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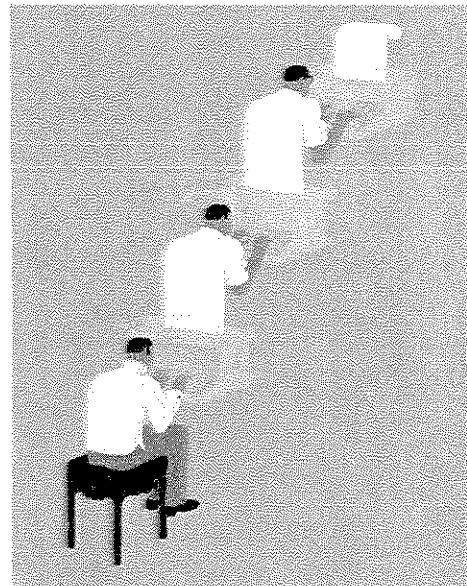
Revising your writing again? Blame the Modernists

How self-editing became the first commandment of literature

By **Craig Fehrman** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 30, 2013

IT'S TOUGH to get a room full of writers to agree on anything—the best wine, the best Shakespeare play, the best time of day to work. Perhaps the only belief that today's writers share is that to produce good writing, you have to revise.

This principle appears everywhere—in classrooms, in newsrooms, in writing guides, and especially in author interviews. “I’ve done as many as 20 or 30 drafts of a story,” Raymond Carver once told *The Paris Review*. “Never less than 10 or 12 drafts.” Joyce Carol Oates, who is so prolific she leaves other authors shaking their heads, has said: “I revise all the time, every day.” Even comedian Jim Gaffigan, author of the new book “Dad is Fat,” recently urged NPR’s listeners to “keep going back and rewriting things to make it clear.”



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It's easy to assume that history's greatest authors have been history's greatest revisers. But that wasn't always how it worked. Until about a century ago, according to various biographers and critics, literature proceeded through handwritten manuscripts that underwent mostly small-scale revisions.

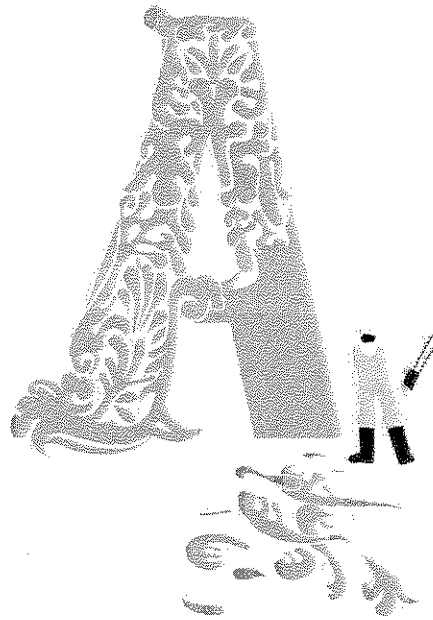
Then something changed. In a new book, "The Work of Revision," Hannah Sullivan, an English professor at Oxford University, argues that revision as we now understand it—where authors, before they publish anything, will spend weeks tearing it down and putting it back together again—is a creation of the 20th century. It was only under Modernist luminaries like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf that the practice came to seem truly essential to creating good literature. Those authors, Sullivan writes, were the first who "revised overtly, passionately, and at many points in the lifespan of their texts."

What caused these writers to put their faith in revision as the key to good literature? In part, it was the philosophy of Modernism—the idea that a novel or poem should challenge the reader, break with tradition, and, in the words of Pound, "Make it new." But Sullivan, who belongs to a new wave of scholars trying to understand literature through the physical and historical realities of its creation, finds that our value of revision was also driven by something else: the typewriter.

It might seem strange to think that we owe the high style of Modernism—and the notion that even a book titled "Dad is Fat" requires strenuous reworking—to a machine. But "The Work of Revision" makes a case that *what* we write often comes down to *how* we write. Careful revision isn't automatic or even automatically useful. And that means, as our technology changes once again, that literary style may already be undergoing another transformation.

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WHAT FIRST GOT Sullivan thinking about revision was encountering a version of Ernest Hemingway she'd never seen before. While a first-year PhD student at Harvard, Sullivan visited the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and its Hemingway collection. She marveled at the famous author's archive—his letters, his family scrapbooks, even his bullfighting materials. But one thing in particular stood out to her: the typescript of his novel "The Sun Also Rises." It showed Hemingway changing his book dramatically from one version to the next. Monologues vanished, entire plot points disappeared, and, in the end, he arrived at the terse, mysterious novel that became part of the American literary canon. "The Hemingway style that's so familiar to us wasn't in the first draft," Sullivan says. "It was a product of revision."



Hemingway's method reminded Sullivan of the way T.S. Eliot had trimmed down "The Waste Land" from pages and pages of manuscript to the final, elliptical 434-line poem. She realized that these authors shared a profound commitment to the power of revision, and that this commitment was itself worth studying. While plenty of literary scholars had examined the way individual authors edited their own works, they rarely compared their findings between authors, or from one period to the next. By making these comparisons, Sullivan identified the Modernists as the first to practice our contemporary form of revision. She also learned how revision contributed to their distinct literary technique. "We often assume that style comes out of nowhere," she says. "But style is produced in revision, and revision is not something writers do naturally."

Revision didn't start with the Modernists, of course, but the paper trail suggests that authors from the deeper past worked much differently than we are taught to do today. In 1637, for example, John Milton, perhaps the most polished poet in the history of the English language, took out a few sheets of paper and wrote the

first draft of his famous elegy “Lycidas.” Thanks to a rare manuscript that survives at Cambridge, Milton experts know the author went back to revise, crossing out lines and phrases and scribbling replacements in the margin or at the bottom of the page. A flower “that sorrow’s livery wears” became a flower “that sad embroidery wears.” But for the most part even Milton stuck to such local tweaks instead of significantly recasting his work.

This same method applies to many of our greatest writers. Ben Jonson, a Renaissance playwright, once observed of Shakespeare that “whatsoever he penned, he never blotted out a line.” Jonson was gently mocking the cult of Shakespeare, and it’s certainly possible that an old chest somewhere contains several radically revised versions of Shakespeare’s plays. But that seems unlikely. In the age of Shakespeare and Milton, paper was an expensive luxury; blotting out a few lines was one thing, but producing draft after draft would have been quite another. Writers didn’t get to revise during the publishing process, either. Printing was slow and messy, and in the rare case a writer got to see a proof of his work—that is, a printed sample of the text, laid out like a book—he had to travel in person to a publishing center like London.

All of these factors suggest that revision was not something that happened on the page. Indeed, during the 19th century, the Romantics made resisting revision a virtue. The best literature, they believed, flowed from spontaneous and organic creative acts. “I am like the tyger (in poesy),” Lord Byron wrote in a letter. “If I miss my first spring—I go growling back to my Jungle. There is no second. I can’t correct.”

But something would soon change, with writers like Hemingway and Eliot insisting on not just a second chance, but a third, fourth, and fifth. Sullivan argues that this change was driven in part by a new philosophy of what made good writing. The Modernists wanted to produce avant-garde literature—literature that was less spontaneous and enthusiastic than it was startling and enigmatic. In an interview with the *Paris Review*, Hemingway famously described his “principle of the iceberg”: “There is seven-eighths of it under the water for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg.”

An equally big part of this change, Sullivan suggests, was a shift in literary technology. In 1850, Britain was producing about 100,000 tons of paper per year; by 1903, that number had increased to 800,000 tons per year. Printers started setting type by machine, which was five times faster than setting it by hand and allowed page proofs to be easily shared and corrected. Before long, authors were guiding their books through a long and potentially fertile process: first a manuscript, then a typescript, perhaps a magazine serial, and finally a series of proofs for the book. “One thing it allowed for that revision by handwriting didn’t is massive structural transformation,” Sullivan says. “Some writers reduced their work massively, and some expanded it massively.”

In all this, the most important technology may have been the typewriter. Today we equate a keyboard with speed, the fastest way to get words down, but as Sullivan points out this wasn’t always the case. In fact, a typescript offered a chance to slow down. Most Modernist writers, like Hemingway with “The Sun Also Rises,” wrote by hand and then painstakingly typed up the results. That took time, but seeing their writing in such dramatically different forms—handwritten in a notebook, typed on a page, printed as a proof—encouraged them to revise it aggressively. “Much as I loathe the typewriter,” W.H. Auden wrote, “I must admit that it is a help in self-criticism. Typescript is so impersonal and hideous to look at that, if I type out a poem, I immediately see defects which I missed when I looked through it in manuscript.”

These changes combined to create a new and extreme approach to literary revision. Consider Ezra Pound and his well-known poem “In a Station of the Metro.” One day in 1912, he got off a train in Paris and, as he wrote in a later essay, “saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another.” Pound went right to work, like a Romantic poet might have, crafting a poem to capture this “sudden emotion.” When Pound finished his 30-line poem, however, he found he hated it. Six months later, he tried again, producing a poem half the length and hating it, too. Finally, after another six months, he completed the final, two-line poem: “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals, on a wet, black bough.” It was spare, dense, and lyrical.

Slowly, the high style and ambition of Modernism became enshrined as a new literary ideal. James Joyce couldn't stop expanding his novel "Ulysses"; by the end, he was calling in last-second additions to his printer by phone. As she revised the famous "Time Passes" section in "To the Lighthouse," Virginia Woolf created multiple perspectives to provoke her readers. Each of the Modernists worked in different ways, but they were united in the belief that careful and substantial reworking would ultimately produce the best literature.

THAT BELIEF IS STILL with us today. There have been a few Romantic-style backlashes against revision—from the Beats, for instance, who often wrote with feverish speed and claimed, in the words of Jack Kerouac, that authors should "never afterthink to 'improve' or defray impressions." But in most parts of literary culture, revision has become as important as inspiration.

In the last 30 years, however, technology has shifted again, and our ideas about writing and revising are changing along with it. Today, most of us compose directly on our computers. Instead of generating physical page after physical page, which we can then reread and reorder, we now create a living document that, increasingly, is not printed at all until it becomes a final, published product. While this makes self-editing easier, Sullivan thinks it may paradoxically make wholesale revision, the kind that leads to radically rethinking our work, more difficult.

"The ideal environment for revision is one where you can preserve several different versions of a text," Sullivan says. With only one in-progress draft on a computer, we lose the cues that led the Modernists to step back from their work and to revise it. "It's that moment of typing things up that led to the really surprising and inventive changes," Sullivan says. "The authors came back to their text, but it seemed estranged."

So why do we continue to champion revision? Sullivan suggests it's partly due to the literary ideals and habits we've inherited from the Modernists. She also mentions the professionalization of creative writing, which pushed authors like Carver and Oates to teach at universities. "Writers need to look more like

professors and to discuss their laborious processes,” Sullivan says. “‘We can’t teach you how to write, but we can teach you how to revise.’ And it’s a big business.”

Still, at a time when we’re losing the technological incentives that helped create our style of revision in the first place, there’s a chance our commitment to it may wane. We now revise in real time, doing something closer to Milton fiddling in his margins than to Hemingway retyping his work. Perhaps this is already encouraging more spontaneous and conversational kinds of literary writing.

As the history of revision makes clear, however, there are many ways to produce great literature, and Sullivan, for her part, does not seem too worried about what’s next. “We tend to be very hopeful about how much revision will achieve,” Sullivan says, “how it will transform a mediocre first draft into a masterpiece.” But revision, she adds, has always come with a cost. “It is potentially wasteful, too,” she says, “and I think we’ve lost sight of something that seemed obvious to earlier generations—revision can go too far, making something worse instead of better.”

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