

# Rewrite Like a Pro

## A Story Principles Guide



## Introduction:

You have finished your first draft.

This is a major accomplishment, regardless of how far the work is from completion. Even if 99 out of your 100 pages don't work that's okay. Though it never feels good to read pages that don't work, this is the only way to learn what does. The purpose of early drafts is to find your path, not to finish a masterpiece. Remember that one flawed choice can lead to 20 others – for example, you learn who a character really is only after wrapping up your first draft -- but that's just one thing you'll need to fix and the rest will fall in line. You write, learn, rewrite. Confidence comes from having a growth mindset, and the conviction that you can always improve what you're doing.

Below you'll go through a step-by-step process for managing your rewrite.

## Workbook:

As always, adjust this to suit your own process and style. This will help you structure a process that helps instill a sense of control.

1. After you finish the first draft, celebrate the win. Confidence breeds confidence. Make a little ritual – a toast, a walk, a candle, whatever. Instill confidence and take good care of yourself.
2. Detach. Get distance. Disconnect from all the emotion you poured into your story and all the dreams you have for it. Take some time away from it.
3. Get into the mindset of an editor who is tough but fair. Be curious about what you've written. Based on what you read, try to figure out what the story wants to be. Give yourself time to really think. Note what's working, what's authentic and well-crafted, and note what's not.



4. Work through the following checklist by asking yourself questions and journaling answers:

- Do you find the Central Dramatic Question (CDQ) interesting?
- Does the final moment answer the CDQ that is asked when the hammer comes down? Tie these two moments together. That throws a rope that catches the other side of the chasm.
- When your hammer comes down does it move you? Does it make you feel that this thing, happening to this person, at this time, would radically alter their life and need to be immediately addressed?
- Is the hero's object of desire clear? Does it make you want to go on the journey? The importance of this can't be overstated. Frodo needs to get the ring into the fires of Mordor, Hamlet needs to kill the king, Ladybird needs to escape her suffocating small-town life. What, exactly, does your hero need to do? And does their quest excite you?
- At this point, you should have a good feel for how well the beginning of your story is working. Now turn to the middle. As your hero struggles to acquire their object of desire, are they active and decisive? Do they make intelligent decisions and take compelling actions to get it?
- Are your scenes tightly connected by cause and effect? Does each scene lead directly to the next? Do you finish each scene and feel excited to learn what will happen next? You should be able to express them with simply written bullet points.
- Do you max out the intensity, emotion, and spectacle in the middle? Does the story seem to slow down or lose focus?
- Next, set up the transition from the middle into the ending. Does your hero take escalating risks until they are pushed to



make one final decision, the one they feel certain will answer the CDQ?

- Once your hero makes a decision that they are certain will lead them – or ultimately fail to lead them – to their object of desire, do you force them to *confirm* the decision by making it as hard as possible for them to stick to their guns?
- Do you resolve the CDQ cleanly, clearly, and definitely?
- Do you then tie up all loose ends, tell us how the hero feels, show us how they've changed from the beginning, and do you end with one single, emotionally charged image? To track their ultimate transformation, review your beginning here and make certain we feel the connection between start and finish.
- Are you exceeding expectations in unique ways, but within the conventions of your genre?
- Go through your cast. Is each character unique, compelling, essential? Does each have their own worldview, tone, vibe, and feel integral to the story? If you can cut a character without harming your story you either need to cut them or make them essential.
- Does your story feel meaningful to you? Did your hero's journey capture a truth about life as you see it?
- Lastly, trust your gut – did you enjoy the story or not? Use common sense and take notes on what you love and what you think needs work.

5. Put aside your editor's persona and reconnect with your story.



6. Take your time. Empty your mind. Consider the Buddhist idea of “active emptiness” – the emptiness in the cup that allows you to fill it. This will help you recognize things that inspire ideas for your story.
7. Once you’ve addressed the big issues, craft a new treatment or even just a light outline. And start the next draft.
8. The first thing a brown belt does is go back to the beginning. They return to white belt. Except now when they do the fundamentals and train the basics, they’re a whole different person. Their soul is bigger. They know more. They are not someone who feels silly in a gi. They have had some fights. They’ve been smacked upside the head and now they know why it’s so important to master the fundamentals. You’re not a white belt anymore. You know what you’re doing. You’re putting in the work.
9. Know that one of your most important advantages is your mindset. Other writers get nervous and intimidated by returning to square one. If you can feel confident here, you can feel confident anywhere. This is a competitive advantage.

Again, customize this process to suit your own style and needs. But now you should feel a great sense of confidence. You’re in control. Your mind is strong and you know exactly what you’re doing. You may not know how to solve each problem, but at least you know exactly which ones you’re working on. And that is very empowering. You got this.