

Sample Beta Reader Questions

Beta readers can serve as your very first “test-drive” of a new manuscript, offering a lay reader’s perspective on how effectively you’ve conveyed your vision on the page.

But people who may not be familiar with storytelling elements or writing craft may not always know how to offer the kind of feedback in specific areas that can be most useful to an author, and may not understand what you’re asking for. (The first time I solicited my husband’s input on one of my proto-novels, he offered up only, “It’s good.”)

You can help them—and guide them toward practical, actionable feedback—by offering specific questions for them to consider.

I’ve suggested a handful below for both fiction and nonfiction, but feel free to brainstorm more of your own that may better suit your needs as a writer or on a particular manuscript. You want to keep your questions somewhat open-ended (meaning not just yes-or-no), but remember most people aren’t willing or able to offer you an essay answer for each one, so keep them as simple and pointed as possible.

And don’t forget that a beta read is a big “ask”—everyone is busy, and taking time to read your work and offer their considered opinions is a generous act, whether or not they are able to offer you what you may need. Be gracious and grateful, no matter what they offer—even if it’s not constructive or helpful. (You simply know next time to pick a different reader.) I always preface with a note outlining what I’m looking for and offering a rough schedule request (so your beta reader knows what deadline you’re working under and whether they can meet it)—and thanking them for their kindness:

Cover letter:

Dear [generous soul],

As you know, I’ve been working on my story/nonfiction [project you are working on], and at this stage it would be so valuable to me to hear from a few trusted readers how well it’s working and any areas that could use more attention. Might you be willing to take a look at it and offer some feedback, and would you have time to do it by, say, mid-March?

Let me know if so—I’d be honored to have your input.

I’m looking for high-level feedback—by all means if you have specific comments I welcome them, but in general I’m looking to see [offer a bit of specific info on areas where you suspect you may need to focus on, e.g., “how well the book flows, whether it’s clear and understandable, whether the information feels relevant and useful and actionable, etc.”].

If it helps I’ve created a list of questions that might guide your feedback, though you’re welcome to range outside these areas, of course. Please feel free to be frank—your honest feedback is invaluable to me in making this the most useful, professional, and competitive book I can.

Thank you so much! You’re helping me a lot.

Then you can customize your questions; I've included suggestions for both fiction and nonfiction below. Try to limit yourself to no more than a handful; I'd say 6-12 or so as a guideline—on the low end if complex answers are required, or higher if they are more straightforward—and let your reader know they don't necessarily need to address each one.

The first thing you might ask for is for your beta reader to sum up your story in a line or two, what they understand it to be about, its main storyline and conflict/issue. This is a great way to ascertain whether readers are "getting" your story as you intended to tell it, whether its spine is clear and strong. (Hat tip to author Robin Tatum for this great suggestion.)

Fiction:

- Did the story hold together and feel complete, the end satisfying?
- Were there any main characters who didn't feel real to you, or whom you didn't feel invested in? Which ones? What about them didn't grab you or feel compelling?
- Were there any parts that felt unrealistic to you?
- Anywhere you felt disengaged, or confused, or impatient to get to more action?
- Were there places that jarred or you were pulled out of the story? Anywhere you found it difficult to focus or where you didn't feel strongly drawn to keep reading? At what point of the story did that happen, and do you know what about those areas didn't feel compelling to you?
- Were there any places where you reacted particularly emotionally—touched, scared, excited, nervous, worried, etc.—or places where you didn't when you felt you "should"? What were they? If you weren't affected in those places, do you know what made you not connect to those scenes?
- Are there any other thoughts you have that I may not have asked about?

Nonfiction:

- Did you know what the book was about, specifically, from the beginning, and know who its intended audience is?
- Were there any areas you found confusing or unclear?
- Did any parts feel redundant to you?
- What parts did you find most helpful? Were there parts you did not find helpful?
- Was anything missing from the book? Would you like to see any subjects expanded?
- Did the book have a logical flow? Were there any chapters or parts that felt out of place to you?
- Did you start to get bored or confused at any point in the book?

- Did it leave you feeling motivated to effect the techniques I describe? Did you find the content actionable?
- Is there any way you can think of that I could make it better, or any other feedback you'd like to add?

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Editorial