**The Warmth of the Messy Page**

**Revision strategies and survival tips.**

**By Rachel Richardson**

Congratulations! You’ve written a poem! Now what?

If you’re anything like me, after all the effort to get the words onto the page (or screen), you’re having a moment of basking in your creation. This poem finally says just what you’ve been meaning to say for years. It certainly surpasses all your other poems. Look at how elegant this image is, and how about that musical phrase? You read through it a few more times, maybe tweaking a word or two, adding a bit of punctuation, maybe fooling with the title. But, basically, you’re done. For a moment, it seems so *easy*. You wrote a masterpiece in an afternoon!

Then (if you’re like me), the doubt starts to creep in. Maybe this image *isn’t* actually the best [metaphor](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/metaphor) for your subject. Maybe this [stanza](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/stanza) clunks a little. Maybe you print it, hand it to a trusted reader, and watch as his eyes move down the page, his mouth not falling open into a gasp of epiphany or smile of perfect satisfaction. Fortunately, there are ways to make the poem better.

Revision is a tool we should value as highly as drafting, if not more so—revision is our chance to get our poems closer to the ideal we imagine, to communicate more perfectly with our readers. Susan Sontag reassuringly says this of the effort to compose: “Setting out to write, if you have the idea of ‘literature’ in your head, is formidable, intimidating. A plunge in an icy lake. Then comes the warm part: when you already have something to work with, upgrade, edit.” The longer I write, the more I welcome revision. I have a draft of a poem, after all, not the tyranny of a blank page in front of me.

Lulling ourselves into thinking the first draft of a poem gets down a “pure” thought and is true to the inspiration that launched it is easy. That fallacy is enticing. The notion that great poetry just comes to us is a myth: even the more straightforward, classic poems required a lot of work. When we compare our art to the other arts, revision starts to seem more obviously necessary. For example, a sculptor’s initial job is to scavenge a usable piece of stone. It’s unwieldy, but it gets the materials on the table; maybe the sculptor is even able to make the first blunt cuts to give the stone a general shape. That’s the first draft. She has her idea, but there’s much more work ahead. Her job now is to chisel it, to work with the finer tools to bring the details into clarity and bright relief. She probably also has to think and rethink her direction as she goes, as she encounters unexpected irregularities within her stone and as her idea for the shape changes and develops over the weeks or months she works with it so closely. That’s revision.

Romantic poet [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/samuel-taylor-coleridge) defined a poem as “the best words in the best order.” That’s a high bar, *best*, and of course, there’s no road map to show us how to get there: what’s best must be determined for every poem. But it’s a beautifully simple description of what every poet is aiming for. The best words in the best order. Thinking of this as the goal lets us begin to consider how we might wield our chisels to make the most precise, beautiful pieces of art. We need to examine our drafts on both the word level and the structural level, reconsidering how these elements work on their own and together.

As you can imagine, different writers will have very different approaches to revision. My own revision process is messy, often flopping between the handwritten notebook page, the computer screen, and printed text I can overlay with scribble. I need to constantly change the way I see the words to keep them dynamic and to keep a record of my movement through the drafts, in case I decide I’ve made a misstep and want to go back. One of my early teachers, [Sydney Lea](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/sydney-lea), said that if he writes 13 drafts of a poem, he often ends up going back to the 11th.

Revising is a must if you want to improve your poetry, and it can become the most enjoyable part of the work. The first draft was perhaps a surge of inspiration, and if you were lucky, you got something onto the page that surprised and pleased you. But there might be more to that thought. The best way to find out is to excavate your material further. Or maybe you feel the reverse: you wrote a poem out of strong feeling or to fulfill an assignment, and it *didn’t* take you anywhere. You’re frustrated that you had this beautiful image in your head, but it doesn’t seem translatable onto the page. Or you’re frustrated that this assigned form or subject just won’t come to life in your hands. Revision can show you the unexpected paths here too—it can help you subvert those roadblocks and find new life in static material. The goal in all of the revision process is not to “correct” or even “edit” poems, which suggests there is a single right way, but to explore them to see what more might be hiding within the rock, available to the persistent searcher. It might lead you not only to revise this poem but also to gather new material for your next and your next.

Of course, different poems you write will be missing different things, so your approach to revising them should first identify what your poem needs. It can be daunting to start revising without a plan, only a sense that you need to make the poem *better*. This is why I find exercises particularly useful as I begin the revision process, so I’ve organized the following exercises into categories to target particular problems that seem the most common in early drafts. Anything at all can shake up how you see a poem, so feel free to experiment wildly with new shapes, new orders, radical cutting, and so on.

THE OVERSTUFFED COUCH
This poem has great content. There are good images, lovely language, but the problem is that there’s too much of everything. The best material feels buried. How can you excavate? What will bring out the great moments and make the poem move more fluidly down the page?

1. Scrutinize your first line. Maybe even the first three or four lines. Are they necessary? Often the beginning of a poem is the “match” that lit the fire, but once the fire is burning on its own, that catalyst material is unneeded. Ask yourself this: do readers really need this information to get into the poem? Which line first excites you? Could that be the poem’s start? (If you don’t know, ask a friend to read it and tell you where the poem gets going.)
2. Do the same with your last line (or lines). Is it necessary? Often poets will overwrite an ending in a first draft, tacking on a flourish or restatement of an idea to nail in their point. Similarly, you don’t need to proclaim “this is poetry!” with your final line. Trust your readers to do some of the work of thinking through the poem—you don’t need to overstate it.
3. Look closely at your descriptions. Do you ever repeat yourself? Do you use the words most accurate and evocative (and only those) for your subject? In particular, inspect your adjectives and adverbs. Could the nouns and verbs do the work without these added descriptors? Often excessive adjectives and adverbs are a cover-up for weak nouns and verbs.
4. Move quickly through your poem with pen in hand, aiming to cut 30 percent of it. What happens when you do this? Could you cut even more? Check out [Marianne Moore’s](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/marianne-moore) famous—some would say infamous—revision of her poem “Poetry” from 30 lines down to just three. Many argue that this revision goes too far, cutting out much of the depth the longer version provided through imagery. But perhaps it gains something too. What do you think of each?

THE SKELETON
This poem provides a beginning—maybe the germ of an idea or a barely sketched image. Or maybe there’s a strong structural component, but many words feel as though they are placeholders for the real, charged material that should be there. How can you build from this start?

1. If you have a short poem that doesn’t go very far, think of it as a scene instead of a standalone poem. Write the next scene. And another. Maybe this is a poem in sections or a sequence.
2. Do some research on your subjects. Do you have an image or allusion in your poem? Do you know all there is to know about it? Maybe you need to find out more about the maple tree or unspecified green bird or civil rights protest in your hometown. Research can take many forms, from browsing the Internet and conducting historical word usage searches to scouring instruction manuals or interviewing people. In my poem “My Grandmother Plays Emily in ‘Our Town,’” my research was to read Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town*. I had known my grandmother performed in it, and it was a pivotal event in her life, but I hadn’t known what the play was really about. Reading it gave me insight to see deeper metaphors in my own story than I’d ever considered before.
3. If you’re working with a strict form, read [Elizabeth Bishop’s](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/elizabeth-bishop) drafts of “[One Art](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176996)” (available in the book *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke Box*). Besides making you feel better that a brilliant poem can start out looking like an unrecoverable mess, Bishop’s drafts show how she sketched in the lines of the poem one by one after discerning her rhyme scheme. She also doodles with rhyme words and phrases all over her notebook pages. If you have a few lines you love, but others are weak (or simply not there yet), try riffing off these best lines on a sheet of paper, following the meter and/or rhyme restrictions for your form. Write much more than you need. For now, what you write doesn’t have to fit into the poem—you’re just seeing what else might be available to play with. The more freely you can approach this drafting, the better your chance at finding what will work.

THE PANCAKE
This poem often elicits a shrug from readers. It’s fine in terms of technical skill, but it lives in two dimensions. It feels lifeless, not moving but simply being. This is the kind of poem that poets are always tempted to throw away in disgust—but don’t do that. Not yet. It may need only a little shift. Even if it needs radical rethinking, it can still launch you into something great.

1. Did you know where you were going as you wrote this? Did you get there? That may feel like what you’re “supposed” to do as a writer—explain something you know to an audience—but in poetry, it’s deadly. [Robert Frost](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-frost) said, “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.” He also said, more directly, “I have never started a poem yet whose end I knew.” Take that statement up as a challenge: what would happen if you set this poem to the side and started a new poem with the last line of this draft as the new first line? Keep writing the poem backward for as long as it feels surprising—or let yourself veer into a totally new place.
2. Go through your poem and underline verbs. Do you use versions of *to be*, *to have*, *to do*, and other generic actions? These are your movement words, but if you’re using verbs that hardly move at all, you’re wasting a central opportunity to bring life into your poem. Try replacing as many static verbs as you can with dynamic, specific ones.
3. Look at your sentences. How does each one start? Do many start the same way (for example, subject-verb-object). Are they similar lengths? If so, try to change some of the structures. Make compound sentences. Maybe a few sentence fragments. Add a question or two. Then read it aloud and see what happens.
4. Sometimes a poem is flat because the subject feels distant in some way. Change some element of the *position* from which your poem is speaking. For example, if it’s in third person, you might try first. If it’s in past tense, try present.

THE LIVELY MESS
This poem’s problem is not lack of energy or interesting language but lack of cohesion. It hasn’t found its proper abode yet—it ranges all over the place without building a kind of logic, narrative, or momentum that compels readers to read to the end.

1. First, congratulate yourself that you’ve written so many good lines! You have great building blocks for a poem; you just need to find it. Getting away from the page entirely for a while may be helpful. Cut your poem into lines or groups of a few lines, and assemble them in front of you on a table or floor (let yourself spread out). You might even intersperse lines from other poems or unattached morsels from your notebook. Then read through them, physically moving them around to see where you might make interesting tension or connections. Lines can resonate with one another logically but also in sound or image or other indirect ways. Try making an entirely new poem out of your newly arranged lines. This is also a good way to expose the weak language in a poem—you’ll probably find your new poem is shorter than the old one.
2. Find a published poem you like, and look closely at how the poet arranged it. What kind of first sentence is used—is it long, short, active? What information does it give us at the outset? Try to rewrite your poem as an imitation of this poem’s structure. How does it change? If you can’t think of an author to read, try [Gerard Manley Hopkins](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/gerard-manley-hopkins), [Sylvia Plath](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/sylvia-plath), or [Harryette Mullen](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/harryette-mullen). What would your poem sound like in one of their voices? How would they spike and recompose it?
3. Is your poem in free verse? Try to rewrite it into a strict traditional form—sometimes this scaffolding will help shape a poem (and a poet’s thoughts) and provide the momentum of rhythm to move it forward. A repetitive poem might benefit from the [villanelle’s](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/villanelle) circling back. A meditative poem might make a beautiful [sonnet](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/sonnet). A long narrative might find useful structure in the [sestina](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/sestina).

No matter what your approach, engaging in revision will help you see your work more clearly and help you discover more of what you meant and sometimes what you didn’t even know you meant. The word itself says so: *re-vision*. To see again, to see better. Getting back into work that felt complete may seem daunting—why mess it up again?—but always leads to deepening the poem itself and your own skill in the craft of writing. You will see your work newly each time you come back to it with the willingness to explore further possibilities. It can even be a lot of fun.

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