

WHERE THE MAGIC HAPPENS: AN OPEN-HEART/OPEN-MIND APPROACH TO REVISIONS & EDITS

I love the editing phase—it's where the magic happens.
—Lynda McDaniel, The Appalachian Mystery Series

REVISIONS & EDITS—DIFFERENT LABELS, MUCH THE SAME WORK

Congratulations! You have a FIRST DRAFT (or second or third). Not everyone who starts writing a book gets that far. They quit too soon—before the magic can happen. This often occurs because:

The tendency to let the inner critic (never welcome) or inner editor (welcome at the right time) bluster and bully can overwhelm authors during the drafting phase and stymie the best of us, even the most prolific writers.

To tame (or train) the inner editor, consider the principle of: **Yin & Yang**. Or, if you prefer: **Left Brain v. Right Brain**:

- **Yin / Right Brain:** The first draft brain...expansive, open, intuitive, free-spirited
- **Yang / Left Brain:** The editing brain...analytical, logical, organized, and contained.

Note: Most authors are a combination of free spirits, Pantsers, and organized writers, Planners. But the “trying to be helpful” inner editor is likely to pop up no matter what label we use.

The steps involved in revising and editing differ, depending on:

Drafting styles:

- **Fast first draft:** Write through, no going back, no editing. Take notes along the way. Although pre-planning may be involved, this is a “free spirit” approach. (This method has tons of “spirited” advocates.)
- **Revise/edit as you go:** Follow either a rough or detailed outline, produce scene content, and often edit a portion of the work of the previous writing session. (One of the most common drafting styles.)
- **Revise, edit, polish along the way:** Edit and polish chapter by chapter, with the goal of having a spiffy manuscript ready to go.

REVISE v. EDIT

Revising and editing aren't necessarily the same process, but writers often use the terms interchangeably. Some people also keep track of their draft number. I don't, because different areas require more work than others and I lose track. What I've listed below are a few examples of the kinds of things that differentiate the two phases, at least to an extent.

The “**Oops**” factor: You're probably headed for deep revisions if... Oops...

- You have 7-pound babies born after a 4-month pregnancy.
- You have lost track of place, time, and space—no grounding.
- You have no plot (a favorite of mine).
- Everyone's happy and the children are well-behaved (another one of my quirks).
- Characters don't care enough about each other—and neither do you.

The “**It will be okay**” factor: You're probably in “No problem, I can fix this mode,” if...

- The characters spend too much time in coffeehouses and bars, cooking and eating and meeting for lunch, or driving around and parking.
- Sections are flat, static, and you're *telling* readers how the H & H feel about this or that.
- You spot weak verbs and too many adverbs.
- You're, once again, repeating your favorite words, yet again.
- When you read sentences aloud, the rhythm is off—awkward.
- Your scenes start early and end late.
- You start calling what you're doing “tweaking.”

Note: Some believe in letting a manuscript sit a week or month before editing; others like to read it through first without making changes. Those strategies don't work for me, but I make copious notes as I write the first draft. (I use comment boxes in WORD.) Early drafts are for my eyes only.

Do what works for you. If you prefer to dive in and start the revision-edit in chapter 1, or address mid-book issues, go ahead—you're the boss. This process is seldom linear, and each book has its own demands, which is why I recommend experimenting.

THE MAGIC TRICKS

First-line areas to keep track of are a priority. You can stop and fix things, make notes about what's needed, or do a combination—as most of us tend to do. I like to fix the obvious and note other places for future edits.

Does it hang together? Put another way, this is where you make sure Christmas Eve takes place in December.

- Do you *own* and *show* your setting? Is it consistent, clear, and compelling for the reader?
- Do events follow each other in an accurate timeline according to the story time you've created?
- Will readers know where your characters' location in every scene—or do they float in space? Are they disembodied?

Character arcs: Backstory and character arcs go together; the change and growth arcs in the book arise from the backstory. These questions get to the heart of your story.

- Do you have enough backstory? Too much? Where have you dropped it into the story?
- Do you have info dumps? What can you slash or move?
- Are the characters authentic for the historical period (including present day), their place in the world, and your specific story?
- Is there a clear link between the original conflict or wound and actions that bring about the fundamental healing and change?
- Do the characters have emotional shifts—hope to fear, sadness to joy? Do they laugh now and then? Humor is important.
- Have the characters recognized and addressed their wounds, thus earning their HEA?
- Does the trope you're framing work? Can you identify your theme?

These questions get to the heart of your story—the internal arc. Your protagonists might insist they don't want a partner at all, or specifically, don't want this partner. Why? What's the backstory? An earlier emotional wound? Trauma?

In your current story, what heals the damage and alters the character's destiny? Are your characters old flames and could earn a second chance? How do you show that? Are they really enemies to lovers, or a variation of the theme? Marriage of convenience? Cinderella?

Story Arcs/Plot: *What do your characters do all day?* We create plots to bring our characters together, break them up, save each other's lives (literally or figuratively), put character traits on display, and entertain the readers. Each genre has tropes and themes, so in romance we need to ask the questions most relevant to our genre.

- Does the plot complement the theme?
- Is the plot complete, or are there inconsistencies or holes?
- Are characters allowed to succeed/fail, while showing strengths/revealing weaknesses?
- Do your characters take risks—what's at stake when they do?
- Does the book offer conflict, intrigue, excitement, difficulties, worry, fear—and the entertainment factor romance readers expect?
- Have you appropriately handled sensitive issues such as violence of all kinds, racism/sexism, and other biases and frank prejudices?
- Do secondary characters serve a purpose—do they stand out and are they entertaining?
- Have you avoided common stereotypes/cliches—dull accountants, “cute” older people, overly cheerful nurses, eccentric or nerdy scientists?
- Do readers know what the characters most value?

SCENE & CHAPTER LEVEL

A book that works comes down to scenes and chapters. *Avoid revising and editing based on what's happening in a scene or chapter and instead ask: What are the characters doing?*

- How are the characters' actions—in this scene or chapter—driving the plot?
- Are “talking” scenes active, with characters grounded and fully engaged physically and mentally as they speak?
- Speaking of speaking, does your dialogue get to the point and avoid too many greetings, introductions, and other flat speech?
- Are there cliffhangers or a question at the end of a scene or chapter?
- Does the action rise and fall, scene to scene, chapter to chapter?
- Does the pacing work overall and for both narrative and dialogue?
- Do you begin and end scenes and chapters in the right place? (The scriptwriting adage, “arrive late, exit early” applies here.)

THE MAGIC OF DETAILS

Details make the difference between an enjoyable book and a truly memorable one. This is where sensory information takes center stage.

This magic happens on the scene level but shapes the shifting moods of the whole book. *For each scene ask if you are using the environment to advantage, rather than simply adding setting details:*

- Are we inside or outside? Small spaces add tension, focus, intimacy, closeness; expansive spaces can reduce tension or provide distraction, and create distance, but can also lead to fun and humor—companionship.
- Dark or light? Dim rooms and dusk can add a bit of mystery or fear—and romance; sunlight/bright light can reveal, distract, can be happy or harsh.
- Is there background noise or is it quiet? Must characters talk over sounds and strain to hear? Happy noises? Or the ragged sounds of anger or grief? At ease or uncomfortable with silence? Do the sounds add tension? Lighten the mood? Match the mood or add incongruity?
- What do the characters see? Does it match expectations or surprise them? Is the environment a mix of old and new, warm or sterile, stressful or comforting?
- What do the characters smell and taste? Do good smells and tastes lift the mood? Do bad smells trigger anger or aggression? Do pleasant smells and tastes trigger memories/nostalgia—a mellow or sad mood?
- What's the weather? And why? All kinds of weather, balmy to stormy, can raise or lower mood, trigger memories, cause or solve problems, act as obstacles or ease conditions, or otherwise dress up your scenes.
- Do you effectively use tools of the time, typewriters (or pencils) or computers, messengers or letter carriers (or horses), emails and texts, dial phones, party lines, answering machines, voicemail, cell/smart phones?



Environment v. Setting Details

The *setting* is Chicago, a farm, or a factory. The environment is the constant squeak of the elevated train (or El) rounding a corner, or the smell of a chicken coop, or fifty women sitting at sewing machines.

Likewise, a bird is nothing more than a setting detail and lacks meaning, but an owl, a seagull, or an eagle are part of an environment and chosen for a reason. These are examples of the kinds of additions that distinguish a book from others of similar genre—they can make it special:

Note: *It's not the quantity of detail that matters—it's the meaning. Details dot the environment but don't litter it. Details are the path to "show, don't tell."*

- Your characters bake cookies—what kind? And why? Is it Halloween or Christmas, or is baking the way they manage stress?
- A mending pile sits in the corner. Why are you mentioning it? What is it *showing*? Is it part of an inventory of a room? What is it showing about the character(s). Does enhance other details? What sits next to it or nearby?
- The squeak of an El train means what? Is it a familiar sound of home, or an assault that intensifies a headache. Does this detail carry its weight?
- The smell of a chicken coop brings about what reaction? Is it, “I hate this place,” or, “Remember Dad’s chicken house fiasco?” Does the fiasco, and therefore the smell, relate to a plot point or to a specific character?
- Red corduroy couch v. stained couch. Was it red at one time?
- Neat lawn v. scrubby patches of yellow grass
- Jogging on a flat stretch of firm sand v. struggling to run in deep, dry sand.
- Staring at fifty women at sewing machines v. vowing never to be one of the women working in her uncle’s sweatshop

WRAPPING UP: In essence, romance is about essence.

Screenwriter Michael Hauge has said: *The character arc is the emotional journey from identity to essence. The essence is the inner child, the core of the character who has been wounded through life and now needs to heal and become whole.*

The goal of our books is to provide a meaningful, life-changing journey. By doing the work, our characters earn a HEA—with each other! This is what differentiates romance from other genres.

IN CONCLUSION

Thank you for joining me on this journey. I hope you'll approach revisions and edits with an open mind and open heart—if do, you'll enjoy making the magic happen.

For a copy of the workshop notes, email me: virginiaauthor47@gmail.com.

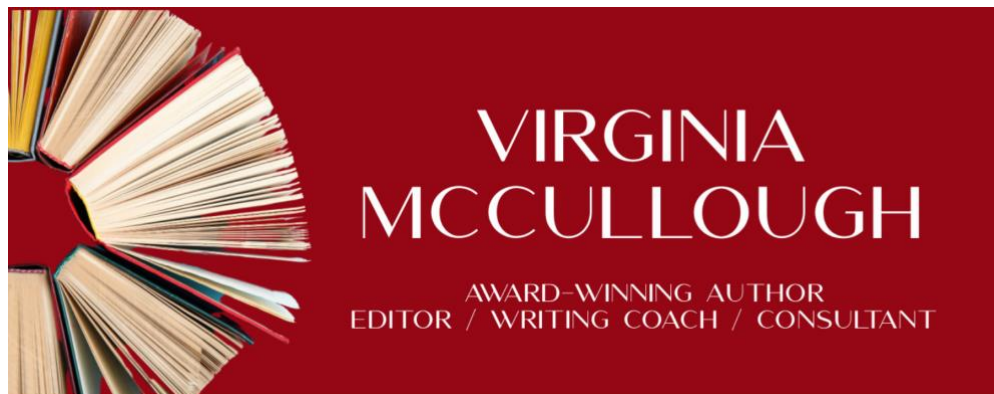
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COMING IN 2024—*BE A WRITER, STAY A WRITER—THE FIRST 50 YEARS ARE THE HARDEST!*

Join me on my 50-year journey from my first article sale to *Baby Talk* magazine in the 1970s to my latest book contract. More than a memoir, I recount my path to a full-time writing business and show you how you can use your skills to find a niche that's right for you. You *can* create the writer's life you've dreamed of.

Also in 2024, watch for *The Thanksgiving Surprise*, book 3 of my *Home to Adelaide Creek* series for the *Harlequin Heartwarming Western* line. (Book 1: *The Rancher's Wyoming Twins*; Book 2: *The Doc's Holiday Homecoming*.)



Virginia McCullough is an award-winning author of women's fiction and romance, a seasoned workshop presenter, and supporter of writers everywhere. She belongs to the RWA and (Hearts Through History), the Women's Fiction Writers Association (WFWA), and the Author's Guild.

She's written numerous nonfiction books both as a coauthor and a ghostwriter. She's lived in many locales, loves to travel, and now makes her home in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Virginia's women's fiction titles include *AMBER LIGHT*, *GRETA'S GRACE*, *ISLAND HEALING*, and *THE JACKS OF HER HEART*. Set on the shores of oceans, lakes, or rivers, Virginia's books explore themes of hope, healing, and plenty of second chances.

Virginia McCullough, 10-2023, virginiaauthor47@gmail.com