Your Revision Guide

This is by no means a complete or exhaustive list, though it was exhausting to come up with! You will want to add to this as you go, as you increase your own wisdom and delight in that of others'. May it be of benefit!

Note: The designation of “macro” and “micro” is super-relative. What is one person’s macro is another’s micro. So don’t let that trip you up. 😊 For the most part, I’ve only put under “micro” things that I truly don’t put A LOT of worry into until I’ve finished the hard work of birthing a book and I’m into the finessing stage. So, all plot and story and character is in place – the book is a book. I’m just making it better. It's all very important and legitimate and necessary, but it's more craft work of a more surgical nature, and is usually done in my third or fourth draft, and on through second pass pages.

Keep In Mind…

:: Mindful Revising: Zen teacher and writer Natalie Goldberg suggests that we ask ourselves as we revise, *Where am I not present in the writing?* Meaning, where are we phoning it in? Where were we not in the character’s skin, in the moment, deep in the work? I think this is a great guiding principle as we go through the whole revision process.

:: Another guiding principle is to think about what Amanda Jenkins calls the “niggling feeling”: pay attention when you get a feeling that something feels off. You might not yet know why, but if you’re getting at all tripped up–snagging on a word, or falling out of a scene–pay attention to that.

:: Always stay in the character’s skin. It’s about character. Always, always.

:: Another Jenkins thing to always be on the lookout for: the “missed moment” – where did you miss an opportunity to go somewhere cool and deep?
Macro Revisions

Character

- Desire
  - Is there a clear emotional arc—a desire line—for your character? Put more simply, your character should change over the course of the story, growing as a person. What is the change that takes place in the end of the book? How are they different from the beginning?

- Sub-desires: there is the main desire, but there are other things they want. What are they?

- Misbelief (what is the story she tells herself? What’s “running” her?)

- Sub-beliefs

- “Third Rail” (Desire + Misbelief): List all the ways the third rail shows up in the story.

- Mission (this is mostly for genre fiction)

- Defining Moment in Past

- Endowed Object: not necessary, but helpful

- Touchstones (memories, quotes, etc. – guiding lights your character refers to)

- Worldview

- Realizations: As you do your read-through, write down any realizations your character has about herself, her place in the world—anything that might inform you as you move forward.

- Secondary Characters
  - Love Interest:
    - Have they helped the proto come fuller into themselves?
    - Have you avoided clichés in your genre for the love interest? (If you don’t know them, get thee to a library and start creating a list!)
    - Is there a slow build, or do they get together too fast? (Instalove)
    - Is your proto’s self worth too wrapped up in the love interest?
    - Power: regardless of gender (but especially if you’re working with traditional male/female relationships), have you created an imbalance of power? Is the dude too patriarchal? Is your female presented as a damsel in distress, or does she get to save herself—and maybe even him, too? Watch for any behavior that is controlling etc. that is presented as sexy—especially if you’re writing for teens.

- Antagonist: Are they a fully realized human or just twirling their mustache? Did you give us a moment to feel a pang for them? Or at least to get a glimpse into why they’re so messed up? (Watch out for the “He was abused so that’s why he’s a killer” cliché).

- Friends / Crew
  - Are they all different, unique?
- Do they have their own desires and misbeliefs that are also playing out against and with the proto’s?
- How do they reveal more of the proto to herself?
- Are they more than just vessels for the proto’s self-realization?
- Bechdel test: is there at least one scene where your female characters are talking about something other than a boy?

Plot / Story

“Don’t be a plot bitch!” – Amanda Jenkins

Plot: Beginnings

- Inciting Incident: What is it? How does it propel the character into the action of the whole story?
- Are you starting on “the day that is different”?
- Does your story start in the best place? Is there a better place for this story to start?

Plot: Big Picture

- Plotting through Character: always keeping in mind how all events arise out of the character’s desire and misbelief. Have you imposed the plot on your character or is the plot coming FROM character?
- Taking a big picture look at your plot: Have you imposed plot on the character or has the plot come about organically?
- Main Problem (i.e. Arguably, the main problem of the Harry Potter books is that Voldemort is back and must be defeated and that Harry is the only person to defeat him. Then, each book has its own problem that works into cosmos of the bigger problem).
- Ticking Clock – you must have one. What is it? Is it believable?

Plot: Sub-Plots, The Middle, and Other Considerations

- Sub-plots: are they connected to the bigger whole?
- Do you have a saggy middle?
- Do you have any info dumps? (Read: you don’t want them)
- Tension—is there any? Are you consistently building tension toward the climax?
- Suspense! Do you have it?

Plot: Ending
Chapter-by-Chapter Plot Considerations

- What is the point of each chapter? (As in, what does it accomplish for both plot and character forward momentum? See the Story Genius scene card for help organizing your thoughts).
- How is my character's desire and misbelief working in this chapter to help her get closer to her understanding at the end of the book of who she is? (Desire + misbelief = “third rail” in Story genius lingo)
- Scenes: are there any missed moments - scenes where you glossed over action or events that needed more space and expansiveness and depth?
- Does your chapter end with a question? Not a literal question, but does it leave a mystery there that the reader wants to solve? It doesn't have to be a cliffhanger, but it should be an uncertainty that makes the reader want to find out more.
- Have you created opportunities for the reader to make guesses about what might happen in the story’s future? Readers like clues and foreshadowing. They like to play detective a bit. It also shows that you are laying the groundwork so that when twists etc. happen, it doesn’t seem convenient.

Random Plot Considerations

- Is there anything that is too convenient?
- According to author Tim Wynne-Jones, the reader will give you one coincidence. That’s it. You need to earn everything else. So use it wisely! (I quite agree with him).
- Have you given the reader enough credit?
- Have you given the reader too much credit?
- Is there anything that is unnecessarily complicated?
- Do you need all your subplots?
The first sentence of the book. For the love, get it right. Make it good. Make me want to read your book.

- Metaphors: get rid of clichés and dig deep for the one that resonates with your world and character
- Use objective correlatives
- Figurative language: are you showing and not telling?
- Getting into the character’s skin through language that incorporates all the senses
- Word choice: words that make sense for the world itself and the characters
- Voice – a combo of word choice and rhythm and that je ne sais quoi
- Trim the fat: eliminate unnecessary words. This will often happen in a micro revision, but in this macro one, you really have to get out the stuff you know you don’t need. Don’t be redundant.
- Also in micro revision, but be aware here, too: don’t repeat things. Be aware of your writer ticks. If you use a certain adjective or sentence structure or metaphor or descriptor a lot, be careful to cut down on that.
- Vary your sentence structure and use sentence length to accentuate pacing and tone.
- Are you showing off? Don’t. That’s obnoxious. Don’t draw attention to yourself as the writer. This will, as John Gardner says, take readers out of the fictive dream. Anything you do that is a misstep in your writing will remind them they’re reading a book and take them out of the voyeuristic reading experience.

Action and Sex Scenes

- Is it clear where everyone is at all times?
- Have you oriented the reader in terms of the space—where things are, etc? Not just cardinal directions, but using buildings and other items that can help them stay grounded in where they are as the action takes place?
- Have you grounded the reader in place using sensory details, and do you often remind them of the setting through details as the scene goes on?
- Have you used your setting creatively?
- Have you used good metaphors and fun, specific word choice to describe the fighting as it’s happening? Not just “punch” “kick” “grab.”
- Have you used sentence length to help keep the action flowing (short, choppy sentences to create a breathless pacing, longer, more luxurious sentences for more sensual moments?)
- Have you balanced internal observations of the character with the external action?
- Have you inserted dialogue throughout the action?
- Have you creatively used space? (If you’re writing an action scene, a good movie fight scene to check out is the apartment showdown in Atomic Blonde. They do a great job of using objects in the space as weapons and showing how exhausting the fight is).
- Have you brought humor into the scene? Good for both action and sex scenes!
- Have you simplified complex maneuvers and tech use in order to keep the action flowing?
Sex: have you found a way to avoid clichés and make the act particular to these characters?
Sex: have you found a way to use metaphor to describe both the sexual act and the emotions of your characters?
Have you ever shot a gun? Held a knife or sword? Taken a self-defense class? If you’re going to write a lot of action scenes, I recommend some field research.
Have you stayed in your proto’s skin?
Are there any missed moments, or did you go as deep as you needed to in the death scenes, etc?

Dialogue

Read this shit out loud, people. Don’t be a lazy git.
Pacing— you don’t have to be Aaron Sorkin, but don’t overstay your welcome, either. Keep it snappy.
Watch out for monologues.
Believability: seriously, would anyone say this?
Clunkiness: Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue.
Make every line do double-duty. All dialogue should also be conveying information about character internal states, the world, even revealing things about plot, etc. If they’re talking about the weather, it should only be because WINTER IS COMING.
Dialogue tags: don’t get too crazy here. “said,” “asked” is really all you need. Sometimes a gun “growled” or “snapped” is good, but watch out for going hog wild on those tags. They can get distracting.
Speaking of tags: make sure you check to make sure it’s always clear who is speaking and to whom. Use tags when necessary, but when the dialogue is only between two people, you can omit them for a few lines.
Use “stage business,” as we say in the theatre, to keep it lively. Have people move about during dialogue, and do stuff. You know, swords up: “Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.” This can also keep it fresh so that you don’t have to use tags. For example:

I crossed to where Helen was kneeling over the dead body, hungry. “It might be contagious— leave it alone.” (You don’t need “I said” at the end, because the action makes it clear the speaker who crossed to Helen was the one speaking. Also, I have no idea why I just wrote a mini scene about cannibals.).

Make sure the dialogue is age-appropriate. Would a teen / kid / octogenarian say this?
Balance your clever. Clever is good, and witty dialogue is most excellent. But don’t get too carried away lest you lose your characters’ authenticity.
Keep the reader grounded in a sense of place during dialogue. Remind them where they are by adding in sensory details about the environment.
Same with the proto. Check in with the proto’s internal state.
Action / reaction. “All acting is reacting.” This is the adage I heard over and over again in acting class. Same with dialogue. When your proto or other characters are told something, they need to
take that in. If you’re writing in first or close third, you will need to remember to check in with your proto’s internal state. Rhetorical questions to self here can be helpful, as they wonder what other characters might be thinking or feeling.

World

- Fantasy authors, see your special section below
- Use all five senses
- The devil (or God) is in the details: BE SPECIFIC
- Use metaphors that evoke this world and are connected to it
- Consider all aspects of the world: have you grounded the reader in place and time through not just place but fashion, food, music, culture, language, religion, etc?
- Finish up and check any major research

World – Fantasy (sci-fi and some historical help here, too)

- Watch for clichés – all fantasy is in conversation with what came before it, and that’s cool, but don’t be derivative. Add to the conversation.
- Don’t forget about WONDER. It’s what so many fantasy readers read for. Don’t get so caught up in the minutiae that you forget to be magical. That being said, make your magic system and world airtight. Set up rules for your world and follow them. This is what allows your reader to trust you, and know they’re in good hands. It’s what allows them to believe all the crazy stuff you’re going to throw their way.

- Magic System (the following from a lecture at VCFA by Holly Black):
  - Day or night magic? (Day is logical, night is more enigmatic)
  - What is the cost of the magic?
  - What are the limits of the magic?
  - Who has the magic?
  - What does it do?
  - How does the user make it happen?
  - How is the user affected?
  - How is the world affected?
  - How are the magic users grouped and perceived?
  - Open fantasy (everyone knows magic exists) or Closed Fantasy (only some people know)?
Consider models for your system. Is it organized crime, academia, familial, tribal, etc.

What do the rules of magic say about the world of your book?

Worldbuilding

David Mitchell has a great way of looking at this: figure out what people in this world are taking for granted. This will help you build, regardless of whether it’s fantasy or sci-fi, or even historical.

Geography

Culture of people with and without magic

Language (made up, but also slang, how magic is spoken of, terms etc.)

Food

Fashion

History

Weather

Religion

Martial Arts

Music / Dance

Technology

Real World Considerations

Checking my privilege: This is important, but you have to feel into this to find a balance between writing mindfully and authentically (good) and censoring yourself or writing from a place of fear or inauthenticity (not so good).

Is there anything in the manuscript which needs some consultation with someone of a different racial / religious / gender / sexual background?

Is there anywhere in the book where I haven’t been writing mindfully about the conditions of the world and all my characters’ places in it?

Have I written honestly?

Are there any stereotypes I’ve unwittingly used or played into?

YA

If characters have sex, you do need to talk about pregnancy prevention and safe sex. Do it artfully, but you gotta.

Cursing: fucking go for it. 😊 But, really, in YA, you just do you and that’s something your editor and you can decide to cut down on, if need be. Sometimes it’s worth a bit of cutting back and sometimes it’s not.
Don’t dumb your stuff down. Kids read up and they’re smart. Write the book you want to write, but also be familiar with the genre. Get the industry out of your head as much as you can, but be smart. It’s all a balance.

Length: You don’t want a huge tome. 80K is good for YA. Fantasy YA try to be at 90K if you can. You might go over (I always do—a lot, sometimes), but shoot for 90.

Micro Revising

Some of this is best for a read-out-loud pass. Or, you can do a micro line-edit, then read out loud.

- Pay attention to niggling feelings—and fix whatever needs fixing accordingly
- Eliminate repeated words
- Revise sentences that accidentally rhyme
- Finesse clunky dialogue
- Revise awkward phrasing
- Be on the lookout for repeated metaphors, dialogue tags, phrases or adjectives – any overuse
- Inconsistencies with time or other continuity issues (hair color etc.)
- POV consistency
- Tense consistency
- Sentence structure – Are your sentences different lengths to create delicious rhythm and to add to your pacing? Short, staccato sentences are great for tense actions scenes, whereas long sentences with lots of commas are wonderful for lush, lyrical descriptive moments or sexy scenes.
- Use of white space – wonderful for dramatic pauses, to create nice emotional beats, to really let something important land
- Grammar: Contrary to the belief of some, you actually need to have your shit together with grammar before you send out your stuff. No “oh, they have copyeditors for that stuff.” You’re a writer. Be professional. If you’re not very good at grammar, then get better at it. Get help. Hire someone to look at your books before you send them out to an agent. Seriously.
- Double-check all research-related items for facts
- Does this manuscript need any sensitivity reads or expert reads in order to ensure that I’ve done my due diligence to the subject matter?

Revision for Nonfiction or Historical Fiction – Extra Considerations
If you’re writing in these genres (god help us all), there are MANY additional considerations. MANY. I’ve quickly sketched the big things to be aware of as you work through your revision. Your book’s timeline and deadlines will necessitate you doing different things at different stages, so best of luck to you (and me!).

- Fact-checking (duh)
- As you draft and revise, I recommend putting comments in your ms so that you are prepared to undergo the thorough vetting you’ll be receiving from your future copyeditor on all fronts.
- Keep an online database of all your notes and photographs. You want all info readily at hand as you get vetted by copyeditors, and this all ensures you don’t lose anything. It also REALLY helps keep things moving quickly as you work because it’s all in one place.
- Expert readers for subject matter, language translations, etc.
- Scouring your endnotes, footnotes, and bibliography a thousand times for mistakes
- For the love, make sure you have cited things correctly. If you are doing archival research, PLEASE make sure to put the full record number and folder etc. Simply saying it’s from the National Archives, Kew is not sufficient. Someone should be able to take your citation and go and directly get that material.
- Permissions: make sure you’ve secured them for all images, etc. well in advance of pub. Your publisher should have sample contracts for you. You’ll likely be in charge of tracking all this down.
- I recommend keeping a running list of everyone who’s helped you and experts you’ve consulted. You may or may not want to thank them in the acknowledgements, but you certainly might need to prove to copyeditors that you’ve consulted on a matter.
- Be a smart researcher. Go to the source as much as you can. Don’t work out of books that don’t provide endnotes and citations. There is A LOT of disinformation out there, so make sure that the books you work from are ones that were excellently researched, ideally in archives and/or with firsthand accounts.

*We can always begin again.*

~ Sharon Salzberg

:: About ::

**Heather Demetrios** is a certified meditation teacher and a critically acclaimed author of books in many genres, particularly young adult fiction. When she isn’t spending time in imaginary places, you’ll find her traipsing around the world with her husband, writer Zach Fehst. Heather has an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and is a recipient of the PEN New England Susan P. Bloom Discovery Award for
Her debut novel, *Something Real*, her novels include *I’ll Meet You There, Bad Romance*, as well as the Dark Caravan fantasy series: *Exquisite Captive, Blood Passage*, and *Freedom’s Slave*. She is also the editor of *Dear Heartbreak: YA Authors and Teens on the Dark Side of Love* and the author of *Code Name Badass*, an upcoming feminist pop biography of WWII lady spy, Virginia Hall. New fantasy, contemporary, and historical novels are forthcoming. Her honors include books that have been named Bank Street Best Children’s Books, YALSA Best Fiction For Young Adults selections, a Goodreads Choice Nominee, a Kirkus Best Book, and a Barnes and Noble Best Book. Her work has also appeared in The Los Angeles Review of Books, Bustle, and other fine sources. She writes a regular Mindfulness Monday column for writers for Vermont College of Fine Arts, which you can also find on her blog, *The Lotus & Pen*. Find out more about Heather and her books at www.heatherdemetrios.com.

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Heather transformed my life. And while that may sound dramatic, it's true. We worked together during a creative season and she not only helped me find my identity as a writer, but she introduced me to the magic of a meditation practice. She always curated thoughtful exercises for me to work on before our calls, and I was always amazed at how she had the exact right thing I needed to hear, read or experience to help me break through. I completed the first draft of my novel (which had been languishing for over 2 years) because of Heather's wise teaching, encouragement, and voice in my head. I know we'll continue to work together. And knowing that brings me peace that I'll continue to grow as a writer.

- Mariam Muzaffar

I had no idea what to expect before starting the Creative Season with Heather. I only knew I needed help, and I was positive that Heather was the one to help me. She kicked me in the pants during an online class I took from her the year prior, and I was hoping the Creative Season would take me even further. I was not disappointed. I looked forward to Heather's calls the way my kids look forward to Christmas. Every time we talked, I learned something about myself. There was so much holding me back, and I loved how when things she suggested weren’t working for me, she willingly threw everything out to start from square one. She helped me pull myself back together after a long-term depression and write through and around everything I was facing. I am still, months later, internalizing all of her lessons, but, even during the season itself, every week marked a step in the right direction on my way to becoming a writer. I now have a completed draft and will be attending conferences this summer to promote my work! I really don’t think I would be anywhere close to where I am now had it not been for Heather. I really miss our scheduled calls, but I love that I know she's still just an email or text away. She's definitely someone you want in your corner with you as you fight for what you want out of writing and life!

- Cheryl McCosh

Shes empathetic, a great problem solver and a wonderful cheerleader. She'll kick you in the toosh if you need that too. But when you succeed, which you will under her coaching, your joy is her joy. As it should be, because she was your guide in becoming your best self.

- Jasmine Shefrin

For more client testimonies and to learn more about working together, please visit www.heatherdemetrios.com/my-clients