

It might be the middle of summer, but PoorCynic's school of writing advice is never out of session. It's time for another (incredibly delayed) workshop/rant/advice/thing. I'll be covering beta reading and peer editing in this particular post. Subjects I will be touching upon include reading as an editor as well as giving and receiving constructive criticism. As with the previous workshops, I will start with my own personal observations before concluding with a little writing exercise.

Before we begin: many thanks to Neshomeh for sending me an outline of beta advice from two years ago.

GIVE...

Before You Begin

You need to set some ground expectations with the person whose piece you're editing. Ask them what they want you to look for and how they would like your recommendations to be put forward (unless they tell you first, of course). Some prefer blunt honesty while others would rather you be a bit gentler with your criticism. Some writers might just be looking for a quick once over for SPaG -- Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar -- errors.

Note: being blunt does not mean being a jerk. (As someone who was taught to be blunt in his editing from creative writing and screenplay college courses AND who has been accused of jerkery in the past, I am speaking from experience). Don't insult or belittle the author. Don't say that a plot twist was stupid, say that it doesn't make any sense to you as a reader. Be civil. Be polite. Use points from the story to back up your comments.

In The Loop

Keep the author informed, at least a little. You should lay out when you intend to edit the piece before actually doing so. Nothing too specific; don't say 8:15 PM to 10:30 PM is beta time (unless you are actually that strict in your personal scheduling), but do say something like "I'll look at this over the weekend." If something comes up in your life that takes up all of your time, tell them that. See also the section on being considerate to your betas.

The Once Over

The first time you read through someone's piece, it should be as a reader. Don't worry about searching out every misplaced comma or misspelled word. The first time should be all about the story. Does it make sense? Is the pacing good? Are the

characterizations steady? Does it move you in some way, whether through comedy or drama or horror or what have you? I would consider those elements far more important than SPaG (although don't get me wrong, SPaG's still pretty vital too).

If you've been asked to check the canonical veracity of the piece, this is the stage where you do so. Specifically citing points in the canon that support or contradict what they've written can be a plus.

The Twice Over

Now read it again. Now you should be looking at the elements of the piece more so than the overall story. The nitty gritty of SPaG. Read sentences aloud to see if they scan properly. When you mark something as textually or grammatically awkward, be extremely specific in how it is awkward. Don't just write "Confusing. Please fix." Write something like "The structure of this sentence is confusing because it makes it seem like you've switched subjects right in the middle" or something similar.

Your criticisms should be down to the detail. Cite specific moments. Cite specific lines. Remember that your goal is to help this person make as good of a story as they can.

Once You're Finished

Any SPaG issues should be pointed out exactly where they occur. Likewise, minor story and pacing problems that only occur once or twice should be noted in the text. Anything that affects the story as a whole or happens frequently enough that citing every instance would be tedious, you should make note of it in a grand overall summation of your thoughts.

I Came In Here For An Argument

There might be some points on which you and the author disagree. Typically these are elements that are more up for debate than SPaG (although this Board's debate over "alright" versus "all right" showed that was questionable). You know, things like pacing and characterization and plot points. As the beta, you can argue with the author about those elements up to a point. That's the key, though: *to a point*. Remember that the author should have the final say. It is, after all, his or her work. Not yours.

Authors, you should remember that your beta is trying to help. You approached them for their advice and assistance. You don't have to take it all at face value, but you should at the very least consider what they have to say.

And as always, be civil to one another.

You Say Colour, I Say Color

I want to add one final note on editing and regional variations of English. It's sometimes easy to forget that the PPC community is an internationally diverse organization. Not everyone has been brought up with the same types of spelling and grammar rules. Trying to cover every difference between British and American English -- even just the most commonly encountered ones -- could be a workshop in and of itself. You can find a quick primer made by the British Council [here](#). But otherwise if you're a beta and you're not sure if a slightly wonky spelling is due to a regional difference, take the time to look it up. If you're STILL not sure even after a quick bit of research, flag it.

AND TAKE

Finding a Beta

The Board is obviously the go-to place to ask for betas and editors. There's also the [PPC Beta Reader Directory](#), but I would hesitate to give that a full recommendation as it is somewhat out of date.

How many and what kind of editors you will need is going to depend on the context of your piece. You are always going to need one at minimum to check the technical aspects of the piece: spelling, grammar, consistency, and whatnot. More might help you find more errors, but you also have to consider that more editors might result in a greater chance of delays. If you're writing a mission in a continuum that you're not overly familiar with (it's been known to happen *looks askance at some of his own pieces*), you should also consider finding a beta with a strong knowledge base in the canon.

Formatting

Ask your beta how they want to read through your piece. Some prefer that you actually send them a copy through email. Others prefer links through public sharing programs like Google Docs or Dropbox. If you use those programs, remember to send your beta a private link. Don't just slap it on the Board for everyone to see.

Be Considerate

Finally, remember that editors and betas are also actual people with actual lives outside of the PPC community. Sometimes Real Life-related delays and issues can cause your piece to fall to the bottom to their to-do pile. Be patient. If my beta goes silent, I typically try to wait for at least a week before sending them a little email reminder. If they can no longer assist you, thank them for helping and looking for a new editor.

The Final Ruling

That's always yours. As I mentioned before, you don't have to take every bit of advice that your beta gives you. If you elect not to change something, however, you should explain your reasoning to your beta. Maybe a character is acting a certain way because of a plot point in a future mission. Maybe an otherwise odd event had to take place because it was important to set up the rest of the story. Don't just ignore them.

THE CHALLENGE!

Write a short story -- just a couple of paragraphs, maybe two pages at most. It can be about whatever you like, but you should keep your own editing to a minimum. Whatever state your rough drafts are typically in when you're ready to get a beta is the state your assignment should be in. Post it. Then, as other people post their own responses, beta them. They will in turn beta yours. It doesn't matter if someone else has already pointed out a specific SPaG error -- in fact, don't read other people's editing summations until after you've finished your own. This is testing your skill as an editor, not a writer.

Have fun and good writing to you all. Stay tuned for future workshop updates!