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Bridget's (perhaps overly strong) Opinions on Beta Readers

Okay, so I've gotten my full disclosure out of the way right from the get-go...

Yes, I have some strong opinions on the subject of "beta readers" (the term for non-professional, unpaid readers who offer perspectives on your writing)—but for a good reason. I have seen lovely people with wonderful, promising projects be completely derailed by feedback from well-meaning but misguided friends and family.

Giving your book to another human being to read is always a hard thing to do. But it's important—since, ultimately, we want our work to be read and enjoyed by other people.

The questions below are the ones I'm most frequently asked about the beta reader process. My answers are intended to help you get the kind of feedback that will keep you going, not the kind that will stop you in your tracks.

WHY should I use beta readers?

Your brain is a wonderful, one-of-a-kind landscape of thoughts, hopes, fears, dreams, and experiences. Its uniqueness is in large part why the rest of the world wants to read your writing: We want to learn what it's like to be you! However, its uniqueness can also make it hard for us to understand what's going on in your head.

I can't tell you how many times I have given what I thought was a finished piece writing to a colleague, only to have them say, "I have no idea what you're referring to here." Usually, what they're referencing is a thing, event, or process or I thought was so commonplace that it didn't warrant an explanation. And then there are the times when someone has illuminated a blind spot for me, saying, "You know, I think some people might find that statement a bit offensive." I used a phrase or a word that had connotations I didn't know about; thankfully, an early reader enabled me to avoid an unintended interpretation.

On top of these smaller-picture insights, beta readers can offer their perspectives on bigger picture issues. They're exploring your work with fresh eyes and coming to it with a host of unique reading experiences. As a result, they can offer invaluable feedback on issues such as pacing, believability, suspense, character likability, flow, and organization of topics.

It's extremely rare for any written material—books, poems, essays, articles—to be published without first being passed by multiple sets of eyes. The more these early eyes can help you polish your material, the better chance the later eyes will look favorably upon your work!

WHEN should I send my manuscript to beta readers?

This is a key question, and one that deserves some thought.

In my opinion, it's best not to have folks read your work until it is fairly well shaped. If you send a piece to a reader too early, they will—whether they know it or not—influence what the work becomes. In other words, if it feels unfinished to them, they will likely do some of the finishing for you. That can be helpful if you're looking for that kind of input, but, in my experience, it's best for authors to muddle through the process of figuring out what something is and where it's going on their own. This way, you're creating what YOU want to create, not something your friend wants you to create.

It's also possible to send your work out too late. You'll know this is the case if you find yourself rejecting nearly all feedback you get. If you find yourself thinking, "Yeah, that's a better idea for an ending, but I've already written an ending, and I don't see how I can go back and make the book lead up to this new ending without totally rewriting it. So, never mind." If your work is so firmly shaped (or you are so "over" writing it!) that there's no way for you to accommodate your readers' ideas, then you've come to the party too late.

The challenge is to find the "just right" spot between these two. In the ideal world, when you send your work to beta readers, it is well-formed enough to know what it is and what it's trying to accomplish, but it's still malleable enough to absorb and leverage the good ideas that beta readers can provide.

WHOM should I entrust with my baby?

- People who are smart and insightful readers—ideally, ones with whom you have discussed books in the past
- People who read the genre in which you are writing
- People who are the target audience for your work
- People who are likely to be able to guide their feedback according to your guidelines (as opposed to highly opinionated people who are going to override your expressed needs)

Chances are a lot of these people will be friends and family. As such, they may not be as unbiased as you'd like. And that's okay. If you can afford it, it can be helpful to find a professional editor to read your work as well. They are trained to evaluate writing based on

how effectively it meets the author's expressed intentions, and they will have a plethora of suggestions regarding how the work might be more commercially viable, if that's your goal.

I generally advise writers to stick to 3-5 people, max. More than that and you can end up overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of feedback you have to manage.

WHAT should I ask my beta readers?

I'm a huge proponent of giving your readers a list of specific questions to answer. Not doing so typically results in people giving you feedback about things you aren't open to and/or don't speak to the spirit of the book.

Here are some of the questions I like to use:

- In 1-3 sentences, what would you say this book is about?
- What scene(s) really stuck with you?
- How was the organization of the topics covered in the text?
- Were there any places where you got lost or confused?
- Were there any times you thought the characters behaved in ways that seemed inconsistent with who they were?
- How was the pacing overall? Are there spots where you got bored or thought things could move faster?
- How did the movement between times and places work for you? Were there any shifts that were jarring or that threw you off?
- Who do you think is the ideal audience for this book?
- Did you ever feel "hit over the head" by the themes of the book?

You get the idea.

Ask questions that you really want the answers to! Then use the answers to make your book even better.

HOW should I communicate my guidelines to my beta readers?

I advise the writers I work with to compose a short letter to their beta readers and to include it when they send the manuscript. This letter should include a statement of appreciation for their time and energy, the list of questions you've composed, and a gentle reminder of what you are not looking for (e.g., line editing! It's amazing how many people want to line edit. They can't help themselves. Don't let them. It's not their job, and it distracts them from the bigger issues you want them reading for).

I also suggest giving them a deadline by which to do the work. Without one, you may find yourself on hold forever. Anywhere from 2 to 4 weeks is appropriate.

I've got my feedback...now what??

This part can be hard, so be prepared for it!

First off, soak up the positive. There will probably be a lot of it, yet, most of us end up focusing on readers' critical feedback. Make yourself absorb the good! This is what keeps us going.

Then, notice trends. I often disregard one person's opinion unless it really resonates with a thought or feeling I was already having. However, if multiple readers say the same thing, I always give the suggestion serious consideration.

When evaluating those patterns of feedback, feel them in your body. Do you feel repulsed by them? Or do you get this gut feeling that, no matter how inconvenient the comment is, it seems right? I tend to give a lot of weight to these unconscious responses.

Most of all, take time to let their suggestions settle in. Execute changes—especially bigger ones—only after some thoughtful walks. You've expended a lot of time and effort to get to this point; what's another few weeks or months make sure you're making productive changes that are in line with the goals and dreams you have for your writing?

*If you have any questions about any of this or want to run your ideas by me,
I'm always happy to help with this process!
Just reach out...*