SEASONED WRITERS are of two dispositions: the drafters and the revisers. A few lucky souls achieve a state of indifference toward these activities—they’re both willing drafters and revisers, and that is, of course, the sought-after state. Almost all of us begin as drafters, fillers of empty notebooks. The process of writing draws us and holds us in our seats. Later, once we have a readership, even one as small as a writers group or a devoted spouse, we shift our focus from process to product, and this shift is absolutely necessary to our development as artists.

We become revisers. We learn the habit and discipline of revision, which is the most important part of the writing process. Even so, almost all of us will admit to a lingering preference—either we find it difficult to move on or difficult to begin again. These preferences are partly due to personality: Some of us will live in the same house for a lifetime, while others crave new scenery on a regular basis.

Revision means to see again. And there are at least two ways of perceiving—from a distance and close up. The first and most important step in revising a novel is to achieve some distance on the draft at hand, what is referred to as large-scale revision. Here you concern yourself with the architectural integrity of the structure you’ve created and consider questions such as changes in point of view, the need for additional subplots, and alternative beginnings and endings. In The Writing Life, Annie Dillard uses metaphors to illuminate the process of writing a book. My favorite is the house:

The line of words is a hammer. You hammer against the walls of your house. You tap the walls, lightly, everywhere. ... Some of the walls are bearing walls; they have to stay, or everything will fall down. ... Unfortunately, it is often a bearing wall that has to go. It cannot be helped... Knock it out. Duck.

Find ways to gain perspective. Try doing as Tobias Wolff does: Move the furniture out of the living room and spread your manuscript across the floor like a deck of cards. He moves chapters around and then scenes. He stirs things up, opens a window on the story and lets a breeze rush through.

Stephen Koch suggests that writers who’ve finished a first draft consider writing a scenario, a “short but detailed précis or paraphrase of the story that’s been forming.” Note that the story is still “forming.” It isn’t all there yet, so it’s not time for small-scale revision.

Small-scale revision is fix-up work, the sort of thing you do when you buy a house and decide to replace the kitchen cabinets. Small-scale revision is prettifying, and in a novel that means developing scenes, reducing some scenes to summary, and layering in description and detail. It’s updating, like adding new bathroom fixtures. New fixtures won’t do much for a house that’s sitting on a cracked foundation. The essentials of structure must be attended to first.

After small-scale revision comes editing. Editing is essentially touch-up work, where you’ll attend to matters of style: paragraph and sentence structure, clarity, concision. Don’t get ahead of yourself. What’s the point of spackling a wall that’s going the way of a sledgehammer?

As much as possible, separate these activities rather than doing them concurrently. Whatever you do, try to complete one project before starting a new one.

Sharon Oard Warner
Currently at work revising her second novel, Sweetness, Sharon Oard Warner is director of creative writing at the University of New Mexico.