

How to Get Feedback on Your Writing

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Introduction

Fact: putting your writing out for critique is tough. And brave!

But it's also essential, for writers to work on their craft. For non-fiction writing especially, it's key to ensure that what's being said is clear and reads well, can be understood by the target audience, engages them and is right for the market.

There are various forms of feedback you can seek for your writing, from informal to professional.

Friends and family

Informal feedback from friends and family is usually the first tentative dip into critique.

This can be useful, but there is an issue in that because loved ones are so close and care so much about us, they may not be quite so objective or able to feel completely free to say what we might need to hear.

There's also the possibility that when someone external to that tight-knit group points this out (as I'm doing now!), sometimes the reaction can be a bit defended.

Our close ones don't want to upset us, so if they do provide notes, they're likely to be supportive and positive – which is great, cheerleading always welcome!

But the feedback might not be quite technically informed enough to focus and guide us effectively in our writing, or regarding the content.

It's a great first step – but to get where we need to go, looking outside our immediate circle is what we really need.

Beta readers

Beta reads are usually supplied by people either knowledgeable in the field we're writing about, such as industry colleagues or professionals, or are writers themselves who can pick up on elements of the text in direct relation to the genre, topic and writing craft.

Their perspective is the reader experience, which in turn informs the writing.

Much of the transition for a writer in receiving feedback is making the jump from what's in our head to what's on the page for others.

And when we're producing non-fiction, essentially we are writing for our readers rather than ourselves.

Beta input can be helpful because past a certain point, we can become so close to our own text that it's difficult to see the wood for the trees.

This is known as 'revision hell', where we've worked so long and hard on our text that we can't seem to make sense of it anymore, and just need a fresh perspective.

Betas can be found in writing groups, online groups and on social media; some editors read beta too, both in and outside of their professional work.

For example, if you're writing a how-to book, it's a good idea to ask a knowledgeable expert, colleague or industry peer and someone in your target audience to read your content. Around three to five readers is a good number to get enough comments to consider.

When you have their agreement to read, give your betas a pre-prepared list of questions that you'd like them to consider as well as their own response.

For example, you could ask them if the coverage is sufficient, if they feel you've missed anything, would the text benefit from inclusion of X topic, Y idea, etc.

This will be specific to your script, so there is no one-size-fits-all questionnaire here.

What this does is help you get targeted feedback on any parts of the writing or content over which you might be

experiencing confusion, have been bugging you, or simply aren't sure if they work.

You can also ask for general feedback, such as did your betas like the content, what appealed to them – the important thing, though, is to know *why*.

Be sure to include open-ended questions that give your readers space to respond *and* prompts them to specify their reasons.

When should I approach beta readers?

It's best to approach betas before engaging an editor, and definitely not at the same time as professional editorial development work.

The reason is that this can confuse the process. Once you start working with an editor, the collaboration will be technical, structured and directional, targeted towards successful publication.

Pulling the process out to include what might be completely contradictory suggestions from informal and professional readers can create lack of focus and clarity – for both you and your editor.

Your editor may need to deal with random alteration between drafts as a result of beta input that they don't know about or haven't seen before, or brand-new

content for which they haven't already provided notes. It can also be a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth.

Do get your beta input first, take the script as far as you can, then consult a professional to help you get your script to the finish line.

Professional editing

Editors provide feedback in the form of manuscript critique and assessment and development editing. (For more on this, see my mini-guide: Manuscript Assessment and Development Editing.)

In terms of critique, assessment is a high-level overview of the text, usually supplied as a report ('editorial letter'), sometimes with notes at source in the text to show the author how and where they manifest.

The feedback here is practical and bespoke, giving you actionable notes and examples of the core strengths of your writing and content.

It also outlines any aspects of the text which might benefit from review, fresh input or adjustment. It will be balanced and take into account your purpose and intention for the script.

At this point, it's important to reassure you that nothing an editor says about your script is ever a diktat!

Any feedback is only a suggestion: this is your book, and you remain in control of your writing and content.

It's also important to emphasise this:

Critique is not criticism!

A good editor will never slam your writing.

The feedback you receive will be measured, respectful and in the full appreciation and understanding of your writing and publishing goals.

How to process feedback

As mentioned at the start of this guide, dealing with feedback can be challenging. Our writing comes from our creative source – who we are, what we think and feel – so it can be difficult to detach.

It's completely understandable.

Let me reassure you that every good writer has had to face it at some point – no matter how talented.

Even uber-famous, bestselling authors, who've sat down with their commissioning editors at major publishing houses and had to hear that what's on the page hasn't quite emerged fully-formed, pristine and ready for an adoring public!

Our first reaction might be emotional, offended, outraged, injured or simply:

'No – I don't think so...'

That's entirely natural, and perfectly OK.

When we're processing feedback, it's important not to operate on that first reaction. By all means feel angry, upset or annoyed... just be sure to step away from your email while you're feeling like that!

But seriously... read the feedback, then – and this is the important bit – set it aside.

Give it time, just let your thoughts and feelings do what they need to. Then, when you've given it space, go back in and see if the notes resonate.

Sometimes they will, and you realise they're helping to support you or giving good insight into what you want to achieve, and suggesting ways to do that.

Sometimes they won't, and you disagree.

Sometimes, in the professional editorial context, they'll prompt discussion between you and your editor to clarify purpose, intention and meaning.

And all of this is perfectly OK too.

See feedback as a proactive step to a positive outcome, and you'll be well on the way to making your work the very best it can be.

If you'd like to know more about working with an editor and the different types of editing, take a look at my other free mini-guides!

And if you've found the advice in this booklet useful and would like more information or an informal discussion about your project, contact me:

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