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Bridget's Guide to the Logistics of Revision

So, you've written a draft. You've read it over a bunch of times and tried to spruce it up, but then you decided (like all wise writers do!) to get a set of outside eyes to look at your work. In all likelihood, this set of eyes belonged to a well-meaning fellow creative who had a lot of reactions, praise, and suggestions to share with you. Chances are, they shared that feedback in the "track changes" features of Microsoft Word. (Note: The directions below are aimed at writers working in Word. I've added a few comments at the end of the document about using Google Docs and using paper.)

Now that you have their commentary, you have found yourself in the position of needing to pour over it and, well, DO something about it.

But you're overwhelmed. They did a lot of writing! At first glance, some of it looks very useful, And, other parts of it rub you the wrong way. You know you're going to have to go through it all page by page to decide what to consider and what to ignore, but before even embarking upon that effort, you need to figure out a system for keeping track of what you're doing.

The system is not entirely obvious; I know this because almost everyone I work with asks me for advice on how to manage this process! This tip sheet is aimed at giving you a few strategies to get you going.

1. **First things first: Make a copy.**

A copy of what, you ask? Two things:

1. *The manuscript you sent your editor.* You may already have this, but check to make sure. Label it something like "My book, copy sent to X Aug 2023." This way you are absolutely sure you have at least ONE version of the book you thought was the best thing you could produce before your editor got their hands on it.
2. *The manuscript your editor gives back to you with comments.* Depending on what strategy you end up using to handle your revisions, you may find yourself accepting and rejecting their suggestions as well as deleting or responding to their margin comments. That means you will be altering this document. Before you start to do so, make a copy of what they sent you so that you can refer back to it, just in case. Label it something like "My book with X's comments Aug 2023."

The ease with which you can duplicate documents WITH their edits and commentary is the number one reason I prefer track changes over GoogleDocs and hard copies. More on that below.

2. **Decide which document will become your WORKING REVISION DRAFT.**

Before you start making changes, you need to decide what copy of your book you want to make changes ON.

The way I see it, you have two options:

1. *The copy your editor sent you with their comments all over it.*
2. *An unmarked copy of the original manuscript that you sent to them.*

I'll explain the pros and cons of each below, but first, keep in mind that whichever way you go, you'll still need an untouched copy of 1 and 2 above! In other words, if you decide that you are going to make the edited copy your working copy (#1 above), great; *duplicate it*. Call one version "My book with X's comments Aug 2023." Then retitl the other one something like, "My book, WORKING COPY, Sept 2023." THEN you're ready to start.

Now onto the advantages and disadvantages of the options above.

1. Pros:

- It's typically faster. In places where your editor redid a sentence for you, for example, you can just click "accept" and move on.
- You aren't likely to get lost or skip feedback because the messy, colored comments mark where you last left off.
- You can easily keep track of what you have and have not dealt with. For example, when you have addressed a comment, you delete it. If you want to consider a comment further, you leave it in. Simple.
- You can respond to the comments with your own comments and, in doing so, create notes for yourself to guide your revision.

Cons:

- You might not feel like you are in full control of your editing process. If you just accept changes with a single click, you might not be giving them as much thought as you ought to.
- You might feel like your voice is getting lost. No matter how good your editor is, their voice is not yours. When they insert text, it's generally meant as placeholder text (i.e., "do something like this"). It can be easy to just accept what they have written and end up with chunks of text that don't sound like you.
- Sometimes, if you have major overhauls to do (moving entire sections, for example) it can get too confusing and messy to do this with all of markup in place.

2. Pros:

- You are in complete control of every word. Nothing gets changed in the manuscript unless you type that change.
- You are less like to lose your voice because every word is going through your hands.
- It's cleaner. All the ugly, multi-colored markup is left in the editor's draft. Your working copy consists of your beautiful words alone.
- It's usually easier for people who don't have a lot of experience cutting, pasting, and moving text in Word and/or using track changes in general.

Cons:

- It's typically slower. If you do like what your editor has done, you have to replicate it on your working copy; you can't just click "accept" and move on.
- It's easier to lose track of which edits you have addressed and which you haven't. Of course, you can click through changes on the editor's copy as you go, but doing that AND making changes by hand in your working copy can be very time consuming.
- You have to have both documents (their edits and your working copy) open on your screen when you're revising. For some folks, this can be challenging to manage.

Neither one of these techniques is "better" than the other. My guess is you'll know your personality and type and working style well enough to gravitate towards one. If it doesn't work, give the other a try.

Personally, I use #1—but my editors tend not to have many sentence-level changes for me. I mostly receive big picture suggestions that take big picture thinking, so I like having their comment in the margins as I work to mull over ideas.

I work with people who have used both techniques with great success.

3. Label, label, label!

As you may have already surmised, good labelling of your documents makes this process much easier. Yes, your copies have dates stamped on them by the computer, but that's only half the battle. Your labels should tell you *what kind of file* each document is. "Old draft" is a good start. How about adding when it's from or what has changed? "March 2023 draft before all humpback whale material was cut" is more descriptive, as is "January 2023 draft with new ending." There's nothing more annoying than spending hours rereading old material to try to figure out what it was and whether or not you need it.

If you are cutting material from your draft, great, hack away! But don't delete your cuts altogether. Consider putting them in a document—a well-labelled one that is, like, "Chapter 4 Cut Material July 2023." You may decide to put it in a folder with other cut chapters. In that

case, be sure to title your folder, “Cut Material.” Then, it’s not gone; it’s just out of your sight for now. If you really decide you need it (rare), you can dig it back up.

Similarly, you probably want to make an “Old Drafts” folder. Stick the previous copies in there where you can’t see them or let them confuse you, but you can retrieve them easily if necessary.

4. Thoughts on Google Docs

In many ways, GDocs is similar to track changes, only less wonky and glitchy (how could it be MORE wonky and glitchy, right?). It’s also cheaper and takes up no room on your hard drive. All of these features make it really appealing.

However, it’s got a couple big drawbacks. One is that it isn’t stored on your hard drive. That means you can’t work on it when you’re offline, which is a dealbreaker for me. Another is the fact that you cannot download a copy with your editor’s suggestions to hang onto. Yes, you can look back through many days or weeks of changes to get some suggestion back up on screen, but does anyone ever do that? It’s too time consuming.

My commitment to “versioning”—that is, to knowing where my text was at different stages of the process and owning my own copies of those texts—keeps me away from GDocs for any piece of writing longer than ten pages. GDocs was designed for business document collaboration more than for long-term creative processes, and this priority creates limitations for writers.

5. Thoughts about paper

I’m not going to mince words; I’m not a fan. In addition to killing trees, there’s the nasty ink toner, the planned obsolescence of printers, the possibility of losing pages or whole books (the dog ate them?), the total inefficiency of writing by hand and then retyping...you get the picture. Word processing was the world’s greatest gift to writers, and track changes/Google Docs editor was the world’s greatest gift to editors. They are the industry standard now, and very, very few agents and publishers will accept hard copies of anything. If you’re in this business, it pays to embrace the tools of the trade.

And...I absolutely get that for some people, seeing words on paper is the only way they edit! If that’s you, okay. I’d encourage you to adapt the techniques I describe in this tip sheet in whatever way you can. You can make paper copies as needed, package and label everything, use post-it notes, consider crossing out edits you have already dealt with, etc.

And maybe try revising on a computer when you have a short piece sometime...just to see how it goes! It might be easier than you think, and it will save you tons of time and the world a fair bit of resources.

Now what?

Now that you have a system, it's time to start revising!

How do you decide which of your editor's comments to work with and which to disregard?

That's another ball of wax which I'll address in a subsequent tip sheet. Hang on, more coming!

*If you have any questions about any of this or want to run your ideas by me,
I'm always happy to help with this process!
Just reach out...*