Guide For Beta Readers

Let me start by saying thank you for your willingness to read my manuscript and provide feedback!

Below is a set of guidelines I ask all my beta readers and those providing general critique to read and follow when going through one of my manuscripts. These guidelines are a general idea of what I am looking for, and **NOT** looking for, from Beta Readers. The most helpful feedback would be your emotional reactions, along with your thoughts and feelings about the characters, setting, plot, pacing, action sequences and dialogue. I'm **not** really looking for criticisms on grammatical structure or suggestions on how you would write it if it was your story — as much as I would love to see you write a book, this is not it, plus I already have an Editor whose job it is to criticize me :0). Please be aware that your suggestions might help me see where something can be improved or make me think of a new idea or direction I hadn't thought of before. In some cases I may use your comment directly while in others I will not. Regardless, please don't plan on a by-line if you see I use a word, sentence, or idea you provided in your feedback :-)

Providing Feedback: To try and simplify the process I am requesting, if at all possible, that comments be made on the manuscript (Word document) that I will be sending you, using Word's Comment function. If you want to make any "suggested" changes, such as *line outs*, or *deletions/additions* (generally to correct a typo, delete duplicate words, add a missing word, a potentially better word, etc.), please turn Tracking On before you make the change so I can see where you actually made it. If this is not possible and you have to make comments/"suggested" changes on a separate document, then if you are referencing a specific line, please use the corresponding Line Number in the document. If it is NOT reasonable to provide feedback using one of the above methods, then please do what you can considering your limited time and whatever way works best for you.

PLEASE DO…

ASK QUESTIONS. Specific questions of any kind are almost always better than flat statements or comments, because they let me know where there are gaps in my storytelling, where I'm saying one thing while thinking I'm saying something altogether different, and where unexplored story paths might lie. ALL questions are appreciated!

Especially appreciated questions: "Why did that happen?" "How did X character get to Y place before Z character?" "How does X work again?" "Why is X character suddenly acting like this?" and "What happened to ?"

"I really loved this part, because…" Identifying the strongest and punchiest parts can help me hone them and strengthen the weaker parts.

"This section was boring / confusing / felt rushed." As above, please let me know where you're lost or worse bored, or sections that feel out of place, disjointed or poorly paced.

"This part made me feel joyous / elated / crushed / disappointed / scared / disgusted / disturbed" I really appreciate your emotional gut reactions. Having an idea of how you feel lets me know if I'm getting the right response with my text and lets me see my story through different eyes.

"I absolutely loved / hated / felt sorry for / totally want to sleep with / would shoot on sight X character" As above, emotional responses to characters are even more important than response to events or bits of story. This is particularly true of major protagonists and antagonists.

"Oh holy crap, I can't believe I didn't see that coming / I saw that coming a mile away, that was so obvious! / Wait, what the hell just happened?" Plot twists can be the hardest things to get right, because sometimes I'll think I've laid the clues carefully when I've actually been far too vague, and other times it turns out when I think I've created the wickedest of twist, and in reality it is actually as obvious as the plot of a Saturday morning cartoon.

"This was sort of cliched." Though what is a cliche and what is not can be somewhat subjective, this is also very good to know. Just be aware that sometimes a cliche is what is required.

"I just didn't understand X at all," / "Okay, I'm totally lost," Please do point out the spots where I've dropped the ball in keeping you engaged and interested.

"Horses don't do that" / "Steam engines don't work that way." / "If you did that in a real fight you'd get killed." If you spot anachronisms or lapses in realism / research and *you know what you're talking about*, PLEASE point these out! Just be aware of the caveat in the list below concerning fantasy believability vs historical realism. My main concern is keeping the illusion of the world that I have created and the characters movement within that world.

PLEASE DON'T…

Let me start this section with "It's good." Nice to know, but really not useful. Please tell me why you thought it was good. What did it make you feel or think?

"It sucks." Again, good to know, if not nice, but could you kindly tell me why?

"You should do X instead of Y." I could, but then it would be your book, not mine.

"I think it'd be cool if you put X in." As above.

"If it was my book I would have..." **Seriously!**

"You should put a comma here." Unless it's a glaring affront to The Laws of Grammatical Correctness, sentence structure and wording are mostly a matter of style and voice. Also, as I mentioned at the beginning, this is more an editor's job than a beta reader's. (Caveat: unlike many writers I WILL make an exception for typos, obvious missing words, and duplicate words. If you spot one, please let me know, thanks! ALSO, if I am asking you to Critique rather than Beta Read, I may ask you for grammatical assistance.)

"You should write more like..." Each author has their own voice and while I appreciate your love for another, please let me... be me.

"X character wouldn't do that." While it's helpful to know if a character starts acting completely against their personality, it's better to point out which actions feel off. I may have a very good reason to have the character acting that way that I haven't revealed yet.

"Magic / Warp drive technology / Alien biology doesn't work that way!" / "Your fantasy setting can't have X because it didn't exist in Medieval Europe," While it's extremely helpful to have anachronisms and stretched believability pointed out, please remember that fantasy settings are generally not Earth and may have different and sometimes deliberately anachronistic cultural and technological components. Even if the setting is Earth, because of the nature of fantasy literature, it may still contain differences from the norm. Before you point out an 'anachronism' please read the book carefully to make sure it isn't a deliberate part of the world building. Also, when dealing with fantasy and magic, as long as there's internal consistency, all bets are off.

"I saw this thing that was sort of like this in this one Lifetime channel movie once, you have to change it or people will think you ripped it off…" Just about every idea that can be had, has been at some point. You cannot write a story and hope that absolutely nobody out there has done anything remotely like it. Please point out things like this only if it's something major - like the entire plot - strikingly resembling something well known - like Star Wars or The Matrix.

"Hey I didn't like this part so I just rewrote it for you, no need to thank me…" Uh. You've got to be kidding!

"I made some suggestions, but if you use any of my ideas you have to put my name in as co writer okay?" I think we should start seeing other people.

Thanks again for volunteering to help me make my story a better read for my audience. If you have any questions, please contact me and I will try to clarify as best I can. I look forward to receiving your insightful feedback.

HTTP://PeterCruikshank.com/betareader