

of elements and have them rank the elements of your story in order of what they think was most “professionally handled.” The list might include such items as plot, characterizations, use of language, and so on. Ask your critics to do the best they can and not to leave anything out. If six or seven out of ten list the same things near the top, you know what you’re doing right. Those areas ranked lowest are where you need to focus your attention.

Another good diagnostic tool is to have each scene of your novel graded on an interest curve. Have your readers give you a grade of one to ten on every scene. If they are mildly interested it’s a five; completely bored, a one; and totally gripped, a ten. If all your readers identify the same chapters or sections as under six or so, you know where to punch it up.

You can also make up a “Gallup poll” for your readers when they’ve finished the book. Ask them to vote for their favorite character, their least favorite character, the greatest scene, the worst scene, and so on. You can also ask them to recount the story to you; the parts that are left out most often are the parts where you’ve put the readers to sleep.

The best analyst of your story, potentially, is you. Self-analysis is a learned skill; with practice you can become a master. Since it is part of becoming a craftsman, you might as well start practicing it immediately. Reread your manuscript. Pretend someone else wrote it. Pretend it’s a sick patient, and you’re a doctor who’s diagnosing its ills. One helpful method is to read your novel into a tape recorder and then play it back. Hearing it instead of reading it will transform your perception of it and might expose its faults. You might also try telling the story of your novel to a friend from start to finish. What you leave out and what you fumble over will help pinpoint weaknesses.

It is easier to be objective if you put your manuscript aside for some time before you begin to analyze it. Three or four months

would not be too long. Some writers wait a year. In the meantime you can work on another one.

The most important thing about rewriting is your attitude. When you rewrite you will have to be absolutely ruthless with cuts, trims, and changes. As you examine each scene, keep in mind the most important principle of rewriting: *if you suspect it’s lousy, it is.*

SELF-ANALYZING YOUR STORY, STEP BY STEP

- The first question to ask yourself is: have you proved your premise? If you wanted to show that “greed leads to happiness,” have you done it, or is it something else that leads to happiness in your story? Luck, say. If it’s luck and not greed, you must rewrite your manuscript so that greed and not luck is what leads to happiness. You already decided before you began that the premise was one you believed in and that was worth proving. If you haven’t proved it, you must go back and look at the stepsheet, look at the incidents, and decide on the changes that must be made so that the story will prove the premise. If you decide that with this character, as things turned out, it wasn’t greed, but self-sacrifice at the end which led to happiness, you might consider changing your premise even at this late stage. But if you do, you must rewrite so that the story proves the new premise.
- Ask yourself whether you’ve touched the reader’s emotions and allowed the reader to identify

- with the character. Are there any scenes in which a sympathetic character acts cruelly or stupidly or duplicitously so that sympathy is lost?
- Are the characters in opposition? Are they always at their maximum capacity? Do they pass the "would he really" test in all situations? Are they securely placed in a crucible so they cannot disengage from the conflict? Do they have ruling passions? Are they well-motivated, decisive, determined? Have you avoided stereotypes?
- Principal characters should grow from pole to pole. Do yours?
- Have you plunged your characters into rising conflicts? Are the conflicts ever static? Do they sometimes jump?
- Are the conflicts adequately resolved so there is a sense of completeness? Have you left the reader with the feeling that the whole story has been told?
- Are the scenes and incidents varied; are repetitions avoided?
- Does the story begin at the correct place? Do you begin the story too early, so that it takes too long to get the conflicts heated up? Do you start too late, so that the reader is plunged into the heat of a rising conflict without first having a chance to become intimate with the characters?
- Do the events of the story grow out of one another? Is the reader able to clearly follow the A-B-C-D of events?
- Is the climax revolutionary? Is it satisfying? Does the climax-resolution have a surprise in it? Has the climax-resolution been exploited for powerful emotions?

- Is there some poetic justice or irony? If not, could there be?
- Does the story show many facets of the important characters? Are various emotional states explored? Are the characters fully revealed at the end?
- Are there any anticlimatic events? If so, cut them.
- Ask yourself whether you've chosen the proper narrative voice. Does it grate? Is it preachy? Would it help to tell this story in another viewpoint?
- Are all flashbacks absolutely necessary?
- Have you run away from conflicts that ought to be exploited? Have all significant actions been fully described?
- Are the conflicts symbolized, where possible, with appropriate life symbols?
- Check each scene. Does it have a rising conflict? Is it as exciting as it could be? If it can be cut without ill effect, it should be cut.
- Check every line of dialogue. Is it in conflict? Does it further the characterizations? Does it further the story? Is it fresh? Is it colorful? Is it the cleverest thing the character can say?
- Is the writing sensual, appealing to taste, smell, hearing, sight, touch, and the sixth, or psychic, sense? Are opportunities for humor exploited? Is passive voice used when it should be active? Are "to be" verbs used when more active verbs would serve better? Is the writing specific and concrete rather than generalized? Is there time and textural density to the writing? Is the writing forceful and sure, or limp and pallid?