

# Revision Cheat Sheet #1: Structure

## Structure comes first.

**As tempting as it may seem, don't start editing until you have a full manuscript written.**

Structural editing comes before smaller-scale fixes, so wait until you've finished your story and set it aside long enough to give yourself a chance to disconnect. You want to come back at the story with fresh eyes! Once you have a full manuscript and have rested from it, invest in a double-spaced, printed copy. It's worth the money to be able to flip through the pages and scribble all over them with your favorite pen as you prepare to rewrite the story.



Rewriting, on that note, is what you'll be doing with your first revision. You've put a lot of work into getting the story written all the way to the end, but now it's time to let the first draft go. It's not a failure—it's a necessary first step toward a story that will be much stronger than you originally anticipated. At this point, everything should be open to change—even your favorite characters, scenes, and plot twists.

Think of it as building a house out of Play-Doh: if your foundation won't stand, nothing you add on top will make it look better. It's better to squish it back together and reform it now than to let it stay lopsided forever. Don't worry about grammar and style yet; this is the big-picture step.

There are three things to address on your structural revision draft: characterization, conflict, and plot.

## Check #1: Characterization

Characters and their desires drive the main conflicts of every book, so begin your first revision with a look at your characters. Evaluate who your protagonist and other important characters are now that they've had an entire book to reveal their personalities and struggles.

- If you planned your characters to be a certain way ahead of time, do they still fit that picture? If you didn't put a lot of planning into them beforehand, have you discovered who they are? Take note of their desires, personalities, strengths, and weaknesses, making sure they remain consistent throughout the book.
- If the characters are flat and one-sided, identify ways to round them out into more believable people through their behavior in the book. Every character is a person, not a prop, and people are neither fully good nor fully evil. Good characters will have flaws in

their reasoning or make mistakes. Bad characters will have reasons for their actions that they believe are good.

- If your characters don't grow and change through their experiences, take a deep look at what happens to them in the story. Think about what they would learn or react to in those circumstances. When faced with what your character is facing, what choices is a person forced to make about how they act or what they believe? How do your characters see the world differently as time goes on?

**As you make sure that your characters are consistent, well-rounded, and able to grow from their experiences, take a look at your point of view.**

If you're relating your main character's actions and thoughts, third person limited is a good point of view to use. It focuses the story on what one character (at a time) is thinking and doing, and it lets the reader follow their story. If you want to show those thoughts and actions through a strongly-biased and potentially unreliable worldview, that's the time to tell the story in first person. Don't write in first person unless there's a specific reason to show every sentence of the story through a biased lens.

## **Check #2: Conflict**

If your story has believable characters, it should also have believable conflict. This doesn't just refer to fight scenes—it means the inner and outer struggles that occur when your characters have difficulty getting what they want.

- Do you know what the main struggle driving the story is? Make sure that there is one; no character should be carrying out plot details without a reason. That main struggle should be resolved in some way by the end of the book—don't confuse it with the overarching struggle of a series if you're writing multiple books.
- Do you know what the secondary struggles in the story are? Make sure that all of these agree with your newly-clarified ideas of who your characters are and what they want. Life is rarely so simple as to have only one struggle at a time, so make sure you're fully addressing your characters' reality.
- If you find parts of your story that are based on nonexistent conflicts, cut them. If you find parts of your story that ignore the established conflicts of the characters involved, fix them. Characters generally don't change who they are and what they want from scene to scene, so until they find resolution, they will continue facing the same struggles.

**Remember, a book can contain a mixture of conflict types.**

It will be helpful to know whether yours focuses primarily on man vs. man, man vs. society, man vs. nature, or man vs. self; however, that doesn't mean you should ignore secondary conflicts. Your characters, like all people, will have conflicting struggles and distractions. Make sure you understand how the conflicts relate to and interact with each other.

## Check #3: Plot

You know your characters, and you understand their struggles. Whatever storyline you wrote to get through the first draft, be prepared to change it now. Your characters and their struggles, not your original outline, should dictate the final plot of your novel.

- Look at the beginning of your story: does it start when your protagonist's main struggle begins? If you added any fluff chapters to the beginning of the story, cut them out. If you started your story too late and have had to rely on awkward explanations and flashbacks to explain what's going on, consider starting the story earlier. The beginning of the story needs to connect your reader with your main character and struggle.
- Look at the ending of your story: does it tie up or at least address all loose ends? Don't leave anything hanging unnecessarily, and don't drag on the story by adding new, unresolved content.
- Look at the overall pacing of the novel: do you spend a lot of plot time on scenes that don't really matter to your central conflict? Cut them out. Are there important events that you barely mentioned? Flesh them out with additional scenes.

**Add, subtract, and rearrange anything necessary to make your plot flow logically and believably.**

Change anything that moves too slowly or too quickly, and don't be afraid to completely change what happens to better reflect what your characters would do in a given situation. My favorite book for this stage of story development is *Characters and Viewpoint* by Orson Scott Card. He addresses realistic characterization, focused viewpoint, and the main story types that will help you address your character's struggle through plot. I highly recommend it as a resource for any writer who wants stronger characters and more focused stories.

Rewriting your book is a lot of work, but don't skimp at this point—your characters will thank you for expressing their personalities, struggles, and experiences in a more believable way. Besides, you've already proven that you can write a full draft. All you need to do now is do it again!