

Successful Rewriting: Paring Down and Fleshing Out

By Lisa Gardner

When I wrote my first mainstream suspense novel, I was determined to be brilliant. I had already written thirteen category romance novels for Silhouette Intimate Moments, so I was confident of my writing and convinced I could make the leap to mainstream fiction. As a homework assignment, I identified other authors who'd made the plunge from category romance to *New York Times* bestselling suspense and I binged on their work—Sandra Brown, Tami Hoag, Iris Johansen, Tess Gerritsen, Jayne Ann Krentz, Nora Roberts, etc.

Unfortunately, when I was done with the first draft of my suspense novel, I didn't have a Sandra Brown book or a Tami Hoag thriller. Instead, I had a really long category romance. Apparently, practice had made perfect, and even when allowed more space and complexity, I reverted back to type.

I was lucky, however. The first draft of *The Perfect Husband* had some good scenes. So Bantam bought it. And promptly ordered me to tear the book apart. In the next year, I did two complete revisions of the novel, and we're not talking changing a word here or there. In fact, I sliced out half of the old novel. I created new characters, new plot points, new twists, and fresh scenes. I added police procedure. I toned down the melodrama. I finally took the book from genre fiction to breakout suspense.

The following is the process I used for analyzing my manuscript to figure out what to keep and what to go. I think this process works best when you have a complete draft of a book, but you can also use it to outline your novel.

How to Play Book Doctor

The first step is to outline your book, scene by scene, on individual note cards. If you've written the novel, then go through it and break it down into its individual building blocks. If you haven't written the novel, use the note cards to outline the book as best as you know it.

Remember, don't graph chapters—in many ways chapters are arbitrary breaks in the novel. What you want to capture is each scene, whether it's ten pages or two pages long. Scenes are the skeleton of any novel, and the goal of this exercise is to analyze your story bone-deep. Now then:

- Lay out note cards on the floor, in sequential order. On the bottom of each card, identify the purpose of the scene. For example advance plot, develop character, provide resting moment, advance subplot, turning point, etc. Yes, one scene may serve multiple purposes. In fact, you are on the right track

when you are writing scenes that do many things at once, such as provide a plot point while developing character. Also, note the point of view of each scene, who is telling this piece of the story. That will come in handy later.

- First pass, looking at the overview of your story:
 - Do you have an opening scene? Is that really a gripping, compelling opening or can you think of something better?
 - Identify the key plot points of your story, e.g., where something significant develops such as the heroine learns her real father may be a serial killer.
 - Identify at least two plot twists, e.g., where something unexpected happens that takes the book in a whole new direction, e.g., the main suspect suddenly turns up dead. In a suspense novel, you need many plot points and at least two or three key plot twists. The plot points and twists are the skeleton of your story. Character development, scene development, secondary relationships, etc., become the meat on these bones.
 - Finally, analyze your ending. Does it flow from steadily building tension, and is it exciting? The beginning and ending scenes are two of the most important scenes in a novel.
- Second pass, focusing on structure of the novel:
 - Identify major plot points:
 - Do they move the story forward, or are they merely repeating a pattern (heroine starts to trust hero, gets burned, moves back. Heroine starts to trust hero, thinks he lies to her, retreats, etc.) Each major plot point, aka fresh complication, needs to reveal something new. It can be either new action/evidence to advance a suspense novel, or deeper layers of a character to advance a relationship story. Any scenes that are not moving the story forward can go.
 - Do the plot points steadily build tension, e.g., does more and more become at stake in the novel.
 - After major plot points, do you have resting moments to ease the tension for the characters and reader? Comedic action, love scenes, etc., all provide great resting moments. For example, in the Indiana Jones movies, there is always a comedic moment after an intense action scene. Indy bravely dodges a boulder, then screams at a snake, etc.
 - Analyze major turning points:

- Do they take the book in a new direction, someplace the reader didn't see coming? You need at least two turning points in a major work of fiction or your story will lack freshness and movement.
- Are they appropriately foreshadowed, or so well motivated that when the reader does know the entire truth, the turning points/plot twists still make sense. In other words, turning points should be clever, but also believable.
- Third pass, analyze individual scenes of the novel even more closely:
 - Revisit the opening hook that immediately establishes tension? Is it still the best scene for the job?
 - Are too many scenes alike, e.g., hero/heroine talking, eating, walking all the time, etc. My editor once complained about a book where every single scene took place in a doorway. That's just odd.
 - Are the scenes fresh, or do you rely on too many clichéd romantic moments, e.g., the heroine has a nightmare in the middle of the night, the hero rushes to comfort her, then they both realize they're naked, etc. Yes, such a moment provides a good excuse for sex, but it's also been done thousands of times. I know, I've used it. 😊
 - Note point of view (POV). Do you go huge sections of the book with only one person's POV, then suddenly switch to another's? This can be jarring. Or do you switch POV all the time, which can also be choppy? Only you can know the right balance of POV in your novel, but it's something worth considering.
 - Watch scene and sequel. Scene and sequel are screenwriting terms—it's how you end one scene then start another. Good scene and sequel is the cliffhanger ending on chapter one, leading to the startling opening of chapter two—the reader is hooked at all times. Bad scene and sequel can be an abrupt ending to one chapter, and a flat opening to the next. It leads to an “episodic tone”—the chapters don't seem to be nicely woven together as a cohesive story. It also jars the reader out of suspension of disbelief.

— Analyze resolution:

- Do you end with an appropriate black moment and/or action sequence that builds logically from your major plot points and provides emotional release for the characters and reader?
- Is the resolution fresh or can the reader see it coming? One method is to write down six solutions to your conflict, throw them away, and use the seventh. If the resolution of your novel was that hard for you to figure out, it will be that hard for the reader to figure out.

Conclusion:

Congratulations, you have now thoroughly overanalyzed your novel and you'll never be able to read it quite the same way again. That's okay.

From this diagnostic, you will hopefully have identified several parts of your novel that can be cut. For example, that ninth scene whose only purpose is character development, or yet one more scene of the characters drinking in a bar. You may also have identified some major holes in your novel—you don't have enough plot points or plot twists. You need less talk and more action. This gives you some ideas for new material to add to better balance the pacing and structure of your book.

Of course, there is no one perfect structure for a novel, or one absolute method for analyzing your text. The novel should always be your story told your way. Belief in your own voice is still the greatest key to writing success.