

# A Short Guide to Critique

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## Welcome, Concritter!

Welcome to TK's concrit guide! This guide covers the basics of providing concrit/beta reading feedback to an author in a structured format. If you are an experienced beta, this guide might not have much to offer you. However, if you're new to offering concrit, this guide will help demystify what happens during the beta process. The method presented here is not the only way to provide good concrit; it's merely one way to engage with an author. The guiding theory of this method is the idea that a concritter/beta reader should establish a rapport with any author that they are critiquing, because a beta's job is to use their knowledge to make their author's fic the best version of itself that it can be.

The rationale behind this type of criticism is two-fold.

**One, your goal as a concritter/beta is to inspire your author to investigate their work & make changes that will benefit their (current or future) story.**

**And two, you never know what is going to inspire your author to make positive changes to their work.**

As a long-time beta reader and writer workshop participant, I'd like to believe that my in-depth critiques of grammar, structure, and story have been the key to authors changing their works for the better. However, sometimes it's been the most off-the-cuff remarks that I've made about a story's tone, or my confusion about the meaning of a certain part of a story, or even just an enthusiastic comment about a moment/trope/ship in a work that has caused an author to radically change their fic for the better. I never could have anticipated that these specific one-off comments would be so instrumental to an author's growth.

When this guide suggests that you embed criticism within a framework of specific positive feedback—I'm not just asking you to say nice things just for the sake of saying nice things. Sometimes positive reactions to parts of a fic that are working can give an author tangible clues to **what** they're doing right and **how** they're doing it right. This insight may unlock an author's understanding of what their fic is trying to accomplish.

To that end, I'll encourage you to think of **concrit** as three distinct yet related types of feedback:

- Your reactions to your author's fic.
- Your thoughts on what a fic does well/positive feedback.
- Your specific, actionable advice for improvement/criticism.

When you combine these three types of feedback, you can give your author powerful tools to understand not just what you're asking them to change, but why you're asking them to change it--and what ultimate aim this change might allow your author to achieve.

## Determining Your Strengths As a Beta Reader

When you're embarking on beta-reading for your author, one of the first things to do is a short review of your skills as an author. What kinds of things do you feel like you have expertise in? What kinds of things do you care about in your own writing? What do you feel like you do well, or that others have praised your work for? Doing a short review of your skills will help you focus better on the *type* of feedback you can give to other authors.

Some of the most common kinds of feedback a beta can offer are:

**Technique:** A technique beta is someone who can comment on particular writing techniques by medium and offer instructions and/or point out tutorials about how to achieve the desired effect. This is the most technical kind of beta work and usually requires the author to be well-versed in that specific medium (drabbles, fiction, non-fiction, epistolary, diary, poetry; or trope-specific genres like fake dating, pretend marriages, etc).

**Execution (style):** A style beta is someone who can comment on the style of your prose, and offer suggestions based on how your overall style is coming across to your readers. A style beta will often point out when you lapse into diction that doesn't match up with your overall style; or if your sentences aren't specifically achieving what you want them to; or if your rhetorical devices are falling flat. This type of beta-work can overlap with SPAG. The idea isn't just to offer you "is this grammatical or not" level of advice, but "is your writing maintaining the style you set out for yourself" level of advice.

**Emotional Impact (mood/tone/atmosphere):** What kind of scene/body language/mood is your work conveying? A beta that comments on emotional impact will talk about how your piece reads to them and/or how it might be perceived by others. This is very subjective feedback, but can offer an author a useful outside perspective on how the elements are conveying (or not conveying) emotion & context. Did you hope to write an emotional piece about a character meditating on the other half of the OTP after they died, and are interested in knowing how that's coming across? An emotional impact beta will help you navigate these waters. The caveat here is that emotional impact reading can be some of the most subjective possible feedback, so one beta might not give you the full range of how your work will be perceived.

**Cheerleading:** A cheerleader is someone who comments positively on your fic, encourages you to keep creating, and helps you think about how your work is coming across to your audience. A cheerleader can be especially useful when you're bogged down in edits, and/or you want to know how your piece is landing with someone who's interested in your project. Usually cheerleading doesn't go hand-in-hand with concrit, but it can be nice to give some enthusiastic feedback if you feel like you can offer it!

**Canon checking:** A canon-checker is someone who is very familiar with a particular canon, and can offer helpful advice about canon events, characters, places. ESPECIALLY useful when you have a fandom that is big enough to contradict itself.

**Story (narrative/structure):** A beta who offers to comment on narrative/story structure will look at how your narrative is coming across, and if it's telling the story that you want it to. A story beta will help you tighten up your story choices; check to make sure your story beats are working; see if your climax is up-to-snuff, and talk to you about how satisfying the ending of a piece was (and maybe help guide you to other possibilities if your story ending was weak).

**SPAG:** Spelling and grammar betas are the bread-and-butter of beta-reading. If a story doesn't seem to need anything else, you may still need to provide a spelling-and-grammar check to make sure that your author hasn't accidentally written a scene with mis-spelled main character names or the odd missing dialogue tag. Almost all works can use a decent SPAG reading, but try to take care that you aren't railroading your author's style into yours when you offer grammatical edits. For example, if your author is profligate with dashes or commas, consider removing *some* of them if they're slowing down comprehension of a sentence. But don't try to completely strip out a story's style, even if it conflicts with how you personally choose to write.

**POV, or Composition and framing:** A composition and framing beta is someone who can look at your set-up with a critical eye of--have you chosen the right moments to illustrate your story? Have you picked the right scenes for maximum impact? Or are your characters getting lost in the scene(s) that you've set up? These betas look at what you've written and what you haven't, and help you understand how POV choices might interact with other issues to make scenes stronger or weaker.

Depending on where else you think that your skills might lie, you might also consider what **special knowledge** you may have about particular tropes, genres, characters, and settings, and how this knowledge might help you connect with an author's work.

Special knowledge often can stem from your specific interests, your experience, or your writing style.

**TKodami:** I'm interested in 18th and 19th c. captains logs. Many of my fandoms have some element of "being on a ship", even if they're not completely analogous to serving aboard a naval vessel. Many of my favorite ships feature captain/first officer dynamics.

As a beta, I know that I can offer pretty decent feedback for:

- the canons that I'm interested in (canon checking)
- ship dynamics similar to the ones that I've spent a lot of time reading (any kind of ship or naval vessel, with sailing, adventuring, sea- or space-travel in a closed environment)
- Execution/style & and emotional impact feedback.

Other stuff sneaks into the beta reading I do--especially when an author asks me to comment on something else about their work--but these are the kinds of feedback that form the bedrock of my beta reading.

If you are just starting out, it is okay if you don't know what your strengths as a beta reader are yet! You often discover your strengths after doing a lot of beta work.

# Crafting a Good Response To Your Author

*Author's Note: If you've participated in writing workshops before, my advice to you might come across as self-explanatory. Hopefully you will find some words of wisdom in here, regardless of your familiarity with workshopping, betaing, and critiquing!*

Delivering good concrit is an art.

Good concrit will motivate your author to reevaluate their work and make positive changes that helps get their point across with less friction between their writing and their intended audience.

The role of you, the critiquer, is three-fold.

**One: Read a work that you feel like you *can* comment on with some measure of authority.** That means finding a piece that you can respond to in some way, because you have some familiarity with: the genre; the fandom; the ship or the ship dynamic; the tropes that the story uses; the mood or tone that the story is trying to achieve; the style the author is using; the setting the author has deployed; the format the author has chosen to write in; the audience the author is trying to reach, etc. If you realize that you can't comment on any of these things, one of the most important things that you the concritter can do, is find another piece. Stumbling into a situation where you're being asked to comment on dark gothic noncon villanelles when you are only familiar with upbeat domestic drabble sequences—that might be a bit too much of a mismatch between you & your author, and your advice might fall flat if you are not familiar with the genre/form constraints of the piece you are critiquing.

However, it's also fine if there's only a small overlap between your area of expertise and the piece you are reading! If you're reading an unfamiliar fandom & unfamiliar ship, but the piece is set during the Regency and you know *a ton* about the Regency period and what readers of Regency fandoms/ships often look for, you're in business!

**Two: Build confidence with your author that you are offering them good advice and that your advice will help them create stronger work.** The best kinds of writing critique are delivered when you and the author you are working with understand each other's goals, aims, and desires for the piece you are concritting.

As a critiquer, you may be reading someone's work you've never read before; or someone who you are very familiar with. Either way, it's important to establish rapport. When you establish rapport, you are trying to tell an author that you've read their work closely; that you can provide a description of what their work is back to them; that you understand what the goals of their piece are; that you can point out places in the work that you liked; and you can point out places in the work where you thought their work fell short of their aims.

It's possible that at any given time, you will miss the mark. But it's important for an author to hear that too. Maybe when you were reading an author's work, you encountered an effective but disturbing portrait of how loneliness warps a person's perception of reality; but from the author's point of view, they wrote a cute story about a business woman befriending and fucking a ghost. It's good to be able to express your viewpoint of a story back to an author! Sometimes you see things in a *very different*

*light* than what was intended. There is value in letting your author understand a story through your eyes.

And take it from people who've done a lot of beta-reading, don't assume that because you know an author personally that they understand the assumptions that go into your beta-work. You might provide a beta-read that elides the "I think you're a strong writer" part and jump right into direct & blunt feedback. Unless you've used this beta style with someone before and they've responded positively to it, *assume that being blunt & direct on someone's work with NO positive feedback will be received more harshly than you intended it.*

We can be surprisingly vulnerable when sharing our work in an environment where it is going to be critiqued; it's good to approach any critique job as a conversation between you and your author that requires balance between praise & critique, between seeing someone's strengths and weaknesses.

**Three: Offer actionable advice that your author can employ in their work.** General statements about writing can be fine, but it's good to offer specific and actionable advice, if you can provide it.

...[W]henever I hear someone in workshop say, "I loved it. I didn't find anything wrong with it," the statement itself is meant to make the writer feel good, but it is so unhelpful that saying nothing would most likely be better. What did you love? Why? Did the turn of phrase in this line make your heart jump? Did this character's way with words win you over? When something doesn't work, why not? Did something seem implausible? Did something confuse you?

["On Giving Feedback,"](#) Peter Biello

Did you find a particular passage moving? Note which one it is! Give a page number if you have to, or quote it back to your author, or describe it as best you can.

Did you struggle with how an author chose to integrate their exposition into the story? Did it intrude on an otherwise lovely & intimate moment between characters? Let your author know! Tell them where the exposition intruded; and why the exposition intruded, and maybe give a suggestion about what they could do with it (cut it from this scene? Move it to another scene? Add it to a section that seems more relevant?) Give a specific example of lines that you felt would be stronger without the exposition.

Did a scene feel weird, and you just can't understand why? Maybe providing a suggestion would be outside of your scope as a beta-reader, but you can always express *why* something isn't working for you—just so long as you provide the author with some specifics about your confusion!

"The scene where Udolpho speared the monster just didn't make any sense to me; Udolpho & the monster's friendship had been developing so wonderfully in the scenes leading up to the stabbing. Did Udolpho experience a change of heart that didn't make it into the fic? Are we to understand that the motivation for the stabbing was random?—that Udolpho was the monster all along? I'd love to have some more insight on this! I'm a bit out to sea right now."

Most importantly, try to stay away from generic comments. "This was a good fic!" or "This fic worked well," or "your writing was good in x." or "you need to work on your tone" or "try to keep your characters from being OOC or OTT" are all very generic, non-actionable comments. Instead, try comments that are more focused on the specifics of the story you are reading.

Examples of specific, actionable comments:

- Instead of “X was good”, consider talking up how or why you found something good, and your reaction to that good thing. For example: “I enjoyed the case in this fic. The case elements were well-paced, and the presentation of new deductions, and new clues kept me hanging on after every scene break. I was riveted and read far more than I was expecting to in one sitting—I was eager to discover what would happen next!”
  - ◆ **Specific:** you mention that you specifically enjoyed the casefic elements and the pacing of the case.
  - ◆ **Actionable:** The punchy scene-breaks are driving the story forward with a pretty fast pace. An author might, then, choose to rework some of the scene-breaks later if there are any that flounder, or don’t have the same energy as the ones that propelled you through the first part of the fic. Likewise, maybe the author wants a little less of a relentless pace, and may decide to make some of their scene breaks a little more chill in response to your critique.
  
- Instead of “the characterization worked well,” consider making comments about what the characterization was, whether you enjoyed it, and how it affected your reception of that character in the fic. For example: “You handled the characterization of the sea monster wonderfully in this fic. They were mysterious but friendly in their first appearance with Udolpho, and I sympathized with them when they were stabbed in chapter three.”
  - ◆ **Specific:** you mention that you enjoyed the characterization of the sea monster, and the characterization make you feel *sympathetic* to the monster when it’s stabbed.
  - ◆ **Actionable:** Your mentioning of several characteristics of the sea monster open you up to having a dialogue with your author. You found the sea monster *mysterious but friendly*, and maybe the author wants to lean into this characterization; or maybe they had thought that they’d written a *dangerous and unknowable terror from the deep*, and now they’re having second thoughts about their framing of the sea monster if you found it friendly. Now a writer has some place to begin to dig into how their characterization of the sea monster is working, since they’ve identified an expectation mismatch between their writing and your reception of it.
  
- Instead of “you need to work on your tone,” consider pointing out the inconsistency or discrepancy in the tone; where the tone seemed to intrude on the fic in an unnatural way. For example: “The tone in this fic slides between slapstick and tragedy. On page 10, I struggled with the sudden intrusion of Udolpho’s tragic backstory with his parents. The story had been a straightforward comedy up to that point, and then Udolpho’s backstory was followed by an immediate pratfall. You might consider saving Udolpho’s tragic backstory for a scene for a scene that isn’t focused on physical comedy. Perhaps the following scene in the officer’s galley, where everyone is swapping stories about their lives, would be a better place for it?”
  - ◆ **Specific:** this comment covers a tonal mismatch between the purpose of a scene (comedy) and its execution. This kind of feedback asks your author to consider a change to the pacing of a character reveal.
  - ◆ **Actionable:** you have proposed a change to the fic wherein a tragic backstory is moved out of a comedy scene and into a following scene where characters are swapping stories in an officer’s galley. This proposed move will change the fic quite a bit; it proposes to keep things light when they’re light and to move into a heavier/more

angsty tone when it delves into character backstory. Some writers and readers enjoy emotional whiplash when it's well-executed--so your author might not take your suggestion--but it was good to offer your perspective on the pacing. Maybe the author will take your suggestion in part (less pratfalls after revealing a character's trauma), or maybe they'll think hard about how to make the emotional whiplash in the scene apply more widely to their fic (e.g. make the fic more consistent in its inconsistencies).

→ Instead of "trying to keep your characters from being over the top," consider pointing out the emotional reactions that's keeping you from gelling with their emotional arc. For Example: "Your characters seem to react to every plot event with the same level of emotional intensity. When the story's climax happens, it was hard to tell that the character felt any differently about discovering a serial killer living in his basement than when he ran out of chex mix in the breakfast scene on page 8. This is fine, if it's the kind of character voice you're hoping to convey... but because everything was a Big Deal to Roger, he didn't feel like he was in any special peril during his kidnapping. The big action sequence where the sea monster rescued him from the serial killer wasn't as cathartic as it could have been if Roger felt like he was experiencing true peril, in my opinion!"

- ◆ **Specific:** this comment targets the emotional arc of Roger & how that ties into the emotional payoff of the whole fic. This kind of comment can be effective--but also somewhat hard to deliver to an author--since it touches on the entire build-up of the fic.
- ◆ **Actionable:** You provided an instance where Roger's emotional reaction seemed OTT in the breakfast scene on page 8. The author has a place to begin to fix their story if they *do* want Roger to feel in peril during his kidnapping.

But they may also see your reaction ("Roger didn't feel like he was in peril; I didn't experience the catharsis I had hoped to"), and use that reaction in order to make changes that you didn't suggest. For example, maybe they will keep Roger's OTT reactions in the earlier fic, but instead make Roger oddly calm, or quiet, or have an otherwise markedly different reaction to the kidnapping in order to point up how unusual/unreal the situation is through a character underreacting to their peril. In either case, your feedback provided your author with an actionable place to work on their fic using your reaction to the story as a guidepost.

# The Structure of a Good Critique

(when you are writing up a critique separate from a work)

Ideally, when you're preparing a critique for a story, you will have some author notes in front of you, asking you to look at x in a story, or to consider how y is working. If you're working with a published fic, you'll likely have other information too: warnings, additional tags, summary, author notes, etc.

Often, a writer will have an inkling in their mind after they finished a draft that they maybe just didn't have a good grasp on x. Maybe the ending felt rushed, maybe they wondered why the slow burn between their characters didn't feel like it was sparking the right romantic notes. Maybe they wanted to know why otherwise enthusiastic readers for a particular kind of dubcon that this author loves to write were turning cold on this particular dubcon setup in their latest work.

Once you've decided that you're a good reader for this particular task, it's good to think about how to structure your feedback.

Huge note right here, right now. **If an author asks you to comment on something in a fic--and you don't know much about that element, trope, or genre--it's okay to tell your author that you're not specialized in that kind of reading.** During a concrit event, you may be reading outside of your normal wheelhouse. Don't feel like you have to offer an expert opinion on a trope that you don't normally read. Simply note your unfamiliarity with the element that the author has asked about, and press on to elements of the story that you're more comfortable offering feedback on. In an ideal world, every beta would be a great fit for the story they're reading; but that's rarely the case. If there's a significant mismatch between what your author wants you to focus on, and what you feel comfortable offering advice on, mention that your strengths of a beta reader lie elsewhere, and that the author might want to look for a beta that specializes in x if they want a more in-depth opinion on it.

## + An introduction where you identify themes, tropes, or the major action in the work.

This section can be short, but it helps establish a rapport between you & your author if they know that you've put thought into what *their specific work* is about. The longer a work is, the more important this section is. If you're reading a 2k PWP, it's not as important to start here. But sometimes there will be tension between you and the author on the order of "was this person even reading the same story that I wrote??" and that can be headed off a little by doing VERY BRIEF summary. Sometimes writers will be really surprised what you tell them about their own work. Maybe they thought they were writing enemies-to-lovers, but what you saw on the page was "Good Friends Who Have Three Tense Dates". Summary can reveal important mismatches between authorial intent and what the concritter read.

## + Discussion about what a work does well.

- Most creators are protective about their work, whatever medium they're work in. One of the best ways to help an author understand what you're asking them to change is to tell them what they're doing well. A good rule of thumb is that your discussion of what works well should probably be about 2 or 3 discrete *things*. It can be style, characterization, character voices, plot, tone, the narrative build-up, keeping a reader engaged, well-realized tropes, etc.

- Sometimes telling an author what *works* may help them more than simply pointing out what doesn't. Any feedback that you give to an author can help them critically evaluate their work. Mentioning that a moment landed perfectly for you (and articulating why you liked it, maybe



the character voice was *absolutely-right*, maybe they hit a trope in an unexpected but great way) may help them improve, by giving your author the tools to analyze what they're done well.

#### **+ Discussion about where a work can *improve* and why this will help improve the work, from your POV.**

When you're offering concrit, the goal you should be approaching is "how do I help this person achieve x", informed by what an author has informed you x is. You can, and should, say outright what specific things aren't working in a story in order to achieve x. You can also say that x isn't the problem at all; it's just a symptom of other issues that you see in the work. Some of the most common issues that you can comment on are:

- SPAG (spelling and grammar)
- Canon/Detail (canon checking/historical details/etc)
- Execution (style):
- Emotional impact (mood, tone, atmosphere)
- Reader Expectations (w/r/t tropes and genres)
- Story (narrative/structure)
- Composition and framing (POV)

There are many things that you can comment on that aren't covered by this guide. If you see a place you think that your author can improve, mention it!

On the flipside of the coin, don't overwhelm yourself or your author. You don't need to fix every mistake in a manuscript! Your author will likely tune out your advice if the way you approach concrit is "everything about this fic needs work".

Try to identify **two to five things** that you think that your author can improve. It's best to lead with your biggest proposed changes, and/or group your suggested changes under umbrella issues. Usually the biggest proposed change for any critique is the element that severely impacts your ability to enjoy a story on its own merits.

Some examples:

#### **Example One.**

A story has numerous places to improve--it has some small POV slippages, the grammar could use some work, there are a few canon errors, and the author's metaphors are a little prosaic. However, when you get down to it, the weakest element of the story is how it handles character interiority. The character has a sudden change of heart in the last scene, and it came out of nowhere (to you).

When you're offering feedback, you would want to start with the suggestion that impacts the whole story: the character's sudden and inexplicable change of heart. Maybe the lack of character insight in a 3rd-to-close 3rd perspective made it the character's change of heart in the last scene fall completely flat. Other issues like the POV slippage might have distracted you, but the lack of payoff on the character deciding to change their mind is what stripped the story of its heart. In your critique, you'd want to focus on your reaction to the final scene, emphasizing that the character's change of heart came out of nowhere, and maybe suggest a

way to fix it is through providing more direct characterization/character interiority in previous scenes to build towards this change.

### **Example Two.**

The fic is a short, warm, fluffy domestic scene between a couple. It's heartwarming—or it would be, if glaring SPAG issues or numerous idiom/malapropism errors weren't popping up in every paragraph. Almost every fic—even published novels—have the occasional SPAG error. That's just life. But if the SPAG is so bad that it's obscuring your ability to enjoy the story, you will likely need to offer a good SPAG pass and/or inform the author that they need to get a rigorous SPAG checking on their work. Mentioning the story has SPAG errors and then pointing some of the examples that are the most distracting to you in your letter will help your author locate issues. Always lead with the examples where the lack of clarity really yanks you out of a fic to the detriment of the story.

### **Example Three.**

Your author has presented you with a published fic that's tagged for PWP and heat fic. However, when you read the fic, the first 3/4ths of it are in fact a rather bleak angsty meditation on the characters' relationships that have nothing to do with porn, or heats, while they engage in domestic chores. The final ¼ of the fic is a heat with a small sex scene tagged on at the end.

There's obviously many different schools of thought about how to tag a work, and you and your author might not see eye-to-eye. In any case, it would behoove you to mention how the tone comes across to you in the piece, how you experienced the expectation mismatch between tags & content, and maybe suggest some other tags, or some changes that might center the tagged content. For example, maybe the angsty meditation on relationships at the beginning of the fic could tie in more explicitly to the character's heats; or maybe the angst could be cut down in favor of the character experiencing the emotional changes/compulsion of the heat instead of simply reflecting on past relationships.

After you've tackled the **tone** issue, then you'd want to move on to other advice.

### **+ Pull back & reframe your discussion in terms of the story succeeding.**

End your critique with some positive praise, or simply a reminder of how your more granular suggestions can result in a stronger story.

The praise sandwich theory is one of the better ways to approach something as personal as writing. In my experience leading workshops and being workshoped, even the most defensive & hesitant creator could take something away from a critique where they learned what they did well, what people liked, and how people were experiencing their work (compared to how they envisioned it). You can't ever know how well your critique will go down with your author ahead of time, but you can hope for the best when you've established that your desire is to help the author and that you're on their side—and that their draft is not all doom-and-gloom.

# Tips for Good On-Draft Critique

*(when you are adding notes directly to someone's draft)*

Providing someone with beta notes on their draft rather than in a composed text is one of the more satisfying—and fraught—ways to receive feedback. If you've ever had this type of beta reading done, you'll know what I mean.

Immediate commenting means that you can:

- see anything and everything that moved your reader to comment, not just what they remembered at the end of their critique process.
- see the beta reader's mental process of reading your fic: their excitement, their confusion and their realizations
- see where a beta might struggle with your SPAG

As a beta reader, it's important to remember a few rules of etiquette when you're in someone's draft.

## **Editing Someone Else's Prose**

When you're directly in someone's draft, doing a beta read on Google Docs or Word or another collaborative environment, you're playing in someone else's sandbox. As such, it's good form not to immediately jump in and "fix" sentences on the draft **UNLESS YOU'VE BEEN GIVEN PERMISSION TO DO SO**. Sometimes people share drafts with editing permissions turned on by accident; sometimes people don't create a specific beta copy of their draft. It can be *extremely* disorienting to see someone attack your sentences if you haven't asked for that kind of hands-on editorial work.

Ideally, you'd discuss what kind of editing/betaing that your author wants before you jump into a draft. If you haven't had that discussion with your author, it is safest to assume that sentence-level edits should be left in comment boxes rather than you editing a sentence directly.

If you have been given permission to edit someone else's sentences, you're good to go! Moving around stray particles, or fixing tenses is always useful. More advanced edits should be approached with your author's style in mind. Your edits should be in-line with the voice that your author has chosen to write in. Run-on sentences in a work that's mainly written in a style that prioritizes proper grammar is often an error—but there may be a stylistic reason for that run-on sentence in that particular moment.

## **Use Those Comment Boxes**

Let your suggestions in the comment boxes do the work for you. Adding your grammatical suggestions in a comment box can help an author keep track of the changes you propose (and give them a chance to think about that sentence. Was that run-on sentence a deliberate stylistic choice? A mistake?)

## **To Comment Or Not to Comment On Your First Read-Through**

Many betas have their own process and their own preferences about when to comment on a draft. Some betas prefer to read through a story fully before they comment; some betas enjoy leaving comments that coincide with their first read-through.

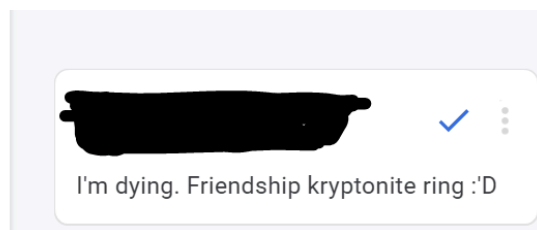
There is no hard-and-fast rule about when it's best to jump into critique. Some issues will stand out to you on your first read. Other issues will only become apparent after you've reached the fic's conclusion and circled back around.

For an in-depth beta of a shorter work (under 6k), you likely will want to read a work twice just to be sure that more issues didn't become apparent to you after you reached the conclusion of a fic. Longer works (20k+) can be a huge time commitment as a beta, and it's more than okay to only read them once and provide your feedback as you go.

### **Don't Just Offer SPAG Advice (unless your author has specifically only asked for SPAG help)**

When you're in someone's draft, you may experience the urge to fix SPAG and call it a day. A beta read that only focuses on SPAG can feel like a reader was wholly indifferent to the rest of an author's fic. Unless you've specifically agreed with your author to only offer SPAG feedback, I suggest that you provide other kinds of feedback as well. Questions, comments, concerns, emojis--anything that demonstrates that you connected with your author's work. These comments don't have to be gushing, or even positive (though positivity goes a long way in on-draft comments). If you have some type of emotional reaction to the fic that's due to the author's craft, let them know!

outside," he says, to everyone and no one in particular. "We



### **Don't Forget to Offer Your Take On The Story & Positive Reactions**

Point out moments that you like, enjoy, or were moved by. Stuff that made you laugh. Stuff that made you cry.

### **If a fic contains triggering material**

If a fic unexpectedly contains triggering material, and it's not possible to continue reading, let your author know if you have to stop the beta-read for them with as politely and directly as possible.

# Some Thoughts on Betaing Porn

## When critiquing porn, try to remember commenting etiquette

[“How do you comment on smut”](#) is one of those age-old questions that gets circulated. This question can be tricky when you’re beta-reading someone’s PWP. Unlike leaving a comment on an ao3 work, you’re likely going to be offering more in-depth/direct feedback on the work.

First off: if you don’t feel comfortable critiquing smut and your author writes explicit works, say so! Your author shouldn’t expect you to jump into an explicit fisting fic and offer commentary about it if your comfort level is only with Mature-style sex scenes.

If you **are** comfortable beta-reading explicit works, you may end up reading for someone with kinks that are outside of your areas of interest, especially in a challenge setting like the Concrit Exchange.

The best match happens when you as a beta share some (or most!) of the fic’s interests, so you can comment on questions your author may have about their smut. Common question that E-rated writers have for their betas is “how do I make this hotter?” or “why isn’t this sex scene working as well as it should?” As you may have experienced yourself, *writing* smut can give a writer a warped view of what they’ve written. A sex scene may feel dull and lifeless to an author,, and they need an outside opinion on what they’ve written--the other age-old question, “is this smut any good?”

## Communicate with your author about how to treat explicit work in the fic & what they’d like feedback on

If you’re betaing an E-rated fic or a PWP, you should communicate with your author how they’d like you to handle commenting on explicit material. Your author may have specific questions in mind.

- +They may be looking for **general reassurance**. “Did this scene work for you?”
- +They may be interested in **how the sex works with the plot**. “Did this sex scene feel like a natural development between these characters? Would it have worked better somewhere else in the plot?”
- +They may be interested in **the blocking in a sex scene**. “Did any extra hands or feet pop up during the sex?” Or “could you follow along with what the characters were doing during the sex?”
- +They may be interested in **mood/tone feedback**. “How did the smut come across to you as a reader? Was it tonally appropriate for the story / hot / engaging / make sense for the characters / make you want to read more?”
- +They may be interested in **how a specific kink** played into the overall scene. “Did this kink go together well with the rest of the scene? Did it help build the tension?” This might require more specialized knowledge and/or a reader that’s into that specific kink to give good feedback.
- +They may ask an umbrella question like **how do I make this porn hotter?** Which might touch on all of the questions above. “Hotness” might be a measure of how engaged/into the porn you are, and you might need to comment on any of the above in order to give your author good advice.

**Beta-ing porn can be a lot like troubleshooting.** Often a writer will come to you and have general concerns about their sex scenes. They can’t quite put their finger on what is or isn’t working. You, as the beta-reader, might need to run through a list of “what is/isn’t working” in a scene to arrive at the fundamental issue your author is experiencing.

*A specific example from one of my past beta-reads was an author asked me to beta-read a sex scene in a fic that had multiple sex scenes, and escalating intimacy & rebuilding of trust after a dubious consent*

*encounter*. Previous scenes were all pretty hot and working as intended. The last scene fell completely flat. When I broached this topic with my author, I had to step back and really *think through* what wasn't working for me about this particular scene. There were a lot of things that I felt were wrong. Sentences felt a little robotic and perfunctory. The blocking was overly stiff and concerned with where hands were at any given moment... and I wasn't as concerned with where the hands were going as a reader.

When I sat down to think of the difference between what made the previous scenes hot, and this current scene odd--I realized the perspective character seemed to be ...almost disassociating from the scene. Where the POV character's emotions and reactions had been a big part of previous narration, suddenly all of that insight was gone. I was reading a sex scene between two characters that *should* be on the same page as each other, coming to an emotional resolution together and re-learning how to trust one another in the climax of the plot, but I couldn't tell that this was happening at all because of the disappearance of the perspective character's interiority.

Once I told the author that, a lightbulb clicked on. Without any further commentary by me on the other issues (robotic/by-the-numbers prose, and stiff blocking), that one insight helped the author unlock the scene. The other issues disappeared once the author checked in with the POV character's feelings and emotions. The climax of the story came off well, and so did the characters.

### **Commenting on a specific kink in a fic**

If your author is interested in how *kink x* plays out in the fic and you don't read *kink x*, feel free to express, "this isn't my kink, so I may not have anything relevant to say about how it's used in the fic". An author may still want your input about how the kink plays in a fic, if it's just a small part of story!

If your author is interested in how *kink x* plays out in the fic and you read *kink x* widely, express your expertise! You may have a nuanced understanding about what people like about *kink x*, and you may be able to give helpful pointers to your author in how to draw out specific aspects of *kink x*. How to make a scene really pop & focus on what makes *kink x* so appealing to its fans.

### **Try not to accidentally kinkshame your author**

Beta-reading may expose an author's vulnerabilities more than they expected. Otherwise neutral commentary may seem unintentionally kinkshame-y when it's written directly in the margins of their fic. I would suggest avoiding talking about what kinks you don't like when you're working in someone else's draft.

DO discuss your interests prior to accepting beta work; but once you've agreed to read a fic, commit to being as polite and professional about kinks, tropes, and situations that you may otherwise have a lot of (not-so-positive) feelings about.

If you agree to read an eggpreg fic and you're not into it, your lack of interest in the kink should be put aside for the time being. Your goal as a beta reader in this situation is "how can this fic be the best eggpreg fic it can be".

In order to provide the best feedback possible on E-rated scenes, you might need to delve into a scene with an author with some direct questions.

After reading a bondage scene, you might say to an author whose indicated that they're interested in you beta-ing their E-rated material: "this scene seemed to be all about Udolpho's trust and how he

gives up his power, and makes himself vulnerable to the sea monster. Using the kelp as restraints was a pretty clever touch. It made the scene feel spontaneous and hot. Something felt a little off about the pacing, though. Are you looking for specific feedback on this section?"

When you've been given the go-ahead, possibly with the author noting, "yeah, the pacing did seem wonky in that section. I've read it so much... could you point out what felt odd to you?"

Now it's time to dig into that section, and think of it like any other beta task. You have a goal (make the sex hot) and you have some tools to help you get there.

**Unless indicated otherwise, assume the kinks present in the work are non-negotiable element of the fic. (If you're unsure about which kinks are the main feature of the fic, ask your author for relevant tags!)**

In most circumstances, I would advise that betas refrain from offering opinions on a kink's "relevance" to the fic, unless:

- A) you have that type of editing relationship/friendship with your author OR
- B) you know that kind of commentary is welcome.

An author may ask you, "I wrote *kink x, y, and z* in this work and I'm not sure if they gelled. What was your take? Did anything break you out of the sex scene?"

Under these circumstances, it's okay to talk about how relevant a particular kink is to a fic! Please tread carefully during these conversations if there's a level of mismatch between your interests and your authors'. You might enjoy everything in a sex scene up until one character possessively bites the other; or you might wonder about the relevance of an erotic massage *after* both characters have orgasmed when it seems like it would make more sense before the blowjob.

Feel free to mention to an author about how an element might appear to be out-of-sync with your expectations (erotic massage *after* both characters have gotten off might seem like a pacing issue if your author doesn't do a good job of showing why the characters are into it). Err on the side of treating moments like these as elements to be deployed to their maximum effectiveness (best after-orgasm massage possible!), not things that should be discarded because they don't work for you.

If you have any doubt about something that seems obvious to you, ask your author non-judgemental questions about the logic of their sex scenes! Maybe your author think the post-orgasm massage is a wonderful, sexy fantasy, and they've just failed to capture that feeling with their characters' reaction to it.

...and maybe your author will agree that the massage might be a little much, and save it for a different scene.

### **Responding to smut that works for you**

When a fic is hot and it works for you, continue to be as polite and professional in your feedback about it as possible.

Offering feedback like "this section was hot" or heart emojis or **(the one place where I will say this)** "this is good" are polite and professional ways of letting an author know that you responded to their porn; their porn *is working as intended*; and that they've done A+ level work. This is the part where we

use the professional figleaf where we read porn for its *merits* and its *hotness* and we untether our commentary from anything to do with our personal preferences or physical bodies.

You may have a different beta-relationship with the author you are beta-ing for, and they might have a different tolerance level than what I'm suggesting here.

Basically, my advice is: if you don't know your author's comfort level, be careful not to cross someone's TMI threshold when you're offering concrit.



# Examples of Concrit from Drafts

*Examples & discussion pulled from a beta-reading session on the first draft of [Dragonslayers](#) by nowrunalong, used with her permission.*

The draft for *Dragonslayers* emphasized physical humor, and a series of misunderstandings by the batkids as they tried to figure out who had published a children's book about Batman and Superman. Bruce and Clark were both background characters whom Tim Drake, Dick Grayson, and Damian Wayne were "investigating."

A large amount of my commentary on the draft emphasized how nowrunalong could use a small number of details to sell Bruce's characterization while the story let its comedic premise play out. The issues that I focused on were **how stock phrases could make or break a character**; how **active sentence constructions helped sell the humor** of her situations; and **how strong scene breaks help propel comedy**.

Those were my take-aways for how nowrunalong could strengthen her draft based on her tone and her desire to write comedy. Another beta-reader likely would have found other things to critique based on their writing priorities.

When Bruce gets back from the office\*, he's greeted by the sight of Batman and Superman wrestling in his living room.

"I do not require your help, alien," Damian is saying loudly, Batman's cowl sliding down so that the forehead obscures his eyes. Gripped in a headlock, he kicks Superman in the shin with a comically oversized boot.

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\* I have some questions about the opening sentence of the draft! The first half "When Bruce gets home from the office" begs A LOT of questions, while the second half is delightful.

In very, very few Batman continuities is Bruce ever the type that "gets home from the office" with any regularity like a salaried employee. The tone, and the implied regularity of Bruce's work in that opener really throw me for a loop, and I'm instantly questioning Bruce's characterization. That's a bad footing for a no specific continuity fic, where Bruce's characterization should hit us like "yep, that seems like Bruce Wayne," even if none of the details of this particular Bruce's life lines up with any specific canon.

Instead, consider adding a little specificity. Some possible scenarios: "When Bruce returns home from the quarterly stockholder meeting" or "When Bruce returns home from a WayneTech facility tour" or "When Bruce returns home from a last-minute planning committee with Lucius".

These examples all imply a much different kind of worklife for Bruce, and one that jives more with a Bruce Wayne who isn't just punching the clock; he's filling in at the office when he's specifically needed...because being Batman is what takes up most of his time. If you start out with a strong detail like this, it'll go a long way to getting your reader onboard with Bruce's characterization as the story unwinds into comedy.

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"He played the part of the dragon," Damian answers gravely. "I defeated him."

"We defeated him," Dick corrects, "with teamwork." To Bruce, he adds: "Tim's asleep behind the couch."

Bruce takes another look\* at the scene in front of him. Dick's knee-high red socks have collapsed sadly\*\* around his ankles. Damian is drowning in Batman's cape. Jason is wearing what looks to be the tiara Barbara wore to prom.\*\*\* Tim is, apparently, conked out on the hardwood floor.\*\*\*\*

"Okay," he says, and retreats to the kitchen...

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This is a good start! To sell the comedy of the scene, I would push some of the verbs into a more active form. Right now you have passive descriptions ("takes another look", followed by a lot of "is" descriptions), which are fine--but lack a kind of comedic urgency which you are looking for in this passage.

*Suggestions: more active description.*

\*"takes another look" → "Bruce surveys the scene in front of him."

Part of the comedy comes from the idea of Bruce, as the "ruler" of his domain decides to "survey" what is happening--and it's a bunch of weird chaos from his weird, weird children.)

\*\*"Dick's knee-high red socks have collapsed around his ankles." → remove "sadly"

Removing "sadly" helps play up the comedy of the scene if you aren't commenting on it. Let the reader build up the absurdity in their minds without trying to cue them with the emotions they're supposed to feel.

"Damian is drowning in Batman's cape." → save one "is" sentence--and this one's the one to keep! What a fun image. Damian would absolutely hate being seen ridiculous in any situation. This detail tells me that *something is up*.

\*\*\*"The tiara that Barbara wore to prom stuck out of Jason's hair like a bird's nest." → A sentence that has an active verb construction and a bit of comedic imagery! "Sagged" could be another good verb.

\*\*\*\*"Bruce spotted a spray green scales nearly hidden by the couch--Tim, apparently, conked out on the hardwood floor." → The goal is to make Tim's discovery a little more comedic. Use the details that you think are most evocative/useful to set the scene. This is a rough suggestion, but playing up Tim's costume would help set the scene that Bruce has walked in on, rather than filling in that detail in a later scene.

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Bruce finds Dick, Damian, Jason, and Tim in the front hall. All four are wearing jackets and disturbingly matching furtive expressions.

He should ask.

He does not.

“I’ll be out this evening,” he says, grabbing his own coat from the hook and a pair of leather gloves from the mahogany dresser. “Last-minute meeting with Lucius.”

He escapes out the door, coat still entirely unbuttoned, before anyone can question him.

+\*\*

Bruce had clearly broken all kinds of speed limits on the way to his so-called-meeting: the whole way to Metropolis, Dick never once caught a glimpse of the Aston Martin ahead.

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\*\* I would suggest removing this section break, and replacing it with a few sentences about what the kids are doing. E.g. write out the scene change. OR you can keep the scene break, but if you do that, you should return on some information about the place they end up in.

Reasoning: The rapid-fire scene changes are good but ONLY when they help build up momentum between chunks of narrative. Here you are cutting between scenes so quickly that you really need to tell us the whats, the wheres, etc to give us a glimpse of what the world actually looks like before you cut away from it.

If you want to keep the scene break, I’d suggest cutting back to a moment that locates the kids in a physical space of the library, so it doesn’t feel like you’re cutting between blank white spaces.

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## After You've Given Your Concrit

Once the beta-read is finished, it's up to the author to decide how helpful the beta's notes have been to their work.

You may have provided your author with fantastic notes, and know that you gave this beta reading everything that you could: you read a work sensitively; you provided feedback about what you thought an author's aims were; and you detailed positive and critical feedback about how your author achieved or didn't achieve their desired ends. You may have offered your concrit with specific, actionable advice.

However, you may run into a situation where you and your author have very different ideas about what makes a story interesting, important, fun, or good.

- **As an author, your role in a concrit exchange is to work with the notes you're given** and determine how helpful those notes are going to be for your story. You may end up disagreeing with your beta and not using their work in part or in whole. You may also experience some strong emotional reactions to the criticism you've received. You might feel a certain way about a story/your writing; and your beta might feel another. This can be especially true if your beta pointed out flaws that you didn't expect your writing to have. We can have sore spots about our creative outputs that we didn't even know we had. It can be important to sit with criticism a little while, if your first reaction is strongly negative. Sometimes a beta reader hits on a truth that it takes us a while to digest.

And other times, a beta can just be a bad match for you. It's important to take some time to sort out which might have happened, if you have an incredibly strong negative reaction to the feedback you've received. Work through the advice you've been given, and see if any of it helps you achieve what your fic set out to do.

- **As a beta, your role in a concrit exchange is to be as helpful as possible**, but understand that your advice is an opinion and the author may often choose to solve a problem differently than you have suggested—or disagree with you completely about what their story needs to be the strongest story it can be.

Sometimes an author isn't in a place to hear our concrit, but we can do the best we can with the tools available to us. And sometimes there's a bad match between how a beta views a piece of writing and how an author views it. In this case, we can hope that our view of an author's story has at least provided them with a window into how differently a reader interpretation can be from authorial intention. Even a mismatched beta-and-author pair can often yield useful information for an author!

An author may be very defensive about the notes you've given them, or they may be very blase; they may decide that you've offered them nothing they can use. You can't control the reception of your criticism. In cases where the author has seemingly thrown out your notes, what you do can do is practice letting go of the concrit you've provided.

Trust that the improvements that you pointed out will have some impact on your writer, even if they don't outwardly appear to accept your notes for *this* story. Your author may hear & understand & accept more than what they seem to. Sometimes your advice might not trigger changes to the fic you worked on, but your notes can have a downstream affect on the author's writing for the better.

# Some General Tips from Other Beta Readers

Here's a short run-down of other guides about the beta reading process, both from the beta's perspective and the author's perspective.

[How to Talk to a Beta Reader About Your Fanfiction \(Before, During, and After\)](#)

[Beta Reading at HASA](#)

[The whole series on beta-reading by Developmental\\_Beta @ Ao3](#)

[Developmental Beta: Of Canons Unknown to Me](#)

[Developmental Beta: Following the Hero's Journey](#)