

Emerald City Writers Conference Presents:

Revisions from the Left and Right

By Ann Charles and Wendy Delaney

October 2009

Contents

The Revision Process	1
Left or Right?	1
Editing for “Lefties”	2
Editing for “Righties”	3
Our Top Five Editing Tips to Make Your Story Shine.....	4
Your Presenters.....	5

The Revision Process

Revision is a key element of writing. But how you attack it depends on which side of your brain dominates.

Left or Right?

Are you more left- or right-brained? Yes, this really does influence how you write.

Editing for “Lefties”

Tips for left-brain dominant writers.

Editing for “Righties”

Tips for right-brain dominant writers.

Our Top Five Editing Tips to Make Your Story Shine

Whether you are left- or right-brain dominant, here are some revision tips that will help make your story stronger.

Your Presenters

Contact information for Ann Charles and Wendy Delaney.

The Revision Process

We tend to think of the revision process as a predominantly left-brained activity—analyzing and editing what you have written in an effort to transform rough draft material (aka “dreck”) into an extraordinarily entertaining, “unputdownable” final draft. Whether *your* revision process is predominantly left-brained or is more of a “whole-brain” function depends entirely on you and your gray matter.

What is undeniable is that editing is a key element of writing. It’s where you trim the fat clogging the arteries of your pacing, when you remove the cliché and insert a unique turn of phrase to form the desired image in the reader’s mind. Through editing you fine-tune your manuscript for the same reason a concert pianist has his piano tuned—to enhance the audience experience.

Revision is part of the creative process, therefore it’s also a right-brained activity, right? True. We believe that writing a book, from crafting your first draft to polishing a twenty-first draft, is a whole-brained collaboration between your creative side and your internal editor.

There is no one right way to write or revise a book. **Whatever works for you is the right way.** However, if you feel like you’ve been slogging through the mire with your manuscript revisions or you’ve been getting less than desirable feedback from your submissions, maybe this workshop can help.

Left or Right?

Lefties

First of all, it helps to understand your approach to getting things done (and that includes writing).

Here’s a quick quiz that should help you determine your brain’s dominant side:

- Are you a planner? A list maker (to-do lists, grocery lists)?
- When assembling something, do you read the directions first?
- Does setting goals help you avoid procrastination?

When developing your story:

- Do you like to fill out character development charts (to identify the character’s height, hair color, eye color, etc.)?
- Do you chart your story’s major plot points on a structural diagram or a spreadsheet?
- Do you plan your opening scene (and typically the majority of your book) before you sit down and type the words, “Chapter One”?

If most of the answers to the above questions were yes, you probably have a dominant left brain.

Righties

If most of the answers were no, and you answer yes to the following, you probably have a dominant right brain.

- When making tough decisions, do you typically follow your gut or your heart?
- Do you consider yourself to be fairly spontaneous?
- Is it easy for you to lose track of time?

When developing your story:

- Do you form a whole story around a title that strikes you out of the blue one day?
- Do you find writing detailed character descriptions as tedious as grocery lists?
- Do you prefer to sit write outside of the “box” of an outline and see where the “muse” leads you?

Now that you have an idea of your dominant side, let’s look at using that information to your advantage in the revision process.

Editing for “Lefties”

The more left-brained among us are typically logical, linear thinkers. That helps the editing cause as we dive into the details and analyze our first draft, but it can also present a challenge since the creative act of writing is more of a right-brain activity.

To illustrate this, let’s say Mary Writer (predominantly left-brained) sits down and cranks out six pages Saturday afternoon to complete the chapter she was planning to take to her Monday critique group meeting. She’s feeling good about completing that chapter, but once she reads it to do some light editing before handing it over to her critique group, she decides this chapter needs a lot more than “light” editing. Mary spends three hours on Sunday editing her chapter, making sure she’s showing, not telling, trimming slow sections of narrative, on the hunt for “ly” adverbs. By the time she goes to her critique group meeting, she’s frustrated that she didn’t get more writing done over the weekend. Then, after the meeting, she’s inclined to do more editing, while some of the feedback she received is fresh in her mind. She promises herself that she’ll start the next chapter tomorrow. Although, there’s that one paragraph that Cindy Critiquer said was a bit of an info dump....

Tips for Left-Brain Dominant Writers:

1. We “lefties” have a natural inclination to polish as the page count grows. That can help create a “clean” first draft, but it can also kill your creative momentum if you can’t knock the internal editor chip off your shoulder. Mary Writer is certainly experiencing this problem. If you find that switching back and forth between writing (creating—right-brained activity) and revising (analyzing the fruit of your creativity—left-brained activity) “messes with your muse,” then revising as you go probably isn’t for you. Try to resist the urge to switch from writer to editor. A person with a dominant left-brain may find it challenging to put a muzzle on her internal editor, but with that effort, she may find it easier to complete her first draft.

If the “lefty” must revise to quiet the editor in her head, then try setting time limits—maybe no more than 30 minutes per day on editing. Also, if you want to share your first/second draft with your critique partners, consider asking them to treat your work like a rough draft and not to provide editing suggestions until you ask for them.
2. After you type THE END, let the manuscript sit for a few days (a week or more is optimal) prior to starting the revision process. Analysis takes objectivity, and time helps create emotional distance. Have you ever read page one of a book you wrote months or years earlier? Did it make you smile, or did you say to yourself, “Hey, this isn’t bad.” The day you wrote that scene your internal editor probably tried to convince you it was unmitigated crap. Emotional distance does wonders for internal editors.
3. The left brain is our logic center. If you’re left-brain dominant, use your analysis skills to your advantage and read your first and/or second draft with plot structure in mind.

Are character actions and reactions in the right sequence? Are your characters properly motivated? Use this initial read through as an opportunity to improve the continuity of your novel. If you find occasional plot holes or subplot threads that need to be tied up, make notes in the page margins. Try to resist the temptation to “fix” things as you read. You can fill the plot holes later. Think of this as a continuity check. To do the best analysis of your work as a whole, you need to keep reading.

4. The left brain is the hemisphere that makes us want to be sure that what we’ve written is correct—that we’re using all that information we’ve learned in workshops and how-to books. The quest for “correctness” can tie the right brain up in knots. Focusing on finding the “right word” or the perfect way to describe the night sky before you have completed your first draft can be a waste of time and energy. Apply that energy in the revision process. Once you’ve fixed plot problems, redundancies, etc. (#3 above), we suggest that you focus on the words themselves. Read each sentence with a critical eye. Does it add value to the scene, to the overall story? If the answer is no, cut it. Infuse your writing with vivid, meaningful details. Be specific, but be careful not to bog down your story with unnecessary detail.
5. After two or three cycles of reading and editing, your keen left brain may not be so keen on doing another round of edits. We highly recommend you find a fresh pair of eyes to read your current revision. Then, use that reader/critiquer’s feedback to fine-tune your manuscript. Revise the scene with the pacing problem; fix the dialogue that “sounded” stilted. Then, after your revisions are complete, print your book and take a highlighter to each and every page, marking all the weak verbs, all the “lys”, all dialogue that begins with a qualifier like “Well.” With color, you re-engage your brain to eliminate all the lazy words and phrases, all the weak modifiers, all the clichés. Think vivid and active. Yes, you may be sick of this story by now, but your readers will love you for writing such wonderful scenes!

Editing for “Righties”

For right-brained folks, the revision process is crucial. Because you wrote most of your book “by the seat of your pants,” there are most likely some plot lines that need tweaking; elements or characters that showed up one day on stage midway through that you need to go back and incorporate a little earlier; and thousands of words to either shave or add to hit your page count.

But revision is a dirty word for most right-brainers. It’s left-brain territory. Your creative side is done when you type “The End” on the first draft. The idea of going back through scene-by-scene, or worse—line-by-line, is akin to thumb-screw torture. However, if you want to make this sellable fiction, you have to edit. So, suck it up and figure out how to make your dominant right brain play ball.

A right brainer’s strength in editing is his/her ability to focus on the story itself. So, how can you make your dominant right brain play along when approaching the editing process?

Tips for Right-Brain Dominant Writers:

1. Start with putting some distance between you and your first draft. In the meantime, read some of your favorite books or scenes from those books. Study the writing, think about your own story, figure out how you can improve your story, and make it somebody’s “favorite” read.
2. Dip your toe into the left-brain waters and create what I like to call a thread worksheet, in which you list all of the threads in your story. Not the subplots here,

just the threads. Then read through your book again to make sure that you haven't left any threads loose and hanging, that you've woven them into your main plot as often as needed, and that you've tied them all off properly at the end.

3. Grab a bottle of Visine eye-drops, plant yourself in front of your computer, and start editing line-by-line on page 1. I know this seems like the ultimate torture, but it must be done. Try to dig in with a right-brain approach: you are going to come up with some creative ways to tighten your scenes and improve the pacing and flow of the story. Your left brain is required to move sequentially through the book, but you'll need your right brain to make the lines and pages sparkle. And while you're entrenched in this work, make sure you have included at least 4 of the 5 senses in every scene (again, another worksheet will help out here).
4. Read your story out loud, using your right brain to listen for any clunker sentences, and silly-sounding or stilted dialogue, anything off key. Better yet, find someone to read your book to you (preferably NOT someone who reads children's books to kids for a living and will tend to use a sing-song voice for your love scenes). Listening to your words will make you cringe when something doesn't flow correctly, and you'll be able to hear your pacing slow to turtle-speed if you can stay awake during those parts.
5. The most important tip for right-brained writers during the revision process is to find a left-brained critique partner to read and edit your work. You need the balance that a left-brained writer can bring to the table. Right brain folks tend to travel down the fiction-writing road wondering what's around that next corner or over that next hill; while left brain writers study the map, following the directions as they go. The left brainers will find your problems. You need your right brain to find the solution. Surround yourself with left brain readers—people who are going to make sure you haven't used the same unique word more than once or twice in the book; who will find that you spelled "too" as "to" on page 100 and 292; who will take care of all of those pesky details that your right brain just can't take the time to see.

Our Top Five Editing Tips to Make Your Story Shine

1. Consider Your Word Choice

- Kill most of your adverbs—especially the 'ly' words.
- Choose the correct word. Spell Check does not always catch incorrect word usage such as there/their/they're.
- Pack meaning into your words. One can walk into a room. One can also burst, saunter, or glide into a room. Word choice helps reflect character and mood.

2. Create Images with Similes and Metaphors

A simile is a comparison of two things using "like" or "as." A metaphor is an implicit comparison without the use of "like." Used well, similes and metaphors help convey images and ideas to your reader.

- Simile example: Superman has strength like steel.
- Metaphor example: Superman is the man of steel.

3. Read Your Work Out Loud

Pay attention to the rhythm of your words. Do your ears hear a clunker of a line that your eyes did not see? Is the same pattern or rhythm repeated over and over? If so, fix it.

4. Make Your Book a Page Turner.

Pacing is a key element to learn and use correctly in a story. In today's market, you have to hook readers from the very first line and tug them through the pages at top speed. Sure, there are times when you need to slow down enough to let them catch their collective breath, but only in the occasional "sit down" scene.

5. Think GMC as You Edit

Are your characters properly motivated? Are the scene goals important enough to keep the reader turning the page?

Make sure your scenes work for you and your story. According to Debra Dixon in her book, *GMC: Goal, Motivation, and Conflict*, each of your scenes should serve at least three purposes, and one purpose must have something to do with your character's goal(s). If you have a scene that is not pulling its weight, chances are it is weighing down your pacing. It may be painful, but cut it. Cut, cut, cut!

Finally, when all typos have been obliterated, when all your dialogue is snappy, and when you can strum the taut thread of tension strung throughout your manuscript, you know your "unputdownable" book is the best it can be. Right? Of course not. But remember, your (future) editor or agent will undoubtedly have suggestions to make your book even better and more marketable. So, submit your book(!) and be open to feedback.

Your Presenters

Ann Charles

Ann Charles writes romantic mysteries that are sprinkled with romance and humor. She is currently toiling away on her next book while her agent works on selling her manuscripts. When she is not dabbling in fiction, she is penning writing-related articles or standing on her workshop soapbox, sharing what she has learned over the years about the craft and self-promotion. <http://www.ann@anncharles.com>

Wendy Delaney

Former Golden Heart finalist and Emerald City Opener winner, Wendy Delaney (aka Wendy Linstad) writes fun-filled romantic mysteries. A long-time member of Romance Writers of America and Sisters in Crime, and this year's Emerald City Opener Contest Co-Coordinator, she has authored several newsletter articles, and regularly partners with Ann Charles to present writing workshops and sessions to help other authors develop their plots. Wendy makes her home in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and has two grown sons.

You can also find them both at <http://www.1stturningpoint.com>, where they and over two dozen other authors, reviewers, and PR consultants have joined together to teach and share (and learn from each other) all sorts of great information about promotion for both unpublished and published authors.