Two: The Plan

I have a lot less to say in this section, except where I introduce a new concept like "lines of threads." By now you should have a lot of notes and questions from the chapters you have read and the description you have written. Look back to earlier in this book to review ideas and exercises suggested there. Review your statement of aboutness.

My goal here is to help you organize a plan for revising your novel. Thus, the concepts are extensions of what you have studied in the earlier sections.

How do I revise?

1. Write a capsule summary of the plot, emphasizing the story problem, the crisis point, and the resolution.
2. Write a new summary of the novel.
3. Write a brief summary of your protagonist’s fate and explain how it fulfills your vision for the novel.
4. Develop a scheme of core scenes.

5. Develop a scheme of lines of threads.
6. Identify key scene sequences in each plot movement.
7. Identify passages, scenes, and chapters from the first draft that will be used in the revision.
8. Identify passages, scenes, and chapters that need new drafts.
9. Decide whether you will amend your first draft or begin again with a new manuscript.
10. Write a document that describes your love of your story.

Summaries

1. Write a capsule summary of the plot, emphasizing the story problem, the crisis point, and the resolution.

You have chosen to write a novel that is predominantly a novel of story (character) or a novel of plot. Either way, both action and meaning are developed, but right now, consider which approach you are more committed to. Then, if you like, write the other summary as well. Keep these points in mind, though:

1. A novel of story (character) is going to be about the protagonist’s journey in the context of the plot—but the character is the real subject. Depth, complexity, inner conflict, empathy—these are the qualities of the character that are developed by the plot. A paragraph summary is adequate.

2. A novel of plot has a strong story line with twists and turns, questions and suspense, crisis and high tension, and a resolution that pulls everything together. Consider your protagonist’s journey as one of overcoming obstacles and arriving at a solution or achievement; of vanquishing an antagonist or...
circumstances that were a threat to the well-being of the protagonist and those he cared for. Three short paragraphs would follow the prescription.

3. Intensifying and resolving plot.

You will be using your summary from now on in other exercises. You are creating a blueprint for revision.

Don’t skip this step. Don’t rush. This is deeper and more expansive than your warm-up exercise above.

A reminder: Writing in summary frees you from the pressure of finding the “right” words, of shaping the scenes—all of the self-consciousness of getting things on the page. You are thinking about story, not style. This is for you, not a reader.

You might start by telling the story in three sentences. I’m not sure why, but my students love this exercise. I think it clarifies story, for one thing; and it testifies that there actually is a story. Some of my students have then taken each sentence, one by one, and “peeled” it by expanding it into three new sentences. So now you have a summary of nine sentences. Then you can start making sequences between sentences. It’s sort of like greasing your skis; it gets you going.

Sit down away from your manuscript and your notes, preferably after a few days of rest from the work. Then tell your story. Don’t worry about sticking to the draft. Don’t spend much time brooding over the ideas for changes that come up. Don’t worry about whether it’s long or short. Don’t worry about the parts right now. Just sit down and tell the story in a summary form. Imagine yourself speaking: Here is a story.

Let yourself be, caught up in the flow of narrative, and—if something occurs that surprises you, don’t stop to consider whether it really belongs.

After you have written such a free-flowing draft, you can study it, scratch your head, and consider whether to write it over again. You can think about what ideas for changes popped up. You can identify still-not-quite-decided points. You might want to look back over all the notes you have taken up to this point. Perhaps amend this new summary based on your compiled observations.

What you want now is a guide to take you into revision. It can have some questions and some “maybes” in it. Your summary should capture enough that you feel that the story is coherent, dramatic, and structured. The summary is about what happens. It doesn’t include backstory, commentary, interiority. If you feel that the novel is very much about those latter things, I suggest that you write a page that summarizes the backstory and describes how it impinges on the story; write a separate page that talks about the meaning. Get it out of your system. Give yourself some distance by writing it out. Think it through away from the manuscript.

You could do this in three to five pages. Or you could write fifteen to twenty pages. It depends on the length and complexity of the story and on your impulse. I like to do both—a short version, then a longer one. If your story has parallel plots of more or less equal weight, I would treat them in two separate plot summaries. There will be overlap. Or you can write the summary in sections, alternating the same way that it appears in your draft. If it helps you, write summaries of the subplots, but we will be looking at those shortly.

You should be able to look over your summary and identify places where the story clearly should be told in scenes. Other parts may be told in summary. Don’t automatically use the scheme of scenes you have already written; stay open to fresh