



# After The First Draft

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by  
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So, you've finished your manuscript or short story. Congratulations, that's quite an achievement. Still, how do you know if it's any good? Let someone else read it. Scary thought, isn't it? Yes, it is. These words represent you, your imagination, your creativity. Even your characters are part of you; every character you create represents at least one aspect of your personality, whether you realize it is there or not. There's nothing quite like creating a work of fiction out of you, your experiences, then handing it over to someone else to evaluate to make your stomach turn to jelly. After all, is this person really commenting on your work, or on you? Well, there are four ways to find out.

The first, give your work to someone you know, your mother, sister, brother, best friend, et cetera. Chances are this person isn't going to be commenting or critiquing you as a person, so you're safe there. But how valuable is the advice going to be? After all, your mother probably isn't going to tell you anything is wrong with your writing. Why would she? Or if she does say it was dry in spots, or overwritten in spots, what happens when you try to pin her down on it? A smile? A shrug? The ever-popular, "I'm not sure, it just bothered me?" How are you going to fix the problems when you don't have any definite ones? So this avenue isn't going to help you. Let's try the second way.

Again, give your work to someone you know, but don't tell them you wrote it. Tell them someone you know wrote it and you agreed to go over it, but don't know what to say and need help. Will this work? Sure, better than revealing yourself as the author anyway. Still, you may find yourself in a similar situation as the first method – nothing definite as far as problems to correct, simply more smiles, shrugs and "I'm not sure" – unless you are willing to grill this person and make them pin down the problems. You are going to have to be Columbo or Matlock and find out what they didn't like – the characters, pacing problems, stilted or unbelievable dialogue, et cetera. The hardest part with this is remaining quiet while the critic voices their opinions and suggestions. You cannot defend your work. Not only will it inadvertently reveal you to be the author and may put your critic in a now awkward situation, it doesn't do any good. If grilling your critic doesn't work and you still can't pin down the problems, give your critic a list of story elements – plot, characterization, dialogue, et cetera – and have s/he rank them according to how well you handled each element. You still may not have any ideas about how to fix the problems, but at least you know what they are. This second method of getting a critique is better than the first, but I still think it pales in comparison to the third.

Join a group, on-line or in-person, be it a creative writing class or a critique group. This is by far the best way to get a meaningful, helpful critique. The people who join writing groups are usually quite serious about their craft. They will not only be able to tell you what is wrong with your creation, but how to fix it as well. This is exactly the type of help you will need, but what type of group should you join?

According to James Frey, author of *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*, there tend to be three types of writ-

ers' groups predominately: puff, literary and destructive. I agree with him as I have been a member of two types, puff and destructive.

Puff groups are the most fun to belong to because no matter what you write, they will never say anything bad about your work. Usually the comments run along the lines of, "I love your characters more than any real person I have ever met," or "by having your main character so suspicious of everything you set up some wonderful foreshadowing." I usually end up wondering if an old-fashioned swoon will follow the comment. A true writer will learn nothing from this type of blatant flattery, no matter how much we appreciate hearing it. All a group like this will convince you of is that your seriously, possibly even fatally, flawed first draft is a finished masterpiece that will outsell Shakespeare.

Literary groups are even easier to spot than puff groups. They will compare everything you write to a literary work such as *The Three Musketeers* or *The Return of the Native*, for better or worse. You will learn more about existentialism, allusions (Freudian for sure) and experimental prose (hopefully at least one member will know what the experiment is about) that you will ever need or want to know. This type of group won't help you either. Knowing you write like Alexander Dumas or Thomas Hardy won't do you any good, especially when two authors already write like Dumas and Hardy. Why imitate them? You need to write like you.

So, how do you find out how you write? Easy, join a destructive group. Now groups like these aren't as bad as they sound. They do not destroy fellow writers out of fear of competition or because each member truly believes no one can write as well as s/he does. I will warn you, however, that upon first visit to a destructive group you may feel you have fallen into some type of writing Hell where the only goal seems to be to destroy the writer's ego. You may even hear questions such as "who's on the chopping block next meeting" instead of "who is submitted works for next time?" Or you may hear comments such as, "I thought these guys were psychotic serial murderers. Why are they acting like babysitters? Get them into character. Make them act bad and ugly. They're supposed to offend me, not make me want to hire them to watch my kids next Tuesday." However, keep in mind that members of these groups limit their criticisms to the work at hand. Members should never go after the author as a person. (Those that do are quickly corrected by the others.)

So even though the group is having immense fun turning your golden prose into french fries, remember it's good. It's hard to take, yes, and you'll get mad. Maybe you'll even cry, or bang your head against the wall, or curse each member's name in turn but eventually you will calm down and try to find what these others see, or don't see, in your work that you are missing. I think James Frey said it best when he wrote, "It's hard to take, but you don't make steel in a hot tub; you make it in a blast furnace."

Now that you have the definitions of the three main types of groups out there, how do you find one? Check out local bookstores and libraries; get on the Internet too. Most groups have a website these days. If you aren't sure if the group you're interested in is right for you, talk to some of the members. If it is a closed or member's-only group, ask if you can attend a few meetings before making a commitment. Most will say yes. If the group spokesperson says "no" to this request, move on and find another group. After all, how can they ask you to make a commitment to a group when you don't have any idea what you are committing to?

Now we come to the fourth method of determining the quality of your writing. This is by far the most expensive method, both financially and egotistically, which is why it has been left for last. Hire a professional editor, if you can afford it. This method is going to give you the best advice about your writing, for better and worse. An editor makes a living helping authors turn their works into something of publishable quality. Not only will an editor find plot holes, stiff dialogue and pacing problems, s/he will also find d noun-verb agreement errors, dangling modifiers and other structural mistakes. Nevertheless, a professional edit is not cheap. Costs can range

from a flat fee of \$100 for the first set number of pages, the first 300 for example, with a per page fee after that, to a per page only fee ranging from \$1 to \$5 dependent on the level of edit requested. For a 400-page novel, this could get expensive. Be forewarned, however, that an editor is not going to spare your feelings. If there is a problem, it will be marked and suggestions may or may not be made without thought of how the critique will be received. Editors assume all authors can separate themselves from their work and not take a critique personally. (This is something you should be able to do despite which method you choose to have your work evaluated.) As a result, it can be expensive concerning your ego as well. But try to remember, the editor or critic is your friend. S/he is doing a service you requested and is trying to help make improvements.

Something to keep in mind, though, no matter which method you choose, is that your work is just that – yours. Don't feel obligated to make changes and don't let anyone try to talk you into rewriting it a different way. Be sure when you rewrite your story or novel, that it is you rewriting your work, not someone else's. Always ask yourself, "if I change this, will it change the premise of my story?" If the answer is no, it's up to you whether or not to make the change. If the answer is yes, don't change it. At least not right away. Think about any suggestions first, whether you like the ideas initially or not. If after thinking about the suggestion and you like the idea, then go ahead and rewrite.

If you join a group, get a consensus before you consider a change. Don't let one or two of the more vocal members influence you to make changes where you don't need them. However, if most of the members, or most of your critics, agree with a certain point, you probably have a problem. In short, no matter which of the above methods you choose, never alter a word of your writing if you don't think it will make your work stronger in the end.



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