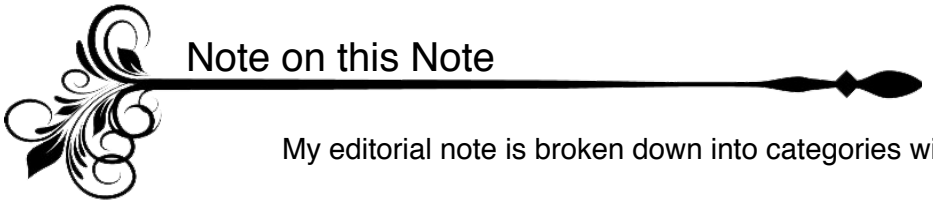
Dear Author,

Thank you for sharing such a personal story with me. I admire the strength you've shown in choosing to discuss such a private and difficult topic. The fact that you've turned it into a novel is even more noteworthy; most people would shy away from discussing such a topic, let alone choosing to turn it into a novel. What you've already accomplished is no small feat.

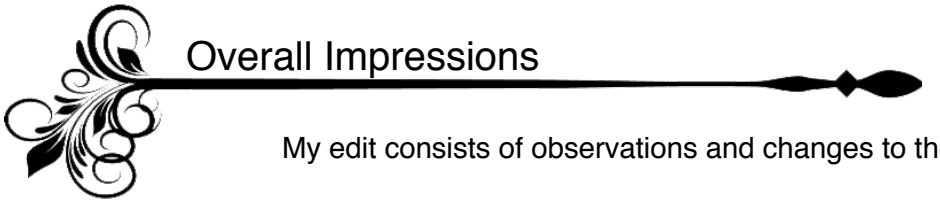
I encountered a variety of obstacles and successes while reading your novel; however, the most important task is already out of the way. You have a story to tell and you're working to tell it. Our job now is to figure out what we can do together to eliminate the obstacles that prevent your story from being the best story possible.



Note on this Note

My editorial note is broken down into categories with observations and examples. I'll give an overall impression of the work and an overview of my comments. My goal is to clearly identify problems and successes in your manuscript. I'll conclude with a list of suggested revision steps, which you can use to help guide you through the process.

Editorial notes can be intimidating, but don't despair. This is not a literary critique or a review; it's a note designed to point out the strengths and weaknesses of your novel. Each category is designed to make you reconsider and evaluate the choices you've made in telling your story. And please remember—I'm here to help you make your novel the best that it can be. You are not alone during this process.



Overall Impressions

My edit consists of observations and changes to the novel's structure, language, and narrative. This includes the timeline, cuts, chapter titles, journal entries, the fourth wall, extraneous details, metaphors, melodrama, the essay, characters, reflection and revelations,

and verisimilitude. It might seem like I've listed everything in your manuscript, but each of these sections also contain examples of effective passages and devices.

Structure

In this section, we'll consider the effectiveness of the narrative's timeline. We'll also consider rearranging certain scenes and cutting certain scenes based on their position in the timeline. After that, we'll take a look at other cuts, chapter titles, and journal usage.

Timeline

With a few exceptions, *War Against the War* follows a straightforward timeline. It's a natural progression through the events of Rosa's life, and it mostly works. The events Rosa describes are often complicated, so keeping a simple timeline like you've written is for the best. The first chapter is especially powerful, because you leave off on such a cliffhanger. It's an effective way to begin the novel.

In terms of the timeline, there are a few moments that aren't as effective as they could be, and I'd consider cutting them. The story about claustrophobia on page 160 is an example. This story is unnecessary because the previous chapter already does a good job of illustrating this feeling. In addition, the last sentence of the chapter in which the story appears actually does a better, and more succinct, job of describing the feeling. "I retreated to my corner and tried to shove down the dry-socket, sandpapery, coiled-spring, locked-in-the-trunk-as-the-car-sinks-underwater feeling. Claustrophobia." This single sentence is more powerful than that entire story, and the presence of the story unfortunately makes it feel redundant. Between the two, the sentence is the stronger choice.

The next example is a flashback on page 257. It's a seemingly random memory Rosa has that she explains with the concept of vortex time. Her explanation for this concept can be shortened; however, I recommend cutting it and the flashback. The flashback has no clear

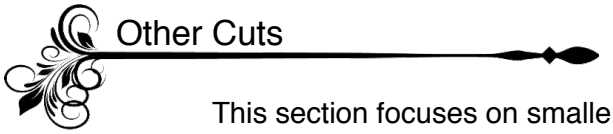
impetus and its purpose is even more unclear. Rosa mentions having an unfortunate amount of free time on her hands during this period of time, but it doesn't need to be filled for the reader's sake. The natural breaks that occur between each sequence of time in the field will help the reader understand the flow of time. Remove the flashback and the pacing drastically improves.

The other issue with this flashback is it doesn't add anything to the current scene. A story about Rosa's younger life with Wayne would be better utilized near the beginning, but the story as a whole isn't really about him or her interactions with him. I understand its inclusion—it is inarguably an important and devastating moment in Rosa's life, and it affects the person she becomes. That is significant. However, it doesn't work in its current location, and it distracts from the current scene. You could consider moving it to near the story's beginning; however, that creates another problem: the beginning already proceeds at a brisk pace, and this would slow it down. It is for that reason that I'd recommend completely cutting it. As a result, it would also be necessary to remove the explanation about vortex time.

On page 319, Rosa reflects on her interview with Dave. She mentions how George Ramos stood up for her on the radio and in the newspaper. The scene is supposed to be poignant as she reflects on her guilt for those whom she feels she's let down. It could be, except that this is our first introduction to Ramos. Readers are given a very brief introduction to him: his profession and how he always asked Rosa questions in the hall. To make this scene effective, remove the summary on page 318, and show readers a conversation with him earlier in the story. That way, when Rosa reflects on it, we'll better understand her guilt.

In the same vein, the bolt necklace on page 302 could be part of the natural timeline. Rosa says that she found it after boot camp #2, so that discovery could be added there. The rest of that story could naturally occur after LDAC, and it would function as a revelation at that point. This revelation would be more effective than the flashback because the reader could discover its importance along with Rosa.

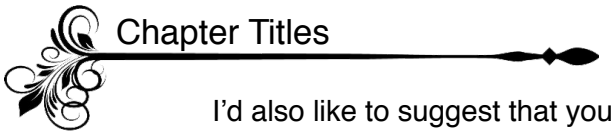
In part four, chapters 14 and 15 should also be switched. Chapter 14 jumps ahead to 2015, but chapter 15 jumps back to 2007. These chapters should be chronological. Chapter 14 is more cohesive with chapter 16, The Aftermath, because it's about Rosa in the future. Chapter 14 already feels like an ending, so having a flashback between it and the actual ending is jarring and unnecessary.



Other Cuts

This section focuses on smaller cuts that are unrelated to the timeline. These are cuts that are less complicated and easier to make than the ones related to the timeline. To start, the intro to chapter two is unnecessary. Instead of prefacing the entire story, jump right in and let readers immediately begin their journey with Rosa.

On page 73, Rosa listens in on a conversation between her bunkmates. The conversation between Salvarado and Ellis is largely inconsequential. This is the first scene in which these two characters appear, and readers never see them again. The gist of the conversation—who's hot and who's not—seems par the course given their ages, but there's also nothing particularly significant about it either.

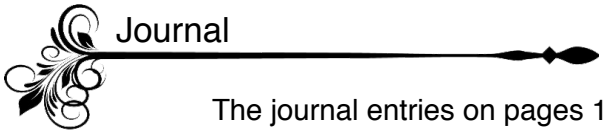


Chapter Titles

I'd also like to suggest that you consider cutting the chapter titles. For the most part, the chapter titles summarize the exact content you write about in that chapter. These titles have a way of undermining your narrative, because they give away too much information. For example, here's a random set of chapter titles I grabbed by skimming through the text: "Second Chance, Last Chance"; "Keeping Up Appearances"; "The Pitch"; "The Secret"; "Claustrophobia"; "Navigation"; "Admissions"; and "Quandries".

All of these titles perfectly match the content therein, which is not only redundant, but also a spoiler. Keep the numbers, dates, and part titles, but remove the chapter titles and see

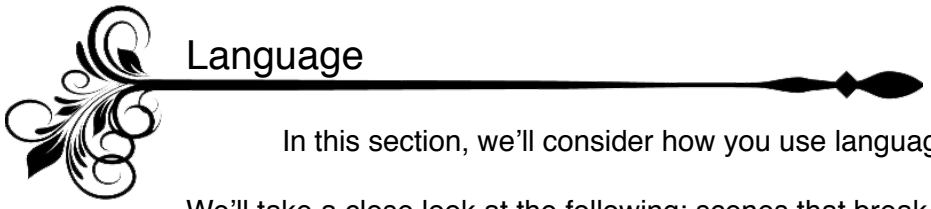
how it improves the reading experience. The reader will no longer know what to expect, and the pacing will also improve because each chapter is no longer summarized and introduced.



Journal

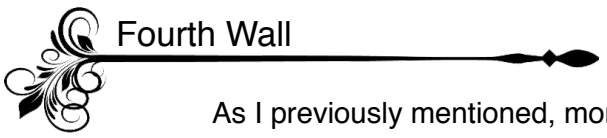
The journal entries on pages 138 and 165 are difficult to integrate into the narrative because of their form. As journal entries, they naturally break the fourth wall. Generally speaking, it's wise to avoid these moments as often as possible because anything that creates such a break in the narrative is distracting for readers. It pulls them away from the current story. I'd suggest using the most brief introduction that you possibly can. On page 138, don't tell readers what Rosa wrote about or the conclusions she drew from writing. Let them explore the content and draw their own conclusions.

On page 142, Rosa proceeds to analyze the journal for readers. This is also problematic. In its current format, you present that readers are about to read a journal, you tell them what's in the journal, and then you analyze that content for them. Readers should be doing that work on their own. This heavy-handed approach not only breaks the fourth wall, but is likely to insult readers, as if they can't think about what they just read. The journal entries on page 165 avoid some of the pitfalls by omitting the intro and analysis. We'll take a closer look at the content of these journals in the narrative section.



Language

In this section, we'll consider how you use language to construct the pieces of your story. We'll take a close look at the following: scenes that break the fourth wall, extraneous details, the impact or detriment of similes and metaphors, and instances of melodrama. Please note that there is overlap between all of these sections.



Fourth Wall

As I previously mentioned, moments that break the fourth wall can be distracting because they naturally break the pace of the narrative. Repeated instances of this can transcend distraction and completely pull readers out of the story. There are very few instances in which any author can pull this off without a negative side effect.

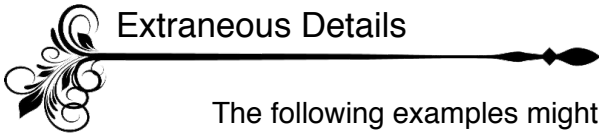
The solution to many of these examples is to delete the offending sentence or paragraph. The first prominent example is on page 4. Readers already know that Rosa will become a conscientious objector at some point in the story. The dates also make it clear that this chapter is six years in the past. The quasi-philosophical musings also don't add to the narrative. The previous chapter already effectively sets the tone and purpose of the narrative, so an additional introduction such as this is unnecessary. Let readers jump right into Rosa's journey without delay.

Page 19 has another example. In this scene, Rosa is reminiscing about childhood events that took place at the kitchen table. She gives a variety of examples to counter the weight of the conversation that is about to take place. It's an effective scene because of that comparison. However, the scene is weakened because of the last sentence, "I am telling you all this because I loved that table, and still love it, but now it's a bittersweet love because of what happened there on November 20th 2000." Readers know that Rosa loves the table because of the memories she just shared. They can also infer that it's about to be bittersweet because of the conversation that's about to take place. That sentence calls attention to itself to tell readers this scene is important, which is something they already know.

This situation also occurs on pages 310 and 376. On 310, you inform readers that they've returned to the book's beginning. The first line is identical to the first line of chapter one. There's actually no reason to point this out. The repetition of the first line helps indicate that fact to readers, and even if that wasn't enough, why distract readers by pointing it out? Even if they

don't catch it immediately, they're likely to figure it out a few paragraphs in. If worse came to worse and they somehow still didn't catch it, you'd still be destroying the momentum you've built up over the course of the last few chapters by telling them.

On page 376, you remind readers that Rosa had seventy-two hours to call the army and schedule her muster day appointment. There's no need to point this out because they learned about that on page 374. They know about it because they just read it a moment ago. "I avoided the ROTC side of campus. It seems childish now, but I even turned around and found a different way to class if I spotted BDUs ahead," on page 335 doesn't quite break the fourth wall, but the part about being childish has the same effect. The point of view is slightly different because Rosa is talking about it from a future perspective, which clashes with the previous line. I deleted that bit to fix the issue. Readers are also likely to draw that conclusion from the scene itself.

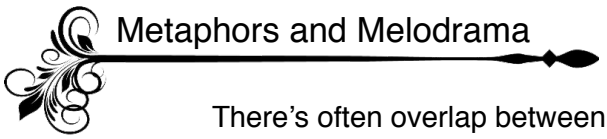


Extraneous Details

The following examples might seem insignificant, but they're useful in demonstrating how you can easily trim the fat from your writing. Removing instances such as these tighten your prose and improve the overall pacing of your narrative. They're also easy and quick fixes.

By extraneous, I mean brief instances in which you provided details that aren't essential. These are usually short descriptions that I deleted. For example, on page 108, the paragraph that begins "Hohns let out a 'pssst'…" can be deleted because the point of the scene—the conversation about Rullen and the date—is over. Readers don't benefit from knowing that everyone went back to formation after the conversation ends. In the same vein, I also deleted the paragraph on page 315 that begins "Morgan took the curves slowly" because these details don't add anything to the conversation. The lobby description on page 332 is of a basic lobby. Neither scene adds anything essential, so you can delete both and get to the next scene faster.

Page 387's "She looked ridiculous" summarizes what the reader just read. Readers just saw your sister acting in a ridiculous way, so there's no reason to tell them she looks ridiculous. The declaration on page 397, "The only cure for PTSD is not sending people to war. Especially illegal, ineffective, unpopular wars" isn't entirely accurate. The second bit doesn't logically follow the first because the war's intent doesn't matter. Any solider who goes to war—or any battle for that matter—could be afflicted with PTSD. Suggesting that this is especially true of illegal, ineffective, or unpopular wars is a thinly veiled reference to Iraq and Afghanistan. Readers already know that's what you mean because that's what the entire book has been about. I deleted it because it's a fact true of all conflict, and readers can intuit that you are specifically talking about recent wars.



Metaphors and Melodrama

There's often overlap between these two concepts, so I've grouped them together. There's a fine line between drama and melodrama, and the concept of melodrama is admittedly a bit subjective. However, by looking at your successful and problematic scenes, we can help pin point when your descriptive language goes a little too far.

The simile on page 36 about feeling like a gunslinger in the wild west is delightfully playful. The line that follows, "like I was about to spend the day threading my horse through sagebrush and cacti, a bandana around my neck, a cowboy hat pulled low. My walk turned to a swagger," is especially effective. Readers can see how that feeling naturally leads to such mannerisms. It's also interesting characterization because of the setting in which she feels this way.

The metaphor on page 100 is another excellent example, "And so I let complacency envelop me like Morro Bay's nightly fog, diving into the rhythm of school and work and surfing." It matches exactly what Rosa is feeling in this moment. It's simply structured and grounded in

realism, which helps make it so effective. While it's realistic, readers can also envision the abstraction: the fog, the complacency, pushes away all of Rosa's fears and essentially creates a shield that protects her.

Like I mentioned in the structure section, the line about claustrophobia is so succinct and effective that it's able to replace an entire story. I also left positive comments in the line by line edit with several other examples of effective language. Now that we've seen positive examples and why they're effective, we can look at problematic examples.

The last line of page 24, "I had no idea I was surrounded by bars", is one such example. You've already used the cage metaphor on page 22, which makes this metaphor redundant with that one. The foreshadowing is also unnecessary because, again, the cage metaphor also handles that. There's also no reason to not on end the positive note that you have. It's unnecessary to constantly remind readers of the metaphorical cage.

Speaking of the cage metaphor, it's unfortunately overused. The fifth usage is on page 66, but it's used seven times throughout the book. Three of the usages are in chapter titles, which is easily fixable if you decide to remove chapter titles. If not, I'd encourage you to rename those chapters. Aside from the chapter titles, I'd stick with the usages on pages 22 and 179 because the first usage signifies the entrapment's beginning and the latter signifies Rosa's decision to make choices to escape. These are poignant moments, which are ruined through repetition.

Page 135 is another example of redundancy. The last paragraph before the break summarizes what readers already know: Rosa drowns in infatuation and uses men as crutches. The last line also foreshadows that Jack might be different. Readers have already seen Rosa go through two terrible relationships, so there's no reason to reiterate those facts. And foreshadowing that Jack is different ruins some of the surprise because readers will be inclined to think he's just another jerk until proven otherwise. This entire paragraph can be cut.

On page 130, the line that begins “Because I was so engulfed in regretting The Mistake…” essentially summarizes the last few paragraphs. Rosa has been talking about the mistake, her relationship with Santos, and how she copes with those disasters. This list restates that and throws extra drama on top. Rosa is “engulfed,” “obsessed,” and “committed to wallowing in misery,” which she solves with her “trusty friend, physical pain.” The cavalier manner in which Rosa addresses her self-harm makes it worse, and the change in point of view in the next line compounds that.

This situation is more complicated to fix than the others. My recommendation is to scrap the paragraph. Rephrase the self-harm to something such as “I turned once again to physical pain; I could focus only on bleeding.” Keeping it in first person makes it personal for Rosa and removing the emotional verbs helps keep the scene grounded and realistic. The next lines naturally follow from here.

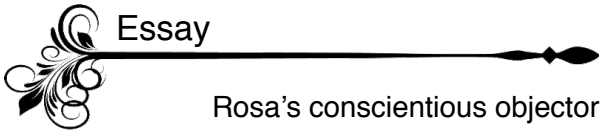
Two other examples that are overwritten, but are easily improved through cuts, are on pages 353 and 364. On 353, Rosa looks out over Morro Bay and ponders how beautiful it could be if the power plant weren’t there. The imagery is beautiful and powerful, but it’s derailed by Rosa’s final thought, “Men and their friggin’ machines.” It’s overly dramatic because the scene itself is already dramatic. Readers don’t need a reminder that the scenery is ruined by the plant’s presence—that’s the scene’s entire point. It’s also a bit of a melodramatic cop out—as if to suggest all men ruin everything just like all the men in Rosa’s life have ruined hers. It’s also a power plant, not a war machine. On 364, Rosa’s metaphorical shell begins to crack and flake off. Saying that “Some of that shell is still in the desert, buried underneath layers of pale, silty soil” is overkill.

A few more metaphors are either unclear, overwritten or unnecessary. On page 143, Rosa thinks about the “colossus of human resources we were abusing while anti-American sentiment grew and grew.” I assume she’s talking about the soldiers and the military, but to

whom does “we” refer? Furthermore, this is one of the first situations in which Rosa discusses her objections. Instead of talking about her objections in such an abstract way, Rosa should give readers a clearer idea about her objections. This is one instance in which metaphors are detrimental to the narrative.

The wave metaphor on page 337 is obvious, made even more so by Rosa’s analysis of it. The line “Was this a sign the pushback was about to get bigger, stronger, faster? Or that if I just clung on a little longer they would let me go?” unnecessarily draws more attention to the metaphor. I also wonder about her picking the easiest direction to swim in. If the reader uses this entire situation to parallel Rosa’s involvement in the army, couldn’t this action be viewed as a cop out? It might create the implication that she chose the easy way out—conscientious objection—instead of facing the waves/battles head on.

Similarly, on page 390, you speak to the reader about your life after your discharge. You’re speaking to the reader at this point; you’re no longer a character in your own story. The scene in which you and Leila burn your Army papers has just occurred. The nature of fire is obvious to readers—rebirth, death, revolt. Talking about the nature of fire and fire metaphors weakens this scene. You’re already talking about these concepts, so calling them out for further analysis is unnecessary. It’s also a tad overbearing because readers already understand fire, fire metaphors, and how you’ve used them.



Rosa’s conscientious objector essay is one of the most important parts of the narrative. It’s important to present it without any editorializing, because the reader should be left alone to determine how they feel about it. Trying to force the reader to recognize certain attributes or conclusions will only have the opposite effect. If there are opportunities to expand upon your essay excerpts, I’d also consider that.

In the paragraph on page 298 you state, “Ten years later, I am still impressed by many of the ideas, the phrasing, the logic. But most of all, I’m proud of the girl who drew a line in the sand against the U.S. government, the odds of being heard, let alone winning conscientious objector status be damned.” This unfortunately comes off as narcissistic. You’re essentially applauding yourself for your actions. This is written for you, not the reader. Let the reader read your essay and then be impressed by it. Let them be proud of your actions. The previous paragraph already talks about the essay, so this entire paragraph can go. You can jump right into the essay without any further introduction.

The last paragraph of this chapter suffers from the same issues. You begin with “It’s not just an essay” and then go on to applaud yourself further. The reader knows it isn’t just any old essay. They also know of its significance to you and your life; it’s not solely important to the situation at hand. The reader can also see you changing through this essay. Nothing in this paragraph is necessary for the reader. They can draw all these conclusions on their own. Omitting these paragraphs will help keep you humble, grounded, and relatable to the reader.

Narrative

I’ve saved the narrative section for last because it’s the most complicated and difficult part to address. We’ll look at issues related to characters, reflection and revelation, and verisimilitude.

Character

The point of this section is to help you trim the narrative’s characters down to those who are the most important. There are about 80 characters in the narrative. It’s not entirely unexpected given the military setting; however, it’s incredibly difficult to keep the soldiers and officers apart. With the exception of the ROTC cadets on pages 247–274, all the other soldiers blend into the background. None of them are particularly memorable, and none of them feel

particularly important either because readers learn so little about them. It feels like you have a ton of soldiers to make the scenes feel real, but the opposite is actually occurring. Focusing on a few characters in each scene will make your scenes feel more alive and realistic.

The soldiers and officers can largely be divided into three groups: boot camp, AIT, and ROTC. During boot camp, there are three soldiers and two drill sergeants: Greene, Pickerillo, and Mathis, and Evans and Rims. Pickerillo appears once and Mathis appears four times. Neither provides anything essential to the scenes in which they appear. Greene is essential; however; she is pivotal to the scene in which Rosa rebels against regulations she feels are nonsensical. Evans is important to that scene as well, and Rims is important when Rosa seeks medical attention. Mathis and Pickerillo could easily be unnamed soldiers and no one would be any the wiser.

During AIT, there are sixteen soldiers. As an example, let's look at a few characters that can be deleted. For starters, Hohns mostly stands around and has one minor line of dialogue. Newman, Lee, Kitner, Muller, DuNorde, Brown, and White are all similar to Hohns. Removing all of these characters cuts the characters in the scene in half, and you can still keep the scenes as you've written them. It also gives you breathing room to focus more on the soldiers who feature more prominently at AIT.

ROTC is a slightly different situation because of the training exercise. Jones, Rusk, Syth, Govassi, Knox, Thomas, each appear once and don't contribute anything important to the overall narrative or the scenes in which they appear. They mostly function as filler to help round out the scenes, but they really aren't essential. Much like with the AIT soldiers, focus more on those who are important to the scenes and the narrative to bring those scenes to life.

Speaking of ROTC and bringing characters and scenes to life, page 236 is a great example of characterization, but readers need more. We get a bit more during the training exercise and the summarized moments on page 265, but these are moments that are worth

thoroughly exploring. You have a great start here, but consider what else you can do to add to these scenes. By further characterizing these soldiers, Rosa herself is more fully developed. The pinnacle moment, the political discussion on page 267, could become even stronger by developing these characters more before this moment occurs. This particular scene is one of the most important scenes in the narrative because Rosa finally confronts other people about her fears and objections to the war. Readers will be drawn in even more if they know these soldiers as well as they know Rosa.

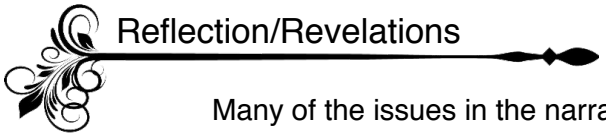
There are also characters who aren't soldiers that can be cut. Eric, Alura's husband, and Paul Kelly, the deceased news anchor, don't have pivotal roles. Paul's role could be important if his role is expanded. His death feels like an afterthought, though, and his impact on Rosa is negligible. Sonja doesn't contribute much either. Is it possible that Michael could take over for her lines with something comparable?

Rullen is another character that can be removed from the narrative. His role in the book is essentially a lesser form of Santos' and an even lesser form of Jack. Given that his role so closely mirrors that of Santos', he could be removed with very little loss to the narrative. His role occupies all of six pages. Readers see a bit more of Santos, so I'm inclined to keep him, but when compared to Jack, neither of them are essential. Rosa states that these men are merely a distraction for her. Given that Jack perfectly exemplifies that reality, the small page time devoted to Rullen and Santos feels unnecessary.

Mike and Jimmy also feel like afterthoughts. Mike is important because he's the reason Rosa moves to California, which sets off an entire chain of events in the narrative; however, readers also know very little about him. Rosa's thoughts during the move feel like a setup for her eventual breakup with him. It would be easier to accept those thoughts simply as thoughts and not as a narrative device if readers knew Mike as a person. As it stands, Rosa doesn't really have a reason to break up with him. She just seems to do it to further the story.

Jimmy is another character who seems to exist just to further the plot. His conversation with Rosa on page 95 is important, but that's also his only significant contribution. He shows up in two flashbacks that provide a few more details about him, but neither scene is particularly important to the narrative as a whole. Given Rosa's attitude toward him in the beginning, readers already know he isn't a particularly likable or dependable father. The flashbacks in which he appear reinforce that, but to what end? Readers don't learn anything additional about him, and he virtually disappears after the scene on page 95, which makes this scene feel staged for the plot. His character requires a significant overhaul if you want him to make a substantial contribution to the narrative.

I realize that cutting characters isn't easy, but the sheer number of characters in the narrative is overwhelming. You don't necessarily have to cut all the characters I mentioned or even the number I suggested, but I'd encourage you to revisit your characters and see who is really important to the narrative. Focus more on those with pivotal roles. This will improve the characterization of all the characters, including Rosa, and it will make the narrative more engaging.



Reflection/Revelations

Many of the issues in the narrative stem from Rosa's lack of reflection. Rosa also chooses to withhold in moments that require revelation. These are complicated issues that require immediate attention. Fortunately, as a writer, this problem is one of the more enjoyable obstacles.

There are multiple moments in which Rosa either uses abstraction or avoidance. On pages 105 and 106, Rosa discusses some of her objections to the war. This is a useful moment for the narrative because readers are given insight into Rosa's thoughts. The problem, however, is that these thoughts read like regurgitated sound bytes from the news. There's very little

reflection on her part about these events and what they mean to her. It's surprisingly impersonal when it should be incredibly personal.

The same problem occurs on page 141 In her journal, Rosa writes "We end up killing all the wrong people. Innocent civilians." What does it mean to Rosa that this occurs? Could the ends justify the means? Readers don't know. She simply states it as a fact, which again makes it feel like a sound byte from the news. Given that this line is from her journal, it seems like there would be more introspection.

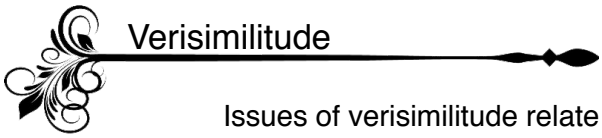
Your, the author's, analysis of the journal on pages 142 and 143 is also problematic because you're asking readers to accept your interpretation of the events. However, your analysis of your journal comes to conclusions the reader couldn't possibly develop on their own. You discuss, from a future point of view, situations in which Rosa would be willing to go to war, but there's also no way she could possibly know that at the time, and there's no reason for readers to logically believe it either. Because the content of the journal is so jumbled, you insist upon readers that "It skirts the core of the problem and indulges distractions. And it omits a big hope I had back then." Technically speaking, yes, it skirts the core of the problem; however, readers can't draw any of these conclusions on their own. That calls into question the validity and importance of the journal. After all, everything they learn from this situation they learn from the author from a future point of view. The conclusions can't be drawn from the content as it is currently written.

On page 157, Rosa participates in an interview about signing up for the ROTC. Her motivations for doing so are unclear. Does she agree to the interview because people were talking about her? If so, why does that matter to her? Does she agree simply because Dave asks her? Given the previous scene with the Army physical and her struggles with depression and anxiety, it's important readers understand her motivations for participating.

On pages 179 and 180, Rosa talks about how developing “articulate, specific explanations of my feelings became a matter of pride,” but readers aren’t shown or told about those explanations. In Rosa’s conversation with Bate, she talks about “how I never expected to be asked to fight in a war, especially one I was opposed to, how I didn’t belong, how I sometimes gave in to the lure of cutting myself.” Her objections are summarized and abstracted. Even though Rosa just told readers that she’d developed concise explanations about her feelings, she doesn’t share them with Bate or with readers. These moments are important to the narrative as a whole, and the summarization and refusal to share important insights severely undermines your ability to tell Rosa’s story. It also impacts the verisimilitude of these scenes.

Page 291 also suffers from this issue. In this scene, Rosa is explaining her objections to her mother. This explanation isn’t for the military. It’s a personal explanation that is unlikely to sound or feel like any other explanation. After all, she’s not explaining it to her fellow soldiers, officers, or everyday citizens. This moment could be especially human given the circumstances, and it would be a shame not to capitalize on it.

As it stands, Rosa is closed off not only from the people around her but also from readers. They’re given so little insight into her feelings about war and her situation that it’s a struggle to become emotionally invested in the story. Expanding upon the moments I’ve mentioned can help solve that, but also consider other moments that can benefit from such exploration.



Issues of verisimilitude relate to the story’s believability. The basic question is this: are the events, as written, realistic, truthful, and accurate? Unfortunately, there are multiple moments in the narrative that force readers to ask this question. As you can imagine, these moments threaten the entire narrative and absolutely must be addressed.

The key issue here is whether or not Rosa is a conscientious objector, and, unfortunately, I'm inclined to believe she isn't based on the available information. There are several instances in which she isn't entirely truthful with readers, which naturally calls into question all her other actions. The narrative is supposed to be about her journey to the realization that she is a conscientious objector, but that doesn't happen as it's written. Right now, the story is about a teenage girl who unfortunately makes a terrible mistake and who then spends the next several years trying to find ways to get out of that mistake.

Part of the reason for that we've already talked about: Rosa doesn't really talk about how she feels about the war. She mostly shares abstractions and tenuous connections that suggest, but don't prove, that her depression is linked to moral objection to the war. Rosa does seem to prove her depression is linked to the war, but whether or not that's because of the war or moral objections to the war is a matter of debate. Those are two very different realities.

On page 21, Rosa thinks to herself, No one would ever let Vietnam happen again. We were smarter, more sophisticated. Evolved." This feels like a deliberate and unnecessary setup. It doesn't seem like something a teenager would think, and even if Rosa did think this, why is this line necessary? Given the subject matter of the book and the introduction, readers already know it isn't true. That, and most readers will already have some sort of pretext for 9/11 and the wars.

Rosa's characterization of Sergeant Brewn is also disingenuous. On page 18, Rosa thinks "I needed him to admit it was abusive and sexist and half the recruits didn't pass." Does Rosa have some sort of knowledge about the military that she isn't sharing? And if it were exactly as she thinks here, why would she join in the first place? Furthermore, even if it were true, it's nothing anyone would ever admit, although, she doesn't ask either. This thought feels like it's coming from the future, and it's designed to help portray Brewn as a villain.

On page 130, Rosa wonders about her gullibility and includes Brewn with Rullen and Santos in a list of men who have misled her. However, based on what readers have seen, Brewn isn't anything like those two men. He didn't mislead Rosa, and he didn't lie to her. This implication continues on page 352 when Jack says "Why not? They lied to you. Said you'd be fighting forest fires if anything." Brewn says on page 20, "Now, we do get called up to help fight wildfires in the summer sometimes." When Rosa's mother presses about whether or not she could get called up to fight a war or some sort of battle such as Desert Storm, Brewn replies, "Well, it's possible. Anything's possible." Neither of these statements is a lie. Rosa repeatedly acts like Brewn lied to her, but that isn't accurate based on how the story is written.

On page 355, Rosa is discussing Brewn with Sunner. During her physical on page 154, she recalls what Brewn told her about physicals, "Don't give them any opportunity to deny you, cause they'll take it, Sergeant Brewn had said. This kid I signed up last year told them his back happened to be hurting that day. They wouldn't let him swear in. He had to get checked out by his doctor and come back in a few weeks. Missed his boot camp date, all cause he was too honest. Too honest? Whoa, whoa. Of course be honest. If you've had surgery, or if you have allergies. Be honest. But piddling little stuff? You tried mushrooms once last year? You had a suicidal thought at one point? Leave it off. That's not what they're looking for." Sunner and Rosa then discuss it: "And your recruiter really told you that? To brush over any physical concerns? Yeah, if we thought they were minor. If we thought they didn't matter." Brewn didn't actually say *any* physical concerns. He said little stuff and then gave examples. Rosa's depression and self-harm obviously transcend "piddling, little stuff". The fact that even Rosa didn't know she had depression at the time can't be blamed on Brewn. His words may have been misleading *or* misconstrued; however, it's unfair to say he outright lied to Rosa, and he can't solely be blamed for the choice Rosa ultimately makes herself. Rosa also uses that advice to try to get out of the ROTC during the physical on page 154, which isn't ethically sound either.

On page 162, Rosa also admits that she found Brewn attractive. “Here we go, I thought. Because the recruiter was sexy. Because I was frothing at the mouth to get out of Fromberg. Because six thousand dollars sounded like a hell of a lot of money at the time.” Brewn certainly can’t be held responsible for how others respond to his appearance. However, this also contributes to the idea that Brewn is a villain. He’s a young, handsome recruiter who lies to teenage girls. Based on what we just discussed, that characterization is inaccurate.

It’s entirely possible that Brewn did lie to Rosa. Many recruiters did lie to potential applicants; there was an entire scandal about it, which you reference in the prologue. However, as you’ve written it, Brewn feels like a scapegoat. If he did in fact lie, show readers those lies. There should be no doubt about whether or not he did.

Regarding the ROTC physical on page 154, Rosa has an opportunity to check the box for conscientious objector. Rosa thinks “The term described exactly what I’d come to feel, but also exactly what I thought the Army didn’t tolerate.” Given that this is the first time Rosa has seen or heard the term, it couldn’t possibly encapsulate *everything* she’s come to feel, which, again, readers don’t have a clear picture of either. It’s not a term that is described simply by the word itself. It has an incredibly complicated and detailed definition that, at this point in time, doesn’t and couldn’t match what she’s feeling.

There’s a large gap between Rosa’s feelings of conscientious objection and her insistence that she honor her contract. Her feelings about objection waver throughout the narrative, but her dedication to her contract remains steadfast until the latter half of the narrative. There are two obstacles to checking the box: first, honoring her contract, and second, the possibility of the military calling her a liar. The second reason makes sense because it would look incredibly suspicious to check that box after accepting the ROTC contract. The first reason is more confusing. She’s far more dedicated to her contract than her beliefs. I understand that Rosa’s beliefs evolve and grow stronger over time; however, her dedication to her contract

transcends “I have to honor my contract.” It’s almost an obsession, and there isn’t a clear reason for that. It seems like her personal beliefs, confused of not, would trump a contract. Explore her feelings about the contract more and why she’s so dedicated to something she no longer believes in, but decides to honor anyway (at least for now). It’s not just that she’s stuck with it. There’s something more here.

On page 179, Rosa talks about how “every thread of anxiety and depression and frustration led back to ROTC or the National Guard.” This is unfortunately difficult to prove because many of Rosa’s negative behaviors carry over from her time before the military. Her doctor diagnoses her with situational depression, but readers can’t know that’s accurate either because we only ever see her in situations in which these detrimental activities take place. This excludes the epilogue, but that situation is also vastly different than any other in the narrative. This could be solved if Rosa spent more time thinking about the moral ramifications of war and not thinking in abstractions. Showing the conversations she has with her therapist would be incredibly useful in making this connection.

Rosa talks about joining the ROTC on page 358. She says, “I accepted his reasoning and entered into the new program, agreeing to an additional two years of military service in order to secure what seemed to me to be clear educational and career advantages.” This is inaccurate. Rosa joins specifically to avoid deployment. She doesn’t join for educational opportunities. There may or may not be an ethical component to this decision (if there is, readers aren’t privy to it), but that’s not the point. At no point during the conversation on pages 143-147 does Rosa talk or think about the educational aspect of joining the ROTC. She talks about the potential of an educational gap during the interview with Dave, but readers have already seen her panic about deploying. Her assertion that she joined for educational and career advantages is not a convincing argument. If this excerpt from the essay is accurate, these scenes need to be reworked to actually reflect that.

The most significant problem in the narrative is Rosa's conscientious objector status functions as a deus ex machina—she is saved from a hopeless situation by it. Rosa fails to connect her negative feelings to the moral ramifications of war. She connects it to being in the military, but being depressed about being in the military and being depressed about the moral implications of war are completely different concepts. Conscientious objection is only applicable to the second situation.

Rosa spends the majority of the novel switching between acceptance and rejection. This back and forth actually clashes with the definition of a conscientious objector. As shown on pages 286 and 287, a conscientious objector holds a position that is sincere and deeply held. This person's moral and ethical beliefs are so strong that they almost resemble religious beliefs. On page 267, Rosa thinks, "But every night I made the opposite decision." Rosa doesn't actually start the application until August 2005, and she continues to change her mind up until the point. This is not a deeply held belief as defined by the conscientious objector definition provided in the narrative.

On page 301, Rosa writes in her application "I became more and more depressed and anxious about my involvement in the military. ROTC training brought out even stronger feelings against violence and war." Readers do see some of Rosa's insights on page 274, which is helpful, but simply not enough. Situational depression isn't a moral objection to the war. The implication is that Rosa's depression and anxiety stem from her morals conflicting with war. This isn't something that should be implied because that's the entire premise of the book. Deus ex machina is used to clarify Rosa's feelings by implying that all of her thoughts and behaviors over the last five years weren't tied to the war but instead tied to her moral objection to the war. Readers can't conclude this is true on their own, and it's a difficult conclusion to accept.

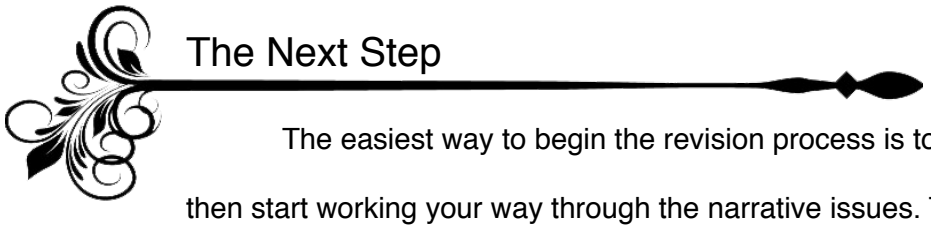
This conclusion would be easier to accept if all the other aforementioned issues were fixed, but as it stands, Rosa is unable to explain her feelings throughout the book, and she then

uses the essay and CO paperwork to retroactively say all her unexplained feelings were undoubtedly related to morality and not just the military. Unfortunately, that is a convenient solution. The military eventually acknowledges Rosa as CO, but the circumstances surrounding that muddle the situation. Readers aren't privy to the conversations between her therapist and her doctor that lead to those conclusions either. So, while some of the characters do accept her CO status, readers will struggle to come to that conclusion as well because there's too little information on which to base that conclusion.

There are also a few extra questions that could be addressed that would help readers better understand Rosa. Based on her CO application, she would have objected to World War II. No one asks that and, of course, the obvious answer "I didn't live then, so I can't say" is absolutely valid. It's not really a fair question to answer anyway; however, readers see her think about this hypothetical. Her declaration of CO presumably indicates her objection, so what does that mean? Again, I only ask because Rosa thinks about it and it is an interesting hypothetical to examine in this situation.

The next question pertains to loan repayment and benefits. Rosa thinks about repaying the military on page 351, but she never says anything about it later. As an honorable discharge, Rosa is also entitled to certain benefits. Did she repay the military for her education? Did she accept any sort of benefits? If not, why not and is that ethical considering her contract? These questions would have to be answered in the prologue, but they could take the place of some of the more pedantic moments seen there.

These narrative issues need to be addressed for readers to accept that Rosa is a CO. It's not enough to tell or to imply to readers that she is one.



The Next Step

The easiest way to begin the revision process is to respond to the in-line comments and then start working your way through the narrative issues. The narrative issues overlap with the

language and structure sections, so fixing the narrative will help you naturally fix the other issues. While revising the narrative, keep in mind the significance of Rosa's morality as it pertains to the war. Creating a clear connection between her feelings, moral objections, and the war is of the utmost importance in telling this story. Don't summarize, hide, or simply state those moments. Don't give readers a moment to doubt whether or not Rosa is a CO.

Thank you again for allowing me the privilege of reading your manuscript. This is an important story to tell, and a thorough revision will improve your ability to tell it. Please let me know if you have any questions during your revision.

Sincerely,

Scott MacDonald