



Fiction Feedback

Anyone else feel a draft in here?

Rants and rambles from Debi Alper, author of contemporary thrillers

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There are as many different ways of writing as there are writers, but this is what works for me.

Draft 1.

This is where I'm chucking the story out. I rarely plan ahead (though at some point in the writing I will probably have a vague idea of the story's trajectory) and I don't read back through until I've finished. I let the story unfold as I write by placing my characters in situations and watching to see how they react and what happens as a result and where that leads onto next. In this way, I find out what's happening at the same time as the protagonists - and the reader. At some point, the story will grow wings and the characters will take me in unsuspected directions.

As the story develops, inevitably adjustments will need to be made in previous chapters to fit into what is revealed by later developments. I usually write in longhand. When I type up a chapter I print it out and mark the MS with any issues I know I'll have to return to later. At the end of the 1st draft, I'll have a complete MS covered in scrawl relating to those issues and any others that come from feedback from my writers' group.

Draft 2.

This is just as crucial a stage in the crafting of a novel as the 1st draft and can't be skipped over. I start by making the changes I was already aware of and then begin reading through to see how the whole thing hangs together. I look for inconsistencies in character and plot. Structural issues like unnecessary timeline distortions. There may be scenes and even whole chapters which are superfluous and need to be deleted, where I was just writing to continue the flow. If the section has no role in driving the narrative forwards it has to go. There will also be sections that are vital to the plot but which I have skated over in my rush to splurge out the story. I'll check that any sub plots are properly woven into the main narrative and that there are no irrelevant threads or characters. I'll look out for POV shifts and any areas where I should be showing not telling (or the reverse!).

NB: This stage is vital, whether you're submitting your MS to an existing agent (as I am) or pitching to a new one. It's just as crucial if you're submitting the book for an editorial critique. You should never let anyone see your MS until you have ensured you have made it as good as it possibly can be yourself. Don't expect anyone to accept your novel because they can see it's a hidden gem. If it's a gem, it needs to be so bright and sparkly they can't avoid noticing it.

Even if you're submitting the MS for a critique, it makes sense to polish it as best you can before sending it to an editor, in order to get the best value from the feedback.

Ironically, the longest reports I've written have been for books with the greatest potential. That's because it doesn't take many words to say things like 'You're using far too many adverbs throughout' or 'Stick to a linear chronological narrative whenever possible' or 'Watch out for confusing POV shifts' etc.

Draft 3.

Ah, the final stage. This is the polish and is also essential. With this last read through, I make sure I've always used the right word/phrase/image, that there's no clunky prose and that every word earns its keep.

And that's it. You've completed a book. It's no longer your WIP and it's time to launch it into the world. Good luck!

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