

# EIGHT FINAL REVISIONS TO TRY BEFORE YOU HIT SUBMIT

by Matt Bell

**O**VER the past decade I've had the pleasure of judging dozens of fiction contests for both individual stories and book-length manuscripts. Sometimes that means reading every entry submitted; other times it means only looking at the ten finalists selected by the magazine's or press's permanent staff. In every case, I begin hoping to be surprised and wowed—and when I am it's often because the story I'm reading is not only ambitious and entertaining, but also as polished as it can be.

While I am primarily a writer and teacher of fiction writing, much of the advice that follows can also be applied to narrative works more generally. (Astute poets might even find corollaries to apply to their art by thinking about, say, stanzas where I've talked about paragraphs.) No matter what genre of prose you're writing in, here are eight ways you might make your submitted work rise above the rest.

## Ensure change occurs at the levels of both story and scene.

Most writers agree that something has to change between the beginning of a story and its end, so write and revise

with this in mind. But the same is true at the scene level: If you can't define what has changed in a particular scene, then the scene might not be doing enough work. Note that *change* can mean different things: Your protagonist might enter a scene with a question and come out with an answer; a character might be in danger and, by scene's end, escape; your protagonist could believe they're ready to employ the solution to a problem only to encounter a new complication. Usually the change in Scene A creates the need for Scene B to exist, while the change in Scene B makes Scene C necessary, and so on until you reach the final scene in the story. If this isn't happening, adjust until the causal relationships within and between your scenes are as strong as possible.

## Rewrite the endings of your scenes toward compelling transitions.

Once real change is present in your scenes, go through your story and look only at each scene's final paragraphs: My sense is most writers put slightly more effort into openings when drafting, possibly because reaching the end of a scene for the first time is such a relief that we rush to the exit. Think especially about how the end of each scene creates a desire to continue. What is it about this closing moment that ensures a reader will leap across the white space of a section break to begin the next scene?

## Clearly mark transitions in time and space.

To make logical connections, the reader needs to know the temporal and spatial relationship between your story's events: Where is this scene happening,

compared with the one before it? How much time has passed since the last scene? Therefore, scene openers like "The next night..." or "Back in the boardroom..." do crucial work in grounding the reader and transmitting the logic of the story, which makes it easier for someone reading a lot of submissions at once to stay engaged. And while these time and setting tags appear in the most utilitarian language, don't worry about their dimming the poetry of your prose—as with speech tags, readers don't linger once they have the information they need.

## Vary sentence and paragraph lengths.

Ursula K. Le Guin once noted, "There is no optimum sentence length. The optimum is variety." The same goes for paragraph length. Variety is usually better than conformity. Most of us have a default sentence and paragraph length we tend toward—I've never seen a sentence I didn't want to put a half dozen clauses into—but much of what creates the impression of style and energy in prose is skillful, purposeful variance. If you find that your sentences and paragraphs are overly similar, change them up to further emphasize the action occurring on the page. A series of long, multicaused sentences followed by a short punchy one has more impact than more of the same.

## Do a revision pass focused entirely on dialogue.

As a next step, revise only the passages where dialogue appears, looking to punch up the banter between characters, focusing special attention on your mix of direct, indirect, and summarized dialogue. My general rule: Information delivery is best done in summarized dialogue, while more dramatic material

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**MATT BELL** is the author of the novels *Appleseed*, a New York Times Notable Book (Custom House, 2021); *Scrapper* (Soho Press, 2015); and *In the House Upon the Dirt Between the Lake and the Woods* (Soho Press, 2013). His book on craft, *Refuse to Be Done: How to Write and Rewrite a Novel in Three Drafts* (Soho Press), was published in March. Originally from Michigan, he teaches creative writing at Arizona State University.

usually appears in a combination of direct and indirect. But in the same way that varying sentence and paragraph lengths makes for a stronger style, intermixing dialogue types usually creates a more textured and engaging conversation.

### **Choose more powerful verbs.**

One way to instantly elevate an entire story is to make a pass through the manuscript in which you focus on improving only your verb choices. When drafting, writers tend to put a lot of focus on their nouns—who is acting, what they’re acting upon, what their object of desire is, and so on. But the most active part of every sentence is its verbs: Swapping in more interesting verbs almost always makes for a more vivid reading experience. Are the verbs you’ve employed in each sentence the

most surprising, evocative ones you could find, or are they more mundane and obvious choices? Revise toward surprise at the level of the verbs, because it’ll add up to surprise at the level of the story.

### **Delete the weakest sentence...from every paragraph.**

The contest you’re entering likely has a word limit. More often than not, you’ll find your entry is a tad too long. But you’ve already revised and revised to get to this point: How do you turn a 5,500-word story into a 5,000-word story? One of my own late-stage tactics is to try to identify and then delete the weakest sentence in *every* paragraph. This sounds dramatic, and it is—but so are the results. Sometimes you’ll need to replace what you’ve cut, but what remains will be better than what you

took out, by your own metrics.

### **Read your story aloud, one more time.**

The last thing I do before I send out work is read it from beginning to end, out loud, one more time. Partly this keeps me from skimming at the last moment, when I’m tired and ready to let go. By having to actually say every word, you’ll catch a few last typos. More important is the reward this solo performance offers you for all your hard work: Whatever contest judges some-day think—whatever agents or editors or future readers might think—you should get to experience what you’ve made purely for yourself, enjoying the story and feeling proud of it before anyone else gets a say. That’s an easy win you can choose right now, before hitting Submit. I hope you will. 