

Learn to Love Critiques

By Andrea Pyros

Negative feedback doesn't have to wound. Here's how to use those critiques to your best advantage

Every writer has been there. They send their work out for another pair of eyes, and back comes a raft of “this section isn't working,” “cut here,” and “I'm confused by this” notes on their chapters. It's easy to feel wounded or defensive when your words are met with anything less than rave reviews, but if you embrace the slash of the red pen, your work will improve. You can learn to love this integral part of the writing process. Here's how.

RECOGNIZE THAT EVERYONE REVISES

Before you even send out your pages to a reader, remind yourself that everyone receives editorial suggestions. Beginning writers may imagine that their more experienced peers receive plenty of praise and very little criticism, but editors and authors we spoke with say otherwise. They stressed that there's always collaboration—and plenty of work—from rough draft to final product, whether it's someone's first novel or fifteenth. “As writers, we are always growing. You always get edits back, and there are always things [readers point out that] you didn't think about. Some of my best-selling books have been elevated because of that feedback,” said Christi Caldwell, the *USA Today* best-selling author of emotional Regency romances. “I'm looking to make it the best product it can be, so when I get my edits back, I don't need somebody to tell me how great it is. I

want them to point out the things that aren't as great, so when the book comes out, I don't say, ‘Why didn't I catch that before?’”

If you've ever read something twenty times, only to have a colleague point out a glaring typo in it that you've completely missed, you probably understand why it can be incredibly helpful for a fresh pair of eyes on a manuscript. It allows you to consider the actions of a character, to catch errors you might have missed, and to see things from an entirely different point of view. Harlequin Kimani Editor Shannon Criss said, “Writers who are in various stages of their careers do receive editorial feedback from their editor. I think it's beneficial for authors to have someone else review their work to offer another perspective. Editors should be considered a writer's publishing partner, and the constructive criticism that we offer is only meant to enhance and strengthen the story.”

DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY

What does change as a writer gains more experience is that, with practice, it gets easier to listen to feedback and welcome it, instead of having it sting or make you want to give up. “I'm not sure I'd trust someone who told me my work was perfect the first go-round,” said Grace Callaway, best-selling author of the *Mayhem in Mayfair* and *Heart of Enquiry* series. Callaway still revises just as much now as when she began her writing career, completing at least eight drafts for every book. And there are plenty of eyes on her work along the way. “I'm working on my twelfth book, and I continue to collaborate with my editorial team to make my work the best that it can be.”

If you were to watch enough films about artistic geniuses, you'd believe that writers work in a secret lair, leaving their offices only to hand in completely perfect, ready-to-publish manuscripts. We're rarely shown the reality of the artistic process or of the many people involved in bringing a project to light. No wonder we take legitimate feedback as a personal attack. "As human beings, we are not taught to value input as an opportunity for growth and development. We are taught that our skills are inherent and that criticism is to be avoided," Deb Werksman, editorial director of Sourcebooks Casablanca, said. But Werksman and her team try to "cultivate a 'growth mindset' so that feedback is a welcome opportunity to stretch, grow, and expand." Her hope is that writers who work with her will take editorial direction in the spirit it's given: everyone working together to produce the best possible end project.

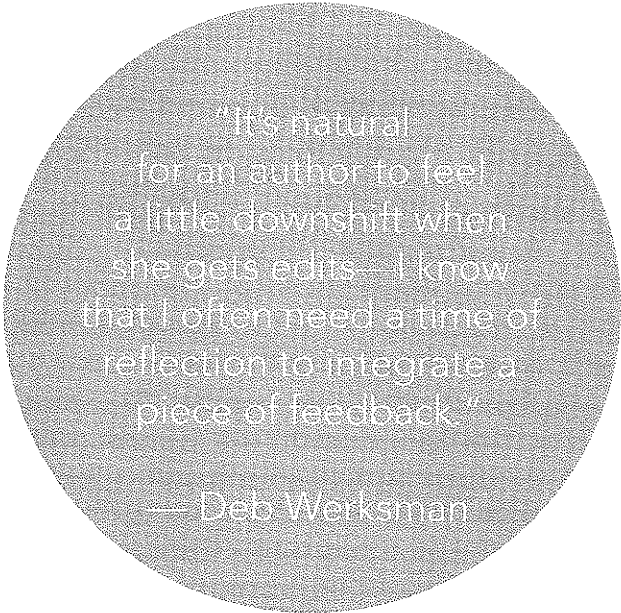
Even if you don't love what your critiquer is saying about your writing, know that the very act of their taking the time to read your work and provide feedback on it is a good sign, said Kerry Leddy Malawista, a psychoanalyst and writer in Potomac, Maryland, and co-chair of New Directions in Writing. Leddy Malawista, whose personal essays have appeared nationally in newspapers, magazines and literary journals, said, "Someone took your work seriously and put time in to provide you with feedback. That means it warrants attention."

ALLOW TIME TO REFLECT

If you start glancing through the notes and find yourself feeling upset or frustrated, put them away for a bit, Leddy Malawista advised. There's no need to immediately take in the feedback, to respond, or to start slashing chapters. Take a break, and sit on it for a while. Once you're ready, you can go back to the notes and see what you can find of use. "You don't have to take it whole," Leddy Malawista said, "But is there something of value in it?"

"View the situation as objectively as possible," Werksman said. "If the editor is knowledgeable about the category, she is worth listening to, even if the author decides not to follow the editor's [or other critiquer's] advice in the end." She understands that "it's natural for an author to feel a little downshift when she gets edits—I know that I often need a time of reflection to integrate a piece of feedback."

Though it's worthwhile to evaluate the feedback you're provided and examine if it makes sense to you, that *doesn't* mean you have to accept every single suggestion you're given. Criss explained, "As with any relationship, communication is key! If an author has a problem with any requested revisions, I feel that a phone conversation is the best way to resolve this issue. Editors don't often get the opportunity to speak by phone with the authors we work with, so this is the perfect time to do so. We'll *always* make time for you!"



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— Deb Werksman

Callaway agreed. "After careful deliberation (and, if need be, discussion with my editor), if I don't agree with an edit, I don't use it. With experience, it has become easier for me to discern whether or not a suggestion is useful because I have a keener sense of my craft, brand, and audience expectations."

That holds true if you're receiving notes from a friend, beta reader, or critique partner. If you've considered their input fairly and their comment doesn't ring true about your work, it's ultimately your name on the book, and therefore your call.

FIND THE RIGHT READERS

Leddy Malawista laughs when she talks about working with someone whose feedback to her was, “This is a piece of crap!” Though Leddy Malawista understood that was this person’s style and didn’t take it personally, she admitted it isn’t feedback that is particularly helpful for a writer. If you’re getting that kind of commentary from critique partners or potential editors, it’s time to cross that person off of your go-to list for future drafts.

“Criticism, in general, is often interpreted as negative, and it can be a devastating blow to an author,” said Criss. “The old adage, ‘It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it,’ comes into play.” Anyone who doesn’t know how to provide feedback in a constructive and helpful way isn’t going to be much use to your career.

Caldwell, who talks about her love of the editorial process, said, “I would not encourage a writer to stay with someone who is harsh and rips apart your book or shreds your confidence. These books are our babies! When you hear that level of harsh feedback, you think, ‘I can’t work

with this.’ In this industry, it can happen easily, with people telling you, ‘Nobody will ever read your books.’ Well, that doesn’t help my manuscript!” Instead, Caldwell suggests looking for people who give notes along the lines of, “You should consider the chemistry here” or “I’m not feeling this,” which gives you something to think about in a much more productive way.

Another way to make sure you have a successful experience with people you’re sending your pages out to? Provide them with guidance by letting them know what kind of feedback you’re seeking. When she leads writing workshops, Leddy Malawista is sure to ask participants, “What kind of critique do you want?” If writers are specific in what kind of help they need and are able to articulate that clearly, they’ll be able to guide the discussion in a way they find most useful for them.

Whatever you do, don’t give up! Leddy Malawista never wants talented writers to get so crushed by negative comments that they stop writing. She likens it to the old adages of getting back on the horse: “You can feel crushed for a day or two, but then you get back to writing!”



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