

*Tame your introvert. Without a good, high-functioning writers' group, you're cutting yourself off from one of the most vital tools in the aspiring author's toolbox. Deep and frequent engagement with a stable critique group isn't optional. In this chapter, we start with an essay about the perils of self-editing, followed by a study of beta readers. We end with 13 points for offering a critique and 11 points for receiving a critique and some standards for feedback and networking.*

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## 5.1 Layers of the Onion

HERE'S A DIRTY LITTLE SECRET about writing for publication: You cannot do it alone. Sure, you might sit in your special place—a coffee shop, a dedicated room in your house, a bench in the park, an Amtrak sleeper car, a National Park Service residency—and scribble in peace, by yourself, without distraction. For most people, manuscript development really is an individual act of creative beauty. But the solo generation of a manuscript isn't the end of the process. In fact, it's just the beginning.

You need a broad professional network to bolster your odds of success. Lone-wolf writers generally don't fare well in the market because editors know when the only previous eyeballs on your story were your own. Everyone makes telltale minor mistakes we're incapable of identifying on self edit, but which glow like nuclear waste when fresh eyes with different perspectives engage with the manuscript.

My nuclear waste? My first drafts tend to repeat the same 10-cent words in successive sentences and my commas proliferate like rabbits in a predator-free carrot patch. And when I get on a roll—i.e., when I plow through a section of text after the second martini—I deploy the passive voice with the reckless abandon of a parkour champion dancing atop the skyscrapers of New York City. And sometimes I over-indulge in mixed metaphors, and sometimes not even on purpose.

How do I know that my writing bears those traits of toxicity? Because my critique groups rarely fail to point them out, so now I'm primed to correct them on self-edit in ways I never would have caught *before* I built a relationship with my fellow scribes.

There's an old rule about editing: Every pass catches 80 percent of the errors remaining in the manuscript. If you're blind to some percentage of those errors, then it's likely that enough problems remain that your work will be kicked out early in the slush-pile editing, especially if you forego walking through comprehensive self-edit checklists. There's just too much good content out there looking for a home to take a chance on a query laden with obvious mechanical defects.

The solution? Start with your writing tribe—a critique group.

Consider: With what small cluster of fellow writers do you share ideas and chapters? When you painstakingly crafted your *magnum opus*, with whom did you share especially problematic scenes or seek advice about character or plot development? As you completed chapters, who looked at them? If your answer is either “no one” or “my Great Aunt Ethel who likes to read a lot,” then the most critical network a writer relies upon hasn’t helped you to hone your work product.

Beyond the tribe, consider a cohort of beta readers. These people aren’t necessarily the members of your critique group. Rather, they’re experienced writers in their own right, competent to evaluate work in your genre and within your targeted length, but who aren’t as familiar with your style as members of your critique group. A beta reader will look at the whole manuscript and offer feedback—not necessarily edits, but comments sufficient to help you figure out if you’re on the right track. Beta readers are especially useful for reviewing detailed novel synopses.

Armed with a tribe and a circle of beta readers, you’ll be better equipped to move to the next layer out: Peer authors. Network with other local writers! Attend book launches and poetry readings and literary mixers. Get to know the people who also write in your community, even if you don’t share work with each other. A handful of peer authors turning a megaphone toward their own readers powerfully augments your reach when you need to promote your book, yet those other authors aren’t going to market for you if they’ve never met you. If they know you, like you, and trust you, they’ll be there for you—especially if you’re also there for them. Peer relationships are always a two-way street.

Beyond fellows authors, your next layer out includes editors, agents, and publishers. Publishing can be a remarkably inbred affair. The larger the press, the more likely it is that a manuscript is considered not because it came out of the slush pile, but because it was advocated through word-of-mouth referral or through rainmaker or alumni relationships. For the largest presses, authors cannot even submit a query package; the big New York publishers work exclusively with agents. And within the agent world, the more seasoned the agent, the harder it is to obtain that agent’s representation. Your query package must be *flawless* to get any attention at all unless you happen to know the right cousin or ex-girlfriend or former professor or whatever.

The outermost layer of the onion, of course, is the general book-buying public. Readers are a fickle lot, but you can’t access them until you’ve worked through all the inner layers.

Early-career authors sometimes resist peer networking. They aspire to move their story from their laptop directly to the general reading public. Many times, they’re introverted—a characteristic of writers!—and resist or resent the imperative to grow the onion large enough to meaningfully flavor the manuscript. The problem with this approach is that you’ll likely remain invisible in your own community, and the work product you push along will not be as strong as it could have been, had you taken seriously the value of a critique group and a circle of beta readers.

The moral of the story: *Writing may be a solitary exercise, but being a published author requires a supportive community.* You cannot short-circuit the path

from your desktop printer to the bookstore shelf. You must deliberately plan for your success.

## 5.2 Beta Readers

BETA READERS HAVE ALWAYS SERVED as a professional writer's best protection against misaligned expectations about the quality of his or her work. They come in two flavors: Persistent and transient. Persistent beta readers are usually just called *critique groups* whereas the transient ones typically consist of individual peer writers willing to do you a favor in exchange for future reciprocity.

It's not okay to ask your Great Aunt Ethel to serve as your beta reader. Always pick people who are *writers*. Every now and then, I receive cover letters containing statements that the author's mom/sister/aunt/cousin "who likes to read" thought the manuscript was great. As accolades go, that's weak sauce unless said mom/sister/aunt/cousin happened to be Margaret Atwood and she included her endorsement as a signed letter within the query package.

### Critique Groups

A good critique group networks a stable, small number of people—six to eight is good; more than 10 proves too unwieldy—who are reasonably competent writers in their own right. A critique group is a significant long-term investment. The best ones meet weekly or semimonthly for several hours at a time. They conduct focused critiques of members' work and discuss craft and share practical advice for resolving the vexing literary problems of the day.

Avoid critique groups that meet monthly or less often or which consist of mostly inexperienced writers. You're welcome to join them, perhaps as a mentor or for the social value, but they're unlikely to give you meaningful feedback relative to your time investment.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, groups with open membership, for which you can't predict who will be present at any given meeting, foreclose meaningful relationship building that helps others grow familiar with your voice and goals and therefore optimize the feedback they offer.

If you can't get a substantive critique on a chapter or two at least once every other month, then you'd be well advised to find an alternative group. Likewise, if the feedback you receive is superficial—nothing written, or comments that suggest your colleagues didn't read, or read only once, your piece before the meeting—then the group is similarly sub-optimal.

It's helpful to ensure that at least some members of the group enjoy some expertise with your genres and your typical story length. If you write epic fantasies, for example, a group of literary-fiction short-story writers will be of value, but not nearly as much value as a group of fantasy writers or novel writers would be. It's okay to ask about the background and experience of group members when you ask to join, or are invited to join,

1: I participate in a monthly social confab of writers who eat pizza and sometimes play writing-related games. It's a ton of fun, but it's more "friend group" than "critique group." Writing-related friend groups are wonderful, but they don't meet the definition of *critique group* as advanced in this book.

2: Can't find a group? Your local library system might help, or join a virtual group. Online groups aren't as helpful as in-person meetings, but they're better than nothing.

a critique group; joining the wrong group may be more harmful than not joining a group at all.<sup>2</sup>

## Relationship Maintenance

Because a critique group is the core of your support system, your success depends on large part on how you relate to the rest of the team.

For starters, understand that the group is a *community*. They'll help you, but you must help them. If you're one member of a group of seven, then you'll end up six-parts giving to one-part receiving. That ratio doesn't work in your favor, unless that one-seventh slice that you obtain is well-optimized to help you advance your craft and to keep you motivated when you're imprisoned in a maze of writers blocks.

So how do you optimize it?

First, work with partners who align to your specific level of experience, your writing level, and your genre. The closer your group's skill level touches on the stuff you actually write, the more useful their observations become. Although it's not helpful to have a group filled with people who only write the same thing—outside perspectives matter—a balance of some-who-do and some-who-don't ensure you encounter several different interpretations of your work. The Goldilocks Principle governs, to some degree.

Second, insist that everyone in the group pulls his or her own weight. If some people habitually decline to fully engage with critiques, they're free-riding. It's okay to ask whether low-engaged members provide net value or merely fill a seat that someone else could more profitably occupy. When a critical mass of members develops a rotating list of excuses why they can't show up or couldn't get the work done, it's time to rethink the group and its membership.

Third, watch for groups with people who habitually reject feedback. A certain type of writer likes to attend critique sessions to read his or her work and to listen to praise. You know the type: As soon as someone offers a suggestion for improvement, the author interrupts with explanations that dismiss the suggestion and undermine the person who made it. Eventually, people learn to either pull their punches or to not even bother with substantive engagement. That passive-aggressive dynamic is a death knell for a well-functioning group. Channel those people out.

Fourth, find groups where education and shared goal accountability—and not just rote review—works into the warp and weft of the group's ethos. Critiques are good, but it's even better if every now and then a member of the group takes accountability for developing some targeted education session, or if the group issues internal challenges to write things, or tracks in a shared space everyone's annual goals and individual progress toward them. Fine-tuning your technique is hard, and although critiques help, they're only part of the solution. A framework for mutual accountability works wonders for keeping people motivated and on the right path.

Fifth, ensure that everyone's aligned as to long-term career goals. A person who wants to write short stories to shop to lit journals because he



wants to join an MFA program is different from a person who only *really* writes during National Novel Writing Month. Everyone doesn't have to have the same goal, but it's helpful when everyone's goals share at least some degree of overlap.

Finally, look for compatibility of outlook. It's not terribly unusual for people who might be compatible on paper to disintegrate as a unit because they don't see eye-to-eye on subjects like politics and religion, when people in the group tend to write politically or religiously engaged stories. Although viewpoint diversity is intrinsically valuable, it's also hard for some people to put their ideology aside to offer good-faith critiques of content that hails from a different perspective.

Whenever you join an existing group or accept members into a new one that you've founded, it's fair to ask pointed questions and to request writing samples. The value of a critique group isn't just checking the box of having one—rather, the value lies in its goodness-of-fit relative to your goals and levels of experience. An ill-fitting or outright toxic group, then, is no better (and often worse) than no group at all.

### 5.3 13 Points for Peer Critiquing

**YOUR PRIMARY GOAL AS A REVIEWER** is to help the author to improve his or her manuscript. A critique session is not an opportunity for you to boast of superior knowledge or skill or to assert your own ideas for alternative plot points. Because most critiques are subjective, it's incumbent upon the reviewer to present feedback in a way that reduces the risk of emotional harm to the author.

This point is significant: Your task is to help the author improve the manuscript in light of the author's natural voice and goals. The worst critiques come from a place that says, "Had I been the author, I would have written it differently." The most toxic critique partners substitute their own preferences, style, and voice for the author's. Such an approach serves no one's best interests.

A baker's dozen of critique principles seem to work well.

**Obtain appropriate context before you begin a critique.** You cannot help the author if you don't understand where the author's at in the process and what he or she needs to advance the draft. At a minimum, you should clarify what you've been given to review (Full story? First chapter? Scene from mid-book?) and what kind of critique the author's looking for. It's also helpful to understand external constraints, like word-count or point-of-view requirements or mandatory thematic elements (e.g., for a literary contest) or expected audiences. If the author doesn't supply this context, ask for it. It's never fair to invest time in a blind reading when the author's only really after one or two bits of undisclosed feedback.

**Read before you review.** Engage the content from start to finish before marking up your copy or taking notes. You won't find plot errors early in the piece until you get to the end of the piece, for example, so don't diminish the value of your critique by being too hasty.

**Find nice things to say.** A critique that emphasizes the negative with very few words of praise not only stings the author, but if this negative mode becomes a habit, you'll find your peers more likely to dismiss your feedback over the long run. Although critiques address specific work products, critiquing in general also becomes an exercise in long-term peer networking and relationship building. People don't generally enjoy hanging around the persistently negative.

**Don't hedge your bets.** Say what you need to say—no more and no less. It's not helpful to caveat statements with qualifiers like "that's just my opinion" or "maybe I'm confused." Not only do those comments imply passive-aggressive snark but they also undermine your authority as a reviewer.

**Find solutions, not problems.** It's far less helpful to an author to be told that some plot point "doesn't work" than to receive feedback that the point "might work better if" some alternative approach were employed. You'll find that offering solutions helps to minimize the overall negativity of your critique. Plus, a solution contextualizes your concern and gives the author at least a starting point for revision.

**Own your feedback.** As a reviewer, your task is to share your reaction to an author's work product. As such, you speak solely for yourself—you don't speak for all readers—and much of what you share is subjective. Using *I* statements instead of *you* statements when expressing an opinion will therefore honor the relationship between author and reviewer. For example, write "I think this scene would flow more smoothly if it had more cowbell because . . ." instead of "you should add more cowbell" or "readers want more cowbell" or "this scene doesn't work."

The point is important enough to bear repeating: *You don't speak for all readers.* So avoid generalizing your feedback. If you don't like a passage, for example, then say so. It's disingenuous to suggest that "most readers" won't like it.<sup>3</sup>

3: Unless you can point to a published, peer-reviewed study that establishes the point.

**Focus on structure, not minutiae.** Help the author to reposition the big rocks rather than fretting about the pebbles and the grains of sand. Incidental foibles are best left for written feedback. It's painful to watch a critique group break into squabbling about the minor details of a story, especially regarding trivial facts or minor continuity glitches. Experienced members usually spot the people who didn't do their homework because, in lieu of contemplating big-picture structural suggestions, they seize upon some nugget of trivia and beat it to death with a sledgehammer.

The pattern really does seem to hold. Reviewers who offer little-to-no written feedback and belabor trivial points in an oral critique (e.g., word use, an apparent factual inconsistency, a minor description imprecision) almost surely didn't prepare in advance. This phenomenon is well-known in university seminar rooms. You cannot fake a structural critique by executing a panicked, surreptitious first read at the start of the feedback session. Thus, people whose feedback is always focused at the line level

and never at the structure level are the very same people who aren't pulling their own weight in the group.

**Present detailed syntax corrections in written form.** Although it's sometimes fair in a group discussion to mention one or two grammar or usage points that many authors consistently get wrong, let your marked-up copy (returned to the author) offer the specifics. Calling out minor mistakes or a large number of line errors, in the context of the oral component of a group peer review, is bad manners.

**Minimize the violence against the author's intent.** As a reviewer, you will encounter styles different from your own. Your task is to honor the style and intent of the author. In particular, claims about the depth of characters, the quantity of scene descriptions, or the choice of words are open to the "well, if I had done it, I would have done X instead" construct. The less violence you inflict on the author's original vision, the more likely it is that the author will give your suggestions a fair evaluation. Ask yourself: Is a point of feedback specifically actionable by the receiving author, or is it your subjective statement that offers no meaningful direction for potential improvements? If the former, great. If the latter, consider leaving that hobbyhorse in the stable.

Relatedly, some authors and genres prove more amenable to polysyllabic diction than others. For example, a space opera might be written at a 12th-grade level, but literary fiction need not be so constrained. The appropriateness of "big words" with more complex sentence structures is highly context dependent, but it's not true that "big words" are always disfavored.

**Hop over the bunny holes.** Check for conformance to genre norms and that the plot follows an expected arc, but think twice before suggesting side stories. Inexperienced reviewers sometimes go down plot bunny holes such that the bulk of their critiques are either what-if scenarios within the plot or alternatives to how scenes unfolded (sometimes unhelpfully couched in terms of generic readers being "drawn in" or "drawn out"). Especially with short stories and samples from novels, avoid the tendency to make the plot or the characters do more than what's necessary to make the story succeed on its own terms.<sup>4</sup>

**Leave some strings untied.** Resist the urge to close every loop if the story doesn't require it. Authors need not make all aspects of the story comprehensible to the lowest common denominator of generic readers. Tolerance for ambiguity often proves stronger among lit-fic writers than among genre-fiction writers. It's okay to leave some facts vague or some resolutions imperfect, if that's the overall direction the author intends. People who belabor minor loose ends are often the same people who either didn't prepare in advance or tend to write black-and-white "plot-driven" stories.

4: Except when you're reviewing a synopsis rather than a story, or if the person you're critiquing specifically requests alternatives to a given plot point.

**Research what you don't understand.** If the author introduces vocabulary or ideas or allusions with which you're unfamiliar, it's never appropriate to suggest that the author's audience targeting is *ipso facto* inappropriate. Rather, take the time to study the language and the concepts—and only then raise the point, if (now informed) you think the targeting is off.

Likewise, do not flag facts within a story unless you're sure that the fact is inaccurate. Instead of suggesting that "I don't think it works this way," instead offer an authoritative description of what's true. Never fake competence, and don't interject speculation or suggestions that the author research something more deeply in lieu of you researching it on the author's behalf.

**Do your job.** Critiquing well takes time. You cannot do it 10 minutes before your writing group convenes or ad-lib it during a face-to-face session. You'll likely need to read the material several times to prepare well-considered suggestions that will empower the author to enhance the manuscript. This curation effort means you may discard valid observations that you know will not be well-received to avoid the author shutting out your feedback altogether. In other words: Pick your battles with care. If Fate precluded you from preparing adequately before a critique session, own up to it and *do not speak during the critique session*. Life, after all, includes many priorities that outrank uncompensated peer review. Each writing group, however, must set its own baseline standard for how often this unpreparedness manifests before someone is asked to step down. Consider the lack of an accountability framework as a giant red flag about the long-term viability of the group.

## 5.4 11 Points for Being Critiqued

DESPITE THE PAIN OF BEING REVIEWED, accept both praise and criticism as a gift on your lifelong journey of perfecting your craft.

Eleven points govern.

**Identify yourself.** Put your name on your story, and give the story some sort of title, even if it's just a working one for the purpose of the critique. The only exception is when the story, by prior agreement, obtains a blind read. Few things prove as vexing to people who edit by hand than to print several stories for review and then they must figure out who wrote what, and which pages apply to which story.

**Format the story correctly.** It's good practice to share documents that are correctly formatted for print, even if most people annotate electronically. As such, use a minimum of 1-inch margins on all sides, double spaced, with no extra spaces between paragraphs. Use an 11- or 12-point serif typeface (like Times New Roman or Palatino). It's *never* acceptable to submit single-spaced documents or stories with butt-ugly typefaces like Comic Papyrus.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, every file should include a running header with your last name, the page number, and either the story title or an

5: I once received a short-story submission written in 16-point Comic Papyrus, shaded in violet.

abbreviation thereof. The only exception to the format-as-if-its-printed rule applies when online or electronic editing is mandatory by prior agreement. And even then, adequate spacing, point size, and margins contribute to on-screen legibility.<sup>6</sup>

6: See Chapter 4 for additional context about formatting standards.

**Offer useable documents.** It's usually safe to send Microsoft Word or Adobe PDF documents; it's riskier to send people OpenOffice documents or InCopy files or even plain-text files. Do not make people click links into cloud-storage services unless—by prior agreement—you're committing your work to a collaborative-editing environment like GitHub or OneDrive or a Google Doc. The file should be accessible and should support tools like PDF comments or Track Changes comments if the critique partner prefers electronic editing, so don't apply security settings to the file to lock down edits.

**Provide context.** Offer a brief setup for a scene so the reviewer enjoys appropriate context for his or her comments. It's not helpful to ask a reviewer to read blindly, particularly from the middle of a larger project. Supply this context as part of your package to your reviewers. Especially for scenes in the middle of a book, informing or reminding your critique partners of where you're at in the story helps to avoid peripheral questions that arise solely because the reader lacks situational awareness.

**Ask for help.** It's rarely helpful to offer a story or scene without indicating why you presented that piece. Do you struggle with characterization? Or plausibility? Or world-building? Or grammar? It's totally legit to say, "I'm having trouble with X and would really like some advice." Otherwise, the feedback you'll get will, inevitably, be a Rorschach test. Likewise, it's great to tell people you're not interested in deep grammar-and-usage review because the draft will likely substantively change. Your readers will appreciate your permission to avoid doing the unnecessary!<sup>7</sup>

7: The only time it's helpful to not lodge a specific ask is when you think it's done-done and ready to shop.

**Clarify, don't confront.** If a reviewer offers feedback that you think misses the boat, it's better to say something like "I intended to do X, but it sounds like you think I didn't fully achieve that goal, so how do you think I could close the gap?" instead of arguing with the reviewer. Savvy reviewers generally figure out which authors will argue and then shy away from offering them their most nuanced and useful guidance. But asking for help in fixing the problem puts the onus on the reviewers to more fully articulate their position—and even if you think a reviewer is off-base, you'll have better insight into how your story might nevertheless be tightened.

**Avoid explanations.** If a reviewer is confused about a plot point, resist the temptation to explain it. Instead, make a note to address the point of confusion in the text because it's likely that other readers will react similarly. If you must explain it to one person, you'll need to explain it to many, so *edit* instead of *defend*.

**Consider the consensus.** As an author, you're always free to reject the counsel of others, but if there's an independent consensus about a point, it's probably prudent to concede.

**Say “thank you.”** Many professional authors never actually speak during critiques of their work, except at the end, when they offer their thanks; they observe the critique rather than participate in it, taking notes and thinking about the story instead of planning their next rebuttal. Always express your gratitude for the reviews, even when you're not fully satisfied with the session. Gratitude builds relationships that transcend individual speed bumps.

#### Zip Your Lips

Each peer group adopts its own conventions, but you'd be well served to observe the no-talking rule when your own work is under review. There's something useful in watching others discuss your work without you stepping in every three seconds to argue or defend. You learn a lot more by keeping your mouth closed and your ears open, compared to the reverse.

**Follow up.** Apply the feedback from the critique session to your story within a few days of having received it. Your reviewers took the time to give you advice; the least you can do is revise the story considering their comments! Particularly when the advice is still fresh in your mind.

**Don't take it personally.** No matter how indelicate the feedback may be, remember that the reviewer is speaking to your story and not to you as a human or to you as an author. Even when it feels as if your story were viciously hacked with a meat cleaver, remember that each round of revision makes the story stronger. And remember, too, that being blindsided by harsh feedback suggests you are too close to the story to see its potential flaws. Instead of being angry or hurt, and therefore amenable to rejecting all the feedback, set everything aside for a few weeks then come back to it with fresh eyes. A little “social distancing” from your own stories works wonders for resetting your good cheer.

## 5.5 Modes of Feedback

YOU'LL ENGAGE IN CRITIQUES in at least one of three ways—orally, in paper form, or in electronic form. And you'll engage the material either in advance, or as a cold read in a group setting. The methods and lead time influence the best way to deliver your comments.

In a cold read—in which, you don't see the material until the session starts—the best you can do is look at material from a line level, throwing in observations about structure as opportunities arise. A line-level analysis looks at the content from the perspective of sentences and paragraphs. You're critiquing mechanics, primarily, and things like characterization, diction, pacing, and tone. Because you can't sit with it to ponder the story,

your feedback on high-level structure will necessarily be hit-or-miss, but offer what you can. A lot of cold-read feedback is impressionistic rather than deeply reasoned. And that's okay. This type of session, performed in a group, functions generatively; as people make observations, others build upon them, so that real insight often follows.

With lead time, however, you've rarely got an excuse to avoid a structural review. The more time you have, the higher-level your assessment should aim. The best critiques look at the story from 50,000 feet to verify genre conformance, plot coherence, plot-conflict alignment, plausibility, and related subjects; it spends less time at the level of individual sentences. The more lead time you enjoy, the less you should obsess about proofreading unless the requestor specifically asks for it.<sup>8</sup>

During the delivery of the critique, you'll usually share feedback face-to-face with the author. Use that time well—mention a few things you thought worked really well and mention a few things that you thought could be improved, *and suggest what those improvements might look like*. Never belabor grammar quibbles or minor factual points in an oral session. And you don't need to treat the oral session like a recitation of your written critique notes. Delivering a summary of your high-level observations suffices.

During the critique session, you'll almost always deliver written notes to the author. When you're working in a real-time collaboration environment, like Google Docs, your comments stamp into the work as it unfolds. If you engage the material in advance, you generally get to pick your poison—handwritten or electronic notes.

Written feedback follows three channels. One consists of simple proofreading. Those edits incorporate directly into the text, either through proofreaders' marks or through actual edits to the source material in a Track Changes mode. The only time you leave comments about proofreading is when you can't edit—for example, when you work from a PDF. The second channel consists of observations at a line level. Those generally run as comments in both a PDF document or a Word document. The third channel consists of summary notes. Those append to the bottom of the file, as new paragraphs in their own right, not connected to any particular passage. Alternatively, the summary may appear as a separate document or a reply to an email or to a forum post.

8: Especially with a story under active development, there's little point to wordsmithing text that'll likely change several more times before final-draft status. So don't waste the energy!

## Critique Checklist

As you progress through a given story, ask questions about how it unfolds:

- ▶ What's the main conflict? Does it inform and guide the plot? Does it make sense? Is it resolved by the end of the story?
- ▶ Does the story conform to genre norms? Does the plot make sense? Are major touchpoints appropriately spaced?
- ▶ Is the point-of-view mode right for the story? Are there too many or too few POV characters? Is it clear which POV governs a given story unit? Was the optimal POV character selected for a given story unit?

- ▶ Does the story advance an archetypal theme? Any jarring inconsistencies with voice at a character, narration, or whole-story level?
- ▶ Does conflict interweave the storyline? Is the reader eager to turn the page to find out what happens next?
- ▶ Do characters feel distinct? Are they well-considered? Do conflicts and motivations seem plausible and multi-dimensional?
- ▶ Are descriptions limited to what's relevant in the moment? Is there too much backstory? Is there too little description given the context? Are the same traits hammered again and again? Are there too many stage directions?
- ▶ Is it clear how the narrator disambiguates from the POV character? Does the narration match the POV? Is author intrusion limited?
- ▶ Is there an appropriate balance of dialogue to action? Does each character speak with a unique voice? Do conversations make sense?
- ▶ Do chapters and scenes make sense? Do things end and begin where they ought? Does the story as a whole begin and end where it should?
- ▶ Is the writing clear, concise, and free of grammar errors? Does word choice and sentence structure align to the target audience?
- ▶ Did you enjoy it? Did it offer a good emotional payoff?

No need to specifically call all these elements out in your critiques. Just thinking comprehensively about all the things you could address is enough to cover the bases.

## 5.6 Beta-Reader Networks

CRITIQUE GROUPS RARELY ADDRESS novel-length materials in one sitting. For that type and intensity of engagement, you'll recruit individual writers who may be willing to spend 20 to 40 hours over four to six weeks to read your novel from start to finish then offer their detailed notes.

Professional networking will serve you well. A busy author is almost surely going to refuse a cold-call request for a beta read for a stranger, but a peer colleague may prove more amenable.

The most typical circumstance for this kind of heavy-lift review outside of a critique group relates to an *advance review copy* of a forthcoming book. ARCs are the last step in a book's development—they're the print-ready version of a book that's enjoying one last round of external review, both to tighten remaining glitches and to serve as promos for reviewers.

You'll sometimes find that authors who are part of various online communities prove willing to perform occasional beta reads. Do your research. Perhaps the one situation you should avoid is the review-trade deal, where two writers trade books in exchange for a "fair review" on Amazon. In this case, the author will review your manuscript-in-progress if you read a recently published book and review it on Amazon or Goodreads. There's nothing inherently wrong with this process, but some authors, particularly self- or vanity-published writers, use this approach to inflate their rankings, and as such, you should rightfully consider whether you're really going to receive as good as you get.



Never pay for a peer review. If you're going to pony up cash for a review, execute a contract with a professional book editor.

