

INDIE AUTHOR MAGAZINE

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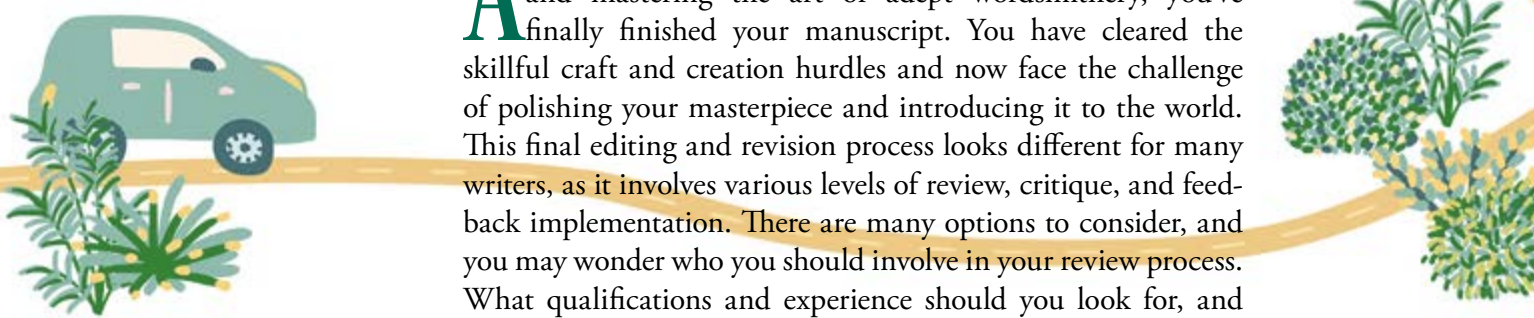
**This Issue's
Featured Author:
Joanna
Penn**

**A Roadmap to Story
Revision: Developmental
Editors or Beta Readers?**



A Roadmap to Story Revision

DEVELOPMENTAL EDITOR OR BETA READERS—WHICH PATH IS RIGHT FOR YOUR STORY?



After several months or even years of research, interviews, and mastering the art of adept wordsmithery, you've finally finished your manuscript. You have cleared the skillful craft and creation hurdles and now face the challenge of polishing your masterpiece and introducing it to the world. This final editing and revision process looks different for many writers, as it involves various levels of review, critique, and feedback implementation. There are many options to consider, and you may wonder who you should involve in your review process. What qualifications and experience should you look for, and how familiar should they be with your topic and industry?

Independent authors frequently consult beta readers and developmental editors when attempting to identify major issues with their manuscript, and even with the similar roles they can play, many have strong reasons for including one or both parties in their manuscript evaluation process. So what's the difference between the two, and which will benefit your manuscript most? Two independent authors with different answers to the question shared their journeys revising their manuscripts and explained the reasons for their preferences.



DEVELOPMENTAL EDITORS VS. BETA READERS

Also known as substantive editing, developmental editing provides detailed feedback on the substance of a written piece. After a writer completes the first or second draft of their project, a developmental editor provides critiques on components such as theme, organization of ideas, plot, and characters. The editor takes the reader's expectations into account and ensures the project has a logical flow, a pronounced theme, consistency, and reader satisfaction. They provide a professional intensive analysis and expert guidance on how to create the best possible version of the project.

Getting a professional opinion on a project that is set for publication provides valuable insight and direction. Writers at all skill levels can benefit from an editor's critiques, guidance, and determination whether their project is on the right track. However, developmental editing comes at a time and financial cost. Writers with a tight budget or deadline should consider the steps involved in the developmental editing process to ensure it fits their needs and expectations.

On the other hand, a well-read beta reader can provide a new perspective on a written project different from that of an editor's. Assembling a team of beta readers who will provide feedback on potential inconsistencies, underdeveloped areas, or other disjointed issues with a manuscript can

make a substantial difference in modifying a manuscript to reach its highest potential. Although most beta readers aren't professionals in the editing and publishing industry, a qualified beta reader can be a great addition to your review team. A beta reader will provide honest feedback on a project, is familiar with the genre or topic, has the capacity to complete the project promptly, and is willing to provide a reader's perspective of the manuscript without being compensated.

Inviting around twelve to thirty beta readers to review a project is a great way to provide a useful consensus on manuscript issues, wrote Smashwords founder Mark Coker in a 2016 article for *Publishers Weekly* (<https://publishersweekly.com>). Keep in mind that only a portion of invited readers will finish the manuscript, and even fewer will provide in-depth feedback on the project. As the goal is to discover a theme among the responses and qualify whether feedback is relevant, the larger the beta reader pool, the better.

But can a beta reader's feedback compare to that of a developmental editor? A qualified beta reader can identify what works and what doesn't work with a manuscript's theme, character, or plot, but they won't necessarily be able to provide solutions for major issues in the way a developmental editor would.

USA Today and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author Abby L. Vandiver is a hybrid author. When publishing independently, Vandiver, who also writes



as Abby Collette and Cade Bentley, prefers using a team of at least five well-read beta readers as opposed to hiring a developmental editor. “Developmental editing is an expense that self-published authors may never recoup over their career,” she says. In lieu of using a developmental editor, Vandiver says, “I feel that a writer should take craft classes to hone their skills.”

Beta readers have been an integral part of Vandiver’s revision process from the beginning. The author advocates building a strong team of beta readers by interacting on Goodreads, Facebook, and in other social media groups to build relationships with peer writers. “In order to publish my best work, I know that it needs to be critiqued,” she says. “I utilize common themes among my beta readers’ feedback to decide on which revisions to make. If it makes sense, I change it.”

Author Stony Rhodes promotes the use of developmental editors in the writing process but believes writers don’t fully understand their value. “I didn’t quite understand developmental editing when I began my writing journey,” she says. “I later learned that they assist in the process of crafting great stories

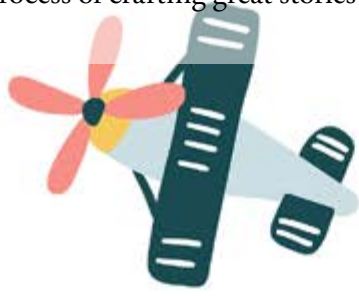
that resonate with readers. I believe researching the results that developmental editors have gotten for their writers is helpful when determining whether their services apply to your current needs.”


Rhodes, a number one Amazon bestselling Romance series author, also says she uses ten to twenty beta readers to learn more about the reader experience. “I want to know firsthand how the story makes them feel and what elements they wish I would have included in the story. It also helps to get an outside perspective on a project that I’m so close to.”

WHAT TO CONSIDER

To maximize the value of your revision process, first consider what will be the most beneficial type of feedback for your current needs. If you prefer receiving guidance, tools, and resources, consider seeking the assistance of a developmental editor, who can identify opportunities for improvement and suggest a viable implementation plan.

If you’re more interested in learning about how your book will be received by your target audience



A whimsical illustration of a winding road. At the top left, a blue car is driving away. In the middle, a green car is driving towards the right. At the bottom right, a yellow car is driving away. The road is yellow with dashed lines. There are various green plants and bushes along the road. A light blue cloud-like shape is in the background.

and what your readers will experience, beta readers are more than qualified to provide feedback that will create an inside track to this information.

Here are some other aspects of the decision to consider:

Cost

Developmental editing often requires a financial investment; the market average is \$0.07–\$0.08 per word. Beta readers typically do not charge for their services.

Training

Although a certification is not required, developmental editors should be experienced, with a catalog of writers whom they have helped achieve favorable results. Client accomplishments to look for include positive editorial and consumer reviews and book awards. Beta readers should be avid readers, preferably on your topic or in your genre.

Feedback

Most developmental editors provide an in-depth editorial letter featuring several pages of detailed feedback and recommended changes to your book.

Most beta readers provide only brief comments based on their opinions on the plot, characters, or dialogue in the manuscript. They don't normally give recommendations for project improvement, and their feedback can be subjective, Rhodes says, "versus [the] more objective feedback from a developmental editor, who is being paid to read and evaluate the project."

Remember that neither opting for developmental editing nor using a beta reader team needs to be mutually exclusive. Many indie authors, myself included, have successfully combined each service to help paint a full picture of their project's impact and determine a plan for implementing feedback. If using both, keep in mind that beta reader services are typically used after the developmental editing process to gain a clear reader's perspective on the project. The main goal is to identify your needs as a writer, the impact you want to make on your readers, and the optimal plan to revise and publish a book that will properly represent your ideas, core beliefs, and theme. ■

Eryka Parker