RADICAL REVISION: some tips & ideas

Remember that revising is really writing all over again, so dedicate at *least* the same amount of time and energy to your project as the first time you wrote it…and the second…and the third…

Write somewhere you don't normally write. Go sit (or stand!) someplace you don't normally go. Or sit in a different chair, or open a curtain that's normally closed, or close a curtain that's open, or sit at your usual desk but at a different angle…

Write by hand using a pen or pencil you don't normally use, or in a color you don't normally use, or on paper you don't normally use. Or change the font on your computer to something really strange. Or up the font size to 50. Or write by hand, but with your non-dominant hand.

Wear some clothes you rarely wear, preferably clothes that make you feel MORE like your most honest self—maybe clothes you'd never go out in public in, maybe clothes you'd curl up and read at home, alone, in.

Spend some time writing by hand before or after your official revising "session." It wakes up your mind more than the computer will, and helps generate the sort of quiet that facilitates good writing.

If you're working on the computer, keep a pad of paper or notebook next to your keyboard to write down the random things that come to mind (ideas, scenes) as you're revising. Maybe these are notes about what you want to do with the project later, maybe they're irrelevant distractions that you can shut up by writing them down, or maybe they're related ideas that don't seem to fit into what you're doing. (Often I end up jotting down things that *do* end up fitting into what I'm working on, and right where I thought of them, too—it just isn't immediately apparent to me how until after they're written.)

Put all your killed darlings in another document that you can retrieve them from if necessary (a graveyard). It makes erasing things easier—you can be more impulsive, since your words aren't totally "killed"—even though, 98% of the time, you never will take those darlings back. Or, you can save your work as a new document each time you go to work on it, so that you have a record of what happened every day. (Or you can use Scrivener or another software that does this for you.)

When you feel you're about to get up—for a drink, a snack, or a break—stay put just a little longer. Often, the impulse to leave your work happens at a critical moment *in* the work: a complication or tension that shouldn't be avoided. And the urge to "get up" can transfer into useful new lines of thinking.

Keep a "vision document": a running log or journal of your goals or ideas for revising the work.

When you're stuck, go for a walk. Leave behind your phone or music or podcasts. Go somewhere where you won't see people you know. Bring a pad of paper and a pen. See what solutions come up.

for generating missing text

1. Why are you writing about this? Freewriting about this question may help you focus your subject, or generate material to include.

2. Write to figure it out. Go to a place in your draft where you could say more. Maybe it's a scene or idea that feels relevant, but in a way you don't yet understand. Write to describe, explain, and free associate. Exhaust yourself. Go past what you know.

3. Take a (mental) picture. Pretend you've taken a snapshot of a detail in your piece (even if it's not something visible), and describe it fully. Or draw a picture of a central moment or scene, filling in every detail. Then describe what is outside the frame of your "photo." Then, describe what happened a moment before your photo, and what happened a moment after. What about an hour before, and an hour later? Zoom out in time until you're writing about what happened years before this central moment, and what will happen years later. What else do you see?

for making connections

4. Associate. Write an unexpected but connected story that comes to mind as you read your draft. You may not know how it fits, and you may not end up including it, but write it anyway. It'll help illuminate something you can't yet quite see.

5. Read. Find something in another book, essay, poem, or story that feels somehow related to your project. "Write off" of that (respond, react, riff, argue, agree…). Again, this may or may not become part of your final draft, but it will help illuminate your ideas.

6. Resist or doubt. Approach your project as a skeptic would, and write in this skeptic's voice. Ask questions, argue, debate—and then let yourself respond.

7. Have a conversation with an honest friend, out loud, or with yourself, on paper. Have your conversation partner (friend or self) relate to, complicate, correct, contradict, debate, or ask you to extend your ideas.

for clarifying and reorganizing

8. Try out a new beginning. This could be something that's on the second, sixth, or tenth page or your draft. Or it could be something entirely new. Don't, however, just write something new and put it on top of the old beginning. First-draft beginnings are almost always placeholders that can later be cut out.

9. Try ending after the end. Write past your current ending. Be sure to account for how your thinking has changed from the beginning and middle of your project.

10. Try ending earlier. Find a spot before the end of your draft that could become your ending. How might it change what's come before?

11. Write something else. Find an arbitrary (6-8?) number of concepts, questions, images, or scenes that seem most important to what you've written. Write a poem or play that shows how these scenes relate (or don't) to one another.

12. Use scissors. Cut up your pages and maybe even your paragraphs into units of discrete action or reflection. Reassemble these in a new order that makes sense. Throw away repetitive or irrelevant ideas. Tape the result to a blank sheet of paper, leaving space to make connections where necessary. (You could have a friend do the first "reassembly," too.)