

Hi, Amy,

I am delighted to have this chance to exchange some ideas with you person to person—although not yet face to face. (Thank you, Paula, for coming up with the Makeover idea!)

You have a real flair for telling a good story and telling it well, with lots of little suspenseful surprises along the way, and you do a fine job with dialogue. I know, too—because I read your other entry in the Makeover Contest—that you also have talent for setting the mood of a scene and (a great combination) an inclination for fantasy.

The first chapter of *Suspicion of Evil* contains some very good, subtle and not-so-subtle, foreshadowing that really kept me involved in what promises to be a story full of the twists and turns that readers love.

The first paragraph did a *very* good job of letting the reader know a number of things about Kaycee without directly stating these facts of her situation: She lives on an ocean beach, there was a terrible accident sometime in the past, she is struggling with grief, and (it appears) storms will play a part in this story. We *sense* here that *something* is going to happen that bring about a dramatic change. You use sound, sight, smell, touch, as well as narrative, to bring the reader to this point.

I was especially glad that your first chapter was selected for the Makeover dialogue because the chapter also shows some common writer-habits that—once you learn to notice them—are very easy to correct/improve in your next-draft revisions.

### Overall suggestions

Before getting to the manuscript itself, let me begin with some big-picture suggestions for your consideration:

1. The focus of my attention in commenting on the chapter is directed toward ways in which you can **tighten up** throughout to keep the story moving. You will see that I have highlighted words and phrases that can be cut or rewritten to eliminate

- 1) **wordiness**
- 2) **repetition** of words or phrases
- 3) **extraneous** words or phrases, and
- 4) **clichéd** phrases.

At the end of the manuscript I have appended brief comments on each of these types of problems for reference and to give you a little more insight into how you might search these out in doing revisions. {Or you could skip now to the section marked \*\*\*.}

2. In revisions you must take a close look at the conventions of **punctuation**. In general, I feel one should not labor over the mechanics in the first rush of creativity, but you will want to brush up on the use of commas, semi-colons, ellipses, and dashes. In the end, when you submit work for publication, punctuation *does* matter. In these days of digital typesetting, those old-time editors and proofreaders are all but extinct. Acquisition editors are looking for perfectly prepared manuscripts. I have altered some of your punctuation in **red** without comment—just to give you the idea.

3. You will find that you do not need to take your character through every step of an action to get her

from here to there. This trait is sometimes called *bridging*, but you might think of it as **stage directions**. Playwrights do it because they have to, but you should not. Bridging leads to flat writing and slows the action. The reader in her mind fills in the steps of familiar actions.

To take a brief example, you write “Brenda gave her a final hug, then walked to the front door, opened it, and ran to her car in the rain.” Try compressing that to something like “Brenda gave her friend a final hug, opened the door against a driving rain, and ran to her car.”

Here’s a hint: There are a couple of key words that signal bridging is about to occur. The first is *and* when used to start a sentence, but also in coordinate clauses. A second red flag is the word *then* when used as a conjunctive adverb, or connector, as in the example above.

### **Here’s my plan:**

I.

I have decided to do a line-edit of the *first two paragraphs* with 1) some color coding, followed (2) by a rewrite to show how those paragraphs might read if suggested changes are made. I think it will be easier for you to see what I mean if I illustrate my points in this way in these opening paragraphs, and then leave it to you to decide from there on if, or how, these types of changes may work for you as you do your own revisions in the remainder of the chapter..

From there I will go through the rest of the manuscript where I will make a few additional suggestions using a different format. I will again color-code words and phrases for your attention, as with the first two paragraphs, but without any re-write. (That’s for you to decide.) I will mark sentences or sections where I have a comment with a bold capital letter such as **[A]**, adding that comment at the end of the paragraph so as not to disrupt the flow.

In my first reading of *Suspicion of Evil* I made a note that the first two-thirds of the chapter is Kaycee’s story; the final third, in a different setting, is Brenda’s story. My sense was that you have two chapters here, depending on how the entire book is structured. The types of revisions I am suggesting are the same for both “chapters.” For this reason—with one exception—I have commented only on the Kaycee “chapter.” I did feel that you may wish to build out the flashback segment of Brenda’s story a little bit more. You have a lot to work with there. I will be happy to go over that chapter with you later if you think it would be helpful.

### **Your manuscript**

So, let’s get started on the first two sample paragraphs. All of this markup may look daunting or complicated, but, believe me, it is not.

### **Here is your original text:**

The smell hung heavy in the salted air, coming closer with each crashing wave that pounded the shoreline. Kaycee Beaumont increased the speed of her morning jog to a near sprint hoping not to get caught in the torrential downpour that was riding in with the angry surf. After the accident, she had taken up jogging as a method of therapy—not that it had helped any—and knew she still had nearly a

quarter of a mile to go when the first droplet of rain spattered her back. Knowing it was useless to run in what was now beginning to feel like quicksand, she came to a stop, reached down, took off her running shoes and began walking the rest of the distance home. She hadn't made it very far when the first droplets of delicate rain turned into a pounding surge. Although the rain had felt like needles pricking her back, she was enjoying the way the saturated sand oozed between her toes with each step she took, and at a snails pace, walked the rest of the way home.

Up ahead, even through the slanting sheets of rain, Kaycee could see the "For Sale" sign at the edge of the property, sticking out of the sand like a grave marker. She couldn't call it *her* property anymore or even *her* house. Ever since the accident it was simply *the* house or *the* property. And until it sold that's the way it would remain. The property had been on the market now for over a year and still there were no bites. Not even a nibble. And until she was able to sell, she would have to remain there and relive that fateful night, day after day after day.

### **Here is the markup:**

The smell of rain hung heavy in the salted air, coming closer **with** each crashing wave that **pounded** the shoreline. Kaycee Beaumont increased the speed of her ~~morning~~ jog to a ~~near~~ sprint, hoping ~~not to get caught in the~~ **torrential downpour** [to escape the downpour] ~~that was~~ riding in **with** [on] the angry surf. After the accident she had ~~taken up jogging as a method of therapy not that it had helped~~ ~~any~~ [began her runs on the beach, restlessly seeking peace in the solitude of early morning.] She ~~knew~~ She had nearly a quarter of a mile to go when the **first droplet** [spray] of rain spattered **her back**, [turning in moments into a wind-driven volley that pricked her skin like fine needles.] She ~~hadn't made it very far when the~~ **first** ~~droplets~~ of delicate rain turned into a **pounding** surge. ~~Although the~~

~~rain had felt like needles pricking her back. [She hadn't made it very far when a fresh surge of rain became a torrent. Knowing it was useless to run in what was now beginning to feel like quicksand, [the]wet sand, [now beginning to tug like quicksand at her running shoes, she stopped, took off her shoes and began walking.] She came to a stop, reached down, took off her running shoes and began walking the distance home. Kaycee enjoyed the way the saturated sand oozed between her toes with each step she took. and at a snails pace, she walked the rest of the way home She slowly walked the rest of the way home.~~

Up ahead, even through the slanting sheets of rain, Kaycee could see the "For Sale" sign at the edge of the property, ~~sticking out of~~ [rising up out]of the sand like a grave marker. She couldn't call it her property anymore or even her house. ~~Ever~~ Since the accident it was simply *the* house or *the* property. ~~And Until~~ it sold that's the way it would be. ~~remain.~~—The property had been on the market ~~now~~ for over a year and still there were no bites. Not even a nibble. ~~And Until~~ she was able to sell, she would have to ~~remain~~ there and relive that fateful night, day after day after day. [If she did not find a buyer, she would remain here and have to relive that fateful night, day after day after day.]

### **Here is how that might read:**

The smell of rain hung heavy in the salted air and heavier still with each crashing wave that pounded the shoreline. Kaycee Beaumont increased the speed of her jog to a sprint, hoping to escape the downpour she saw riding in on the angry surf. She had begun her daily runs on the beach after the accident, restlessly seeking peace in the solitude of the Florida early mornings. She had nearly a quarter of a mile to go when the first spray of rain spattered her back, turning in moments into a wind-driven volley that pricked her skin like fine needles. She hadn't made it very far when a new surge of rain became a torrent. Knowing it was useless to run in the wet sand, now tugging like quicksand at her running shoes, she stopped, took off her shoes and began walking. Kaycee enjoyed the way the

saturated sand oozed between her toes with each step she took. She slowly walked the rest of the way home.

Up ahead, even through the slanting sheets of rain, Kaycee could see the “For Sale” sign at the edge of the property, rising up out of the sand like a grave marker. She couldn’t call it *her* property anymore or even *her* house. Since the accident it was simply *the* house or *the* property. Until it was sold, that’s the way it would be. The property had been on the market for over a year and still there were no bites. Not even a nibble. If she did not find a buyer, she would remain here and have to relive that fateful night, day after day after day.

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So, here we go with the rest of the text! I will give you some hints and comments based on my reading. But, remember, this is *your* book. Only you can know what works *for you*.

Beginning at the third paragraph, which is where we left off in the experiment above:

At the bottom of the steps leading to a substantial back deck, Kaycee stopped and wiped her sopping hair from her eyes and face, **then** looked up. It was **then that** she saw the shadow of a figure standing under the overhang of the house well above her. Taking the steps two at a time she made her way up towards **[A]** the deck.

**[A]** *Toward*, rather than *towards*, is preferred in American usage.

“It’s about time,” a voice squealed. **[B]** “I’m soaked!” Kaycee **couldn’t help but** laughed when she saw the condition of her best friend, Brenda Stellars. Always perfectly dressed and made up, she now stood looking more like a wet dishrag than **the perfect starlet she was so used to being called**, **[C]** with her auburn hair plastered to her face and black mascara trailing down her cheeks.

**[B]** “said” works best 99 percent of the time. The other 1 percent is “asked” or “answered” or a very few other ways of handling attribution. See other instances below which I flag with **[B]**.

[C] Wordy. Try something like “than the woman known for her movie-star grooming.”

“Not funny!” Brenda complained. [B] “Open the damn door would you?”

“It’s unlocked.”

“What!” she shrieked. [B] “You’re ~~to~~ telling me I’ve been standing out here in this ...this hurricane, and the door has been unlocked the whole time?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m telling you. Besides it’s not a hurricane,” Kaycee laughed, [B] “Just a little tropical storm.”

“Whatever. Look at me!”

“I kind of like the new you.” Kaycee said, unable to stop the laughter behind the words. “Come on, I’ll make some coffee and get you some dry clothes.”

Opening the sliding glass door, they walked into the kitchen area where the warmth was a ~~welcoming~~ [welcome] relief from the ~~blowing, slightly chilled~~ rain. [D] Kaycee let her soggy shoes fall to the floor, where they landed with a loud thump, then [and] left the kitchen to change into dry clothes. “Start a pot of coffee, will you?” She yelled [E] from the living room.

[D] Wordy. How about “chilling rain”?

[E] Yelling: This word calls attention to itself. Distracting. Try “called back over her shoulder from the living room”?

Within a few minutes, Kaycee returned to the kitchen wearing a pair of cut-off denim shorts and a Miami Dolphins tee-shirt. Her blond hair was towel dried and hung ~~half-way~~ halfway down her back in a neat ponytail.

“Have you had breakfast yet?” She asked, ~~Brenda~~, handing [Brenda] ~~her~~ a pair of stretch shorts and a similar tee-shirt. [F]

**[F]** This is the kind of place where you can add interesting, if not wholly relevant, detail. Make it another NFL team's shirt?. Atlanta Falcons? (The idea here is, take the opportunity to add another little detail, a little more texture, to Kaycee's character—she and/or Mark were football fans.)

"No," she answered, and **then** disappeared into the nearest bathroom. No doubt trying hard to fix her muddled appearance, Kaycee thought. **[G]**

**[G]** muddled: Try for a better word here. Disheveled?

When she returned, Brenda was as organized as she could **possibly** be under the circumstances, **and** helped herself to a cup of steaming coffee. **[H]** She took a seat at the kitchen table and sat in silence, sipping her black coffee, unsure where to begin.

**[H]** There is a verb agreement problem in the compound sentence as written (*was* passive and past tense; *helped* active tense indicating present action). Break it up.

Outside the rain was crashing into the side of the house **with** ~~at~~ ~~an~~ alarming **force**, ~~speed~~ and gusts of wind were picking up **immensely**. Its whistling fury was easily heard over the sounds of roaring waves and sizzling bacon. **[I]**

**[I]** Good image but the line needs tweaking.

"You sure this isn't a hurricane?" Brenda asked, still not wanting to approach the pressing issue of her visit.

"Positive." Kaycee answered. She removed the crisp bacon, set it on several layers of paper towels to drain, and **then** poured a generous amount of scrambled egg mixture into the hot skillet. After adding fresh peppers, onions, and mushrooms, she turned to face Brenda.

"Out with it," she said, "and don't play dumb. I know you too well, and I know you wouldn't be caught dead out in the rain, let alone out in a storm, without a reason."

"Can't a girl just come and visit her best friend?"

"Brenda!"

"All right, all right. I found a house," she finally managed.

"Come on, Brenda, you know I can't move until I sell this house."

"Yes you can, and you know it."

"I'm not touching that money and that's the end of it!"

"Do you really think Mark would want you to be like this?"

**[J] [K]** Ignoring her, Kaycee turned back to the stove and stirred the eggs. She dropped two slices of wheat bread into the toaster and slammed down the arm. **[I]**

**[J]** Very good handling of dialogue, as is the "slammed down the arm." That's great "showing, not telling" the reader about Kaycee's mood.

**[K]** Paragraph break would work here because you have an implied change of speakers.

"He's dead Kaycee." Brenda continued. "It's been five years and I'm sorry, but you can't stop living your life because of a terrible accident. **[L]** He left you that money so you could go on living."

**[L]** Query: Five years? And the house has been on the market for only one year? Where was Kaycee all that time? In a coma? A related query addresses your statement that the house had been on the market for a full year "without even a nibble." That seems unlikely for a large beach house (with many bathrooms apparently) in Florida.

"You think I don't know that he's dead!" Kaycee screamed. **[B]** Ignoring the toasted bread, she spun on her heels and with tears welling up in her eyes she faced her best friend, a raging fury inside. **[M]**

**[B]** See comment at **[B]** above.

**[M]** Amy, here and in the entire scene to follow (up to the point Brenda leaves) you have a great opportunity to do some very good work. There is a story arc here and a chance to develop the character in far more subtle and deeper ways. I believe the crushing grief can be shown in a less hysterical scene. You must *live* this scene in your own mind and heart and find the behavioral clues that will *show* Kaycee's anguish. She has shown control earlier. Be true to your character. It's been five years. She would not "crumple to the floor." I can't tell you how to write it, but I think this is where all the senses can come in—a roaring in the ears, a sudden shortness of breath, feeling separated from her body, grasping the counter to center herself. That sort of thing. Don't overdo it. But try to *feel it yourself*—then write.

"You think I don't know my husband is dead? You think I don't know my kids are dead!" She howled. **[B]**

Brenda, having been through this so many times before knew that the only thing she could do now was watch, helpless, while Kaycee **crumbled** to the floor below, releasing a flood of tears. **[N]**

**[N]** "crumbled to the floor" would be an original way of saying she fell to pieces, but I think you mean "crumpled to the floor"; "floor below" is either redundant or it is ambiguous, suggesting that she fell through to the floor below..

**After what seemed like hours,** Brenda **finally** got up from the table and went to Kaycee's **crumpled** body. She put her arms around her and comforted her, [as] best ~~as~~ she could.

"You can't keep doing this to yourself, Kaycee. I know it hurts, but you know as well as I do that *not* spending that money isn't going to bring them back."

"Please go." Kaycee managed **[B]**

**[B]** See comment above at first **[B]** entry

"I'll go, but I'm going to leave the information on the table

for you to look over when you feel up to it. It's just what you need honey, trust me. You need to get out of here and start over. You can't stay in a place where the memories haunt your every waking moment. You've got to start living again."

"Please—just go." Brenda gave her a final hug, then walked to the front door, opened it and ran to her car in the rain. Once inside, she couldn't help but feel the acceleration of her heart and wondered if she was doing the right thing. [O]

[O] "Doing the right thing" is not quite right here for two reasons: First, it's a cliché. Second, it is repetitious: Jackson speaks the same words at the end of his scene in the Brenda segment (though, one suspects, due to good foreshadowing, he speaks those words with a different outcome in mind).

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It wasn't until smoke began filling the kitchen that Kaycee managed to find the strength and [to] pull herself up from the kitchen floor. She looked at the stove and immediately saw where the smolder was coming from; the scrambled eggs she had previously started were now a mess of bubbling black. The smells of burnt onions and mushrooms were repulsive, yet she took her time, not caring if the skillet suddenly burst into flames, not caring whether she lived or died. [P]

[P] My comment here follows the comment at [M]. You can do a lot with characterization in these scenes, but they should be carefully written. I suggest you play down the more extreme behavior, and take more care with the pace of the scenes. My sense is that you don't want to set Kaycee up as a "nut-case" just yet. Give yourself latitude to escalate her behaviors further along in the story. Note, however, that the short paragraph immediately below is fine. Not out of the range of the normal experience of a grieving mother, and good foreshadowing at that.

"Please mommy, put it out." It was the faintest whisper, yet loud enough that Kaycee spun around as though someone had just [spoken] screamed in her ear.

No one was there.

~~Taking her time~~, Kaycee wiped ~~the wetness from~~ her face and reached for the charred skillet, ignoring the immediate blistering on her right hand. She let the skillet drop into the sink with a ~~loud~~ crash~~7~~ and turned on the cold water. Upon impact it hissed and sizzled, ~~then~~ released mounds of acrid smoke.

Kaycee turned away from the sink, reached into a cabinet and removed ~~a glass and~~ a bottle of vodka. She took a seat at the kitchen table and ~~then~~ poured herself a generous amount of the ~~clear liquid~~. ~~Up~~ until the accident she had never been much of a drinker, and even now she only drank when she heard the voices in her head~~the~~ voices of her dead children. ~~So, rather than fall off the edge of insanity and into the depths of despair, she chose to drown herself in the bottle instead.~~

~~She reached out to pick up her glass and couldn't help but notice the information that Brenda had left on the table earlier.~~ She took a lengthy drink of the clear poison **[Q]** ~~then looked down at~~ [before noticing] the manila folder in front of her. She nearly dropped her ~~glass~~ when she saw the picture of the large house. **[R]** It appeared to be staring back at her, reaching out for her. That was impossible she thought. Or was it?

**[Q]** The word vodka is preferable to the labored circumlocution; never mind the repetition “rule.”

**[R]** This is another place where you have an opportunity to come up with a fresh, startling line conveying Kaycee’s surprise. Perhaps by using some of those “five senses”

images—heart-stopping, weak knees, breathless ... maybe even “cold shiver.” No, guess not that one.

Unsettled, Kaycee drained the ~~liquid~~ in her ~~glass~~, ~~set it down on the table~~ and ~~then proceeded to~~ unclasped the photo from the front of the folder to take a better look. There was something different about the picture she thought. Something ... vaguely familiar. *But what was it?* ~~she~~ wondered.

The house itself was rather impressive looking. It seemed to be a rather substantial two-story Victorian. Or was it a three-story? [S] It was hard to tell from the photo itself considering ~~a large-portion~~ [much] of the house was ~~hiding~~ [hidden] behind monstrous trees. After staring at the photo for an undetermined amount of time, Kaycee finally came to the conclusion that the house had a rather ominous look of sadness to it. Yet she liked it. She liked it a lot. ~~And it was~~ At that moment ~~that~~ she knew she had to have it. [T] It was as if the house itself was calling out to her, inviting her into its space. She didn't need to read any of the information that was stuffed inside the folder, nor did she want to. She wouldn't change her mind. The price was located on the [folder]~~picture directly under the house itself.~~ If she used the life insurance money Mark had taken out shortly before his death, ~~it was a price she could easily afford to pay for directly, without the worries of a thirty year mortgage.~~ [she would be able to pay cash.] And for the first time in over five years, Kaycee Beaumont was finally able to look forward to something.

[S] I'm only guessing, but I suspect "maybe three stories" is foreshadowing. Nicely done!

[T] Whenever possible try to avoid the *it is, there is, there are*, and the related "is" constructions with an indefinite subject such as "it" or "there." To take another example from your text, you write "It wasn't until smoke began filling the kitchen that ...", and, later, "It was hard to tell from the photo ...". "It was then her world went black.". Without stumbling into the grammatical underbrush, I'll ask you to take my word for it: These are flat, passive usages. Try a rewrite with active verbs.

She poured more ~~of the~~ vodka ~~into her glass~~ and raised [her glass] ~~it~~ ~~towards~~ the ceiling, toasting to a new beginning.

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### **Brenda's story**

I explained earlier that I have not marked up the last third of your manuscript, which I believe should be a new chapter. Perhaps see how the suggestions I have made above work for you, and apply that to

the Brenda segment. Nonetheless, I would like to make two more comments by way of overall suggestions.

### **Credibility**

Because fiction arises from the writer's imagination, it is all the more important that the writer get real-life facts straight, if not in the creative first stage, then certainly in revision. Give your imaginative elements credibility by making sure that settings and basic realities of life are factual. Readers both notice and care. Short of sci-fi, I think this is especially important if there are fantasy elements in the story.

Let me quote this segment from the Brenda flashback where, as a child, she has been bitten by a shark:

Brenda had been safely strapped on a gurney and taken into the helicopter where an oxygen mask was placed over her mouth and nose and an IV was quickly placed into her arm. As soon as the emergency aircraft began to lift off the ground, Brenda once again awakened and then slowly peered out of the window. It was then that she saw both of her parents being swallowed by a colossal wave.

This paragraph cries out for goggling some facts and photos. Would it have been possible for the child Brenda, strapped to a gurney in a Medivac helicopter, to have been able to look out the window (much less, sit up) and see her parents swept away by a colossal wave? And on this day, some 25 years ago?

Moreover, short of a tsunami, would a tranquil beach scene, albeit with a minor storm brewing, raise such "colossal" waves within such a short period of time?

### **Revision**

Fiction is a creative act—a "right brain" function. This comes easily to you. Self-editing is another function altogether, a work of the "left brain." In that sense good fiction is a craft, and one that requires attention and discipline. If you were to ask any great fiction writer what the three most important things she must do, I bet most would say "Read and revise. Read and revise. Read and revise." Lisa Lenard-Cook in her new book, *The mind of Your Story*—which I highly recommend—quotes Frank Yerby, who said "A good novel is made with the knife, not the pen."

### **\*\*\* So, more on revision and tightening up**

#### **Wordiness:**

There are some "writer-rules" here, which, of course, do not always apply: The first commandment is "Make every word count." Details of setting or character add reality and texture to fiction, but only if the detail is significant in establishing character or setting. Watch out for gratuitous verbiage.

#### **Repetition** of words or phrases:

You know all about this, of course, but sometimes words or phrases just get stuck in our heads and show up too often. Repetition of words in a paragraph or even whole phrases in a scene, are annoying

to the reader. Often it is hard for a writer to notice these familiar usages because they are so embedded in her mind.

**Extraneous** words and phrases or unnecessary explanation:

Here is the area where I feel a tough read-through with a blue pencil in hand will really tighten up your writing, Amy, giving the story more impact and “punch.”

The corollaries to “Make every word count” are 1) the **one right noun** is usually better than an adjective-noun combination, and 2) the **one right verb** is *always* better than a weak verb modified by adverbs.

**Clichéd** phrases (including tired metaphors):

George Orwell has penned a great rule for this: “Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.” That’s a little extreme, but you get the idea.

Consider, for example, “torrential downpour,” “drown herself in the bottle,” “at a snail’s pace,” “at the tender age of ...,” “a menacing grin,” “her world went black,” and the like. What you want to do is find the one unique word or metaphor that evokes in the reader’s mind the image that you want to convey and in such a way that she can fill in the picture from her own experiences.

I hope that all—or some—of this will be helpful to you, Amy, as you proceed with your novel. I enjoy your work and I think you have real talent as a story-teller. I am looking forward to talking with you on Paula’s webcast.

*Ann Paden*