

10. Unwriting

If, after a lot of serious editing, your work still doesn't 'feel' right to you, it may be time to take more drastic measures. Before advocating major surgery, however, try this – more of an 'unwrite' than a 'rewrite'.

- Cover up the opening paragraph of your prose piece, or the first few lines/first stanza of your poem, or the first speech (perhaps even the first scene) of your play. Now read it as if it starts at this new point. How much, if anything, have you lost?
- Now cover up the final paragraph / the last few lines / the closing speech. Again, how much, if anything, have you lost?

You will probably find – as a lot of writers do – that the opening of your first draft has been more of a warming up exercise, a way of breaking yourself in gently to the often daunting task of filling that first blank page or screen. Strangely, these initial efforts can persist through any number of drafts, and it's only when you eliminate them and see that nothing's been lost that you realise what has happened.

Similarly, the ending of the first draft – often persisting through version after version – merely reflects the fact that you are unwilling to let go of something to which you have become deeply attached. Sometimes you just have to be ruthless with yourself.

Try this now with something you've written. You may find that removing more than the first and last paragraphs is necessary, but anything that sharpens your work is worth making sacrifices for. Over the years you will develop an instinct about this, but it's always something to bear in mind ...even when you're a published writer.