Why should the reader turn from the first page to the second? Is the language fresh? Are the characters alive? Does the first sentence, paragraph, page introduce real tension? If it doesn't, you have probably begun at the wrong place. If you are *unable* to find a way to introduce tension on the first page, you may have to doubt whether you have a story after all.

Is it original? Almost every writer thinks first, in some way or other, of the familiar, the usual, the given. This character is a stereotype, that emotion is too easy, that phrase is a cliché. First-draft laziness is inevitable, but it is also a way of being dishonest. A good writer will comb the work for clichés and labor to find the exact, the honest, and the fresh.

Is it clear? Although ambiguity and mystery provide some of our most profound pleasures in literature, beginning writers are often unable to distinguish between mystery and muddle, ambiguity and sloppiness. You may want your character to be rich with contradiction, but we still want to know whether that character is male or female, black or white, old or young. We need to be oriented on the simplest level of reality before we can share your imaginative world. Where are we? When are we? Who are they? How do things look? What time of day or night is it? What's the weather? What's happening?

Is it self-conscious? Probably the most famous piece of advice to the rewriter is William Faulkner's "kill all your darlings." When you are carried away with the purple of your prose, the music of your alliteration, the hilarity of your wit, the profundity of your insights, then the chances are that you are having a better time writing than the reader will have reading. No reader will forgive you, and no reader should. Just tell the story. The style will follow of itself if you just tell the story.

Where is it too long? Most of us, and even the best of us, write too long. We are so anxious to explain every nuance, cover every possible aspect of character, action, and setting that we forget the necessity of stringent selection. In fiction, and especially in the short story, we want sharpness, economy, and vivid, telling detail. More than necessary is too much. I have been helped in my own tendency to tell all by a friend who went through a copy of one of my novels, drawing a line through the last sentence of about every third paragraph. Then in the margin he wrote, again and again, "Hit it, baby, and get out." That's good advice for anyone.

Where is it undeveloped in character, imagery, theme? In any first, second, or third draft of a manuscript there are likely to be necessary passages sketched, skipped, or skeletal. What information is missing, what actions are incomplete, what motives obscure, what images inexact? Where does the action occur too abruptly so that it loses its emotional force?

* * *

Where is it too general? Originality, economy, and clarity can all be achieved through the judicious use of significant detail. Learn to spot general, vague, and fuzzy terms. Be suspicious of yourself anytime you see nouns like *someone* and *everything,* adjectives like *huge* and *handsome,* adverbs like *very* and *really.* Seek instead a particular thing, a particular size, an exact degree.

Although the dread of "starting over" is a real and understandable one, the chances are that the rewards of revising will startlingly outweigh the pains. Sometimes a character who is dead on the page will come to life through the addition of a few sentences or significant details. Sometimes a turgid or tedious paragraph can become sharp with a few judicious cuts. Sometimes dropping page one and putting page seven where page three used to be can provide the skeleton of an otherwise limp story. And sometimes, often, perhaps always, the difference between an amateur rough-cut and a publishable story is in the struggle at the rewriting stage.

An Example of the Revision Process

Short story writer Stephen Dunning won the 1990 "World's Best Short Story Contest" with a tight, complex, and evocative story that illustrates most of the principles discussed in this book. "Wanting to Fly" has, in two hundred and forty-five words, eight characters, a power struggle that builds and comes to a crisis, dialogue that reveals character and moves the action, a strong voice, irony, metaphor, and a pattern of change that reveals a theme.

Assuming that a story of such density was not "tossed off," I asked Dunning if he would share his revision process with other writers. What follows are four (of perhaps nine or ten) versions of the story, with Dunning's generous notes. He says:

> Mornings I often fast-write, try to hang onto my dreams. Not "free-write," but go so fast I leave censors behind, stumble and goof, hoping to trick myself into a little chunk I like. A word or an image. (Much less often, an "idea.")
>
> Very inefficient! I collect fast-writes (I do them on processor now, for speed) and when I have a stack, I search for chunks of language that interest me. I do this search with high-lighters in hand—pink, for hot items, yellow, for "maybe," green that means "Huh?" Things that puzzle me, but might be important. Obsessions, for example. I highlight words, phrases, images, "talk," mistakes. (Unproved theory of mine: write fast enough, make enough mistakes, you can track your obsessions. They leak out on you.)
>
> How much do I glean?
>
> As little as possible. I've learned, a few words per page. An occasional sentence.
>
> I type these little chunks fresh, set them up in their new environment. Then I doodle, connecting items with lines, starring something special. Now I'm ready to

"practice writing," which is what practicing writers do.

How? By answering my own questions: Why does this interest me? What else can I say about it? What does it remind me of? What would ________(Mother, my childhood sweetheart, Jesus, my mean sister, Winston Churchill—plug in someone who fits) say about this?

In a journal entry dated "somewhere around Halloween 1989," Dunning produced the "fast-write" (what I've referred to in this book as freedrafting) that provided the seeds of the story "Wanting to Fly." The fast-write passage is reproduced here exactly as it came from his word processor, "stumble and goofs" intact.

Version 1

fqast write from dreamsone is a computer dream. it's twenty two fifty eighjt st clair with the mansion full of statues, hedges. thje magraw boiys danny, oliver, the disapproving one with glasses in the mansion games i did ook, better than the midget biully k but often last withj danny ollie. a bunch of othjer boys, the skinny lop-jawed one who spit at me in fooitball. the golden moment, facing him down. leary, he weas. hius name. stsate fair time, aboiut ten guys playing ball leary was spitting and and tried to tackle me on the rocks, us others, us good guys, would try not to, ill fighjt you fair and square. god, i was good. the other boys waiting. leary backing down. some superboy hero! the evenings when the magraws had to go, id fly over into the mansion. crosbys'. sail from our back porch, go low over the hedges between crosbys and us, soar arouind statues, swoop along hedges. then poull up into resting places, a sectret birdself, something i swear i did, i was a bird, i flew. i restded on statues and tree limbs. i can see the hedges and statues. did the dream go bad? at some pooint i wasn't in it, but watching. dozens of little figures, Boschian. a camera scan a huge painting made up of hundreds of little vignettes of weird, gnome like, devilish flyuers. pictogfraphs, almost, but lots of soaring and dipping. i know it was not the way it shoild be. i was watching, helpless to make everone everhything stop. the other flyers shoildn't be there. my place to fly. the night wqas purple and i love the lightness and speed of my flying. then the dream ended, I tried to identify the wonder of it. it seemed to end on Where did these wondrous things come from? They weren't the neightborhood boys. not worried///tjhere at the ened.

This first-draft-of-something-or-other clearly draws on both dreams and memory. In the second version (which Dunning says is four or five drafts/editings into a possible story) the author has achieved a gently ironic distance on the character of the boy, but it is interesting to note that he has provided a "frame" with a writer in it—something that many writers do, sometimes in an early version, sometimes in a final publication. Perhaps the introduction of an autobiographical element in the frame helps of itself to find authorial distance. By now the bird-boy of the dream has transmogrified into a human cannonball.

Version 2

Leroy slid open the bottom drawer where they kept his costumes. The white and red looked shabby; the silver looked ok. Nylon, and shiny. He thought of something he wanted to write.

"*Part four,*" he wrote. "*I always wanted to fly.*"

I was eight years old, in third, in Mrs. McKissup's third grade, when my father took me to State Fair. In the grandstand, after the horse races, sitting close to the track and the infield stage, we saw a man in silver tights and big handlebar moustache shot from a cannon. The name I remember is "The Great Zambini," but that doesn't look exactly right. Later my father gave me names like "The Flying Weenie" and "Zamboosi, the Goosey."

That same night of the State Fair I tried to paint my BVD longies with the gold paint in the tiny spray can Mother used to gild the birdcage. Right over my belly button I made a spot the size of a golden apple before the paint ran out. When my father saw it he paddled my ass with his hairbrush. That May, for my ninth birthday, Mother gave me a silver-grey t-shirt with a picture of Halley's comet flashing in red across the front.

Leroy got up from the table to get a beer. In the Lucky Lager six-pack, Carmen had set two cans of Diet Pepsi. Hint, hint, lay off the sauce. Leroy rolled his eyes and twisted out one of the beers. Well, that was like her, fairly comical.

I could fly in that shirt. Summer evenings in the eerie dusk after supper I wheeled around the neighborhood, content to fly alone. Daytimes at Duncan Frenzel's house I pumped the backyard tire swing higher than anyone and learned how to fly out from it just right before the swing reached the top of its arc. I flew out three or four feet beyond Duncan. At school in the sixth grade me and two buddies took over the primary grades' slide and slid down on our stocking feet, launching off from the lip to see who could jump farthest. Mrs. McKissup came over to tell us to let the little children use the slide. When Mrs. McKissup's back was turned, we went back to the slide, and before that day is out, of course, the three of us are in Mr. Beaver's office.

He calls us "childish" and "selfish." This happens again, he'll have to call our parents. Duncan giggles then, and gets a dirty look. When Mr. Beaver asks what would we do if we were trying to run a decent school, we both giggle. Maybe we had the same idea. Mine was to get rid of Mrs. McKissup and let our student teacher teach. She was beautiful, like a model.

My father heard about it anyway and beat me with the hairbrush until finally I cried and spit "I hate you!" in his face.

The summer between seventh and eight, Philip Callum and me made a slide from a refrigerator carton and nailed it onto the Callum's back porch roof. It hung out two feet past the edge of the roof. Mrs. Callum worked at the Police Department, and

I called her there when Philip landed wrong and broke his ankle. I didn't know the ankle was broke, just that Philip was screaming like crazy and couldn't walk. Before she got home, I tore the slide off the roof, and it wasn't until the first rain that Mr. Callum found out that his porch roof sprinkled like a watering can. After the phone call on that, Daddy beat me hard with the hairbrush. This is like ten days after.

That was my last beating. As long as I was still there, he never beat me. I think that in some serious way Mother told him not to, and he listened. I felt he could do what he wanted to her, but not to me. Later, once I'd run away and started coming home to visit, my father and I got along.

I was visiting after New Year's, home from Ice Capades, when he drowned. January fifth. Out ice-fishing with Arn Bower, he went out further than he should. He knew it was thin. He broke through and came up under the ice. I saw his face before they got him out.

I cancelled the gig I had starting mid-January. I was tired anyway.

Then I remember maybe once a day Arn would call on my mother. They'd drink a few. Arn would put his arms around her, holding her what seemed more than she wanted, but it was hard to tell. Sometimes I watched from outside, saw Mother push Arn's hands from her legs and breasts. But she didn't push hard or seem not to like it when he started again. I always made plenty of noise so Mother could get herself arranged before I come in.

Before, when I was fifteen, I saw the ad for Wallace's World Carnival coming to Anoka. I left a note for Mother, saying I was going to hitch-hike to my Aunt's, at White Bear Lake. I took the Selby-Lake streetcar the opposite direction to the end of the line, and thumbed to Anoka.

I slept that night in the back end of a truck that hauled the ferris wheel; I left the following night in the cab of that same truck. Willie Farley drove, another runaway named Annette sat in the middle, and me against the side door. I'd got hired as roustabout. I'd help put up the rides and tents, clean up after the animals. A dollar a day, food, sleep wherever I could.

He got the next-to-last beer. How long since he'd thought about Annette! Writing was terrific that way, making you remember things.

Willie was my best friend for two years. Long before Annette left to go home to Anoka, Willie got her drunk on dago red and held her head in his lap, in case she tried to get away. It was Willie's plan to help me lose my cherry. "It's time, Little Buddy, don't use it, you lose it."

"How's Annette going to like it?"

"How about you think about your own end, you let me take handle Annette here?"

Then after Willie got her so drunk she didn't know which end was up, he held her head while I pumped myself into her. I'd like myself better if I said I didn't enjoy it, but I did. Annette hardly seemed to notice.

Then Willie left us, going off to get some food. I lay alongside Annette, my right hand under her sweatshirt on her chest. Later she threw up. I got her drinks of water and told what had happened. She already sort of knew. She cried and then we slept there restlessly. At dawn we woke up together, she said she loved me and made me do it to her again. This time was nice. I was full of the wonder of sex, thinking it would be even better if you loved the girl you were making love to, and I didn't love Annette. She never had enough in her mind.

Willie was glad to have Annette shift over on to me. I was up to three dollars a day when Salazar, The Silver Bullet, joined our show, expanded for a two-week stay outside Memphis. In his first flight Salazar broke through his net—It was terrible rotted—and smashed his face bad. Lost half his nose, some teeth, broke his cheekbone and jaw. Willie and Old Man Wallace himself had four hours to talk me into doing the night show. "You're the right size," Old Man Wallace said. Salazar had a small barrel to his cannon. "You bail me out on this one, you're on your way to the big time." With help from Alex the Alligator Man we hauled the gun to a nearby high school football field and rigged a good net. The two of them told me what they thought was true about cannon-balling. Before that night was over, I'd found out they didn't know beans. I can say these three things. You have to push off of the plunger and you have to stretch out in flight. You have to land some way you don't break your bones. Otherwise, it's easy if you have the nerve and don't mind the jolts to your joints.

Carmen came in from her hymns. Leroy hoped she'd say something, like "What you writing there, Leroy?" Anything. But her face was shiny with the humidity and her joy. She was still in Beulah Land. "Oh, the singin was so fine, Leroy, you should of heard us sing."

"I've been writing, here," he said.

"They're raising money for a new organ," Carmen said. "Praise the Lord, we need it."

Leroy turned back to his notebook. "Annette found some silver tights . . ." he said aloud, thinking that might catch her. He wrote that down and went on.

. . . a silver bowling jacket that she took the name off, and a silver spray for my hair. By showtime, I could have flown without the cannon. It was partly knowing that Annette was there, but it was also inevitable: me being a human cannonball was what had to happen because I was me. My father's Flying Weenie. Because of all those nights and dream-times of flying, and the flight from Philip Callum's porch roof. I spelled inevitable *in the fifth grade bee but sat down next-to-last on* para-noid, *putting in a* y *even though I knew better.*

Polly Pineo won. I wanted her to win. I don't know exactly what I thought would happen if she won, but I know I was glad when she did.

I never saw that Salazar again. Old Man Wallace bought the cannon. Or said he did. They used me wherever the space laid out right. Willie and I fixed up Salazar's old cannon until I could fly one hundred fifty feet.

Annette went home, but there were other girls and women everywhere.

Dunning confesses that the second version puzzles him, and that it's possible "the market" was beginning to play a role. "My hunch is: I was trying to get a piece both for the PEN Syndicated Fiction Award" (which Dunning has won twice) "and for the World's Best Short Short Story Contest. Both contests have word limits—PEN's 2,500 and WBSSSC's severe 250."

Dunning also felt that both contests had "taboos, stated or inferred." Perhaps for that reason he drew back in a subsequent long version from the narrator's loss of virginity to a—stronger, in my opinion—bittersweet kissing scene. Gone also are the characters of the writer and his girlfriend Carmen, and the whole frame with its writer writing. The boy's story is sharpened and tightened, but otherwise remains substantially the same.

It's interesting that at this point Dunning began to title his versions, a clue that he had a sense of shape and theme. The progression of titles indicates a subtle shift of emphasis, from "Flying," to "I Always Wanted to Fly," to "Wanting to Fly."

By the time he came to write the penultimate version, Dunning knew he was aiming for the 250-word maximum demanded by the World's Best Short Short Story Contest. He had drastically pruned and condensed. "Note a shift to the present," he says, "a fine way to cut words." One consequence of the shortening is that characters are squashed to sketches ("Bye-bye, Annette: In longer versions she was prominent; here she's a walk-on.") Yet this distilling represents a natural process of characterization, and the richness of the earlier portraits no doubt contributes to the vividness of the later one.

This version of Dunning's story is reproduced as a facsimile of his working manuscript. He says, "Here the inked numbers in the upper right corner indicate that with my pen editings, I've cut 338 to 307. (Lord, Lord! Another 57 to go.)"

Version 3

WORLD'S BEST SHORT STORY CONTEST
991/620/551/496/418/400/369/362/338

338
31
307

I always wanted to fly.

At State Fair we see a man ~~in~~ with silver tights and a handlebar moustache shot from a cannon, a name like ''The Great Zambini''? Driving home Father calls me ~~names like~~ ''Zamboosi, the Goosey'' and ''Flying Weenie.'' But That night, when I paint my BVD's with Ma's birdcage spray, he paddles me good.

My ninth birthday Ma gives me a silver-grey t-shirt with Halley's comet [flashing] across the front. I can fly in that shirt. (Arms out stiff, I tilt around the neighborhood.) [~~Duncan Frenzel and I use~~ catches Duncan and me on] the kindergarten slide.] Mrs McKissup comes over: ''Now you big boys, let the children use it.''

[We don't listen.] Before long we're in Mr. Beaver's office.

''Childish,'' he says. ''Selfish.'' Duncan giggles, (~~and gets a look~~.) Mr. Beaver asks what *we'd* do if we was trying to run a decent school. We both giggle, and Father gets the (~~old~~) call. He beats me with his hairbrush.

(~~We nail it good to Frenzel's porch roof, but~~) Our refrigerator-carton slide, nailed good to F's roof, isn't steady. Duncan lands wrong, screaming and hollering, and I call the police, (~~where his ma works.~~)(~~Turns out~~) the ankle was broke. When it rains, Mr. Frenzel's (~~porch~~) roof sprinkles like a watering can.

That was my last beating.
~~The last time Father beats me is for that.~~

Wallace's Carnival hires me to assemble rides (~~tents and clean after animals.~~) A dollar a day, food, sleep where I can. Next day We leave for Toledo ~~the next day~~, Willie Farley driving the ferris-wheel truck, [another runaway named Annette in the middle, me against the door.]

It's Willie teaches me to fly.

[Annette knows other things.]

And I've been flying ever since. Once I'm famous, Father and me get along fine. I'm home from Cole Brothers

when he drowns. [January fifth,] ice-fishing with Arn Bower. [Father knows the ice is thin, but breaks through and comes up under it.] (Before they get him out,) I see his face, mouth open and lopsided, a giant perch.

Arn Bower starts keeping Ma company, (and that's good.) Wherever I fly there's women for me.

The final award-winning and published version of Dunning's story is so dense that it verges on that hybrid form, the prose poem.

"At some point," he says, "there's tension between the stuff (language, content) and the form. One effect, unfortunate, is sentences that sound more like telegrams than art. But another effect comes from the demands of the form, inviting the writer to 'imaginative' uses of language. Not *altogether* different from writing a haiku or a sonnet, is it? In the third version I wrote:

We don't listen. Before long we're in Mr. Beaver's office. Trying to hang onto the 'stuff' and still honing the piece, the final version reads:

In two minutes Duncan and me're in Beaver's office.

A slender nine words instead of ten! The final version has a little more stuff and 'shows' (images) more than it 'tells.' It's more specific—'In two minutes' instead of 'Before long'—*adding* a word!; 'names' (Duncan and me), and has that lovely contraction (me + are into me're.)

Makes me smile even now."

Final Version

Wanting to Fly

At State Fair a man in silver tights and handlebar moustache—some name like The Great Zambini—blasts from a cannon. Driving home, Father calls me "Goosey Zamboosi" and "Flying Weenie." But later, when I spray my BVD's with Ma's birdcage paint, he paddles me good.

Again.

For my ninth birthday, Ma gives me a silver-grey t-shirt with Halley's comet flashing across. I can fly in that shirt—arms stiff, tilting. Then Mrs. McKissup catches us on the kindergarten slide. "You boys! Let the children use it."

In two minutes Duncan and me're in Beaver's office.

"Childish," Mr. Beaver says. "Selfish." Duncan giggles. "What would you do, you're trying to run a decent school?" We both giggle.

Father uses the hairbrush.

Duncan and me nail a refrigerator-carton to Frenzels' porch roof. Duncan falls awful hard, grabbing his ankle. "It's broke," he hollers. I run for his ma. Next rain the Frenzels' roof sprinkles like a watering can.

My last beating ever.

Wallace's Carnival hires me to assemble rides—dollar a day, food, sleep anywhere I can. We head for Toledo, Willie Farley driving the ferris-wheel truck. It's Willie teaches me cannon-flying. I get pretty famous.

Then of course Father and me get along. I'm home from Cole Brothers when Father drowns, ice-fishing with Arn Bower. Before they hook him, I see his face—mouth open and lopsided, a giant perch.

Arn Bower starts keeping Ma company, and that's good. There's women wherever I fly.

What you have just read is the story of a story, with Dunning as hero trying to catch a little bit of a literal dream, wrestling it, messing up, sidetracked, persistent, pulled by contradictory forces (the dream, the market), learning as he goes, changing as the thing he is making changes. If you think that is a lot of trouble to go to for two hundred and fifty words, think again. That's what writing is.

I remember that in my freshman English class at the University of Arizona, Patrick McCarthy was trying to impress us with how hard we ought to work. He described his own struggle the night before, till two A.M., for a single paragraph. He was a powerful storyteller, and he made it grindingly awful. I was appalled. I put up my hand. "But doesn't it," I asked cheerfully, "get easier?"

McCarthy thought a moment. "No," he said. "It doesn't get easier. It gets better."

And that's the truth of it. There are fine professional writers who never, as a contemporary said of Shakespeare, "blot a word." (Twentieth-century translation: blip a word.) But they are precious few, and you and I are not among them. The minute we get comfortable doing something, we'll do something else; the minute we reach our standards, we'll raise them. The reward will probably not be fame or money or even an intense life replete with talk of illusion and reality, art and death. More likely the reward will be, now and then, some such thing as a "lovely contraction." It'll be enough.