

SAMPLE MANUSCRIPT CRITIQUE

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to read your manuscript.

The purpose of this manuscript critique is to provide you with constructive feedback that will help improve the overall readability of your story, taking into account those tools that make a novel great. It may be overwhelming to read this information, but the good news is that, with some work, these issues can be rectified.

During the review process, I noticed a few things that I must point out that will help shape this book, as well as improve your writing skills. Below is a checklist that provides detailed information on your novel.

Opening

	Yes	Needs Work
1. Does the first page grab the reader's attention?	X	
2. Does the first chapter engage the reader and set up the basis for the rest of the story?	X	
3. Does the first chapter conclude in a way that draws the reader onward?	X	
Overall: Is the opening material sufficient to interest the reader?	X	

Comments: I felt it was a great opening. I got a good sense of who Thomas and Alexia are. A few things to consider:

-  Be careful with switching between 'Thomas' and 'McNeal'. It was getting confusing. I suggest using 'McNeal' in dialogue when his workers are addressing him, but use 'Thomas' in the narrative.
-  You need better taglines. When multiple characters are speaking, you need taglines to identify who is talking.

"The Shawnee Trail to Sedalia by railway good. Cattle sell good." His native delivery was deeply rooted as he spoke to Thomas.

"We'll do a roundup. Gather all we can within two weeks then do a head count once we get them penned. There is a large shipment of cattle and horses due out in three weeks. Do we need the extra hands?"

"Extra hands, not good. We need experienced cowhands to separate sick from healthy before penned." Skybird knew young hands were enthusiastic but they wouldn't be observant.

"Shount." Scott agreed with Skybird as he scanned the movement of the herds.

“De herd, is grande fa’ two weeks. Maybe, I don’t know, *necessitous mas trabadores*.” Carranza mumbled.

“You say we do. We start early Lakeside then South Wood. Cattle graze heavy.” **Who is speaking here?**

The group eased along the sequel of cress cross fence. Scott and Mc Neal lead. McNeal thoughts on stacks of paper work, unfinished payroll, and the time restraints to move his livestock.

“Scott, I don’t want to negotiate on livestock or crops prices this year. You and McCullough go” The cattle barons’ were to gather in Tyler, Texas. The men drink assuasive; some cheated on their wives and gambled away thousands. Thomas wanted none of it this year.

“Did cha come down with some ‘em?” Scott stared at the best negotiator he had ever known. They had accompanied the boss but never participated in negotiations.

 Need to explain what MJM is.

McNeal counted himself fortunate after the Civil War. A northerner who owned vast amounts of southern land. It wasn’t inherited but *given* as a wedding gift. However, the war was over, these run away’s, outlaws, and drifters that infiltrated the **MJM** were irreplaceable. He had to rely on his experience men and take them from their normal jobs, but the cattle sale brought substantial amount of income, the sale provided the ranch with enough money to sustain it with monies left for crops.

Basic Premise & Tone

	Yes	Needs Work
1. Is the basic premise or theme interesting?	X	
2. Is it believable?	X	
3. Is it unique?	X	
4. Does the author set a tone early that is appropriate for the genre and consistent throughout?		X
5. Are general facts and information accurate and consistent throughout the manuscript?	X	
6. Does the author use language, including word choice and sentence structure, in a way that is appropriate for the genre and will contribute to the reader’s enjoyment of the work?		X
Overall: Is the basic premise of the novel appealing and well executed?		X

Comments:

Tone, in written composition, is an attitude of a writer toward a subject or an audience. Tone is generally conveyed through the choice of words or the viewpoint of a writer on a particular subject. Every written piece comprises a central theme or subject matter. The manner in which a writer approaches this theme and subject is the tone. The tone can be formal, informal, serious, comic, sarcastic, sad, and cheerful or it may be any other existing attitudes.

Because you have a lot of incomplete and wordy sentences and confusing/unclear prose, that affects the tone of your manuscript. For example, the following paragraph:

SATURDAY MORNING, HE WAS TIRED, MCNEAL ENTERED THE OAKWOOD HOTEL. A full week of diligent studies, exams, presentations, papers and sequentially a demanding woman wanted to know why he wouldn’t perform when she needed it. His excuse was to tell her that his mind wasn’t on fornication these days, but that would be a lie. She just wasn’t the right girl.

Could be written:

IT WAS SATURDAY MORNING. MCNEAL WAS TIRED AS HE ENTERED THE OAKWOOD HOTEL. He had a full week of diligent studies, exams, presentations, and papers. Add to that a demanding woman who wanted to know why he wouldn’t perform when she needed it and he was tapped out. His excuse was to tell her that his mind wasn’t on fornication these days, but that would be a lie. She just wasn’t the right girl.

Don’t try to jumble too much in one sentence. Shorter, clearer sentences are best for readers. Another example of a jumbled sentence:

So as they stepped on to cobblestone streets, the air was thick with the scent of multi-cultured spices blended with languages and craftsmanship of architectural designs was the presentation of New Orleans upon their arrival Tuesday morning.

I'm not sure how to fix this as the meaning is lost in the wordiness of the sentence. You can possibly say:

They arrived in New Orleans on Tuesday morning. As they stepped on the cobblestone streets, the air was thick with a scent of multi-cultured spices. The various languages and craftsmanship of architectural designs added to the presentation of New Orleans for the crew.

Be sure to read your paragraphs out loud. That will help you determine which ones are overly wordy and need to be rewritten for clarity.

You also had a lot of scenes that were incomplete. In order to draw your readers in, you have to give them scenes they can easily see or that they can relate to. Scenes must have a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning should be vivid and memorable, and help immediately draw your reader into the scene. Middles are the vast territory where the stakes must be raised, characters get caught in conflict, and consequences follow that keeps your plot interesting. Scene endings set the state for the scenes that follow and leave a feeling or taste with the reader that should be unforgettable. When all three are handled well, the result is an incredibly vivid reading experience.

Point of View (POV)

	Yes	Needs Work
1. Is the point of view consistent within each scene?		X
2. Are shifts in point of view, if any, necessary and simple to follow?		X
3. Is the point of view carefully selected for narrative effect (e.g., to provide insight into important characters or heighten suspense by limiting the reader’s access to information)?	X	
Overall: Is the point of view appropriate for the genre, and does it adequately convey all elements of the story?	X	

Comments:

The third-person/past tense POV is perfect for this book. You’re able to capture the thoughts of multiple characters easily. However, you often switched to present tense. In the two examples below, ‘say’ should be ‘said’ as ‘said’ is past tense. This issue can be fixed during the editing process, but should really be addressed when writing.

“Sure, it’s peaceful out here Thomas and those new rose bushes will soon surround the house to make the place look wonderful.” Stella **says** dreamily while unconsciously rubbed a hand down her swollen tummy.

AND

“Stan I’ve reconsidered the move. I did not go to the bank today.’ He **says** strumming his finger on the table. “I’m excited that the opportunity to become an attorney is in my grasp.” He **clinched** his fist. “I’ll have to be in Dallas Monday on an invitation to Dedman School of Law.” It became very still in the room as both men considered their next words.

In this example, you use both present tense (yellow highlight) and past tense (blue highlight). Be sure to keep it consistent.

When writing in third-person, you are able to write the story from multiple characters viewpoints (omniscient); however, you must not jump from one characters POV to another in the same paragraph. If you’re writing from Thomas’ viewpoint, you can’t jump into Alexia viewpoint in the same paragraph. That’s called ‘head-hopping’. Be mindful of that as you write. Complete one characters’ thoughts before jumping into another characters thoughts.

Structure, Plot, and Pace

	Yes	Needs Work
1. Is the novel’s focus revealed early in the manuscript?	X	
2. Is there a planned series of carefully selected, interrelated incidents?		X
3. Does each incident or action propel the reader forward or provide needed background information?		X
4. Are there situations that heighten the conflict, and do they occur at appropriate points in the story’s arc?	X	
5. Is necessary exposition or background information provided succinctly and without slowing the pace?	X	
6. Are the interrelated incidents driven by a recognizable struggle among opposing characters, forces, or events?	X	
7. Is there a clear highest point of the action?		X
8. Is the climax appropriate for the genre?	X	
9. Do incidents foreshadow the conclusion without revealing it?	X	
10. Does the story have a satisfactory ending appropriate to the genre?	X	
Overall: Do the plot and structure sufficiently hold the reader’s interest throughout the manuscript?		X

Comments:

You do a great job of building up the story (plot); however, you have a lot of odd transitions from one scene to the next which affects the structure and pace of the book. In the example below Thomas is being interviewed and then it immediately jumps to him getting an acceptance letter but the scene feels incomplete.

Thomas’s second interview was with Dean Snowden but several of the Administrative Board Members joined them at the table and listened.

“Mr. McNeal what constituted a span of twelve years lack of interest in the pursuit of law?

Thomas answers were honest about his life in general.

“Would you be persistent? We- The Board must insist there be no obstacles to hinder your future endeavor. We have selected a number of students for the next semester. Are you willing to give us your all Mr. McNeal?”

---ODD TRANSITION---

Excited about his acceptance he sent a post to his father and ran into a friend of Rebecca’s while there.

Another example of an odd transition:

McCullough, Jones and Scott sat at the kitchen table wondered when they'd ever seen a storm with hail that size. Scott got up to make more coffee and it had gotten so quiet he was announcing the storm must be over when Sims flung open the door and hollered." To the root cellar everybody. "Hurry! Yawl Hurry!"

---ODD TRANSITION---

Amongst the onion, potatoes and quilts the children slept soundly. The men were out early and while they were gone Alexia unwrapped from the heavy blankets.\

This goes back to making sure you have complete scenes. That will help the structure and pace of the story.

Setting

	Yes	Needs Work
1. Is the setting important to the plot?	X	
2. Do setting descriptions enhance the novel's tone?	X	
3. Is the setting described vividly without slowing the pace of the work?	X	
Overall: Does the novel provide an appropriate sense of place?	X	

Comments:

My only comment is that the year isn't mentioned until chapter 16. I could tell it was set back in the day because of the setting but it would be good to state that earlier on. I thought it was more like the 1700 until you stated it was 1883!

Characterization

	Yes	Needs Work
1. Is there a clear main character or group of characters?	X	
2. Is each character introduced effectively and for a specific purpose?	X	
3. Does the author provide a clear visual image of the characters?	X	
4. Does the author provide descriptions of the characters' mannerisms and personality traits?	X	
5. Does the behavior of all characters seem realistic?	X	
6. Is there a realistic dynamic among the characters?	X	
7. Are the characters well motivated?	X	
8. Are the characters presented with plausible challenges and life situations that are appropriate to the genre?	X	
9. Are the characters flawed to provide dimension?	X	
10. Will the reader feel an emotional connection to any of the characters?	X	
Overall: Are the characters believable and introduced for a clear purpose?	X	

Comments:

You did a great job on the characters! I got a good sense of the father/son relationship between McNeal and McCollough. And the relationship Alexia has with her siblings was well defined. All characters were defined and developed appropriately.

Dialogue

	Yes	Needs Work
1. Is the dialogue conversational and easy to read?		X
2. Does the dialogue reflect the speaker’s background and identifying traits, contributing to character development?	X	
3. Is each character’s dialogue unique and distinguishable from the dialogue of other characters?	X	
4. Is there a good balance of dialogue and action, and is dialogue used effectively to manipulate pace?		X
5. Does the author successfully avoid using dialogue to provide background information that would be better conveyed through narrative?	X	
6. Are dialects used sparingly and effectively?	X	
7. Is dialogue formatted correctly and consistently?		X
Overall: Does the dialogue sound authentic, and is it an effective element of the novel?	X	

Comments:

You did a great job of having the characters speak in the dialect of the time. However, it gets hard to read when there aren’t appropriate tag lines with the dialogue. In the example below, I have no idea who is speaking because there are no taglines to identify the speakers.

Finished Watson, McCullough and McNeal rode back to Oakwood.

“McNeal what’s the status on Miss Julia and her fiancé.”

“Their marriage has been put on hold until her father’s return from California”.

“Well now, I’d like to get better acquainted”

Also, using the same example, the dialog isn’t formatted correctly.

“Their marriage has been put on hold until her father’s return from California”.

Should be:

“Their marriage has been put on hold until her father’s return from California.”

Other examples

Incorrect	Correct
“Yes sir” he quickly gave them direction. They changed quickly then left to find Alexia.	“Yes sir.” He quickly gave them direction. They changed quickly then left to find Alexia.

“I wasn’t sneaking. You peeping Tom.” McCullough said accusingly with a mocked snicker.	“I wasn’t sneaking. You peeping Tom,” McCullough said accusingly with a mocked snicker.
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Again, these issues can be fixed during the editing process, but should really be addressed when writing.

Additional Comments

- ✎ Typically, novels do not have a Table of Contents. If you added that for your benefit, that’s fine, but it does not need to go into the final print of the book.
- ✎ Suggest using regular numbers instead of Roman Numerals for the Chapter numbers. More common and easier to follow!

Conclusion

I know this is a lot of information to take in. My goal is to provide information that will help you as a writer. Please contact me if you have any questions/comments concerning anything stated in this critique.

I feel your manuscript can benefit from my EBM Package Deal (Content Edit, Copyedit, and Proofread).

I’ll be more than happy to work with you once you have gotten your manuscript ready for editing.

Again, it was a pleasure reading your book! Please keep me posted on your decision on editing.

Michelle S. Chester

*Owner/Editorial Consultant
EBM Professional Services*