

THE ABCs OF REVISION
by Pegi Deitz Shea

- A** is for Action. Wipe out the “wases” and use action verbs.
- B** is for Beginning. Did you hook the reader with excitement? In fiction, begin with the story problem or “conflict.” In nonfiction, try a funny or unusual fact, a question, or an anecdote.
- C** is for Character. Do a separate mini “biography” before rewriting. Build a unique identity by showing--not telling--emotions and thoughts. Make dialogue and interior monologue Consistent with Character.
- D** is for Description. Decorate nouns with specific, not general, adjectives. Embellish actions and nouns with simile and metaphor.
- E** is for Edit. Cut adverbs and write better action verbs. In fiction, cut words and sentences that don’t move your story. No saggy middles! In nonfiction, cut sentences that don’t prove your point. No detours! Can you cut two words from every sentence?
- F** is for Finish. In fiction, does the most exciting part (climax) happen near the end? Do you show the result and the main character’s feelings about it? resolution) In nonfiction, does your finish sum up the most important point? Or does it challenge readers to think or act differently?
- G** is for Grammar. Check commas and end punctuation. Check verb agreement and verb tense. Do you have complete and separate paragraphs? Is every word spelled and used correctly?

Major Revisions on my Books

I say, “Writing is only part of a bigger and more important word: rewriting!” I have never had a fiction published in fewer than 10 drafts. Here are some important changes my books in print went through.

The Whispering Cloth – First drafts were written in 1st person instead of 3rd. A character “Susan,” an American aid worker, was deleted from book. “She” is Susan Beam (see my Acknowledgments) a best friend who brought me to the Hmong refugee camp. Editor didn’t want any foreign characters to come between Grandma and Mai. “Miss Susan” is a character—an ESL teacher—in my sequel novel, Tangled Threads, where I have lots of room for characters.

New Moon – First drafts were written as a Mother-Daughter experience. Editor had me change Mom character to an older brother for “Vinnie.” Some fancy similes were reworked to sound more natural coming from an 8-year-old boy.

Ten Mice for Tet – Most importantly, I added “Main Mouse” as a child character to make the counting book narrative and endearing. Main Mouse, the smallest, is a bit messy and naughty, and often left behind. He shines at climax. Also, most text was moved to Back Matter once we saw how gorgeous the original art was—embroidery done in Vietnam.

The Carpet Boy’s Gift – I made the violence less graphic. Editor wanted more explanation of Pakistani rug factory, making the text wordier than I wanted.

Tangled Threads – a sequel to Whispering Cloth, was originally told in 3rd person, not 1st person. I had to delete a subplot of Mai considering marriage. Even though Hmong girls, traditionally, can be married or promised at age 13, my editor felt the subplot was too much for one character to handle. However, I loved the boy character, Yia, and am writing a sequel in which Mai, now 17, must choose between him and a scholarship from RISD.

The Boy and the Spell – I’d originally written this children’s opera adaptation in verse. But the rhythm and rhyme were forced in some spots. Nevertheless, I could still use a lot of inner rhyme and word play in the prose text.

My other books are nonfiction. Usually writers and editors hammer more things out at the outline stage. But beautiful language still counts. When I thought I was done rewriting my forthcoming biography of Noah Webster, my editor asked me, “Now, where’s the poetry?”