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ABOUT THE WFWA

We began this organization in 2013 with the idea to create a safe, nurturing place for writers of women's fiction. The publishing industry is morphing—with new opportunities and, as yet, unknown futures. The founders of the Women's Fiction Writers Association wanted somewhere to amass and disseminate information to and about our chosen genre.

Defining women's fiction has proven as subjective as the types of books we read. For that reason, our guiding statement is broad and comprehensive: stories that are driven by the main character's emotional journey. Our stories may have romance. Or they may not. They could be contemporary. Or historical. But what binds us together is the focus on a main character's emotional journey.



facebook.com/WFWritersAssociation



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Join the closed WFWA Facebook group by sending an email to:
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IF YOU LIKE WHAT YOU'VE READ ...

Send us a letter! We'd love to hear your feedback and reactions on the stories and features. Email them to writeon@womensfictionwriters.org. Submitted letters are considered for publication and may be edited for clarity or space.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Speaking the Same Feedback Language

Community and feedback go hand in hand.

To put yourself in a room of writers is to invite other eyes onto something that started as a closely guarded secret. They may not be reading your pages yet, but you'll inevitably talk about your story. Pitch it. Mention your genre. Share how you want to be published.

Writing may begin as a private act, but at some point, growth requires exposure.

Feedback is not always about the words written in the margins of your draft. We receive feedback every day, whether we recognize it or not. Perhaps you ask a question and someone misunderstands your meaning. Maybe you work in a profession that elicits assumptions. Perhaps you write in a subgenre that a particular reader simply does not enjoy. Every interaction tells us something about how our message—and we—are being received.

Comparison is natural in these spaces. We read the work of others and measure ourselves against it. Yet authenticity remains the goal. The purpose of inviting another set of eyes onto our work is not to become someone else. It is to better understand whether we have succeeded in being ourselves on the page.

This is why safe feedback is so valuable. Safe does not mean easy. It does not mean praise without substance or criticism softened beyond usefulness. Safe feedback comes from people who are willing to tell the truth while still respecting the writer behind the work (and the work itself). It comes from readers who understand that their role is not to rewrite a story but to point out when they lost interest and put it down.

Gold, however, lies in finding people who speak the same feedback language you do. These are readers who understand your goals, recognize your strengths, and know how to communicate concerns in ways that help rather than discourage. Their feedback may not always be comfortable, but it is meaningful.

As an organization, one of the greatest gifts WFWA offers extends beyond simple encouragement. It is thoughtful, honest, and trusted feedback built through meaningful community connections. Writing communities thrive when writers feel safe enough to share their work and confident enough to receive what comes back. That is how we write better books, connect with readers, and grow our trusted-feedback bench for our future endeavors.



We read the work of others and measure ourselves against it. Yet authenticity remains the goal. The purpose of inviting another set of eyes onto our work is not to become someone else. It is to better understand whether we have succeeded in being ourselves on the page.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ginger Haggerty". The script is fluid and cursive.

Ginger Haggerty



Acknowledging How We Got Here

I *love* to read the acknowledgments pages when I finish a book. Sometimes I can't wait, so I read them beforehand. Even though I know it to be untrue, while I'm reading (or listening), it's all too easy to presume the book in my hands (or in my headphones) came out fully formed, cohesive and orderly. As if the author just cooked up their story and immediately published it.

The acknowledgments, though, are a sneak peek behind the curtain. A small and welcome reminder of all that our craft demands, all that necessarily precedes anyone's reading experience. Failures and dead ends. Friends and family who helped brainstorm. Organizations and resources who guided research or offered services and support. Early readers. Later readers. Rereaders. Agents who delivered honest feedback. Editors who marked up every page with the proverbial red pen. And that's only the beginning.

In working with our staff to prepare this issue of the magazine for you—and top to bottom, left to right, the contents to follow are spectacular—I have been reflecting on how creating stories readers want to consume depends on so many different players coming

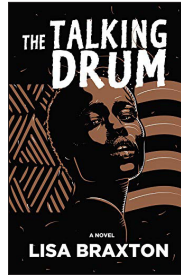
together. Maybe the writer writes the book, but an invisible community challenges it, supports it, believes in it. All together: improves it. Without the myriad and obscured contributions of people who provide feedback in one way or another, we wouldn't have good books.

Thus, written into any book's acknowledgments pages, we have a snapshot into the collective of individuals who helped bring that story into the world. And as I dive into another round of edits in my own manuscript, I am filled with gratitude for all the actors who've helped me reach this point. WFWA is a huge piece of that. So is this magazine. Thank you all for reading and for being part of this community.

As you read this issue, I encourage you to think about the topic of feedback expansively. Because although it can be a one-time exchange, it also lies at the foundation of this industry. It penetrates our work daily: in conversations, in our own heads, at the keypad. It guides us, shapes our stories, and shines light on our career choices—and when we recognize its value, it can uplift our entire community.

MEMBER NEW RELEASES

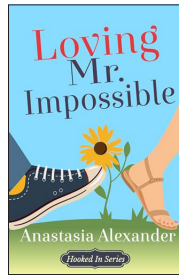
As WFWA continues to grow, so have the volume of member's new releases. Moving forward, women's fiction featured in the magazine will only include the previous quarter's releases. If you are a new member with an older title(s), please still submit your books to be included on the WFWA Goodreads shelf and continue to take advantage of other opportunities to share your work with the membership, including the weekly newsletter and TBR.



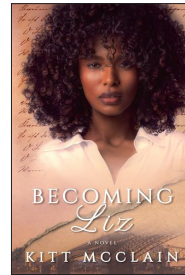
Lisa Braxton
The Talking Drum
5/1/26



Martha Conway
We Meet Apart
5/5/26



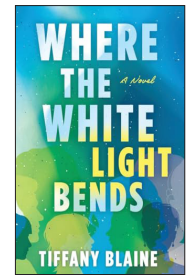
Anastasia Alexander
Loving Mr. Impossible
5/7/26



Kitt McClain
Becoming Liz
5/10/26



Lee Bukowski
Painting Over Cracks
5/12/26



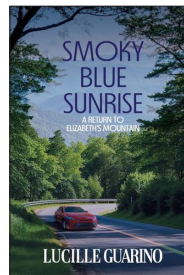
Tiffany Blaine
Where the White
Light Bends
5/12/26



Julee Balko
Square Hearts
5/14/26



Susan McGuirk
Dear Missing Friend
5/19/26



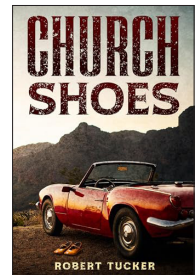
Lucille Guarino
Smoky Blue Sunrise, a Return
to Elizabeth's Mountain
5/21/26



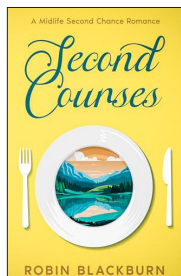
Ramona Matta
Valley Girl
5/23/26



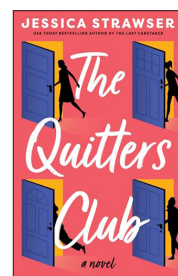
Barbara Pronin
Winter's End
5/25/26



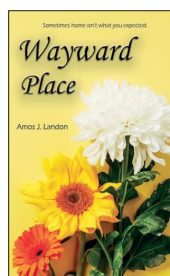
Robert Tucker
Church Shoes
5/25/26



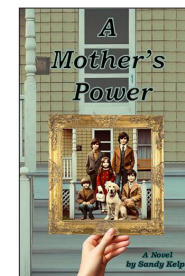
Robin Blackburn
Second Courses: A Midlife
Second Chance Romance
5/26/26



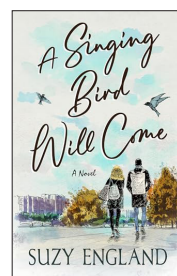
Jessica Strawser
The Quitters Club
6/1/26



Amos J. Landon
Wayward Place
6/1/26



Sandy Kelps
A Mother's Power
6/2/26



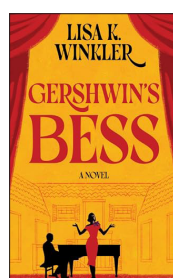
Suzy England
A Singing Bird
Will Come
6/4/26



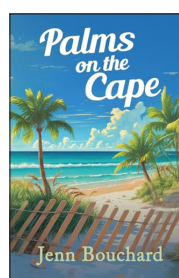
Christine Gunderson
Behind White
Picket Fences
6/9/26



**Meryl Davids
Landau**
Yoga Bind
6/9/26



Lisa K. Winkler
Gershwin's Bess:
A Novel
6/9/26



Jenn Bouchard
Palms on the Cape
7/2/26



Christy Matheson
The Bonnet Brigade
7/11/26



Wendy Haller
Regret No More, A
Flannigan Girls Story
7/19/26



**Monica Goertzen
Hertlein**
Hideaway
7/31/26

CROWDSOURCED

Each segment of Crowdsourced will showcase member responses to a question(or questions) framed around that issue's theme. Whether it be funny, serious, pragmatic, or something else altogether, every question will be crafted as a quick way to commiserate, laugh, and share our stories. We can't wait to hear from you! For this issue, we wanted to know:

“What’s the worst piece of feedback you ever received, and how did you respond?”

“A reviewer rated my creativity, on a scale from 1 to 10—with 10 being the best—a 2. I burst out laughing and asked, ‘How many swimsuit designs with built-in life preservers blowing up while the model is wearing it have you heard of?’ I was proud that I was not troubled in the least. I pitied the reviewer’s lack of imagination and continued writing a book that has won six awards so far.”

— Debra Borchert

“The worst piece of feedback I ever received was at a local writers group. My story included the rape of a 13-year-old (not graphic). Two men in the group said it was ‘unbelievable’ because a 13-year-old doesn’t look sexy enough for a man to want to have sex. Totally oblivious that rape and sex are two different things.”

— DE Riley

“The worst feedback came from an editor I had submitted my manuscript to prior to meeting her at a conference. She criticized the format I had submitted the manuscript in (I was green and didn’t know this was important) and told me she had no interest whatsoever in the story. I was so dashed that I didn’t write for six months. But I learned that format is important when submitting materials, and I also learned that I should be gentle and always include positive feedback when critiquing other writers’ works.”

— Maryka Biaggio

“That my MC should not cry at the cemetery, as no one would still cry thirty years later. I concluded they weren’t my target reader, and I ignored the feedback. :)”

— B. Janie Gardner

“For the book I’m preparing to release this fall, which involves both a singer-songwriter and a man with Down syndrome, a critique partner once wrote out a thousand words of suggestions that involved the singer-songwriter stealing songs that were actually written by the self-advocate. Being a DS mom myself and knowing that was not realistic, I politely said, ‘That’s a great storyline, but it’s not this story. Thanks, but I’ll stick to my own vision.’”

— Kathleen M. Basi

“What’s the best piece of feedback you ever received, and what made it so helpful?”

“The best feedback I received was from my editor who listed the myriad characters in my novel and suggested those that could be combined into one, which helped me refine and simplify the manuscript.”

— Lisa Lehmann

“The best feedback I ever received was to add more description of what my characters looked like. I generally skim that kind of info as a reader, but my beta reader convinced me that some people need concrete visual cues to differentiate characters in [their] minds. As you might imagine, I followed her advice and found it super helpful—even economical—in anchoring my characters in the narrative. Hooray for beta readers!”

— Stacy Prince

“The best advice I ever received was to read a manuscript out loud before sending it to beta readers. It is so helpful for flow, repetition, word choice, tags, and so much more. It is even more helpful to read the characters in the voice you imagine they’d have. Until you hear it spoken, you don’t realize the character would never say that word or would use a different phrase. It is time-consuming but so very helpful!”

— AK White

“This story is riveting! I can’t wait to read the next chapter. While reading I can visualize the surroundings.”

— Zana Etter

In the next issue we’re exploring HABITS AND THE ART OF ATTENTION, and we want to know:

What’s one writing-related habit or trick you wish you started sooner?

Send your responses to writeon@womensfictionwriters.org for a chance to be featured in the magazine. Please use “Crowdsourced-Business” in the subject line and include your full name and your one- to two-sentence response in the body of the email. If you prefer anonymity in the magazine, please indicate this as well.

WELCOME TO “SPOTLIGHT ON DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION”

THE D&I COMMITTEE INVITES OUR GENERAL MEMBERSHIP TO SHARE STORIES THAT IMPACT THEM IN THE AREA OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION. WE WANT TO HEAR ALL VOICES. PLEASE SEND YOUR SUBMISSION TO DI@WOMENSFICTIONWRITERS.ORG.

A Lesson Learned: Trust Yourself

By Roxana Trabulsi

Handing my debut manuscript to my first editor, I was overcome with the vulnerability that every new writer knows firsthand. My story was deeply personal. It was a story I grew up with, inside my family for decades, and here I was placing it in the hands of a stranger I believed knew far more than I did. He was the expert. I was just the writer. Or at least that's what I thought.

So I took his word as gospel. When he suggested cuts, I made them. All of them. Scenes I had meticulously written, details I struggled to get right, moments I felt were so essential to the story: Out they went, because the expert said so—and because I didn't yet trust myself to question or push back.

What resulted was a manuscript that felt . . . thinner. Something about it unsettled me, but I told myself that this was part of the process, and that this was just what editing looked like. I told myself that my discomfort was my ego.

Then I began working with a second editor and I understood what had actually happened. She started asking questions. Where was this? What happened to that? I realized that the things that had been removed were not wrong to be there—they just needed to be rewritten. The moments that made the story mine always belonged. They just needed some finessing.

In my classroom I try to help my students understand this, and it is the same thing I have come to understand through my D&I work. Feedback does not have to be the verdict. It is, however, an invitation to look more closely at what is already there.

In D&I spaces we talk a lot about listening. Not the polite, waiting-your-turn-kind, but the kind where you can let your defenses down long enough to hear what is being offered. That's not easy. But listening does not have to be the same as surrendering, and this is where so many of us writers stumble.



The framework I keep coming back to—in my classroom, in D&I conversations, and in my own writing—is this: Listen. Evaluate. Trust.

Listen fully, without immediately reaching for the reaction. Evaluate honestly: Do the words you have written serve the story? And then trust yourself to decide if something must stay or go.

I trusted my first editor blindly because I didn't know yet that I, too, was an expert. The only expert, in fact, on the story that I was telling.

My second editor never told me to put those scenes back. She just asked enough questions that I found my way back to them myself. That's what the best feedback does. It doesn't rewrite your story. It helps you find the courage to write it more fully.



Roxana Trabulsi is the author of *Of Mud and Honey*. Born in London, United Kingdom, but raised in Dubai, Roxana now lives outside of Boston in Massachusetts, where she works as a high school English teacher for students with learning challenges, a freelance writer, and graphic designer.



CRITIQUE GROUPS: The Good, the Bad, the Ugly



You are a member of a professional organization, so you probably know why you need a critique group (I call them “critters”). But in case you don’t, here are a few reasons why you need one.

Writing may be solitary, but growth is not. In a vacuum, it’s easy to lose perspective and drift into two totally opposite beliefs:

- I am brilliant—ready to publish!
- I am a hack. I might as well quit.

We need critters to offer feedback, to pull us back from the “Pit of Despair,” to share knowledge, motivate us, and to commiserate with. I was lucky when I found my first crit group. They were all of the above and more. We became a team and eventually went on to host a very successful craft blog, Writers in the Storm. We’ve all moved on now, but I would not be published today if it weren’t for those wonderful women, several of whom are still my dear friends.

So where do you go to find a crit group, and how do you know it’s a good one? The answer to the first is, anywhere! I’ve been in groups with random writers on the internet, people I met in writing classes, and local writing groups and organizations I’m involved with. (Did you know that WFWA has critique groups? To learn more about how to participate, email: critique@womensfictionwriters.org.)

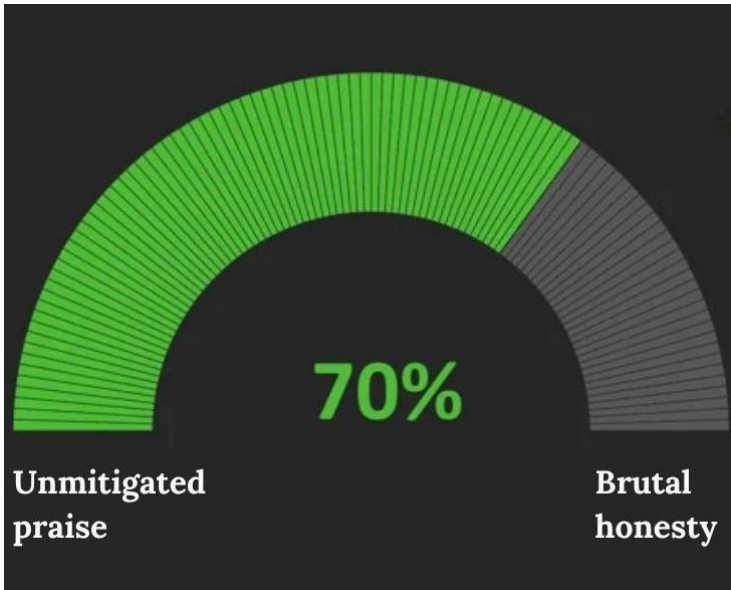
GUIDING SCRIBE

Now on to the second, stickier question. How do you know it's a good group for you?

Bottom line is: You don't.

As with any group of humans, a crit group is a puzzle of personalities, skill levels, and an undefinable chemistry. It can be wonderful. It can also be traumatic.

When you start with a new group, you don't know them. But you do know yourself. What kind of criticism are you okay with? Where is your comfort zone?



I don't think either a 1 or a 10 on this scale will help your growth as a writer.

Most groups have rules for how to critique and what to expect. Read them carefully—you may be able to decide if you're a good fit from that.

My first group warned me that they tended toward the brutal side of the scale. I was okay with that because I knew I was a rank beginner and needed a lot of help. If the group doesn't have rules, don't be afraid to tell them what kind of feedback you're comfortable with. Better to walk away before you waste a lot of time.

Then look at where the members fall on a scale of skill levels. All beginners? All multi-published authors? I think of this like playing tennis. To improve, you want to play with someone a bit more experienced than you. But if they are far more experienced, they will usually get bored and you'll be intimidated—which won't help either of you. A good mix of skill levels isn't always possible, but that's what you should shoot for.



Laura Drake was raised in snowy Michigan but got out west as soon as she could. She was a corporate CFO for 25 years. She fell in love with a crazy motorcyclist and rode behind him for more than 100,000 miles, propping a book on his back and reading on the boring stretches. Riding in central California, they came around a corner to see an old Victorian house on a hill like a shoddy queen surveying her territory. It captured Laura's imagination and she began writing. After 417 rejections, she secured an agent and sold in 2013. Her debut, *The Sweet Spot*, won the 2014 Romance Writers of America® RITA® award for Best First Book. She's since published 10 romances, 4 women's fiction titles, and in 2025 she indie-published a domestic thriller. Though she's genre-hopped, at their core every one of her stories is a woman's journey of becoming. Laura now lives outside Fort Worth, TX, and is working on her next novel.

Do you all need to be writing in the same genre?

I believed that when I started. But my first group's members were writers of military sci-fi, women's fiction, historical romance, political spy novels, and I wrote Western romance. Crazy, right?

But I learned a lot from each: Sci-fi taught me world-building, historical taught me research, political spies taught me suspense, and women's fiction taught me about character arcs. Keep yourself open—you might be surprised what you can learn!

Then there are the details, any of which may or may not work for you:

- Online or in person? Both can work.
- How many members? Too many may not allow sufficient time.
- How often do you meet? Remember, you'll need new material to submit each time.
- How many words/pages are to be submitted? Your schedule and obligations may rule out some groups.

The main thing to remember when you're new to a group is to tread lightly until you get a feel for the people and how everyone crits—you'll soon be comfortable.

A word about longevity. If you're in a group that works well together, you will probably want it to last forever. I know I did. But what in life is like that? Life intrudes: People have children, care for parents, some even give up writing altogether. Not to be a Debbie Downer, but all groups morph. If people leave the group, you may want to invite some new members, or you may decide to move on to another group.

And if you find yourself in a group that isn't helping you for whatever reason, quit.

I know we as women learned early to play nice and not to make waves. I have been in this situation—I liked the people but wasn't getting helpful feedback. I knew if I dropped out it would end some relationships. I hesitated and procrastinated and stayed too long. I began to resent the members, and it didn't end well. Remember how and why you met these people to begin with—it was to help your writing, right? Don't stay too long at the party.

New things can be scary, especially if you are an introvert. But a critique group can be rocket fuel to launch your career as a writer. Push yourself out of your comfort zone. You'll be so very glad you did.

The Art of the Critique: How to Give Feedback That Actually Helps



By Monica Cox

As writers, we often focus on the feedback we receive—how to ask for it, how to interpret it, how to act on it, when to focus on our own story instincts.

But as a member of the writing community, you will often be asked to deliver feedback as well, whether that's in a critique group, beta reading for a friend, or participating in a workshop.

Giving feedback that is kind, constructive, and actionable isn't easy.

"With feedback, the goal is helping an unfinished piece of work become more fully itself," says Jennie Nash, founder and CEO of Author Accelerator. "One of the things I've learned from training book coaches is that feedback requires a very different skill set."

Fortunately, it's a skill you can learn. If you are giving feedback to another writer, here are a few things to keep in mind to make sure you're a positive part of their writing journey.

Set Expectations

Regardless of the setting, be clear on what kind of feedback the writer wants.

"You have to know your role and stay in your lane," Jennie advises. "Are these early exploratory pages from a writer who's still discovering the book? Or is this a later-stage draft where the writer wants rigorous pressure-testing and precision?"

Setting some ground rules will help the writer not only get the most helpful information they need to strengthen their story, but will also guide you as the feedback provider to comment on only what they need in this particular part of their writing journey.

Understanding what kind of input a writer wants for their manuscript will help you provide the most helpful feedback *for that writer*.

Be Curious

"So often, feedback rushes straight toward correction: what's not working, what should change, what could be tightened," Jennie says. "But useful feedback usually starts with curiosity."

I spoke to several writers in WFWA-matched critique groups who echoed the sentiment.

"Recognize it's their story, not yours," says Marsea Nelson, who had experience in both a large critique group for several years and now is a member of a smaller group that met at the Kauai Writers Conference six months ago. (Check out her tips on conference-going in her article in this issue!)

Continued on page 12

Feature

While you may have a million ideas on how to fix something in a writer's manuscript, the story isn't yours to tell. Understanding what the writer is trying to accomplish is key to providing constructive feedback.

And if you aren't sure of a writer's intent, ask.

"Instead of assuming what the author's intention is, it helps to check," says Victoria Hamilton, a member of the same four-person, WFWA-matched critique group for three years.

Start with the Big Picture

When giving initial feedback, stick to the big picture, not grammar or other small issues that can be fixed in line editing (unless specifically asked to).

"I'm more focused on the story and not nitpicky about the technical stuff: grammar, formatting," and so on, says Lita Harris about how she approaches each critique for her fellow group members. "I first need to know if the story has legs."

When you're reading for big-picture feedback, consider:

- *What is the writer's goal?* Is the writer delivering on the promise of the premise?

- *Note the reading experience.* "It's most helpful when a critique partner approaches the manuscript from the perspective of a reader, not a writer, and with the same level of respect and trust that they would an actual, published novel," Marsea says.

- *Find evidence.* Jennie recommends looking for places in the manuscript to illustrate your reactions so the writer can find patterns and better identify potential fixes.

Highlight What Works

Don't just point out mistakes or plot holes. Be sure to point out that stellar turn of phrase, the character voice that's carrying a scene, or a moment that made you laugh or cry. Writers can learn just as much about how to improve their craft by understanding what they are doing well as they can by what they aren't.

"In the past, sometimes I would only point out things to correct," Victoria says. "Now, I've come to realize a writer can lose perspective on her work and feel the whole thing isn't working. So I like to point out things that land well, [like] a great tie-up to a chapter, clever banter, or choice phrasing."

A good rule of thumb is to use the Feedback Sandwich method, where constructive criticism is sandwiched between two positive reactions. For example, try starting with what you like about a manuscript, move to your observations noting where you were confused or places you think could use some additional attention, then wrap it up with what the writer is doing well that you can't wait to see more of in future pages.

Marsea agrees. "I always make sure to start with what I liked because I feel like that helps put the writer immediately at ease."

As writers, we all want to improve our craft. It is a brave thing to share our work and invite feedback. Approach each page with respect, kindness, and the goal of elevating a peer's work. Whether it's your

Quick Tips for Giving Feedback

- What did you like? What is working well in the manuscript? Note places that made you laugh, pulled you to turn the page, or were unique turns of phrase.
- Point out places that confused you, where you skimmed, or anything that bumped you out of the story flow.
- Not sure of what the writer is trying to convey? Ask. Comments that are questions will help the writer think through their intent and story goal to find clarity.
- Don't sweat the small stuff. Leave line edit comments for line editing, unless the writer has asked you to read for them.
- Remember whose story this is and focus on helping the writer realize their vision, not yours.



first time giving feedback or your 500th, always consider the golden rule: Give feedback as you'd like to receive it.

"When giving excellent feedback, you are not only helping someone improve a manuscript," Jennie says. "You are helping them expand their capacity to think, perceive, revise, and stay in relationship with their own creative vision over the long arc of writing a book."



Monica Cox is a writer and Author Accelerator Certified book coach who loves helping writers through the thorny process of revision to find the rose of their story. Monica is a former public and media relations executive and a graduate of the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is represented by Hailey Stephens at Rosecliff Literary.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS



By Kate MacIntosh

You know feedback will help you become a better writer, and you're ready to take the plunge of sharing your work. But what happens if you send it off and all you get back are vague comments—like “I liked it” or “It felt a little slow”—that leave you flailing about how to revise?

Getting feedback that is helpful starts by asking the right questions. Asking about specific details related to your story provides you with notes you can use and gives direction to your readers. These five areas will jump-start your thoughts on what you might ask to get the type of feedback you can sink your teeth, and red pen, into.

It's often more effective to carefully select a smaller number of questions (four to six) to ask readers, compared to overwhelming them with dozens of questions. So, be sure to choose the questions from the lists below that are most pertinent to your story and revision goals.

Character

Our goal as writers is for readers to understand and connect with our characters. This is essential because it helps ensure readers are cheering for the main characters to reach their goals by the end of the book. We want to create characters that readers will remember

long after the last page. The questions you ask about your characters can tell you a lot. For instance, they can help you ascertain if a character's backstory makes sense or whether readers understand the motives and desires that drive the character forward.

You can also explore how readers interpreted a character's arc. When well-executed, the decisions made over the course of the book feel realistic, even if the situations in the book are larger than life. You want to ensure that character choices don't confuse the reader.

- Which character did you connect with most/least? Why?
- What did you see as (character name) biggest strengths? Weaknesses?
- What did you see as (character name) goal? Why do you think they wanted that thing?
- What do you think (character name) is most afraid of?
- What values are most important to (character name)?
- When and how did your feelings about (character name) change?
- How is (character name) different at the end of the story than at the beginning?
- How did the character's decisions and actions drive the story?

Relationships

In most books, a protagonist is not completely on their own, but rather is a part of a world and larger community. Readers learn more about our main character(s) through the interactions they have with others. By exploring what readers think of various relationships, you can see how this element changes their experience of the story.

■ Which relationship felt strongest? Weakest? Why?

■ Did the dialogue between characters feel natural? Could you easily tell who was speaking?

■ What do you think (character A) and (character B) thought of each other at the start of the story versus the end?

Plot Questions

The events of the story, and the reader's desire to see how they will unfold, are what drive them to keep reading. Your goal as a writer is to find the balance between overexplaining, resulting in readers skimming, or leaving information out and creating confusion. You can also target your questions to specific parts of the story, wanting to know if the beginning pages pulled readers in, if the middle kept their interest, and if the ending was satisfying.

■ How would you describe the plot in a few sentences?

■ Were you confused about what was happening at any point in the story? If yes, identify where and why.

■ What do you feel are the stakes in the story?

■ Did you find yourself skimming any sections? If yes, please note where.

■ Did you identify any inconsistencies or plot holes?

■ Did the beginning provide enough information without overwhelming you?

■ How would you describe your interest in the middle of the book? Where did you consider putting the book aside?

■ What was left unresolved that should have been addressed?

■ What emotions did you feel at the end of the story?

World-building and Setting

The importance of world-building and setting depends in part on the type of book you're writing. Stories set in different time periods or magical worlds require a higher level of detail so that the reader feels immersed and can understand this new-to-them setting. But in any novel, the setting can add to the story, showing us how the character fits (or doesn't) in that world. Done well, setting shows character and can increase conflict.

■ Could you clearly picture the setting/time period?

■ What details were inconsistent or confusing?

■ Where did the world rules falter or appear inconsistent?

■ Were you confused by the timeline anywhere in the story?

Specific Story Questions

Some questions may be specific to your story and characters. Knowing which elements of the story are key to the success of your book, allows you to focus on them. For example, in a mystery you want to ensure that readers don't guess the



killer too early, or in a romance you want readers to be in love with your characters.

■ What did you think the twist was going to be?

■ What do you think attracted the protagonist to the love interest? Did you buy their attraction?

■ In a multiple POV story: Which character did you enjoy reading most? Why?

■ Did the story meet your expectations for its genre?

■ For a book in a series: What characters would you most like to see return in another book? What questions do you want resolved in the next book?

And perhaps the most useful open-ended question for any book: If you could change one thing about the manuscript, what would it be?

As with all feedback, you as the writer have the ultimate decision-making power. Not all feedback is created equal. Some beta readers may not fit with your target audience or may have their own preferences that don't match your vision. However, asking specific questions allows you to gather useful information as you tackle those revisions and take your book to the next level. Happy revising!



Kate MacIntosh is a multi-published, award-winning author with novels appearing in nine languages. She's written YA, middle-grade, and nonfiction under the name Eileen Cook and most recently an adult historical novel *The Champagne Letters* that *People* magazine named a best book of December. She's an instructor/mentor with The Creative Academy and Simon Fraser University's Writer's Studio. Several of her books have been optioned for TV or film, but she has yet to walk the red carpet. However, she has perfected her Oscar speech into her hairbrush. Prior to turning to writing, Kate worked as a counsellor for over 20 years.

Coping When Your Agent's Feedback Hits Wrong



Not all feedback from critique partners and beta readers hits the mark. We take what resonates and disregard the rest. But what happens when the most off-target feedback comes from your agent? Are you obligated to lean into everything in your edit letter—even the stuff that's out of sync with your vision for the novel?

The short answer is no. Your story, your decision. But you're probably wondering: *If I resist these revisions, will my agent shop me or drop me?*

While I can't promise any particular outcome, of course, I can provide a wider view of the agent-revision process that might help you steer things in your desired direction. So don't go firing your agent just yet! There's a whole lot of path to walk between one rocky edit letter and a fruitful client-agent partnership.

Why Did My Agent Dig in This Hard on Editorial, Anyway?

Back in the day, agents used to agent and editors used to edit. Today, editors are inundated with more submissions than ever. Why? Publishers are contracting. They expect their teams to do more with fewer staff. At the same time, the agent field is expanding.

The Association of American Literary Agents reports 765 active members—an all-time high. With so many new agents hanging out their shingles, signing clients, and sending manuscripts out to a shrinking number of overtaxed editors, even established agents who represent recognized authors are struggling to get projects into publishers' pipelines.

To be competitive nowadays, agents have to build reputations as successful prospectors who submit ready-to-publish books. Until things change, on top of everything else they do, agents have to edit. Or employ people who do.

Is My Agent a Good Editor Though?

An agent's record as a dealmaker is public knowledge. Check out Publishers Marketplace to see what they've sold, to whom, for (roughly) how much, and under which conditions (pre-empts, auctions, early foreign-rights sales, and deals labeled "significant" or "major" signal hot properties).

All that's good to know. But none of it reflects an agent's skill at editing.

Every project requires a different level of development. An agent's biggest breakouts may have required the least amount of work, while their more modest deals might be the result of months or years of developmental collaboration with an author across multiple drafts. You can't know if an agent's revision strategy is good for you until after your book is published and has made an impression on readers.

My Betas Loved It, So Why Is My Agent Asking for So Many Changes?

Your betas don't have a stake in your book's success, but your agent does. That alone changes the nature of an editorial approach.

In an ideal world, your stable of early readers would have already helped you improve things like plot, structure, pacing, character development, tone, flow, clarity, grammar, and so on before your agent even sees your manuscript. Having all that necessary and valuable work done first frees your agent to focus on the things you're paying them to focus on.

Like what? Here are some examples of what might be pinging through your agent's mind as they read your book:

- Which editors would be excited by this?
- Is this my client's best work? Will editors be excited about this author, even if this particular book is a no?

■ Is this well-timed for the market? Hitting any trends? Offering a fresh perspective on anything in our cultural Zeitgeist? Or . . .

■ Is this chasing a trend or centering a trope that editors no longer want?

■ Is this straddling any lines in the market? Do we need to center it in a particular lane to make discoverability and brand-building easier and marketing more effective?

■ Will this be competing for attention in a crowded niche? How can we make it stand out?

■ Is this too similar to something already published or about to be?

■ Do I want to attach my own name and reputation to this project? Is there something here editors and readers might find problematic?

All feedback can look like Criticism with a Capital C. As you read your edit letter, it can be hard to distinguish which asks are rooted in your agent's opinions of your craft and which stem from your agent's concerns about getting your book out into the world—and when and with which publisher and under which terms and for how much. Knowing that your agent is processing your manuscript through this very different lens can help you process their feedback. That's step one in preparing for what might feel like an uncomfortable, high-stakes conversation.

Before you call your agent:

- Breathe. Avoid firing off any reactionary communications.
- Look again. Did your agent's asks come with more craft language (plot, pacing, stakes) or publishing language (editors, market, timing, trends)? If the former, your agent might be concerned that the book simply isn't ready for editors to see. If the latter, prepare to ask your agent to explain how their revision plan fits into their business strategy for the book.

■ Set your deal-breakers. Under which circumstances would you pull the project? Even end representation? What are you willing and not willing to change? Why? Articulate your rationale.

During the call with your agent:

■ Be truthful. It's OK to say how you feel: that you were disheartened by the edit letter, that you feel the asks will change the book too substantially.

■ Assure your agent. Tell them you're committed to continuing to work on the book upfront. If you lead by asserting your deal-breakers, they might get the impression you're rigid or ready to walk, and they might match that energy. That's just human nature.

■ Seek to understand, then to be understood. Ask your agent to pinpoint their greatest concerns. Maybe those things were never actually big deals to you. Problem solved!

■ Listen. Are they using more craft language or publishing language? That will help you formulate follow-up questions.

■ Ask open-ended questions rather than yes/no questions:

□ "If you were to shop this right now, what are the best and worst outcomes?"

□ "Tell me more about why this particular [scene, relationship, twist, etc.] didn't work for you."

□ "You asked me to change X, but to me, that's the heart of the book. What else could change so that X can stay as is?"

Publishing is a tricky, inscrutable business, and creative differences between you and your agent, the person whose role it is to help you navigate that business, can cause a lot of anxiety. Open, honest communication and a willingness to see things from all sides are the tools that do the most to keep any partnership—and book deal—on track.



Angie Hodapp is the Director of Literary Development at Nelson Literary Agency. She holds a BA and MA in English, is a graduate of the Publishing Institute at the University of Denver, and has worked in professional writing, editing, and education for more than twenty years. When she's not helping writers improve their craft and learn about the ever-changing world of publishing, she can be found knitting, lifting weights, or teaching Pilates.

Navigating Feedback from Sensitivity Readers



By Paulette Stout

We’ve all heard that phrase, “Write what you know.” It encourages us to write from our limited personal experiences, but that doesn’t mean our creativity can’t wander a bit further. Isn’t that the point of fiction? To create? That said, if you decide to stretch your writing chops beyond what you “know” firsthand, you better get the details right. And that’s where sensitivity readers can be your saving grace.

What Is a Sensitivity Reader?

Sensitivity readers are people whose identity or expertise matches the subject matter you’re writing about. They read the book through that lens and point out where details are wrong or you’ve strayed into the culturally offensive. They also point out missed opportunities to add authentic texture that readers will appreciate.

Sensitivity readers can be people you know or people you hire for their expertise. Costs vary depending on the specialty, with highly specialized fields typically costing more. When making initial contact, ask what compensation they believe is fair. It’s often less than you think, with many readers doing it for free for the chance to give positive input on a book. Either way, they are an essential validation point to ensure you deliver a great reading experience for all.

Over the years, I’ve worked with licensed therapists, national organizations related to my topics, professional chefs, nutritionists, lawyers, and Black professional women. My current work has a bisexual main character, and I’ll be giving it to readers from the LGBTQ+ community to be sure I get the details right.

Your job as a writer is to critically evaluate where you need expert help, then find qualified readers. Most authors I know seek out their own sensitivity readers, since that typically happens during the drafting stage. Some publishers do run manuscripts by experts, but that typically happens when they have concerns about the manuscript or the author’s personal connection to the subject matter. Sadly, too many books are published without that important lens, and readers are the worse for it.

Have a Humble Mindset

Find a thick magic marker and write the following line on a sheet of paper: *I don't know what I don't know*. Say it aloud and believe it. It'll help you remember why you're seeking expertise from **someone who knows**.

Listen to their feedback with an open heart and use the advice to improve your work. If you hear perspectives or experiences that challenge your worldview, sit with that tension. Get curious. Ask for personal stories that help illustrate their lived experience to help make the information real to you. Learn from it and use it to grow as a creator (and as a human being).

Quick Tip: If you get twisted in knots because you heard things from your sensitivity reader(s) that “don't sound right” or that you don't believe, you might have exposed an uncomfortable truth: You have more to learn about the identity or topic before writing the scene, character, or story. Take a moment to explore why you want to write about a topic or character. What's your motivation and does that drive extend to learning what you need to get it right? It could be an amazing growth moment for you to learn more and bring your story to life in an authentic way. Or it could mean it's time to pivot and write something else.

In short: Don't *think* you know. Make sure you do. Chances are you know less than you think.

Do Your Homework First

Before you write a single word or search for sensitivity readers, do your research. Explore the topic through books and video interviews, and consult studies and articles to immerse yourself in the subject matter. Understand your topic backward and forward before you reach out to anyone. That way, you'll be equipped to have an informed conversation when the time comes.

Quick Tip: If you're writing a main character who is different from you, you'll want to engage sensitivity readers early and often. If you just need fact-checking, later is fine.

Writing Another Identity: Main Character

When writing a **main character worlds apart** from your lived experience, be prepared to put in the hard work. In my third book, my main character was a Black attorney. I am neither Black nor an attorney. Before I began writing, I read books about the lived experiences of Black women in the workplace. I scoured social media to hear conversations people were having in the Black community. I read articles and talked to Black friends and family. Only then did I reach out for one-on-one interviews. After all that as a foundation, I was prepared to write.

To avoid making huge blunders needing massive rewrites, you might want to share chunks of the first draft with sensitivity readers, then meet to discuss their scene-by-scene feedback. Catching culturally offensive characters or scenes early enables you to apply that learning as drafting progresses. I gave 20,000-word chunks to my sensitivity panel, and their insight deepened my understanding of the Black experience and left me forever changed.

Later, I had a separate sensitivity reader read the whole book for an unbiased opinion from someone less emotionally invested in the story. After her glowing review, I felt confident publishing the book, knowing it had been thoroughly vetted. I share all this to make it very clear to expect heavy lifting if you choose to write leading characters outside your identity.

Quick Tip: If you include only small plot points or characters with



limited on-page time, then it's fine to share highlighted passages of later drafts to confirm details and identify missed opportunities. Remember, working with sensitivity readers isn't just about fixing mistakes. It's about capturing opportunities for authentic cultural portrayals that will resonate with readers.

What Feedback to Accept, What to Reject

Unlike working with many beta readers, you may find yourself relying on one sensitivity reader. You've chosen them for their expertise, so don't be quick to reject their feedback because you disagree or find it uncomfortable.

Listen and learn. As the author, you can and should make informed choices about all feedback. But if you dismiss most of the sensitivity feedback, pause to question whether your cultural ignorance is showing.

Why Getting It Right Matters

It's human nature to connect more readily with people like ourselves—and that extends to the characters we read in books. When diverse readers open your work and see accurate portrayals of people like them, you'll win instant fans. I can speak from personal experience here.

Representation matters. A lot. Providing authentic experiences in books only makes them better, and working with sensitivity readers is your ticket into readers' hearts.



Read in 45 countries, **Paulette Stout** is the multi-award-winning author of bold novels with determined heroines, romance, and fearless social themes. She also co-hosts *The Best of Book Marketing Podcast*, is an author coach, and works by day as the Director of Content and Branding for a global software company. Needless to say, she doesn't sleep much!

How to Survive a Writing Conference as AN INTROVERT



By Marsea Nelson

For years I dreamed of attending the Kauai Writers Conference. This past November I finally had the opportunity to go. I couldn't believe I'd meet so many of my favorite writers (Rebecca Makkai! Sadeqa Johnson! Steven Rowley!) and pitch my novel to several dream agents.

But as excited as I was to attend, I was also trepidatious because, unlike WFWA events I've participated in, I wouldn't go in knowing any of the other attendees. Just thinking about spending seven days conversing with strangers made my introverted self feel limp with exhaustion.

Is it even possible for an introvert to return home from a writing conference without feeling completely wrung out? As I learned, with some prep and strategizing, the answer is: absolutely.

Know That You're Not Alone

In her seminal book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, Susan Cain explains that introverts "like to focus on one task at a time and can have mighty powers of concentration." She also notes that they "tune in to their inner worlds and the treasures to be found there."

With those descriptions, you'd be forgiven in thinking she was talking about writers. So, that's the first tip: Remember that at a writing conference, you're among plenty of other introverts who are just as nervous to put themselves out there.

Also keep in mind that, as Cain notes, introversion isn't something that needs to be "cured."

Introverts enjoy plenty of strengths, including being good listeners and thinking before they speak, which are wonderful attributes when attending a conference.

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How to Survive a Writing Conference as AN INTROVERT

Prepare Beforehand

If your schedule and budget allow, arrive at the conference hotel a day or two early. With that extra time, you can unpack; learn your way around the building; and adjust to the time change, if there is one, before the halls flood with people and you're off to the races.

If that's not possible, you can still "hermit up for a day or two before the conference," says Sophia Dembling, a "professional introvert" who's written two books and hundreds of articles and essays on the topic.

She also recommends studying the schedule ahead of time. "Aside from helping you make the most of the learning experience, you might find a block of time when none of the sessions thrill you and can use that time to find a quiet spot (maybe retreat to your room or take a walk) to decompress."

Waking up early during the conference to enjoy some time alone can also help, Dembling says.

While I'm not one to set my alarm earlier than necessary, I did find that arriving a day early in Hawaii dramatically decreased my anxiety, which in turn, had me heading to the registration desk with confidence instead of low-level panic.

Let Shared Interests Steer Conversations

While introverts generally abhor small talk, there's plenty of low-hanging conversational fruit among writers. You can ask other attendees what they're currently working on, their favorite authors, or what sessions they've enjoyed thus far.

If there are agent and editor meetings, you can inquire about that too. "You can cheer each other on or commiserate, which can be very bonding," Dembling says.



Don't Be Afraid to Skip Stuff

Yes, it would be great if you could attend every session and event, just like it would be awesome if you could see the Coliseum, the Uffizi Galleries, the Sistine Chapel, and the Amalfi Coast over a long weekend in Italy. But would you even enjoy that vacation, or would it just be checking sites off a list? Same goes for conferences.

Especially for multiday events, it's important to play the long game and prioritize. According to Dembling, that should include any provided meals.

"Little fills me with more horror than networking cocktail parties—I fail abysmally at those—but I can succeed over lunch," she says. "I find it much easier to make conversation over the course of a meal, which allows me to

warm up to others at my own pace."

In Hawaii I attended all the breakfasts and lunches—I paid for them in advance so was highly motivated—but I opted to spend two nights having dinner on my own. The first I spent at the hotel bar, book in hand, and the other involved Netflix and room service. I have no regrets.

You know what else you shouldn't regret? Taking a break from writing while at the conference. Sure, you'll spot others curled up on common area couches, scribbling or typing away, but resist any niggling guilt if you don't feel inspired to do the same. Focus on attending sessions and striking up conversations. The writing can resume when you're back at home and, once again, blissfully alone.



Marsea Nelson is a writer and editor living in Falls Church, VA. She is currently at work on her first novel, inspired by the year she spent coaching synchronized swimming in Perth, Australia. Connect with her on Instagram: @marseanelsonwrites.

THE NEXT CHAPTER:

Transitioning From Dream to Career By Christy Matheson



LEARNING FROM YOUR REVIEWS

So... you've gotten through the first layers of feedback and have something published. Now it's time to worry about the next layer: reader reviews.

There are all kinds of debates on whether to read your reviews, so I'm here to tell you—just read them! It's the most direct and honest communication you can get with your own audience, and that's valuable—even when facing reviews can be painful. Below are some suggestions about how to make them work for you.

Frame reader reviews as feedback

By now, you understand that feedback is the only way you're going to grow as an author. We have to get out of our own heads and see our stories as they look from the outside.

Furthermore, publishing is full of rejections. You're going to be hearing “no” (and silence) everywhere you turn. If you read your reviews, you're at least going to hear *some* positive feedback!

Understand who reviews are written for

You've probably heard that “reviews are for readers, not authors,” but I'm going to challenge that—speaking specifically now about review sites (like GoodReads, StoryGraph, and Bookstagram).

People write reviews for *themselves*. They note 5-star reads so they can find them at the end of the year, and they leave reviews so they can remember which authors to read again. Most of all, active readers and reviewers are writing for their own followers and conversations. This means that it's important for reviewers to be honest for other readers, not to offer comments to make the author feel good.

This can be a good thing for you! You're privileged to be listening in on a conversation about your books. But remember . . .

THE NEXT CHAPTER: Transitioning From Dream to Career

Bad stars make for good reviews

If you're not getting some middling or poor reviews (i.e., 3 stars and below), you're not reaching widely enough.

If your reviews are all 4 and 5 stars, it looks to others like they're coming from your friends. If your book is reaching new people, some of them are going to leave 1 star. It's even better if your low reviews explain why they hated it, but in my observation, most of them don't. Even so, low reviews make your page look authentic.

The more books people read and review, the more likely they are to give medium-level stars. You *need* the readers who read widely—they're the ones who are connected in the community. They also write more meaningful reviews. Voracious readers are also more likely to take a chance on a new author—like you.

Write to your audience

You've probably heard discussions about "writing to market," and many authors (especially in women's fiction) have a gut response of "no way!"

But if you want to sell books, you have to write books that people want to buy. It's always better to focus on a niche, and what better audience than the people who are already interested in your books?

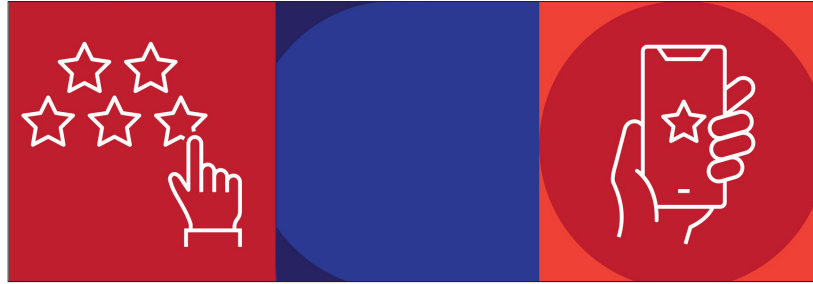
As your reviews accumulate, look at them carefully. What draws readers to your books? What makes the happy readers satisfied, and what do the "I liked it, but . . ." readers mention as the downside?

Then, as you consider your next project, consider how you can lean into what your readers say they care about. If you need to switch series, what can you bring with you? Or is it worth staying in the same world for another book because multiple people are curious about a character or topic you thought was resolved?

This type of decision takes analysis—your readers cannot tell you what you should write. They are not editors or marketing professionals, and some readers just aren't right for your books.

For instance, I've received some criticism that my books are too hard to read or confusing. But my core readers have never had this problem and even the critical readers point to opposite places that confuse them. I've concluded that these readers are looking for a more straightforward writing style. My core readers appreciate my more lyrical style—and they definitely prefer fast pacing!

On the other hand, I've had several readers mention that I write strong or nuanced female characters. I thought all my characters were rich, but reviews mostly mention the women. I have an idea for a book with a male POV, but I'll probably adapt it to a dual POV with a female perspective too. That's a compromise that doesn't feel like it changes my artistic vision and that has a better chance of connecting with my audience.



Watch audience responses to other books in your subniche

What else do your readers like? Identify your sub-subgenre, and read reviews of books that are like yours, including those on similar publishing and sales paths. Notice what themes come up and what readers like to see.

Facebook groups can be great for this, especially if they focus on a theme with new releases. Naturally, you'll want to follow reviewers on Bookstagram or BookTok (although it can be hard to find people in the right niche). NetGalley focuses by definition on new releases, and it's easy to follow links to see authors in other spaces, so even if you aren't using it as an author or reviewer it can be a good research tool. Look at the reviewers who recommend your books on BookBub or 5-star you on GoodReads, and follow their profiles to see what else they read. When you find an author you like, read their reviews.

You'll probably notice themes in what readers gravitate toward, and since these are books in your subniche, you'll find some themes that dovetail nicely with your own writing. For instance, I noticed reviews in my category kept mentioning how they liked seeing food. I don't think about including food, but if that helps give my readers the grounded, comforting sensations I already know they want from my books, I can certainly add in a few details about something delicious.

This is an easy way to write to market without compromising your artistic integrity and deliver books that your ideal audience craves.

As a writer, you need to develop the skill of managing feedback, even when it's painful. If you want to be commercially successful—meaning selling books beyond your family and friends—you have to listen to what readers are saying about books like yours.

In order to glean value from this, read your reviews and analyze them intelligently. Find the value in negative reviews instead of avoiding them, and stay current in your subniche to see what other readers and writers are saying. Best of all, your reviews can be those spots of gold that inspire you to keep writing!



When **Christy Matheson** is not throwing ordinary characters into fairy tales, she is busy raising five children. (Very busy.) She writes character-driven historical fiction with and without fantasy elements, and her "fresh, smart, and totally charming" stories have won multiple awards.

What Is Self-Editing, and Why Is It Taking So Long?



A Roadmap to Success

Critique partners, mentors, and beta readers are an essential part of a writer's life. They help us view our stories objectively, stay abreast of market trends, and align our work with genre expectations. However, the ability to review and refine our own manuscripts is a tool every writer should develop.

In fact, the seven-step writing process we learned in elementary school still works for fiction writing.

We start by **brainstorming** the story we want to write. If necessary, we do **research** on the viability of the topic before we **outline**. Pantsers will perhaps jump straight to **drafting**. The rough draft is where we should, ideally, pour our brainstorm onto the page without worrying about form or function.

However, the next three steps are where many writers get lost. They don't know the difference between **revision**, **editing**, and **proofreading**—or worse, they do, but they get stuck in a perfectionism loop that becomes a never-ending journey.

How Is Revision Different from Editing and Proofreading?

Revision is about looking at the big picture elements of the story—structure, timeline, plot points, characterization, and dialogue. When we revise, we're looking at what to change, cut, or add to help the story make sense.

Editing focuses on smaller details such as syntax, grammar, and word usage.

Once we are satisfied with the manuscript, we should proofread for spelling, spacing, and formatting errors.

The problem is that many writers tackle each of these tasks collectively when they should be done separately. When we lump the three last steps into one, we set ourselves up for frustration because it makes reading the text a slog that takes forever.

But if we separate the steps and focus solely on revision *first*, not only are we able to gain clarity over our work, but it also gives our revision cycle a definitive ending.

Revise in Three Big Steps Step 1: Clarify the GMC

Debra Dixon's *GMC: Goal, Motivation, and Conflict* (1996) focuses on helping writers understand that every successful story is driven by a viewpoint character who urgently wants something (goal) and has a personal reason (motivation) for obtaining it despite impossible odds (obstacles). The best way to test the strength of your story is to make sure each scene meets her basic criteria.

Continued on page 24

THE PROMPT

Start by asking these questions:

- Is it clear what my MC wants in this scene?
 - Is the reasoning behind the pursuit personal and believable?
 - Are there clear obstacles (internal or external) preventing them from achieving their goal?
 - Does their success or failure result in some narrative change by the end of the scene?
- If you can't answer all four questions, the scene may lack stakes or may not serve the overall narrative. On the other hand, if the first few questions are easy to answer, ask deeper questions to ensure you're working to thoroughly examine the text:
- Has the MC changed (physically or mentally)? Do they see things differently?
 - Is the audience clear on why they made the decision or took the action they did?
 - Has the MC adjusted their gameplan for a new attack or action in the scene that follows?
 - Has the event of the scene changed the next portion of the overall story?

Remember, the scenes of a well-constructed novel should build on one another like dominoes, which makes affirmatively answering the second set of questions doubly important.

Step 2: Pinpoint the Emotional Arcs

As you go through each scene in the manuscript, identify the emotional arcs that you hope to see using a modified version of [Freytag's Pyramid](#) as a checklist. This will ensure each scene unfolds in a logical manner.

■ **Opening:** Is the setting, time, and location clear to the reader? Have you established a mechanism for conveying character or backstory in an interesting and succinct manner?

■ **Rising:** Is there a clear catalyst for conflict? Can the reader infer the complication or inciting incident for this

scene? Is the reason why or how the conflict escalated clear? Does the conflict escalate?

■ **Climax:** Does the scene reach a turning point where things change or the narrative shifts?

■ **Falling Action/Resolution:** How does the scene end, and what does the climactic shift cost the viewpoint character? How does that shift or change affect the story moving forward?

Avoid closing a scene where it would naturally end. Try to close with the viewpoint character pondering a question, decision, revelation, or new complication. Also, notice how some of the questions refer to how the reader interprets your text.

Remember, revision is re-envisioning the work from the eyes of those who will consume it.

Step 3: Amplify Emotional Moments

People read fiction to experience empathy and strong emotions. Therefore, our stories should include powerful sensory elements. Take a page from Blake Synder's *Save the Cat* (2005) and make sure that every major moment in each scene aligns with an emotion. Review your finished draft with these thoughts in mind:

■ Are the reveals, actions, or plot points in this scene ordered to create escalating tension that builds logically from beginning to end?

■ Is there a specific emotion assigned to each of those moments, and does the sequence force the character through a dynamic emotional shift? Is it possible for the MC to experience conflicting feelings at the same time? (Remember, real emotion is complex. By showing contradictions, you create characters with psychological realism, which deepens reader investment.)

■ Does the scene contain internal thoughts, body language, or humor to give the reader a momentary rest between intense peaks?

■ Does the scene contain a moment of surprise that complicates the

characters' plans or subverts the reader's expectations?

Revision Means Rewrites AND Rereads

Since revising, editing, and proofreading are separate processes, you will need to read your work several times to complete each step:

■ **First Pass (Revision):** Check scene structure and emotional arcs. Search for places to add more sensory details. Have you properly balanced dialogue and description? Can you refine internal monologue and solidify character goals? Are the motivations and conflicts for each character clear?

■ **Second Pass (Revision):** Cut anything that doesn't escalate emotion, advance plot, raise stakes, or deepen character. Every paragraph should make the reader hungry for the next. If they don't, rewrite or cut them. Beta readers and critique partners can help in this stage. Does the story make sense? Do the characters sound real and individualized? Are there missing elements, plot holes, or continuity errors?

■ **Third Pass (Editing):** Break up long paragraphs and vary syntax. Correct punctuation, grammar, capitalization, and diction. This is where editing programs like [Grammarly](#) or [ProWritingAid](#) can be helpful. You can also use the advanced editing functions in Microsoft Word or Google Docs.

■ **Final Pass (Proofreading):** Read the work aloud, use your software's speech mode, or utilize online resources like [NaturalReader](#) to catch rhythm problems, dropped words, or typographical errors.

Bottom line, your efforts for self-improvement shouldn't stop the moment you write The End. Always search for new ways to take things to the next level.

For more craft advice, pick up the Writer Productivity Series, which covers [How to Craft Killer Dialogue](#), [How to Craft a Killer Cozy Mystery](#), and [Mastering the Art of Suspense](#).



Andrea J. Johnson is the author of the *Victoria Justice Mysteries*, about a trial stenographer turned amateur sleuth (think *Veronica Mars* meets *The Firm*). She holds an MFA in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University and a copyediting certification from UC San Diego. She currently teaches creative writing at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, and her craft essays have appeared in several publications such as *CrimeReads*, *Mystery Scene*, and *The Romance Writers Report*. Learn more about Andrea's writing at www.ajthenovelist.com or follow her on Instagram.

Author Profile: Wanda Bevan

By Brittany Clair

I had such a fun conversation with writer and WFWA member Wanda Bevan recently. In addition to her determination, positivity, and sense of humor, I was struck by her versatility as an author. I found her curiosity and enthusiasm for all manners of writing infectious, and I know you will too. Read on to learn more about Wanda's publication journey, her best advice, and her intended career trajectory.

WO: Tell us about the Wishton series and how you published it.

Wanda: I wrote the first Wishton story, *Their Souls Met in Wishton*, in 2016. I submitted it to a handful of beta readers before sending it out, which I'd recommend to anyone trying to publish. The feedback is invaluable because, for example, if you have six beta readers who don't know one another (hopefully) and four of them have the same problem(s) with your story, you know what you need to go back and work on.

After that, I queried six or seven small indie publishers. Of the ones I heard from, a couple passed, saying they weren't a fan of the book-within-a-book device, and a couple asked for a revise and resubmit, then still passed. A publisher called Solstice Publishing said they loved it and offered me a three-year contract. When it went out of print once the contract was up, I still retained all rights, so I published an eBook version myself on Amazon.

The second book, *Rains of Wishton*, took seven years to finish and I published it in January 2025 with a hybrid publisher, Book Reality Experience. They're a wonderful group that I found through the Alliance of Independent Authors (ALLi) when I was looking for a publisher for my poetry anthology. They also redesigned and reprinted *Souls of Wishton*.

WO: Since we're thinking about feedback in this issue, what are three things you'd do differently in your writing career if you could turn back the clock?

Wanda: ■ I'd promote the book long before it's finished. I've seen this work really well for many authors and seems to be a major key to the marketing process.

■ Spend less time and money submitting to contests, and more time writing.

■ Devote a block of time to write, whether it's daily or weekly.

I say this with the caveat that even if I could turn back the clock, between work and marriage and raising a family, fitting in a writing commitment would be difficult (though not impossible) to achieve. There's nothing cute about showing up to work exhausted and bleary-eyed because you stayed up until 2 a.m. writing while everyone else in the house was asleep.



Wanda Penalver Bevan is originally from Ithaca, New York. Her novel *The Rains of Wishton* (2025) is the second in the Wishton series, following *Their Souls Met in Wishton* (2016). She is also the author of *A Slow Dance in Memoriam* (2022), a poetry anthology. Wanda currently resides in Phoenix, AZ.

WO: What are three things you'd do the same?

Wanda: ■ Write whatever scene comes to me in the story, even if it's not chronological. I guess a better way to say that is, don't feel pinned to an outline.

■ Research local book clubs that might read your book and invite you to come talk about it.

■ Write whenever I can. Even if it means staying up until 2 a.m. while everyone else in the house is asleep.

Feature

WO: You have a professional background in acting and currently work in the hospitality industry. How have these experiences influenced your writing practice?

Wanda: Well, I've been an actress, a legal secretary, a certified hypnotherapist, a film-script reader, an event specialist, and yes, I've been in the hotel business for the past 12 years—it's possible I've left something out. Wife and mother certainly qualify as roles as well. All these experiences have definitely influenced my writing. They've brought me interesting characters and character traits for my stories, observations of human behavior in different kinds of situations, and in general, a broader life experience because of it. Along the way I've continued to grow and gain a deeper understanding of myself, and I guess that's the most important thing you can bring to your writing.

WO: What are you working on now?

Wanda: I'm excited to be writing my first nonfiction manuscript called *An American Man*, about an African-American family in the 1940s and spanning three generations. It's a true story based on the life of my half-brother and the challenges he's overcome personally and professionally after growing up without our biological father. I'm targeting publication for mid-2027.

I'm also in the editing phase of *In the Homes of Strangers: My Summer As an Airbnb Guest*, a collection of essays about my solo move from Los Angeles to Phoenix in 2017. Lastly, I'm working on a collection of meaningful little moments in my life called "Gems for My Children."

At some point, there will be a third and final book in the Wishton series.

WO: What's your favorite thing about WFWA?

Wanda: Opportunities like this! I'm amazed at the number of resources the organization has to offer. There are so many ways to get involved, either online through forums, workshops, and articles, but also in person at conferences. And getting to learn about other members and their writing journeys is a wonderful part of WFWA.

WO: What are three books on your summer reading list?

Wanda: *The False Flat* by Melissa R. Collings
Broken Country by Clare Leslie Hall
Heart the Lover by Lily King



Chapter One

The text message I received began with a depiction of smoke and lights and sirens and blood. From what he could remember, his brother had to be in Toronto for a conference and volunteered to drop him at the airport. He had declined the offer, but his brother insisted, excited about the opportunity for the two of them to bond for a couple hours. He hadn't shared much about the female friend he was meeting at the airport during her layover, and his brother didn't pry. At some point the subject changed to boyhood pranks and the two men were howling hysterically as they recalled some of the most outrageous practical jokes ever played on each other.

That's when the deer ran out in front of them.

He was just waking up from the force of the impact when the paramedics approached the car. He recalls the ride in the ambulance seemed excruciatingly long, but didn't remember anything after that, only what he was told when he woke up following a surgery that lasted eight and a half hours to repair a ruptured spleen and shattered femur. The doctors said the fact that he survived the accident was a miracle, and another one that he'd survived the operation. It would be weeks before there was any firm prognosis of what his quality of life would be like in the coming months, even years. His brother didn't make it.

Seven months passed before I read that text message, hoping time would ease the pain from the day I stood in an airport lounge searching for Liam, longing for the moment that would make me believe something grand and magical really could happen to each and every one of us, waiting for the Universe to follow through with Her promise that Liam would once again be at my side. But She had not delivered. The text message was preceded by three attempts to call me. Ignoring the first call will always remain one of the hardest things I've ever done. Ignoring the second, which came a week later, was easier. It was a month between the second and third—or final—call. Silence followed until the text arrived ten weeks later, which by that time, elicited from me nothing more than surprise. I did speculate, however, what form his apology would take, what possible explanation he could offer for letting me down, leaving me waiting, breaking my heart—the thing he said he'd never do. And I have to admit, I was mildly curious as to where, amid a perfectly constructed collection of poetic words only Liam could deliver with utmost authenticity, the phrase, "I love you, Miranda" would be placed.

Christy Matheson: Giving Back to Help Others Move Forward



Christy Matheson embodies the idea that when it comes to volunteering, there's always time—even if it seems like there isn't.

Long before she joined WFWA in 2022, Christy was contributing online to motherhood and women's communities, freely sharing advice based on her experiences, even while embracing her teaching background to help within her children's homeschool co-op.

When her youngest finally reached preschool, though, Christy's volunteering expanded into the writing world, where she hoped to find her next career. Following advice from her college alumnae network to participate in a professional organization, she joined WFWA because of its focus on writing that explores the protagonist's emotional journey.

And she's never looked back.

"WFWA is the most dynamic and interactive professional organization I've encountered," Christy says.

After a quiet first year in WFWA where she learned the ropes and worked on her own writing, Christy channeled her experiences to help others. To date, she has served in several roles, including as a (repeated) judge in the Rising Star contest and as an editor and contributor for the *Feisty Deeds* anthologies, which are written, edited, and designed by WFWA members.

"If you want to become a better writer and/or send your writing into the world, you have to be open to feedback," Christy says. "I believe it's really that simple. . . . If you want to improve, it's essential to find voices you trust, and then it's essential to listen to them."

Her contributions to WFWA don't stop there, either. She also gives educational presentations, serves as a mentor, submits columns to *WriteOn!*, and remains extremely active (and helpful) on the WFWA Facebook forums.



"I know what it's like to be isolated. I've lived alone in a foreign country, raised children with invisible disabilities, juggling so many logistics that it's hard to even leave the house, let alone talk to people," Christy says. "And through that, I understand the importance of community, even when it takes time. (It always takes time!) I'm willing to spend my energy helping other people through the darkness, because that's the only way that we can move forward—together."

Between all her WFWA volunteering and raising five children and three dogs, the Pacific Northwest resident has indie-published seven fairy tale retellings, written short stories, and is releasing the first of four Regency romances series with a small press this summer.

After a quiet first year in WFWA where she learned the ropes and worked on her own writing, Christy channeled her experiences to help others.

Criticism,
like rain,
should be
gentle enough
to nourish a
man's growth
without
destroying
his roots.

— Frank A. Clark

