

The How, Why, and Free Benefits of Using Beta Readers by Ray H. Gray

What is a Beta Reader? A person who volunteers to read an unpolished, unpublished version of a work with the specific intent to provide feedback so the writer can improve the plot, characters, and scenes (PCS).

Why use Beta Readers? They provide a reader perspective on a manuscript. The writer is too close to their work, filling in unwritten narrative gaps with their intimate knowledge of the PCS. Readers do not have that familiarity, and will let the writer know through feedback.

Beta Readers highlight reader engagement. Is the plot interesting and fresh? What do they feel about the characters? Do the ones they love and hate match the writer's intentions? Is anything offensive or communicated in an unintended manner?

When to use Beta Readers? Ideally, after the manuscript has been reviewed by a Developmental Editor (DE). A DE will take an early draft and identify issues concerning PCS development. Once the DE's issues have been addressed in one or more rewrites, it may be time for Beta Readers.

Beta Readers essentially provide the same feedback as a DE but without the professional knowledge or training. Beta Readers can save the writer money, but should not be used in place of one or more editors.

Ray's process: I used Beta Readers first, fixing the PCS issues through three rounds of Beta Readers. When I submitted the work to a DE, it was more pleasurable for her to critique. She highlighted two style inadequacies that dramatically improved the novel once addressed.

Where to find Beta Readers? Social media, webpages, blogs, book clubs, senior groups, forums, and whenever anyone asks, "What do you do?"

Who makes good Beta Readers? People who read the novel's genre, or multiple genres, depending on the target audience and manuscript content. Age group can be important, too.

Who makes questionable Beta Readers?

1. Family, friends, and co-workers who would hesitate to be critical or could be offended by content.
2. Writers, teachers, and professors are best suited to a launch team or use as editors/proof readers.
3. Critique group members are best suited for developmental work or a launch team.
4. Psychological arsonists, people who love to inflame any situation with negativity. They are easy to recognize because their feedback is so contrary to the rest of the Beta Readers.

How to use Beta Readers?

1. Prepare Beta Readers by informing them of the genre(s) and any content involving sex, politics, and religion.
2. Divide the manuscript into three to ten sections. The complexity of the plot and length of the work will help determine the number of sections required. Compile a questionnaire for each section.
3. Develop a tracking system to follow the progress of each Beta Reader.
4. Manage Beta Reader tracking.
 - a. Send out manuscript sections one at a time to each Beta Reader and keep a record of the date sent.

- b. Log the date they finished reading the section.
- c. Send them the questionnaire for that section and record the date sent.
- d. Log and review their answers when they return the questionnaire.
- e. Send the next section once their feedback is received.

How to put together a questionnaire? MS Word, MS Excel, and PDFs are great ways for putting together a questionnaire. Keep the questionnaires easy to complete. Give the Beta Reader a method to rate their engagement, emotions, and praise/concerns about the novel's PCS.

Examples are shown below:

1. Use a 1 (bad) to 10 (perfect) rating system, or;
2. Use a Strongly Negative, Negative, Neutral, Positive, Strongly Positive rating system.
3. Repeat questions on each questionnaire:
 - f. Did you enjoy reading section (X)?
 - g. How eager are you to read the next section?
 - h. Did you enjoy the writing style?
4. Examples of questions that allow the Beta Readers to provide their thoughts:
 - a. Did you have favorite scene? Please state below.
 - b. Did you have a least favorite scene?
 - c. Were any parts of the section confusing or unclear?
 - d. Did you find yourself making comparisons to other novels based on the section?
 - e. Did you find yourself making predictions of the outcome?
 - f. What is your impression of the novel based upon the sections read so far?
5. List each of the characters in the section and use the rating system to measure the Beta Reader's impression of the characters.
6. Beta readers are also a perfect forum to test 25-word pitches, jacket blurbs, and author bios.
7. Ideally, a Beta Reader should take no more than a week to read a section and complete a questionnaire. Reality? My fastest Beta Reader finished all the sections and questionnaires in one week. The slowest took four months, but provided great feedback. The average Beta Reader took four weeks to complete the process.

Benefits of a Beta Reader

1. New writers often believe their work is a masterpiece and ready for an audience due to the time, effort, and sacrifice required to express their imagination. Beta readers will spotlight how much more work is needed.
2. Every sentence and paragraph of the manuscript connects the writer to the plot, scenes, and characters of their imagination. Beta readers have no such connection. If the writer has inadequately constructed the details with words, the Beta Reader will sense nothing, and will let the writer know through feedback.
3. A writer often intends the reader to understand specifics about the plot, characters, or genre. Beta Readers will point out all the WTFs of the manuscript, often surprising the writer with their impressions and interpretations.
4. Beta Readers will help a writer develop a tough skin. It is impossible to please everyone, and Beta Readers provide proof. Beta readers will quit the process. The act of quitting is valuable feedback, whether the writer learns their reasons or not.
5. I added a new first and last chapter to my novel to better flesh out my protagonist and her story. I added specific reveals and breadcrumbs to my plot when Beta Readers were confused. I put sex in the white space (reader's imagination), but left the seduction and afterglow in the novel.

6. Beta Readers are a good way to test genre categories if not following a genre formula. I felt my novel was a techno-thriller. Beta Readers labeled it mystery/suspense, sci-fi, and techno-thriller. My editor called it an erotic thriller.
7. My personal philosophy: "If someone else has done it, so can I." Beta Readers will help you learn and perfect your writing craft, nourishing your soul. The following statement from a third round Beta Reader helped me realize I had achieved my soul-nourishing goal for my novel: *I love the book! I'm horribly sad it's done. I even think your story could be a beautifully wonderful movie. I think this is very well written and exciting to read. You have an incredible way of connecting readers to feel for ALL your characters even if you don't like them you still love their character for who they are. You did a really great job keeping me guessing and shocking me! I couldn't put the story down. My husband actually had to hide section two so we could get household stuff done. I hope I've helped!!*
8. My first novel, Entangled Secrets, is in editorial rewrite now. It is on track to be self-published in summer 2019.