

Polished Pages: Spring Clean Your Way to a Better Book

I am an expert at housework.

Wait, sorry, there was a word missing in that last sentence. I am an expert at *avoiding* housework. But at least once a year, I am seized with the uncharacteristic urge to do some manic spring cleaning. Time to dust top shelves blanketed in fuzz, purge rooms of obsolete items, and put the vacuum cleaner to good use...assuming I can find the vacuum cleaner.

During my latest bout of tidying insanity, it occurred to me that organizing my house is like writing a book. I start with excited optimism, filled with purpose. Then, halfway through, drowning in debris vomited from a closet I regret opening, I despair that my task is impossible. Swearing and chocolate follow.

A finished manuscript is a wonderful accomplishment (that, unlike a clean house, actually lasts), but don't rush to submit or self-publish. Years ago, I was so excited by an editor request that I deemed a problematic manuscript ready the same way my kids cram everything under their beds and deem their rooms "clean." You only get one chance at a first impression. Could your story benefit from a little polishing and rearranging? Does your narrative sparkle? Are your scenes logically organized?

Temporarily setting your work aside helps provide perspective. Have you ever pulled a fashion mistake from the depths of your closet and wondered *what the heck was I thinking?* In time, you may feel that way about some of the passages in your book. Give yourself a break from the story, then assess it with a critical eye to see if it could use a little spring cleaning.

The first step is often deciding what to keep, what to throw out, and what to recycle.

Occasionally, there will be a great section of writing that just doesn't match its surroundings; it could be a line that's really funny but doesn't feel like something a particular character would say. Or it could be a scene between secondary characters that doesn't fit the word count/focus of the book. Before you permanently erase anything, consider whether or not it could be used in the future. A subplot that was too unwieldy for your current book might work as the premise for a sequel. I keep a file on my desktop where I copy and paste bits that I might

want for later books or to use as fun “deleted scenes” extras on my website or in a newsletter.

Each book is different, and the areas that need the most work will vary. But there are common sources of clutter. To make your pages shine, pay close attention to repetition, conflict, description, and dialogue.

Rid Your Story of Repetition

There are times when repetition works well, when an author chooses to use it as a thematic element or running joke. But there are many ways repetition can sneak up on us, from overusing a favorite word to belaboring backstory. My first drafts are often full of unintentional redundancy, and, according to author Phyllis Bourne (*Between a Rock and a Hot Mess*), I’m not alone.

“In my last few manuscripts,” said Bourne, “I’ve had to do a seek and destroy mission on repetitiveness. If you tell readers something in chapter two, there’s no need to remind them again in chapters five, six and seven. I also check for spots where I’ve reinforced narrative with dialogue. In my head, I believe I’m making it extra clear for the reader, but in reality, it’s just repetitive.”

It helps to remember that audiences can read a book much faster than an author can write one. If you reference something multiple times over a period of weeks or months, it doesn’t feel like overkill, but a reader might see all those references in a matter of hours. As for pet phrases/overused words, don’t worry too much about them during the rough draft; just do a “Find” search once you’re done and delete as needed. After you sweep them away, no one will ever know they were there!

Clarify Conflict

Does your book have one or two clear reasons why the characters can’t be together, or is it a muddled mess of bickering and external obstacles?

It’s a given in most romance novels that the main characters will end the story in love. What keeps readers turning the page isn’t the anticipation of a surprise ending but seeing how the characters overcome the problem keeping them apart. Obviously, there can be more than just one obstacle to a relationship (especially if you’re writing a romantic suspense and, in addition to emotional hurdles, someone is trying to kill your characters.)

But sometimes when writers subconsciously register that the conflict isn't strong enough, we panic and crowd the book with contrived misunderstandings or ex-lovers who have no real reason to suddenly show up on the page. Instead of clustering together inferior, mismatched complications, invest in a key conflict and make it as strong as possible.

Declutter Description

My family has inhabited the same house for over a decade; possessions accumulate. Periodically we donate items that are great individually but add up to an overwhelming whole. What about the world your characters inhabit? Have you related that world in brief, memorable pictures or in overwhelming chunks that slow the pace of the story?

To tie the description into the story, make it as personal as possible. "Spending four paragraphs vividly describing an old, abandoned house doesn't pull many emotional strings," said author Jillian Neal (*Rodeo Summer*). Instead, bring in sense memories such as "she could only faintly recall the smell of her grandmother's chicken pot pie" that allow readers to become more emotionally connected to the characters.

Setting and description should accomplish something, not serve as filler that readers will skim over to get back to the action.

Clean Up Conversations

For me personally, dialogue is the most fun to write—yet sometimes I get carried away playing and don't realize the mess I'm making. I catch my characters giving unintentional speeches.

In real life, people make small-talk, babble, and offer random non sequitur observations. On the page, however, conversation needs to serve a purpose. As Kelly Bowen (*Duke of My Heart*) said, "Each dialogue passage, like any good action scene, should move the story forward. Each conversation should have a specific point. Keep in mind what the reader already knows and use that to springboard your dialogue. For example, if your characters have just survived a traumatic event together, they do not need to spend pages discussing how traumatic the event was. If you've done a good job writing that scene, the reader already

knows how awful it was. What your characters need to discuss is what happens next.”

When tidying up your dialogue, pay attention to the surrounding sentences as well. Have you used adverbs and dialogue tags sparingly, or are they stealing focus from what your characters are actually saying? There are benefits to breaking up dialogue with action tags—from providing visuals to demonstrating body language/a character’s state of mind—but a little bit goes a long way. Scenes become comically melodramatic if after every statement, a character is slamming a hand on a counter, waggling eyebrows, or gasping in surprise.

Write the first draft however it comes to you, but be prepared to streamline during edits.

No matter what areas in your manuscript need the most improvement, remember that sometimes in the process of cleaning, we first make an even bigger mess. It may not feel like progress, but editing isn’t always simple or pretty. You might have to tear apart a scene or chapter to reorganize it into a more effective version. Don’t be afraid to embrace the chaos.

And, in the meantime, I’ve found that swearing and chocolate often help.