to grow bored and stop reading? How are you going to keep them hooked?

Cut out anything redundant

Don't be reluctant to cut passages out of your writing; even long passages. It is common for writers to produce material that is useful only as part of the writing process. You may

- find when you start writing that you need to 'write yourself in' for a while
- discover you have taken a wrong direction
- notice that you have repeated yourself in a way that adds nothing useful to the piece
- realise, particularly when writing fiction, that you have described scenes and details of your characters' lives that don't contribute anything to the story

Be ruthless with such passages.

Be careful, though. It may not always be a good idea to cut too savagely too early on. It depends how freely your ideas flow.



'Valentine', typewriter,
designed by Ettore Sottsass
with Perry King, made by
Olivetti & Co., 1969.
Museum no. M.24.2-1993

Remove unnecessary words. At the level of the sentence or the line, aim to exclude every word that has nothing additional to contribute to the effect of your story or poem.

Cut - but never throw away.

Never throw away your old drafts. That image you rejected from one poem may spark off a new one. That paragraph of description you cut from the early part of a story may turn out at a later stage to be just what you need.

Or you may realise that the cuts you made two days ago were a bit too drastic. Too bad if you have thrown out the drafts and the bin has already been emptied ...

Keep rereading your work

Read your work through over and over again. Read it aloud as well as silently. Whether it is a poem, a story, a reminiscence, or a reflective piece, this is very important. Listen carefully to every word, every line and sentence.

Does anything bring you up short? If so, stop and consider what the problem is.

Is it that something is wrong with the sound? It may be that you are noticing:

- something unexpectedly clumsy or flat in the rhythm of the lines or the sentences
- a rhyming effect somewhere that you hadn't intended and don't want
- a passage that is awkward to pronounce or that sounds unpleasant

Is there a passage or a word that strikes a false note, something that isn't completely accurate?

Reading your work aloud, you may find you notice oddities of expression or grammar that you missed when you simply glanced over it on the page.

When you have finished making your revisions, go back to the beginning and read the piece again.

New passages

It may strike you when you read your work that something is missing: something you meant to include or wanted to put across that has somehow been left out. Or else you may come up with a new idea, something you hadn't thought of when you were working on earlier drafts.



Five glass pens, 19th century.
Museum no. C.11-1948

After incorporating new material, read your work through carefully. Make sure that any new section

- fits properly with the passages on either side
- is in keeping with the rest of the piece
- sounds and feels right

When to polish

Some writers polish very little until they have written a complete first draft. Others polish their work as they go along, paragraph by paragraph, stanza by stanza.

Especially when writing a story, it can be a mistake to polish too intensively at an early stage. There is a risk of interrupting the imaginative process. The flow of the narrative may suffer. Moreover, you may find later that you want to make important changes in setting, character or incidents: then time spent polishing the text of the earlier version will have been largely wasted.

Be patient and persistent

After you think you have completely finished your piece of writing, put it away for a few days, or even longer. Then come back to it and read it through again, and again, listening carefully for any weaknesses you may have missed. First thing in the morning is often a good time for this, because you come to your writing fresh and free from prior impressions.

Revising your work till it satisfies you is an important part of the craft of writing. Be as persistent over it as you need to be.

Be prepared to be patient. Sometimes it may take days, weeks or even years for the right word or image to float into your mind. When it does, it will be worth the wait.