Disclaimer

The advice in this document is meant to be applied to a completed draft. If you are reading this prior to having completed your draft, then, in the strongest possible terms, I urge you to put this aside until such time as you have a full manuscript. Revisions and redrafting take a very different kind of focus than drafting does, and trying to do both at once will sap all of the drafting energy you might have, and will significantly undermine your ability to finish what you've started. Like the truism goes: the job of the first draft is to exist. Having a 'good' story isn't reasonable to expect until at least the end of the second draft, so, if you are still drafting, please finish that before continuing to read this advice.

There are two main exceptions to this. First is if you find yourself with writer's block, which I generally believe to be a symptom of an outline (for plotters) or conceptual framework (for exploratory writers) that isn't fully baked. In that case, you may need to restructure one or more completed scenes before you can progress with the next (or unfinished) one. Second is if you're still in the planning stages and aren't sure if you're ready to start writing yet. Whenever you decide is right for you to start reading the following suggestions, I hope they are useful to you.

Pacing general notes

I'd like to clarify the ways that I tend to approach plot and pacing. This might cover things you already know and approaches you already take, but at the end I'm going to propose a way to self-assess pacing issues, and it would be best to be on the same page when I get there. I'll also be taking this approach with many other sections in this document.

One of the main ways that stories create power for themselves and pleasure and meaning for their readers is through causality and consequence. To express that causality, there are two basics of plot advancement: linear and lateral. Linear plot advancement is a choice or an action that gets a character closer to or further from their goals, and lateral plot advancement is a choice or an action that changes either the character's goals or the ways they want to pursue those goals. (Often, lateral plot advancement is a choice or an action by one character that changes these things for another character, but it doesn't have to be.) Between these two, lateral plot advancement is usually the one that affects the pacing: if there are a lot of lateral plot advancements, then the plot will feel more fast-paced, especially if those advancements are large in magnitude.

A low-magnitude lateral plot advancement is a nuance: it doesn't change a character's goals or the choices they face, but it does change something about how they intend to approach those goals and make those choices. A high-magnitude lateral plot advancement is a redirect: it changes the character's goals and possibly also the choices they'll face to meet those goals. One way to increase the density of lateral plot advancements is to have a scene be about a contested action, where at least two characters are each simultaneously trying to achieve something that puts them at cross purposes. This could take the form of anything from a dinner conversation to a chase sequence, so long as the characters are each actively acting for themselves and against the other in a way that demands improvisation from everyone involved.

If all of that makes sense and is something you more-or-less agree with, then the best way to self-assess pacing issues is to create two different scene-by-scene charts. For the first, go through each scene and note down each character involved, what their goals are for that scene (not for the whole book), what

happens to get them closer to or further from those goals, and what happens to change those goals and the choices they'll need to make later on. Be sure that you can point to a specific place in the manuscript for each thing you write down, so that what you're creating reflects the actual text and not just the intent for the scene. If a given element is unclear in a particular scene, put that down. In the end, you should have a table that looks something like this:

Scene	Char 1	Goal	Advancements	Pivot points	Char 2	Goal	Advancements	Pivot points	Pace
1.1									
1.2									
2.1									

I realize this table looks a bit cramped here, but if you make it in Excel instead of Word then you'll have an arbitrary amount of space to work with. In the table, I'm referring to the first scene in chapter 1 as scene 1.1, and the second scene in chapter 1 as scene 1.2. I'm calling the linear advancements "Advancements" and the lateral advancements "Pivot points," but you're free to use whatever headings you like. I usually find that I only need to note down four characters per scene: the perspective character and up to three others. It's rare that I'll need more, but it does happen. Finally, for the 'Pace' column, count up how many nuances and redirects there are per character.

Once you have this table created, you should be able to quickly scan down the 'pace' column to see where in the book no one's goals are changing, where they're being nuanced, and where they're being redirected. You can use that information to see where things are more meditative and where they're faster. For some books, it's fine for things to be slower and more meditative. Faster isn't necessarily better — it depends on what the manuscript is meant to feel like. If there are more things you would like to review for, then you can add new columns for each of those things.

Once you've got this kind of macro-level view of the book and its pacing, you can make a second table, this one with just four columns:

Scene	First sentence	Changes to make	Reason for changes
1.1			
1.2			
2.1			

Including the first sentence is so you can easily find the beginning of the scene — just copy and paste into the search function for Word, Scrivener, or whatever program you're using to draft and redraft. Organizing revisions this way is meant to keep the revision process manageable, so your notes don't expand to the point that it becomes impossible to find the note for a given scene, or to understand why that note is there in the first place. Depending on the scope of the things that were covered in the previous table, it may be worthwhile to make dedicated revision passes, e.g. one revision pass just for pacing and plot, then another for worldbuilding and another for dialogue.

Compelling characters

Four things that are necessary for most readers to invest in a character are 1) to understand what that character wants and 2) what they care about, and 3) to recognize why their communities care about them (or, if they are an outcast, a misfit, or otherwise isolated, why their communities *should* care about them) and 4) why it's important for the character to get what they want.

It will be very important to establish each of these four aspects of investment for each major character, and to be able to point to where they are shown in the text. If the aspects aren't shown soon after the characters become important, it may be worthwhile to set some time aside to think about how any missing aspects can be incorporated or weak aspects improved. For background characters (including important characters who start as or become background characters), figuring out each of these aspects for yourself will help the characters to breathe more on the page, but establishing them all in the narrative is less of a priority. If you haven't done this already, make sure you know how you want each of those four elements to be reflected in the story for each character, and make sure you can point to where they're included in your next draft.

Plot conflict and challenge

Currently, genre fiction stories in English-language markets are expected to answer the paired questions of "What do the main characters want, and why is it hard for them to get what they want?" (There is more flexibility for other story approaches in countries whose dominant languages are other than English.) A character's main want can be to understand their wants, especially in Bildungsroman and in stories with a strong "literary" focus, but the reader should clearly understand that want, even if it is oblique and not said directly.

There's also a deeper level to this that Matthew Salesses talks about: plot grows from characters accepting, rejecting, and otherwise managing consequences, which themselves can arise from both personal and impersonal forces and events. The characters' wants determine how they manage consequences, but there are important stories to write about people whose agency is quite limited.

While a lot of people, including many in the publishing industry, like to talk about the paired questions at the beginning of this section in terms of conflict, the broader phenomenon that they describe is instead challenge. (I first saw this articulated by Ursula K Le Guin.) You can phrase it as person vs self, person vs nature, and the like, and that can be helpful in some contexts, but conflict is only one form of challenge and it's unnecessary (and often counterproductive) to reduce challenge to conflict.

That said, conflict is not just a matter of aggression and response, but rather arises when people, organizations, or the like are each pursuing their desired consequences in ways that put them at cross purposes. This will likely lead to a 'contested action,' as described in the **Pacing** section, but it could also lead them to negotiate, join forces, seek noninterference, or some other means of resolution.

Your next draft should be clear on what the main character or characters want and why it might be hard for them to fulfill that want. Literary agents and many readers will expect some indication of what each perspective character wants so they can understand what these different tasks and events mean to them and how they relate to the book's core challenge, and will generally expect that want and corollary challenge to be established by the end of the first chapter. Without that, they may have trouble understanding what the book is about.

Relationship arcs

Friendly, familial, mentoring, collaborative, competitive, hostile, romantic, sexual, and other intimacies are based on a lot of things, but for a compelling relationship arc there are three elements that need to be included:

1. What they each get out of the other's company (that is, the basis for the desire of closeness and intimacy, e.g. "You believe in my competence," "You challenge me to do better," et c.)
2. What they each want from the other (that is, their respective conditions for confidence in the relationship, e.g. "Tell me what you expect from me," "Be there for me when I need it," et c.)
   - Unconditional romantic love may be a thing that you have encountered or experienced in your life, but from a narrative perspective it is uninteresting and risks coming off as creepy and/or unbelievable.
3. Why each person has trouble giving what the other person wants from them (that is, the source of the relationship's tension and uncertainty, e.g. "I don't understand why you don't want me to shower you with gifts," "I haven't acknowledged some of my deeper traumas and don't know why I keep saying these things to you," et c.)

Another thing that really helps is at least one moment per relationship partner, where they are compelled to expose one of their vulnerabilities and, in so doing, shed some self-consciousness that was holding them back from committing to the relationship. If the answers to at least one of those elements is weak, then the relationship itself may begin to seem uncompelling; this might be done on purpose, if the relationship in question isn't something the readers should want to see develop and grow more intimate. Just like in the **Characterization** section, make sure you know the answers you want for each of these elements, and also make sure you can point to them at the end of the next draft.

Plot arcs

As a rule, for a scene to unambiguously merit inclusion, it must include (or imply) a consequence whose management changes at least one thing that at least one character wants or needs to do. (For an especially tight-feeling plot, increase the number of affected goals per scene. For a scene to feel more twist-y, move the magnitude of a change away from 'nuance' and toward 'redirect.') When many scenes show success without complication, it can feel like there isn't much happening, even though actions are being undertaken: characters are simply continuing along pre-established lines. The plot and character arcs are not bending. The presence of a challenge, or other complicating factor, is what makes them bend.

There are many ways to address scenes that are light on change, but generally there are two dominant options: cut the scene or amplify a challenge. Which is the better option for a given scene depends on what kind of story you want to tell.

Infodumping and worldbuilding

It's important to avoid passages where the introduction of information, especially regarding backstory and speculative systems, interrupts the flow of the narrative. Whether it happens when readers are actively immersed or when they are still working to suspend disbelief, the change in subject can be very disorienting and risks kicking them out of the narrative again. In the context of the manuscript's first few chapters, especially, or if it happens frequently enough, this may cause some readers to put the book down and choose something else to read.

I would suggest instead to link worldbuilding to character actions. What do people need to know to understand what's going on? Provide just enough information for the action and its effects to be comprehensible, and no more than that. Readers will also generally be able to put most pieces of

information together on their own, so long as the narrative itself is internally consistent — indeed, many readers take a lot of pleasure in figuring things out for themselves — so it's often not necessary to provide more than a bare minimum of worldbuilding for the story to make sense.

Setting and sensorium

One key for evocative "genre" narratives is to provide sense details to help readers re-create the scene as they read, and another is to provide the sense details that your perspective character would either consciously or unconsciously notice and process to gather hunches, change their mood, or any of the other things that people do with sense data. If you provide the right sense details, you can immerse the reader in the setting and communicate character moods all in a single description.

Note that this is a slightly different goal than what I understand of "literary" fiction, which is some combination of using prose to create an aesthetic experience (often by drawing the reader's attention to the aesthetic attributes of individual words, or to turns of phrase), and/or using aesthetic language to construct a moment with multiple valences of feeling that cannot be reduced to a single description or emotion. (A given description may also shift between these different modes.) It may be helpful to define your main goal for the manuscript's descriptions, if you haven't already.

Regardless of your goal, I would recommend to dedicate a revision pass to setting and sensorium, taking a survey of each setting and character action and asking sense questions of them: How does this look / sound / smell / taste / feel? Note that visual descriptions are the easiest ones for readers to wash right over: sound is better, flavors and tactile sensations are better still, and smells tend to be the best. If possible, nontraditional sense descriptions (e.g.: What was your bodily orientation (proprioception), sense of balance (vestibular system), internal sense of your bodily systems (interoception), and sense of time or task completion) will further enrich readers' ability to identify with your characters and their experiences. What you do add doesn't have to be extensive, either: even a phrase or two of setting and sensorium per page will go a long way toward immersing and transporting the readers, though full sentences will often be better in this regard. Note also that new settings and locales should be given more than a phrase or two of establishment. That's the setting's chance to make its first impression, and it needs the same attention as a similarly important person would get.

Locations and mapmaking

If you haven't done this already, you might find making a map of each significant locale to be helpful in your next revision pass. Make a note of each location that gets mentioned within each locale (e.g. the main character's house, the terrifying subterranean mindscape they can't escape, the portal that takes them to a new world, the forest where the spacecraft landed, et c.), then make a note of other things that are present but which don't make it into the narrative, and figure out what each one looks like and where they are in relation to each other. If you like, these maps could even have topological information, though if it makes sense for the locations to be on flat ground then that's fine too. The key would be to understand how long it would take to walk between each place, what kind of effort would be involved in that walk, and what can be seen and heard from where (earshot and lines of sight). If additional sensory information would be helpful to put on the map, like what a particular spot usually smells like, what the plant coverage is, or what material the ground is and how firm it is after it rains, then feel free to include it. It makes a world of difference any time I can tell that an author has worked out (or knows) what it's like to be in a particular space.

Opening with dialogue

I'd like to discourage opening the book with dialogue. I understand why it's appealing: it seems like a way to hit the ground running and immerse readers in the scene. The opposite is usually true, though. As a rule, what draws people into narrative is situation and stakes, and openings are places where the context of what's happening is at its scarcest: we don't know the situation and we don't know the stakes. Those are the most important things to lead with, even if they stay impressionistic. (Stakes don't have to be introduced immediately, but they should be pretty near the first few pages so readers have something to care about. Situation needs to be on the first page so readers can understand what they're reading. Scene-setting counts as situation.) Dialogue is one of the narrative tools that needs the most context to work, so using it as a minimal-context opener means that readers are going to have no idea what's going on and why, and will need to shoulder more than their fair share of establishing work to be immersed and invested in the story. Opening with dialogue is, in effect, asking the readers to do extra work just to understand the story, let alone enjoy it, and some readers will respond by putting the book down. Consider foregrounding context instead. (This is less necessary after a chapter or scene break.)

Dialectic dialogue

The main model I have for effective dialogue is the dialectic, borrowed from Georg Hegel by way of Lois McMaster Bujold. The basic dialectic starts with one idea (the thesis), which is then put up against an idea that differs in some way (the antithesis). Once you resolve the differences between those two ideas, a new idea should emerge that is stronger than the previous two (the synthesis), which carries their respective strengths along while also discarding some of their weaknesses. This process can repeat indefinitely, where the synthesis takes the place of the thesis and is posed against a new antithesis.

As applied to dialogue, that means that dialogue between two characters who are listening to and who respect each other should take the form of one character saying something, then the other character responding in a way that takes into account both what the first character said (and what it implies) and also what the other character believes or wants to do. After that, the first (or next) character responds in kind, and so on and so forth. A character might also imagine some response that isn't actually spoken, and then try to amend what they said with that objection in mind. At the end of the dialogue, at least one character should have a changed understanding of themselves (i.e. what they want), their situation (i.e. the choices before them), the world (i.e. the themes and worldbuilding), or some other element of the story. Dialogue between characters who aren't listening to each other or who don't respect each other might have at least one character holding onto their beliefs without really considering what the other person is saying, or some other failure of the dialectic process.

If you want to double-check whether the dialogue sounds good, it's best to sit down with someone and read it out loud: each person can take a different character's part. It's often quite helpful to identify dialogue that isn't quite working, and it can be a fun thing to do.

Physical beats

Physical beats in dialogue are as important to reader immersion as a vibrant setting is. People don't just convey meaning with words, but with gestures, expressions, looks, postures, inflections, pauses, and by changing the amount of distance between themselves and the person they're talking to and the angle at which they're facing them. People fiddle with their clothing, occupy their hands with some knickknack or

other, or pace back and forth while they're talking, and they do those (and other) things because they're energetic, uncomfortable, not paying attention, or a thousand other reasons. This is pretty consistent across populations, to the point that people with minimal or no bodily expression are often felt to be unnerving, though the way it manifests in a given interaction changes from person to person based on temperament, culture, mood, relationship, social status differences, setting, and more.

In some drafts, however, very little in the way of mannerisms or other beats makes it onto the page — much of the dialogue ends up punctuated by dialogue tags and nothing else. This casts the majority of character interactions as neutral-postured, -mannered, -expressioned, and -distanced. Each of those neutralities in each scene are missed opportunities for characterization and tone-setting, and leaves readers unsure of what it feels like to talk to or be in the presence of these characters who you've worked so hard to develop and give interesting choices to. As you make your sensorium pass, consider also developing the ways your characters emote in their interactions with each other. To really put the polish to your settings and characters, be sure to also clarify the ways that the setting affects the characters' decisions. Even something as simple as having to choose a path between puddles can do a lot to make a breathing world on the page.

Again, I hope this document is helpful to you as you plan and revise. If there's some point of clarification you'd like, or if you'd like help with the heavy lifting, please feel free to contact me:
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Happy drafting!

     - Frank Cernik