

Notes to someone who was never happy with their work

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While reading 'liking' is mostly an emotional thing. When writing you should be far more analytical. If you're trying to write like you read then you'll be wobbling all over the place.

Personally I spend a lot of time developing and improving once the core is laid down then being picky about everything. Even user-guides have to be written well and checked although you normally have the structure of such a technical document laid down for you and the style is pretty basic.

For creative writing you need a solid structure, key ideas for plot, presentation and how the reader will approach the work. These are the themes in your head and the rest is writing skill. If when you're re-reading the core offends you then address the core issues by discussing the core with someone. They might suggest that the main character could be a man instead of a woman and what are the implications of that. Possibly the central idea has lost its cleverness or charm in which case put it into an archive with a note about what bothers you about it.

Once you are happy with your core you're onto the art of wordsmithing. If it was easy everyone would do it! Like everything, break it down. There are three ways to do this - use them all.

(1) Scenes, chapters, verses, conversations. ie. physical chunks of words. Every chunk of words has a purpose and you need to ask what is it, and do the words achieve it? You can ask this question at any time. When you're a fluent writer you'll be doing a good job of knowing at each moment what you want to say or recognise when there's too much of one thing going on, but it is more important to put something on the page than to worry at first writing. I once wrote a story but discovered my idea morphed into two; rather uncomfortable like two in a bath, with the cuckoo story being the eventual prize-winner. Going out tonight? So you'll pick the right sort of clothes, then actual clothes and finally, just before leaving you'll pick off bits of fluff and loose threads. See the analogy with getting your story finished.

(2) Themes, characters, chains of linked/contrasted items. Firstly you need to look carefully and pick them out. Many writers only have a vague idea of what's going on 'in the background'. For example if one character 'grows-up' then we'd expect the others to treat them differently, (how and when) and perhaps to see something symbolic (which may or may not be important to the character) changing likewise. Physical, emotional and ideological background is just as important as foreground. If your characters have a blazing row while sitting in a quiet park then that's different to them having a blazing row in an office, or a disco. There are other things going on and sitting down, picking them out and writing them down (in pencil notes on a big bit of paper) will teach you a lot about the glue that holds the piece together. "John was minding his own business when..." prompts lots of questions. What is his business? What is he doing now? Is he a

natural 'mind my own business' person? Where? Why now? Can people 'do nothing'? and so on. You don't need to tell the reader everything but as a writer you need to ask and answer to be in a position to insinuate the important stuff to the reader. "John shut out the other passengers with his newspaper." tells the reader more and asks more interesting questions about his character and circumstances.

(3) Rather than simply think 'this is rubbish' (or that's good and skip over it) use this checklist to spot weaknesses and sharpen things up:

- Character - People relate to people
- Compartments - Physical, temporal, ideological. Something trying to get in! Something unable to get out. If there's a storm outside (or brewing, or last night) then inside (etc.) will be contrasted and there will be a dividing line you can get your characters and readers to explore.
- Construction - Logical structure is essential. Be consistent with your style and 'voices'.
- Cracks/crisis - How do they appear? (To the characters and the reader) More uncertainty, suspense, exploration and emotion.
- Observation and description - This is why writers need to practice being precise.
- Crisp - Rambling is boring. You can be languid but avoid murkiness
- Colourful - Tickle the reader's imagination, sense of humour. Be interesting.
- Compelling - Emotional attachment and curiosity
- Convincing - Characters must be in character. Places must be pictured and smelled; and not have characteristics that can't be 'seen' by the people (or narrator) present. For example you can't say a lake is teeming with fish unless it is observed to be the case. If a character is running through a dark wet night in winter the lawns are not immaculately trimmed by a team of groundsmen. Action must flow. (Although action can be abbreviated if the reader is on the edge of their seat.) It is very odd for someone to knock at the door then be sat on the sofa drinking a cup of coffee without some joining action or reference to it. So "Come in. Sorry about the mess. Coffee?" (You want your reader to associate themselves with what's going on so try to connect with those everyday actions we do automatically. For example when the postman delivers a strange package one of the things everyone always does is feel how heavy it is, squeeze it and bend it a bit.)

Remember your readers

- Audience
- Age
- Ability

To conclude: Analyse your writing. Once you have the core sorted out (so you think - until some wonderful idea comes along that twists it - that's good) treat the piece as components to be finished to a high standard using the 1-2-3 above.