

21W.755, Writing and Reading Short Stories (Fall 2006)  
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**Sessions 21 and 22: Rewriting**

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## **Rewriting**

We started class talking about process. Rewriting is part of that process. Skill in rewriting is a *different* skill, and one that is equally necessary for a writer. Fortunately, it is a much easier skill to master than writing in the first place.

Remember that **everything** you see in print was rewritten. There is a myth that great writers get it right the first time. This is about as true as the tooth fairy or white alligators in the sewers of New York. We have rewritten edited and commented copies of such brilliant pieces as T.S. Eliot's THE WASTELAND. There is too much going on in a story to be able to get it all right the first time. The first time is to get down the story and the characters. Then you improve everything else, tweak it, and put it into final form.

Do not EVER EVER be distressed if your first draft isn't wonderful or needs work. ALL first drafts (and many second drafts) need work.

One thing professional writers know that newer writers often don't know is that rewriting is part of the work of writing. You aren't finished until you've rewritten at least once.

The other thing professional writers know is that rewriting is a lot easier and faster than writing the first time, and very rewarding. Even when a rewrite looks like it's going to be horrible, once you start working on it the work often goes faster and more easily than you anticipated.

How do you rewrite?  
How do you approach the material?  
Has your initial process changed?  
Is rewriting easier? harder? interesting? overwhelming?  
What advice would you give on rewriting?

Damon Knight's "Red Line"

Damon Knight was a famous writer, teacher of writing (Clarion) and editor in the science fiction world of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His practice was to draw a red line at the point where he stopped reading a story. If he finished the story without drawing the red line, he would consider it for publication.

The point being, **once you lose a reader you don't get him or her back.** When the reader draws that red line, they are not going to finish the story. They are not going to get through the weak section or an action they don't believe and go on. They're going to go to the next story in the magazine or anthology. Short stories do not require enough investment from the reader to continue when they come to a point that loses them.

**Your job is NOT to lose the reader.**

Rewriting is the place where you get to find and correct these issues. **Every** story has issues. **Every** story has places where it can be improved. You want to make sure you pick it up and revise before your reader draws the red line.

## Revision Questions

What is my story *about*?

Is there unnecessary summary?

Why should the reader turn the page?

Is it original?

Is it clear?

Is it self-conscious?

Where is it too long?

Where is it too general?

Where is it undeveloped in character, action, imagery, and theme?

## Possible strategies

1. Retype.
2. Various passes, concentrating on particular elements (character, physicality, dialogue)
3. Confront your personal evasions (hate writing something painful or too intimate or revelatory). Where do you *skip*? (battles? sex? romance?)

Annie Dillard – “Process is nothing; erase your tracks. The path is not the work.”