

Sensitivity Readers: What They Are and How to Work With One

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April 7, 2021

The digital world allows for easy access to just about anyone, and authors of today can benefit greatly from this by finding beta readers, or the first batch of readers who can give a lot of helpful feedback before the manuscript is officially published, from around the globe.

In addition to beta readers who make suggestions to improve your writing, enrolling sensitivity readers can help you check for other issues related to representation.

What Sensitivity Readers Do

Sensitivity readers are beta readers who look through unpublished manuscripts with the clear intention of pinpointing inaccuracies in terms of culture and representation, stereotyping or bias, and politically incorrect language.

Although the publishing world has already made use of these kinds of readers in the past, it's only in recent times that their need has become more pronounced. A lot of it is due to the continued encouragement from groups like We Need Diverse Books, plus a greater consciousness of the need to include more diverse characters in literature.

For example, in 2016, a young adult novel entitled *The Continent* faced criticism before it was published for the way it portrayed people of color. Sensitivity readers called for numerous changes, which pushed back the book's original release date.

Here we may be battling with the tension over just how helpful they can be—or how they can also prove to be a challenge to work with.

What Is Sensitive Reading?

The question is, are you willing to risk postponing publication just because a group of sensitivity readers sound off a warning bell for some parts of your book?

First, you need to understand why diversity matters. The publishing industry is rife with white and predominantly middle-class characters; as issues of equity and inclusion have become more important to a greater number of people, we've seen greater diversity in publishing.

But the truth is that many of these books featuring non-white characters are written by white authors, so despite the authors' desire to be as unbiased as possible, their own upbringings and backgrounds will still have some effect on the way they write.

This is one of the most important ways that sensitivity readers can help. For example, they can:

1. Make sure the book gives better representation

As more people expect diversity in literature, authors need to make sure that they represent characters accurately and don't fall into stereotyping.

Sensitivity readers can point out unintentionally offensive or insensitive portrayals of religion, sexuality, race, or physical disabilities of characters in the book.

2. Help improve the overall quality of the book

Sensitivity readers help authors improve the multidimensional quality of characters because they can easily spot when a character from a non-white background seems like a cookie-cutter stereotype.

3. Help prevent potential social media attacks for mistakes made

This is perhaps one of the greatest upsides to having a group of sensitivity readers read your book prior to publication: would you rather a few people give you direct feedback, or have a whole barrage of angry comments on social media? Clearly, having someone find sore spots that you can still change is a huge plus.

The Challenge of Sensitivity Readers

One of the main things you need to look out for when using sensitivity readers is that you don't get sucked into censorship. Although you want to be sensitive to cultures, races, religions, or other social demographics that are unlike your own, the last thing you want is to tiptoe around complex topics.

While there's wisdom in the advice to "write what you know," it doesn't mean you can't explore topics that you've not personally experienced.

How to Work with a Sensitivity Reader

Generally, the process of working with a sensitivity reader includes the following:

1. Find a sensitivity reader.

First, understand that you shouldn't just pull some random stranger off the street. You need to find readers who at least have some understanding of publishing. They may not necessarily be writers, but they should have some insight into the writing process and current debates in publishing.

One of the best places to start is checking online databases, such as [Writing Diversely](#). Or, you may also check out different writing communities on social media groups, and ask for recommendations or feedback from other writers with experience using beta or

sensitivity readers.

2. Sign the contract.

Remember that the collaboration needs to be clear for both parties. The contract should include details such as fees and the turnaround time you expect from the reader.

Even if the sensitivity reader is a friend, remember that your memory isn't foolproof. Put everything down on paper and make sure you both understand the expectations.

3. Let them read your book.

Then, once you have the contract done, give your reader time to get through your manuscript.

The turnaround time is usually 2–5 weeks, depending on the length of the book. Remember, it won't be a speed reading task, but rather a process that involves evaluating characters, dialogue, and the overall tone of the book in a careful and thoughtful manner.

4. Receive feedback.

Most readers give their feedback by writing comments in the margins of your manuscript, along with a detailed letter. This usually comes with a follow-up consultation, either over the phone or face-to-face.

This feedback should generally pinpoint issues that you as an author may not even have thought of—in other words, potential blind spots.

For example, a sensitivity reader read a children's book featuring a little black girl who enjoyed going to national parks. The sensitivity reader pointed out how, historically, black people were prohibited from visiting national parks, so it wasn't something that black people were used to doing as a community.

She encouraged the author to explore possible reasons how and why the little girl ended up going to national parks, and how it affected her parents and grandparents.

5. Revise your manuscript as needed.

From the feedback, remember that it's still up to you as the author to decide which changes to make and which to reject. You're not obligated to do everything your sensitivity reader suggests, but do keep as open a mind as possible and seriously consider their advice.

Deciding If You Need a Sensitivity Reader

Now that you've learned the advantages and disadvantages that come with a sensitivity reader, we hope that you have a clearer picture about whether or not you need one.

Perhaps one of the things you need to take into account is whether you're writing about a culture different from your own and how authentic you want to be, without falling into the traps of censorship.

If you are still uncertain, feel free to reach out to other authors, particularly those who have written on cultures or races different from their own, and hear their experiences working with a sensitivity reader.