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Draft

The Joys of Trimming

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Draft is a series about the art and craft of writing.

My favorite part of writing is taking stuff out. “In writing, you must kill all your darlings,” William Faulkner famously wrote, suggesting that the process of self-editing requires stoicism and the suppression of a natural affection. Samuel Johnson said something similar: “Read over your compositions and, wherever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.”

But I rarely find getting rid of my words to be an emotional trial. On the contrary, when I can remove a limp adjective or superfluous sentence from a novel chapter or essay, I feel a rush that is a bit like being airborne. For every word I cut, I seem to have more space between my ribs, more lung capacity. I feel simpler and calmer, my head pleasantly lighter. And later, when I turn my work over to an editor, he or she is bound to make some more deletions. I love editors who get rid of things.

Writers know all the good reasons for subjecting their work to a sharp trim. Early drafts are notorious for repetition, indirection and overdevelopment of the trivial. My own writing process is quite messy. I don’t always write my first drafts in full sentences, so it can take a few passes before things even gel enough for me to see what I’ve got. At that point I begin to notice scenes or explanations that have gone on too long, paragraphs that don’t allow readers a healthy pause, characters who say more than they ought to. In my experience, cutting back is

the crucial act that allows the vitality, precision and emotional heart of a piece of writing to emerge.

Shaving phrases and even whole scenes from a piece of writing is light-hauling work, like tossing a few garbage bags into the back of the pickup truck and taking them to the dump. I've had two far more dramatic experiences of removal that were both exhilarating and deeply humbling.

My first novel, "The Understory," clocked in at 250 typewritten pages when it won a small-press contest and was slated for publication. My editor had one particular suggestion for revision, a significant one. He felt there was too much interaction between the main character and the character for whom he conceives an erotic obsession. This was a new one: an editor wanting less development of the central theme. My editor's argument was that my protagonist lived almost entirely in his head, and so the relationship would most likely play out in his head also, not in real life. I gave this some serious thought, and agreed.

What the editor thought would take me a few months ended up taking me two years. Every time I changed one scene of the novel in order to get it in line with the new idea, something else called out to me to be changed too. I eventually rewrote the book from first word to last. Strikingly, all this revision made the manuscript shrink. From 250 typescript pages, the novel went to 140 pages, barely long enough to continue to be considered a novel. My editor opined that "every book has an ideal length" and told me not to worry about it. When the reviews came in, nobody groused that "The Understory" was too short. (I doubt that reviewers ever mind a book's being short.)

My second novel, "The Virgins," went out to agents at the 350-page mark. It consisted of two story lines following the same characters but taking place 25 years apart. More than one agent told me that she or he loved the first narrative but lost interest in the second. The agent I most hoped would represent me spent a long phone conversation discussing how I might rewrite the second half to make it work as well as the first.

I passed two weeks struggling mightily to pursue some of our ideas. I changed third person to first person. I revamped plot lines. Then, the near-obvious occurred to me. I emailed the agent and asked, “What if I just drop the second part of the book?”

“I like it!” came her answer, and so “The Virgins” went out into the world as a slim, 60,000-word version of its formerly 105,000-word self.

When I tell this story, people ask me if it was painful to get rid of such a large chunk of my book. I had spent four years on the writing; two and a half on the second narrative alone. But somehow it wasn’t painful. Once the idea of shedding occurred to me, it was as if a big, neon sign in the sky started flashing the word SOLUTION. I wanted a beautiful book, a book that worked. I wanted a book that worked far more than I wanted to justify two-and-a-half years of writing.

The strangest part is that I sometimes forget I wrote a second part to my novel at all. I rarely let my husband read anything I write until it’s in print or nearly so, because I worry overmuch about his opinion. Thus, Jonathan, who knew the history of the book’s editing, read it for the first time when it was in galleys. After we’d talked about it a bit, he asked, “So what happened to everyone in the second part?” For a minute I didn’t know what he was talking about. The scenes and characters and events I cut had dissolved for me like the dreams you remember vividly upon first waking and by breakfast can hardly retrieve at all.

Once in a while I consider taking my favorite character from my discarded Part Two — the female protagonist’s brother, grown up — and using him in a short story. But I probably won’t. He’s gone, unbirthed, like all the commas and M-dashes and descriptive phrases that were discarded with him. I miss him every once in a while. But not that much.

Pamela Erens is the author of the novels “The Virgins” and “The Understory,” which has just been reissued.