

## REVISION AS DREAM ANALYSIS

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: handout /

### *HOW TO TROUBLESHOOT YOUR SHITTY FIRST DRAFT*

Look at your work with **an attitude of discovery**:

What's here?

What did I not expect to find?

The unexpected is a rune: it's your job to find their **private meanings**: these will help you center, structure, and properly weight the work in revision.

→ To find these private meanings you must let yourself **free associate**:

**Turn off your critical faculty.**

**Free yourself from criticism.**

No connection is trite, if you feel it, nothing is too strange. You're looking for *your meaning*. Later you can turn it into meaning for the reader.

### STEP 1:

Go through your draft and look for the following:

#### a. **Images:**

It can be hard to remember when we've tossed something off quickly, but **every word you've written is a choice**. Something in you chose each object you put into your work, each character.

The question is:

**Why did I choose *this*?**

→ TIP: We're not going to dream dictionaries here. A cigar is not just a cigar, but it's not just a phallus either. Maybe the cigar is leaf piles in autumn, or your grandfather's silence, the Cuban revolution, the corsage you kept in a cigar box on the mantle in your childhood bedroom since junior prom.

#### b. **Structures:**

A story's unique structure is often lurking in your first draft, before you've tried to shove it into the ejaculatory box of rising action, climax, denouement. **The best structures arise organically out of the piece and resonate with its meaning.**

Ask the draft:

**What's important to you?**

**How do you want to be told?**

- i. Is there **repetition**? i.e. of images, words
- ii. Does the **language** take a special form? i.e. long sentences, all dialogue, tiny paragraphs, white space
- iii. What **metaphors** are in the piece? Do any of them feel like they could take control?

#### c. **Omissions:**

Sometimes what's missing from a first draft is an indication of **what will be vital** to it—what you're not yet ready to write.

Ask yourself:

**What am I avoiding?**

Identify the holes in the plot, the character, the setting and prepare to populate them with what you find through your draft-work.

d. **Problems:**

Remember how this is a Shitty First Draft™? It has issues!

Identify them:

**What isn't the reader getting?**

- i. Is it depressed/does it lack impulsion, motivation, conflict?
- ii. Is it acting like the Tasmanian devil/is it missing its center?
- iii. Has it gotten lost and wound up on the floor of a Wal\*<sup>M</sup>art eating a family sized bag of cheese puffs?

Great! Now you know what to fix!

**STEP 2:**

Some techniques for moving into the second draft

- a. **Reversal/Inversion:** What if there's no conflict, or you feel blah about the character you've gone with? Try turning it inside out.
  1. **Opposite Day:** Sometimes characters make all the right decisions: This is boring! Try then having them do the opposite, then build motivation. Story, guaranteed.
  2. **Your story and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day:** There's no such place as utopia. Let the world mess with your character. How does she survive?
  3. **Freaky Friday:** There's no spark? You're just not feeling it? Break up with your character and find another one who has a reason to experience this event.
- b. **Un-censoring:** Freud thought that our minds sometimes protected us from our desires even in dreams. This certainly happens in writing, all the more so when we've been trained in writing for a long time. We force stories into male-pattern plot shapes, our language into formal diction, our story into the box called genre, our characters to be likeable. Stop that! Remember that most of what we call Works of Genius are entirely off the wall: c.f. Melville, Morrison, Bulgakov
  1. **Build your own house:** Your plot does not actually need to look like a scalene triangle. See I b.
  2. **Speak your own language:** Does the queen's English belong in your character's mouth? If not, discover her tongue, her "errors," her unique way of speaking and turns of phrase. (Just, for the love of god, please do not attempt to spell out dialect—syntax will suffice. c.f. George Washington Cable. Yikes.)
  3. **Conventions are for politicians:** The butler definitely didn't do it.
  4. **Your body is what makes you Not a Robot.** Do not be polite! Take us into the bathroom, the bedroom, behind the curtain of the ER. Be like a dog, who, smelling a dead animal on the sidewalk, decides to roll around it in so he can wear it all day. (c.f. Garth Greenwell)

5. **Likeability is for HR Managers.** Ew! No one wants to read about someone who makes no mistakes. In fact, I'm not sure anyone actually *likes* anyone likeable: be honest about your character's quirks, flaws, fetishes, and failings. (Could their flaw be that they are likeable? Maybe...)
- c. **Expansion:** Have you said too much in too little space? Sometimes a first draft is like a diamond. It's too direct. Too clear. Your reader will chip her teeth! Find nuance in expansion.
  1. **Divide and Multiply:** Is one character doing too much? Perhaps he's driving around thinking deep thoughts, or just getting it all done. But what if he was two people? What if they didn't agree?
  2. **Back to the Future:** Does a flashback feel more vivid than the story? Does the outcome of these events in the far future explode what we know about the present? Explore it! You may have found a new beginning... or even an end.
  3. **Apply for a Passport:** Is the setting too familiar to us? to you? Go to Mars! Go to Xanadu! Travel is fossil-fuel free (if you don't use ChatGPT)
- d. **The Road Not Taken:** Did you mean to write about one thing and find yourself lost in a digression?
  1. Is there something you're avoiding? Un-censor it!
  2. Possibly the side road/side story is taking you where you actually need to be.