REVISION:
The Macro to Micro Method
by Sylvie Kurtz

When my kids were younger, I remember watching one of those kid-centered science shows with them. The gist of the episode was how to fill a vase with stones. First the "scientist" started with the sand, then attempted to jam in bigger pebbles and got nowhere. After scratching his head, he had a lightbulb moment. He dumped in the bigger stones, then the gravel, then the sand, and the vase held everything in a cohesive whole.

Revision is like that. Try to start with finding the perfect word on page 169, and you'll get nowhere. But if you start with the rocks, then move to the sand, chances are you'll end up with a satisfying story.

So what are the rocks? Structure. No matter what structure system you use--John Truby's twenty-two steps, Blake Snyder's fifteen steps, the hero's journey's twelve steps, Billy Mernit's seven steps, or Aristotle's classic three-act--the first thing to getting to a story with legs is to make sure it has a structure to stand on. Take the macro view. Look at your story as if you were an eagle flying above. Check on all the major signposts you want to hit on your journey through your story. Are they all there? Did you pick the most interesting route to get to your destination? Does it fulfill your concept of the story you wanted to tell?

Next move on to the medial view. Drop down and zoom in for a closer look. Take the story one construction block at a time. Look at the scenes. What is each scene's purpose? Is what happens meaningful to the story? Does the action move the scene forward? Build the conflict? Do you need to cut or add scenes? Are the scenes in the proper order? Do the scenes show rather than tell the story? Do the scenes flow well one into the other or are they jerky and episodic? Are the goals, motivations, and conflicts clear to the reader? Do the subplots compare, contrast, or support your main theme? Or do they take unnecessary detours that detract (and weaken) your main story? If a scene doesn't work, go back to basic first-aid and ask, "What's the purpose of this scene?"

Hone in on the characters. Are they compelling? Do they have flaws, faults, qualities, and secrets that the reader can identify? Are their goals, conflicts, and motivations clear to the reader? Have you created purpose, credibility, empathy, and complexity? Have you used appearance, speech, actions, thoughts and memories, and indirect information to differentiate each character from another? Do the relationships serve or detract from your story? Do they provide contrast and conflict for your main character? Do agendas compete to create tension?

Do your main characters have arcs, or do they magically change at the crisis point? Have you introduced characters in a way that makes them memorable or interesting?

Shift from the narrative to the dialogue. Does each character have his own voice? Have you used the characters' speech rhythm, tone of voice, grammar, expressions, and vocabulary to make each unique? Is everything that characters utter on-the-nose? Did you create subtext to add depth and show the emotional layer?

Next, get out the microscope. Inspect each word. What can you cut? What can you make more concrete and specific? What can you make more active? Check grammar and spelling. How can each word do more work to provide a full, vivid, colorful experience? Do the words bring forth solid mind pictures that allow the reader to live the story? Do the words cause stumbling blocks? Or do they allow the reader to read fast and smoothly?

Lastly, look at your hellos and goodbyes. The first and last lines of your story will cause the greatest impact on the reader. The first lures him in, and the last makes him want more.

By making sure the big stones of your story are in their proper place, then looking at the gravel of your scenes, characters and dialogue, and finally sifting through the sands of the individual words, you'll have a greater chance of creating a revision that leaves you with a powerful story that satisfies your reader.