

## First Friday Networking Meeting, January 3, 2020

Award-Winning Author **Annette Kassis** on “How to Find, Use and Love Beta Readers”

by Gloria Pierrot-Dyer

What are beta readers, and why do you, as a writer, need them? These were among the most important questions addressed by our speaker, award-winning author Annette Kassis, at the First Friday Networking Meeting on January 9, our first of 2020. Annette is the author of three books, *Prohibition in Sacramento: Moralizers and Bootleggers in the Wettest City in the Nation*, *Sacramento on the Air: How the McClatchy Family Revolutionized the West Coast*, and *Weinstock's: Sacramento's Finest Department Store*. For the last one, she won the Award of Excellence in the Media/Publications Category by the Sacramento Historical Society.

Coming from a background as a marketing executive, at age 47, Annette returned to school as a non-traditional student, to earn her M.A. at CSU Sacramento. As she worked on writing the required thesis, her work was overseen by her thesis committee. She realized later that this was actually a group of beta readers, although, as she pointed out humorously, she didn't know the term at the time. The feedback that she received from her thesis committee proved very helpful to her as she wrote her thesis. She went on to explain that beta readers are neither editors, nor just people who love to read. They are not necessarily even close friends. What beta readers are, to use marketing terminology, is a test marketing group (unpaid). Like her thesis committee, their role is to give you feedback on how well your product (book) will appeal to consumers (reader). While they are not expected to undertake the intense scrutinizing of your work that an editor would perform, they do provide a fresh set of eyes and the holistic perspective of readers as consumers. Their overall impressions of the book can provide very valuable input for the writer, who can then make changes that make the book a better read for its intended audience.

As a brief guide for the use of beta readers, Annette introduced what she calls her “Seven Steps to Better Betas”:

1. **Think of your betas as a focus group.** They should reflect your target audience.
2. **Make sure your betas know what is expected of them.** Tell them what weaknesses in your writing they are to look for and assure them that they can be blunt in their responses. For example, if you have a tendency to switch tenses, they can be on the lookout for that. If they notice any major structural problem (i.e. “This section would have been more helpful back in Chapter 2, instead of here in Chapter 5.”), they should call your attention to that as well, being as detailed and specific as possible.
3. **Make sure you know what's expected of YOU.** Have a strategy and check your ego at the door. Annette's own personal strategy is to give each beta reader a hard copy of the manuscript, and then compare all the betas' responses to each other, side by side.

4. **Know what hills you're willing to die on.** Beta readers' suggestions are valuable, but ultimately, this is your book. If it is suggested to alter something that is very important to you, stick to what you believe is best.
5. **Know what format you want material in and why.** Do you want to give them the full manuscript at once, or do you want them to work chapter by chapter? It should be what works best for you. Will you use hard copies, or will it all be done electronically?
6. **Give them a deadline.** Be realistic and give them enough time, but do set a date. But be mindful of their time constraints. Avoid holidays, for example.
7. **Don't Waste the Opportunity!** Keep an open mind and listen for a new perspective. Your beta may have an out-of-the-box idea that may add a great deal to your book.

Where do you find good beta readers? Here are some possibilities:

1. Consider your **personal network** of friends and family, taking into consideration their individual skills and talents.
2. Think about **groups you belong to**, such as CWC.
3. See the CWC Sacramento **Facebook page for "Beta Readers Group."** You yourself can also consider becoming a beta reader for someone else, by joining a **critique group**.
4. **Online groups, such as Goodreads** have groups sorted by genre.
5. **Book Clubs.** See if a book club will use your book as one of their selections.

Annette recommends that betas not be engaged at the rough draft stage. She herself doesn't engage them until her work is in the third draft. If your betas have been very helpful, you may want to include them in your book's acknowledgements. Annette makes a practice of showing her appreciation by taking her most frequently used betas to lunch. Ultimately, betas provide a very valuable service, without pay. Writers should show great appreciation for what they do.