

Art of the Rewrite: How Rewrites Differ From Your First Draft and Why They're Just As Important

by Carol Phiniotis

For some, the first draft is nothing more than a sketch, a fleshed out outline with placeholder dialogue and action so the entire script can be charted structurally, while leaving the content to be reworked later. On the other end of the spectrum is a writer such as myself. Some call us masochists.

Every time I set pen to paper on a new screenplay I wholeheartedly believe that this time, unlike all the other times, I will give birth to a fully formed, completely integrated master work of perfection on the very first try. Like I said, masochist. Somewhere in me I know it's not possible, nonetheless, I choose to believe I can incorporate every joke, every nuance, and copious amounts of subtext, style and character development, while simultaneously laying down the necessary groundwork.

My delusions notwithstanding, a first draft's true focus is structure and story - getting everything down in the correct order and ensuring it flows in a logical fashion. Sure, there's character development, dialogue, tone, pace, etc., but these details are far more flexible and will undoubtedly be reworked in subsequent drafts. The next order of business after completion of a first draft is usually cutting extraneous scenes, clarifying confusing moments and filling plot holes. I refer to these story/structure related revisions as the craft of rewriting.

It's the subtleties, or the art of rewriting, that I wish to discuss here. Many young writers consider such modifications optional. I consider them essential. They are the difference between a decent script and an exceptional one. They include: identifying and replacing contrived moments, trimming in strategic places, fleshing out character, maximizing scene transitions, making the generic specific, honing dialogue and replacing dialogue with action. To give you some practical examples from films you may have seen:

Identifying and replacing contrived moments: Sometimes writers take the easy way out. We need a character to do or say something to move the story forward, so we use the first idea that springs to mind. At a glance, it meets our needs, but upon closer examination we realize it doesn't work. We're driving plot at the expense of character, and doing so tugs at the fabric of our tale, unconsciously chipping away at the reader's willing suspension of disbelief.

For example, in Mike Werb & Michael Colleary's *Face/Off*, Archer's (John Travolta's) staff learns that Castor Troy (Nicholas Cage), the criminal Archer has devoted his life to capturing, has awoken from his coma, but they decide not to contact Archer as per his previous instructions:

LOOMIS

What a week for Commander Archer
to go on vacation. Maybe we
should let him know.

WANDA

Forget it. He left strict
orders not to be tracked down.

The problem is that everyone knows the most important thing in Archer's life is bringing Castor Troy to justice. In a later draft, Wanda's somewhat contrived reply is rewritten as follows:

WANDA
Forget it. He's knee-deep in
Georgia swamp by now.

By making Archer unreachable, believability is restored.

Trimming: Removing a single line (or word) can have a significant impact on pacing. In this example from *Face/Off*, a technician explains how Archer is to be transformed into Castor Troy:

HOAG
I implanted a micro-chip onto
your larynx -- a prototype
developed for throat cancer
survivors.

Later, the line is trimmed to:

HOAG
I implanted a micro-chip onto
your larynx.

The latter portion of the sentence is clearly something the audience doesn't need to know. The more technical jargon present, the slower the story progresses.

Fleshing out character: In an early draft of a scene in Alan Ball's *American Beauty*, Lester (Kevin Spacey) chats with his daughter, Jane (Thora Birch), and her friend, Angela (Mena Suvari), as follows:

ANGELA
We're going out for pizza.

LESTER
Well, can we give you a lift?

ANGELA
Thanks, but I have a car.

LESTER
That's great! Uh, Janie's
hoping to get a car soon, aren't
you honey?

The shooting script expands on Lester's dialogue, transforming this brief exchange from ordinary to both hilarious and telling of Lester's character:

ANGELA
We're going out for pizza.

LESTER

Oh really, do you need a ride?
We can give you a ride. I have a
car. You wanna come with us?

ANGELA

Thanks... but I have a car.

LESTER

Oh, you have a car. Oh. That's
great! That's great, because
Janie's thinking about getting a
car soon too, aren't you, honey?

In the rewritten version, Lester can't hide his nervousness around Angela as he runs on at the mouth.

In the following additional example from *American Beauty*, changing a single word dramatically alters our feelings about Lester, turning him from someone we're laughing at and perhaps even pitying to someone we can relate to and feel empathy for. In the earlier version:

BRAD

(frank)

I'm, one of the good guys, Les.
I trying to level with you. This
is your one chance to save your
job.

LESTER leans BACK IN his chair, incredulous.

In the later version:

BRAD

(frank)

I'm, one of the good guys, Les.
I'm trying to level with you.
This is your one chance to save
your job.

Lester stares at him, powerless.

And a small, powerless, relatable Lester is exactly what we saw onscreen.

Scene transitions are often overlooked. A simple line of dialogue at a scene's conclusion can greatly affect the flow of your story. Ask yourself, "How does the audience feel about the scene coming up?" Are they eagerly anticipating what's about to unfold? Is there a burning question in their minds that must be answered? In an early draft of *American Beauty* a scene transition between Jane and her soon to be boyfriend, Ricky, played as follows:

RICKY
Come on, let's go to my room

By the shooting script, Ball had stepped it up to:

RICKY
You want to see the most
beautiful thing I've ever
filmed?

While the first transition is functional, it falls flat. However, the second transition not only engages Jane, it also engages the audience. We're invited to participate in the mini mystery Ricky has woven.

Making the generic specific: Specifics are what audiences relate to. Any time a generic descriptor can be replaced with a specific one it is to your benefit. In Jim Uhls' early draft of *Fight Club* he used the following description:

The speaker breaks down, WEEPS UNCONTROLLABLY. Jack watches.

He later replaced it with:

The speaker breaks down and WEEPS UNCONTROLLABLY. Jack is riveted. He barely breathes.

"Jack watches" can be interpreted in any number of ways, but the latter description is exponentially more evocative and communicates a clear message to the reader.

Honing dialogue: Sharpening your dialogue will allow you to layer in subtext, humor and character development. In this excerpt from *American Beauty*, Ball delivers no new information through Carolyn's (Annette Benning's) additional dialogue, but he adds a ton of flavor, not to mention humor. This is a good example of how you might first lay out the important story points and later return to elevate not only the language, but also the impact. In the earlier draft:

CAROLYN
You're smoking pot now? That's
a fine example to set for our
daughter.

In the later draft:

CAROLYN
I see you're smoking pot now.
I'm so glad. I think using
illegal psychotropic substances
is a very positive example to
set for our daughter.

Replacing dialogue with action: Most scripts contain dialogue driven scenes in which at least some wordy bits can be replaced with character action. Doing so makes your film more visual

while also quickening the pace and giving your scenes greater resonance. Actions speak louder than words, after all.

Compare the following scene from the spec script of John August's *Go* between Claire (Katie Holmes) and Gaines (Timothy Olyphant):

CLAIRE
Have you seen her? Her and
Mannie?

He shakes his head.

CLAIRE (cont'd)
See, when we go out, we always
meet here afterwards in case we
get separated. It happens more
than you think.

The Waiter returns, ready to take their order.

GAINES
(to Claire)
So you don't know where they
are?

CLAIRE
For all I know, they could be...

She stops short. A beat.

CLAIRE
...dancing.

She smiles as she hands the Waiter her menu.

In the later shooting script:

CLAIRE
Have you seen Ronna? Or Mannie?

He shakes his head.

CLAIRE
See, when we go out, we always
meet here afterwards in case we
get separated. It happens more
than you'd think. I've been
paging her, but she hasn't
called back.

The lights FLICKER again, storm still raging.

Halfway into getting her coat off, Claire has second thoughts, but continues nonetheless. Gaines is taken off-balance, his private space violated.

Claire finally looks up at Gaines, smiles. A beat.

Here, excess dialogue has been replaced with a character action that carries far more weight. While their casual chit chat is fine it doesn't come close to offering the insight that Claire's actions do. Her display of hesitance to stay and share a meal with Gaines speaks volumes about their fledgling relationship.

While this is certainly not meant to be an exhaustive list, I hope it will serve as a handy jumping off point to help you dig into your rewrites. Rearranging words on a page can be considerably less satisfying than creating pages from scratch. While filling blank pages offers clear benchmarks for progress, it's harder to see the accomplishment at the end of a day filled with trimming, honing dialogue and strengthening character. But, I assure you it's time well spent. Remember, writing is rewriting.