

Ten Ideas for Revision

1. Remember that it's better to have a few pages of something rather than no pages of fear. Revising a story is just playing, seeing where your characters, your voice takes you. The story already exists and is waiting for you, the writer, to find it.
2. Read over your draft, looking for the emotions that are most alive, the characters who are most interesting to you. Begin playing with these emotions/characters, seeing where they take you.
3. Try to write a beginning or end scene to your story. This may not be the final version, but may help you see that the story can have a shape.
4. Try to find a clear line of desire in the story. What does the main character want? What do the other characters want? Try to simplify the characters' main urges. Find a spine that you can develop complex reactions/experiences around.
5. Think about compression. How can one scene do the work of many scenes? Which scene seems most interesting to you? Can you layer some of the interactions/episodes of other scenes into this scene? Are all the characters necessary? Can you compress characters?
6. Think about point of view. Are you interested in the protagonist's point of view? Are you interested in writing from the point of view of one of the other characters? If so, try writing some scenes from that character's point of view. If you enjoy it, you may want to switch; if not, you will learn more about that character.
7. Think about specificity. Specific details will act as "tips of the iceberg" in a story—find the ones that will imply a life for the characters outside the world of the story. If you can't figure out how to specify part of your story, leave abstract language as a place marker and come back to it later.
8. Think about what is in the story because you want it to be included, and what is in the story because you think it should be included. Does some of the writing feel dutiful, unnecessary? Think about what you need in the story, and what you can let go.
9. Remember that taking a break from a story can be a great way of getting perspective on it. Take a day, a week off from your story. Read something new or something you love; look at paintings or sculpture or dance or theater or film that inspires you.

10. Remember that revision is a process and happens in stages. The first stage, you may be trying to find out what the story is about. Then you may develop scenes, layer characters. Later, you may compress scenes/characters. Then you may work on pacing. A late revision focuses on clarity and language. You may work on any of these issues during the process, but try not to get too focused on honing the language too early, as you may not know what will remain in the story. As one writer I know says, “Writing a story is like building a boat. I don’t want to spend too much time intricately painting a hatch when I don’t know if the boat even has a rudder.”