The Author's Ultimate Guide to Beta Readers: How They Help with Book Promotion, Ways to Build Your Reader Community, and How to Find Them

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Beta readers are people who have access to your manuscript ahead of the book release. There are several goals for authors with beta readers:

- Get early feedback and even editing advice from readers. This can help ensure your manuscript is well-formed and meets the needs of your target audience.
- Build a group of advocates who can help spread the word about the book once it's released.
- Generate book reviews early and quickly.

Guy Kawasaki has spoken at length about how he made his manuscript for his book *APE: Author, Publisher, Entrepreneur,* available to over 250 beta readers, and received edits, typos, content suggestions and feedback that helped improve his manuscript. Then, when the book was ultimately released, he had 250 fans ready to write book reviews and help spread word-of-mouth for the book.

How Many Beta Readers Do You Need?

You don't necessarily have to ask beta readers for content feedback, unless that's something you personally want to do. In his book *On Writing*, Stephen King said he only allows a few trusted friends to read his manuscripts in advance. You can run into some frustration when you have too many cooks in the kitchen, so the decision is really up to you.

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However, **beta readers can play an essential role in your book launch** by helping to generate reviews and spread the word via social media. So, whether or not you want feedback on your manuscript, giving early access to the book before it's released can have many promotion benefits.

My personal feeling is that you should have as many beta readers as you can find. The goal as a writer should always be to get your books in the hands of as many people as possible. And yes, that means giving it to them for free. If each reader tells just five friends about the book, you can earn that "lost sale" back over and over again.

Worried that your manuscript will get shared with people outside of your beta reader community? During the 2017 Nonfiction Writers Conference, Seth Godin addressed this common fear. His response: ***"Your problem is not piracy. Your problem is obscurity."*** Godin further said that authors should give their books away and encourage readers to share them because the more eyeballs you can get on your book, the bigger your fan base can grow.

Romance novelists use a formula of giving away the first book in a series, or selling it at a super low price, in order to get readers hooked into their series. While nonfiction authors don't always write series books, most have additional books to offer, or related products and services, and that makes giving your book away highly valuable because you can attract readers to your mailing list, social media, and get them interested in your other products and services.

The bottom line: Enlist the number of beta readers that feels right to you. Maybe you just want twenty or so because this strategy makes you a little uneasy. That's your prerogative. However, I encourage you to think bigger and consider how much more substantial your

book launch can be when you have 100 or more people, who are grateful to have had early access to your book, posting reviews and announcing its release to their own audiences.

How to Work with Beta Readers

One of the best ways to organize early readers is to invite them to a private Facebook or LinkedIn group where you can cultivate this community and get them involved in your book launch process. Ideally you should position participation in your beta reader group as a privilege—an opportunity for people who enjoy your genre to read your new book before the general public.

Also note that since not everyone visits online forums regularly, be sure to add them to a private email list so that you can send messages in addition to communicating within the group.

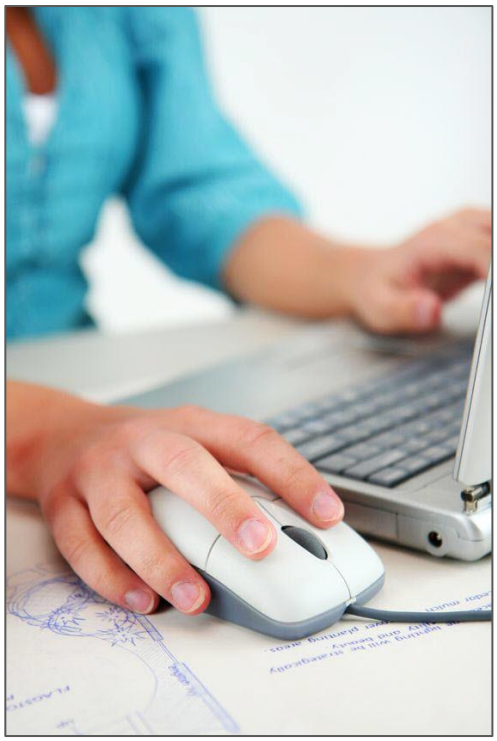
Once you've added readers to the group, engage with them and show them how to help you. If you're seeking feedback on the manuscript, give them a reasonable deadline to respond. Two to four weeks should be enough.

Also give them guidance about the kind of feedback you're seeking. Do you want them looking for punctuation, spelling and grammatical issues? Do you want them to track changes in Word and send back a red-lined copy? Or do you want them to type up some general feedback? Setting expectations at the beginning can prevent your readers from going rogue and giving you the kind of feedback you don't want.

Speaking of feedback, provide a list of questions you want them to answer. Here are some examples:

- Is there enough level of detail throughout the book or are there areas that need clarification? If so, which areas?
- Were there enough real-world examples or are there areas where additional examples would be helpful?
- Does the content flow in a logical order? If not, how could it be improved?
- What is your overall opinion of the book? What would make it better?

The questions shown above could also be incorporated into a document where participants answer these questions for each chapter, if that's the level of feedback you want. Ideally, readers would fill out theirs answers and return the document to you. You can also create a Dropbox folder where you can share revised versions of the manuscript and where you readers can submit their responses or red-lined copies of the manuscript.



For promotion purposes, you'll also need to guide your readers in how to participate. Make it as easy as possible for them to get involved. Here are some suggestions:

- Make them aware of the release date.
- Ask them to share via social media and their own email lists.
- Provide them pre-written tweets, memes, book cover images and content for easy sharing (a private page on your website with details can work just fine).
- Ask them to post reviews on Amazon, BN.com, Goodreads and more.
- Add incentive by offering a bonus for participation or entering them in a contest to win a gift card or prize of some sort.
- Offer to provide guest posts for their blog.

Note that Amazon has been scrutinizing reviews, especially those that appear to come from friends of the author. You may want to offer to purchase some copies of your book, print or Kindle editions, to deliver to those who plan to post reviews so that their reviews show up as a "verified purchase." For the Kindle version, you can use the "Buy for Others" option on the book's sales page.

Remember to keep communicating with your beta readers and help them feel involved in your book launch. Let them know the status, thank them for their reviews and shares, and make sure they feel appreciated.

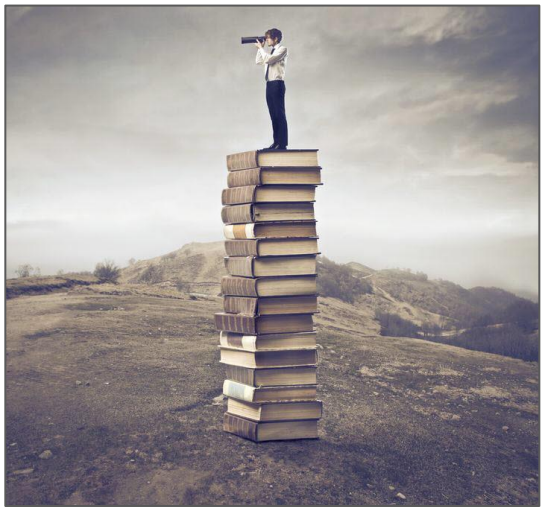
Where to Find Beta Readers

In order to make your beta reader program as successful as possible, you'll need to enlist readers. Create a sign-up form on your website for those interested in joining your group. You may want to ask a few questions to screen participants. Here are some questions to ask them:

- Do you currently enjoy <genre> books? (You want to make sure you're enlisting readers who actually enjoy your genre.)
- Are you interested in providing feedback on the manuscript?
- Are you willing to help promote the book to your own network upon its release?
- Are you willing to post one or more reviews of the book? Where will you post them?
- How else will you assist in spreading the word about the book upon its release?

You could also have applicants give links to their own social media profiles and websites, if this is criteria you care about. I don't think that having a substantial platform should be the

only reason to enlist beta readers, and it could significantly limit participation, but it can be useful to know how wide their reach.



Here are some ways to find them:

- Your own social media and mailing list.
- Ask your colleagues, family and friends to participate.
- Ask your colleagues, family and friends to reach out to their networks.
- Online groups that reach your target audience. For example, if you're writing a memoir on living with diabetes, locate groups for people who have diabetes.
- Reach out to trade associations, alumni groups and other professional organizations that reach your target audience and ask them to help you get the word out to their members.
- Goodreads has a public group specifically for finding beta readers, and so does Facebook.
- Post to writers' forums and communities, such as Absolute Write, Writer's Circle or The Writer's Workshop.
- Contact Amazon reviewers. Look up competing titles on Amazon and then click on each reviewer to find their public profile. Oftentimes reviewers list a personal email, so you can send them an invitation.

Tips for Success

- Consider using a tool like Book Funnel to distribute your manuscript to beta readers. This allows you to make the digital version of your book available in the reader's preferred format, such as Kindle, Nook or iPad reader.

- Engage with your beta readers often so you keep them interested and make them feel like they are a valued part of the process.
- Acknowledge your beta readers somehow. You could thank them in a page printed in your book or in a blog post on your website.
- You could take it a step further and offer extra incentive for their participation, such membership in a program you manage or extra downloadable content. Added incentives never hurt!
- Show your gratitude by thanking them several times. Tell them how they've impacted the book and what it means to you.

The beta reader experience shouldn't feel like a one-way transaction where your readers are there only to serve you. When they're appreciated and know that their participation makes a difference, they will feel even more inspired to help spread the word about your book and about you as an author they admire.

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