

Checklists for Revising Description

During drafting, the most important thing is to get the words of your story down on the page. It is not the time to be fussy about writing perfect descriptions. Ignore that voice that whispers in your ear: “Is this the best way to say this?” and just write.

My motto: **Draft sloppy. Draft fast.**

It is during revision that we can tidy up our descriptions and make them work for us. However, before you dive into the prose, make sure your story is structurally strong and that you know where your major plot points or moments of change are. Ready?

Here are five Revision Checklists for you.

Setting Description Checklist

- The chosen setting enhances the mood of the story and takes the story forward.
- The POV character is clear.
- Objective description is used only for brief, simple location descriptions.
- Vivid imagery using specific nouns creates a mental picture for the reader.
- Strong verbs are used instead of was/were.
- Vocabulary/language used fits POV character’s voice.
- Sensory experiences of the POV character are expressed.
- Cliches are avoided through the use of character-specific comparisons, similes, and metaphors.
- Personification is used to enhance landscape descriptions.
- Visual elements such as color, shape, form, texture, sound, and taste are described.
- Movement of elements in the environment adds tension to the story.
- The POV character uses one of the visual scanning methods: up/down, side to side, zooming in or out.
- Underfoot surfaces are described where relevant.
- Mood is created by using emotion-laden words
- Setting description is woven into dialogue, action, character descriptions, and inner thought.
- Setting description goes no longer than one or two paragraphs.
- Setting description is broken up with the POV character’s inner thoughts, movements, emotions, and sensory experiences.

Character Description Checklist

- There is a character profile for all important characters.
- The POV character is clear.
- Character names reflect the characters' personalities and roles.
- Nicknames and epithets are used to further develop and show personalities.
- Personality, physical features, body language, and visual appearance are interrelated and reflect character personalities.
- Facial expressions and body language go beyond cliché.
- Habitual or emotion-laden body movements enhance personality and show tension.
- Occupations affect the characters' appearances.
- Inner thought has the same "voice" as used in the POV character's dialogue.
- Dress, hair, personal belongings, and likes/dislikes are used to enhance character descriptions.
- Character descriptions are dabbed into the story. Except in special circumstances, no more than three items of appearance are given for a character at a time.
- Mirror or reflection descriptions of the POV character are avoided.
- The POV character does not mention things they cannot sense or perceive, nor mention their own hair, eye color, or facial expression, unless relevant to the story.
- Cliché and overused facial expressions, body features, voice, hair, and clothing are avoided.
- Vivid adjectives, comparisons, similes, and metaphors related to the characters are woven into dialogue, inner thought, and setting.
- Excessive character description is avoided when they first appear in the novel.
- Describe only what is essential to the story. Spread out small dabs of character description as needed to carry the story forward.

Action Description Checklist

- The POV character is clear
- Actions follow the MRS: motivator/stimulus-reaction pattern.
- Action sequences are enhanced by the inclusion of one or more of the following in the given order:
 - Involuntary reflexes (physical/exclamation/visceral)
 - Sensory experiences
 - Internal thought(s)
 - Speech/dialogue
 - Decision and new action
- Active, specific verbs are used to describe the actions.
- Auxiliaries are used minimally.
- Unneeded adverbs and adjectives are eliminated.

- Action is shown through the effects on the characters' hair, body, clothing, and the environment.
- Intense sections of action are shown using short sentences and fragments with minimal or no inner thought.

Inner Thought Description Checklist

- The POV character is clear
- Dialogue and inner thought match in voice.
- Inner thought shows the contradictions between what is said and done vs what the POV character believes and feels, thereby creating tension.
- Inner thought shows the character's growth in their thinking and beliefs. Over the course of the story.
- Inner thought helps the reader bond with the POV character by revealing a secret, a bit of backstory, an emotional struggle, and/or what the character most cares about.
- Reflection scenes of mostly inner thought follow action scenes to allow the character to mull over events and come to decisions. The Black Moment in the novel should be almost all inner thought.
- Head-hopping is avoided. When the POV character changes, so does the scene.
- Direct inner thought or italicized first-person used in a third-person novel is avoided.
- Filtering words have been eliminated
- Exclamations, interjections, and questions are used to make inner thought sound more intimate.
- Long sections of inner thought are broken up by the use of character movements and visceral and sensory reactions.
- Inside inner thought sections, the POV character's name is used only with an action.

Dialogue Description Checklist

- "Said" tags (include: ask, whisper, shout, etc.) are used only when the speaker is unclear.
- "Said" tags are replaced with descriptions of the quality of the character's voices.
- Visceral tags are used to show emotions.
- Physical movement and sensory tags are used to remind the reader where they are in the setting and what the character is doing.
- Body gestures and facial expression tags are used to enhance or contradict what the character is saying
- Inner thought tags are used to show what the character is thinking during the conversation and add tension.

- None of these tags are more than a sentence or two to prevent the conversation becoming unclear to the reader.