

A Checklist for Readers

Questions to Ask Helpful Readers

1) Is there anything you didn't understand?

- ◆ Was anything confusing or hard to follow?
- ◆ Was it ever hard to figure out what was going on?
- ◆ Did anything not make sense to you?
- ◆ Were the events in the story believable?
- ◆ Were you caught up in the story? Or were there things that interrupted the flow and reminded you that you were reading a made-up story?
- ◆ Did you ever get characters confused, or forget who a character was?

2) Were you ever bored?

- ◆ Were there points where your interest flagged?
- ◆ Were there parts that felt extraneous or unnecessary?

3) Did you want to know more?

- ◆ Were there characters you wanted to know more about?
- ◆ Were you left wondering 'what happened then?' at any point?
- ◆ Was there anything else – setting, theme, messages – that you wish had been explored more?

4) Did the characters seem real?

- ◆ Were the characters believable? (Were they ever unbelievable?)
- ◆ Did you care about the characters? (Did you ever not care?)
- ◆ Which characters did you like? Which characters did you hate? Which characters left you indifferent?

5) Did anything seem like a cliché?

- ◆ Did you ever roll your eyes at a plot twist?
- ◆ Did any of the descriptions or metaphors feel tired and unoriginal?

With inspiration from Orson Scott Card's concept of the "Wise Reader," from pp.121-124 of his book *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Writer's Digest Books, 1990).

A Checklist for Writers

Questions for Fiction Writers Who Want to Improve

What is the main conflict in your story?

What is at stake? What is the source of tension in your story? What drives it forward?
How can you make this conflict central to your story? How can you make it dramatic?

Are your characters suffering enough?

What are your characters made of? Suffering will reveal it.
How can you make readers care about your characters? Make them suffer.

What are your characters' weaknesses?

Do they have flaws? Are they human or simply disguised wish fulfillment?

How has your main character(s) developed?

How have the events of your story changed and transformed them?

Are you starting and ending at the right place?

Do you "start as close to the end as possible," like author Kurt Vonnegut advises?
Do you immediately introduce the main question or conflict of the story?
Do you end as soon as your story's main concern or conflict has been resolved?

Is your dialogue effective?

Is it punctuated correctly? Are you overwriting synonyms for 'said'?
Does your dialogue ring true when spoken out loud?
Do different characters speak differently? Do you let characters speak for themselves?

Where have you forgotten to 'show and not tell'?

What are you describing that you could show through characters' speech or actions?
Where are you being generic or abstract when you could be specific and personal?
Is your narration invisible? Or do you keep reminding readers this is a made up story?

So what?

Why is any word, sentence, paragraph, chapter, plot point, or character in your story?

Have you used minimum means for maximum effect?

What jargon can you dispense with? What big words can you replace with little ones?
Where can you shorten your sentences, paragraphs, and chapters?

Is your language fresh?

Are there clichés in your text? What can you rephrase to be more original or poetic?

Who are your writing heroes?

How does their text compare with yours? What are they doing that is worth imitating?

Who are you writing for?

What is your intended audience? When you write, who do you imagine reading your book?