

Fox Vox

Story Insights • Trope Breakdowns • Webserial News

Critiques are Cultural

How asking questions instead
of making demands help
authors grow.

Interview with an Editor

Jyorin from MoonQuill answers
some questions!

Revising vs. Editing

Some questions to ask yourself
as you write.

Deus Ex Machina



Fox Vox

KI UPDATES

“The Author’s Journey” and Feedback Fridays will return in September.

Game Night - September 5th
Time TBD

Server Owner

DJ Firefox

Moderation Team

Catt

Jade

Nithalys

Zeta



FUNDING SUMMARY

\$100

Current Funding

\$183

Annual Costs

\$83

Remaining Need

Donate at



Buymeacoffee

CRITIQUES ARE CULTURAL

How asking questions instead of making demands help authors grow.

Page 3

INTERVIEW WITH AN EDITOR

Jyorin from MoonQuill answers some questions!

Page 8

REVISING VS. EDITING

An infographic with questions to ask yourself as you write

Page 13

TROPE OF THE MONTH

Deus Ex Machina (God from the machine)

Page 14

WRITING CONTESTS

A selection of contests from the greater fiction-writing community.

Page 15

Contents of KI Learn are licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) unless otherwise specified.

You are free to share and adapt these materials under the following conditions:

- Attribution: You must give appropriate credit to Kitsune's Inkwell
- NonCommercial: You may not use the material for commercial purposes
- ShareAlike: If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license

Kitsune's Inkwell, including its logo, mascot Inkari, depictions of Inkari, Nine Tails of Good Tails logo and silhouette, and the Fox Vox e-zine, are licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#)

You are free to share these works under the following conditions:

- Attribution: You must give appropriate credit to Kitsune's Inkwell
- NonCommercial: You may not use the material for commercial purposes
- NoDerivatives: You may not remix, transform, or build upon the material



Critiques are Cultural

By DJ Firefox

No matter how often we tell writers not to take it personally, critiques always end up personal.

Maybe it's because of how folks are often taught about literature and writing in school. In the United States, the most common method of "critique" is via essays students write to prove their "comprehension" of the text. This usually takes the form of a thesis with supporting "evidence" and the emphasis on "themes". The author's intentions, personal contexts, and cultural background all disappear into the background as the essay-focused reader hunts for passages to support their thesis.

As a result, students tend to forget that these novels are *stories* and not just blocks of text to analyze. Analytical reading has its place, but once "the facts" start getting in the way of the story... all of the fun is lost.

Royalty-free photos used in this article by Cottonbro Studio

According to an article published by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, there is a marked decline in the number of people who read for fun, with percentages dropping the older a child gets.

While the exact reasons aren't specified, I would argue that some of it has to do with less "story time" and more "essay time".

But what about those students who *do* continue reading for pleasure? Will they carry these analytical habits into adulthood? These older readers are now beta readers and reviewers, and they bring their school-trained toolkit with them. They've spent years learning to dissect texts, to hunt for evidence, to interrogate themes. While these skills served a purpose in the classroom, when applied to a living writer's work it transforms feedback into something closer to literary analysis than a dialogue between author and reader. The writer becomes a text to be interpreted rather than a person to be understood.

For underrepresented authors especially, this sort of critique can quickly create a tense, stressful environment.

Our preconceptions from our respective cultures influence how we read, and how we relay our opinions to writers can land in ways that we did not intend.

Let's pretend that I'm a Fantasy fiction writer. I would probably rely on "tropes" or archetypes of characters. A Fantasy Elf that doesn't live in a forest or Dwarf that doesn't mine the earth and have an inexplicably Scottish accent might be considered a "badly written" character. But why? Within the bounds of typical fantasy fiction, we have come to expect certain things about elves, but these expectations predominately come from the medieval Germanic mythology perspective.

But what about other cultures? Arabian *Djinn* have parallels to Germanic elves. Both are liminal beings caught between the mortal and divine worlds, capable of shape-shifting and possessing knowledge beyond human reach. What about the Cambodian *Mrenh kongveal*, trickster water spirits tied to specific locations much like how elves are bound to their realms? Or Filipino *Engkanto* who possess magical powers and long lifespans like elves? Even Maori *Patupaiarehe* are described as pale-skinned and nocturnal and can superficially resemble the ethereal elves of European imagination.

It is a common saying in the Writing industry that you should "know the rules before you can break them," but these "rules" are nearly always cultural.

It is a common saying in the Writing industry that you should "know the rules before you can break them," but these "rules" are nearly always cultural.

What we know as the unspoken "rules" about how elves should be depicted in Fantasy fiction stem almost entirely off of Western popular culture. These "rules" then become the template that all magical beings are measured against in Fantasy fictions written in English. When a writer introduces a spirit or supernatural creature, Western readers and critics unconsciously evaluate it against "elf-logic" with its particular conventions, behavioral expectations, and narrative functions. An Engkanto thus isn't read as a being with its own cultural logic, but as "an elf-like creature that doesn't quite work like an elf should." The standards of one cultural tradition have become invisible rules for an entire global genre.





With the internet and globalization, more and more non-native English speakers have dipped their toes into English fiction writing. These writers with different cultural values and backgrounds end up having to learn more than just the terms and formats of Western literary craft, but also its unspoken "rules" of how fiction "should be". Likewise, cultural or linguistic concepts that a native English reader might be completely unfamiliar with suddenly become things that require a bunch of explanation.

A common bit of feedback that a non-native English author might receive would be to spend more time explaining these foreign concepts... even if they wouldn't require any explanation in the author's mother tongue. Or perhaps their characters' dialogue is "too rigid" or "too diminutive" or "too repetitive" or the idiom they used "didn't make sense" in the English context. These authors find that their native English speaking readers have completely lost sight of the story as they're too caught up puzzling out the author's culture.

While the current popularity of Wuxia / Xianxia fiction has changed the landscape in terms of popular foreign culture being more accessible, these foreign fictional tropes are sometimes the *ONLY* lens that an English reader has in terms of Chinese culture (aside from the local take-out place)... which can result in a biased "understanding" of the writer's intent.

This trend extends beyond world culture regions as well. Writers of color are subject to tropes that are implicitly "white", LGBT writers subjected to "straight", and female writers subjected to the patriarchal. All of these marginalized groups suffer from having their cultures being compared to hidden values or reduced to tropes. Does the colored main character speak in a certain way? Must be in a gang. Is the LGBT character bisexual? They must be promiscuous. Is the female main character in a position of power? They're probably "bitchy". Oh, they're not? Well, better label the story as "unconventional" because it did not uphold "the rules".

Let's pretend there is a story written by a Korean-American author set in Korea. Say that the writer has added in some details about watching a man taking home a jar of fresh kimchi home on the subway. They also include details about the surrounding office workers still dressed in suits despite being slick with sweat and how they notice that the man with the fish has buttoned his shirt wrong as there's a button missing from it. The details noted by the protagonist all revolve around the poor state of attire of the gentleman in question. The fact that he is transporting pickled cabbage is inconsequential and largely irrelevant.

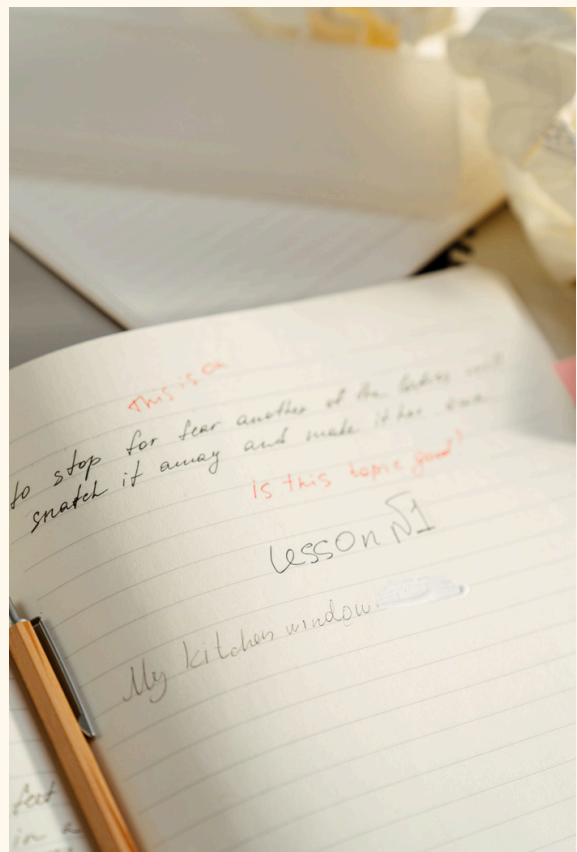
If, however, the same passage was written by a non-Korean, it would not be surprising to have the focus being on the kimchi. Perhaps they would describe how its smell stood out against the packed bodies exhausted after a long day at work. Maybe they might mention a few passengers also eating the food in question (despite a packed subway car being a very poor place to eat dinner). For this hypothetical author, their focus seems reasonable because of their perspectives when it comes to Korean culture. They chose to focus on the "strangeness" of being in Korea and the "strangeness" of seeing a jar of kimchi on a subway instead of how disheveled the man is. The scene is the same, but the attention to detail is completely different.

And if we were to put the two stories side-by-side and asked for native English speakers to review them? You might expect that they would rate the story by the non-Korean higher as it better fits their expectations and world-view.

In fact, it wouldn't be surprising at all to hear critiques for the Korean-American author claiming that they "focused on the wrong details"... even though the details they focused on were the ones that were most important for the story they were trying to tell.

Details, for instance, like how the man with the kimchi ends up sneering at the protagonist's Levi's branded shirt. A shirt that marks them as a "gyopo" (a Korean emigrant). A detail that makes the story less about a strange chance encounter on a subway... and more about the protagonist feeling alienated despite being surrounded by people who look like her.

...and if you were surprised by the protagonist's gender reveal, you hopefully now better understand how your unspoken expectations influence how you read.



Which brings us to the point. Why should we spend so much time talking about a plot point or logistical matter that could easily be cleared up by simply asking the writer what was intended? Rather than make demands of an author (I want to see more of this; I want this or that to happen; I want you to talk about different details), ask more questions. When the writer gets to talk about what they're trying to do, readers discover something more about what the author is actually trying to accomplish. When the writer gets to articulate that, readers may just discover they misread entirely. Not necessarily because the writing failed its goal, but because their own expectations got in the way.

Rather than make demands of an author, ask more questions.

The same goes for giving generic affirmations ("I loved this!"). Feedback like this tells a writer nothing about what actually worked. Instead, be specific about what resonated with you and why while acknowledging when your appreciation might stem from unfamiliarity. "I found this character interaction fascinating because it challenged my assumptions about how relationships work in this cultural context" is more honest and *actually helpful* for a writer than "I thought it was good." It credits the writer's intentions while being transparent about your own position as a reader.

If we look back to that hypothetical story about the man on the subway, it wouldn't be right to say that either author was objectively "better". The Korean-American author's choice to focus on the man's appearance isn't less sophisticated than the non-Korean author's focus on the kimchi. They were simply different as they were rooted in different priorities, cultures, and goals.

It is up to us as readers to allow writers from diverse backgrounds to develop their voices authentically rather than conforming to a single standard. When we practice transparency about our own assumptions and ask questions instead of making demands, we create space for writers to be fully themselves.

When we practice transparency about our own assumptions and ask questions instead of making demands, we create space for writers to be fully themselves.



Interview with an Editor at



MOONQUILL

Kitsune's Inkwell reached out to Editor (and "in charge of pretty much everything except finances") **Jyorin** from MoonQuill to ask a few questions about editing and publication. They were kind enough to respond and give us a few insights on the process!

Disclaimer: KI is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or otherwise sponsored by MoonQuill. The views expressed in this interview are solely those of Jyorin in their respective position at MoonQuill. The MoonQuill logo and Agent Galaxy are copyright of MoonQuill, used with permission.

What is a frequent issue that you see in manuscripts?

The most frequent errors we've seen are incorrect dialogue punctuation and heavy repetition (both in word choice and information). Repetition is especially an issue in webserials because writers often reuse lines from the end of the previous chapter at the start of the next as a mini refresher for readers that may not have read straight through.

What is a common mistake beginners make that most experienced writers have learned to avoid?

Not knowing your audience.

New authors want to write what they like to read, and that's fantastic, but if it's niche and you don't know your audience, it'll be hard for you to succeed. Even if you're writing something highly marketable, it can still flop if you're ignoring the story beats of the genre.

What is an instant “green flag” you notice in manuscripts?

Presentation!

MoonQuill doesn't require anything fancy for submissions, but it's always refreshing to see authors go above and beyond the basic requirements. Instant green flags for our team include minimal mistakes in the manuscript, a strong blurb and query letter, and visual aids. One particular submission we got years ago had art inserts, a cover, and custom music files with it. We don't expect that level of commitment from anyone, but it showed the authors were serious about their story and it got us excited to work with them. No other submission has topped that.

What is something that writers tend to obsess over that Editors may not worry so much about?

Each editor is different, so it's hard to say. If I had to pick, I'd say “confusing the reader” is mentioned a bit. Authors think they absolutely must put dialogue tags after each line of speech, and you don't. If there are only two people talking, proper punctuation and paragraphs will be enough unless there is action or narration splitting the conversation and causing confusion. If you have three or more people, you should cycle through two speaking at a time and add a tag when a new one is switched in.

How much does grammar perfection matter when submitting a manuscript for review?

On a scale of 1 to 10, I would put it at a 7. Perfection isn't necessary or realistic, but a strong understanding of grammar and spelling rules is a must. Nearly all writing programs have a decent checker for this (or even add-ons), so there's little reason for manuscripts to be submitted with heavy errors or common mistakes, especially when they're underlined in blue and red squiggles once you open the doc.

What is the biggest thing that writers misunderstand about the editing process?

Most authors don't understand the different levels of editing, what each level is for, and when to have it done. That often causes more confusion than anything. Not everyone needs developmental editing, and you should ask your chosen editor what type of editing they think you need. An honest editor will not do a copy/line edit in something that needs to be dev edited without telling you your options. If you choose to forego that process as a self-pub, that's your choice.

Another common misconception is that editing is just reading, and that beta readers can replace editors. Editing involves so much more than just reading and changing words. You have to manage pacing, emotional beats, flow, remember character personalities and growth, and a million other things. Beta readers do something far less complicated that goes right under the surface, but editors are deep diving into each aspect. No matter who you're working with for your manuscript, ask questions!

For MoonQuill, our editing process is collaborative. Authors are given access to the editing doc from the start and are encouraged to give early feedback to ensure the editor is correctly understanding their vision. Editing should always be a conversation. Each side should ask questions and be flexible on changes. Some authors think editors just want to make the story their own, and (at least for our editors) that's not true. We're problem solvers! There is a reason behind each change and we're always happy to explain our decision if the reason isn't clear.

Authors are free to offer alternatives, but they should not be making major changes to the story after the first round of editing is done unless it's something they've discussed with the editor.

Developmental Editing

Big-picture work on plot, structure, character arcs, pacing, and overall story coherence.

Usually done after completing your first or second draft.

Line Editing

Sentence-by-sentence refinement of clarity, flow, word choice, and style consistency.

Done after big-picture work is complete and major structural issues are resolved.

Copy Editing

Correction of grammar, punctuation, spelling, consistency in formatting and style guide adherence.

Completed once the manuscript content is considered "done".

Proofreading

Final check for typos, formatting errors, and missed corrections before publication.

Done immediately before the manuscript goes to "print".

Of course, when working with a freelance editor as a self-pub, the editor may have their own process. Ask:

- How many passes do you do?
- What is your process?
- When will I be able to see edits and offer feedback?
- If I find errors after the final pass, will you correct them? / What is your quality guarantee?
- Do you use AI for any part of your process?
- When will you deliver the final edits and do you have a policy on if you're late on delivery?

Similarly, you should never pay the full amount to a freelance editor in advance. Normal practice is a deposit (usually 50%) with the rest due after completion and before delivery. Some editors may offer payment plans too.

If you've been signed by a publisher, they handle the costs unless you've signed with a hybrid. Always avoid vanity presses.

What does a manuscript need to be “ready” for submission?

I feel a manuscript is ready once it's fully written and has been self-edited at least twice in full. It should also be given to a few readers who aren't friends or family for early feedback, and of course following the submission guidelines for the publisher you're reaching out to is a must.

MoonQuill's Requirements for Submitting Manuscripts

Manuscripts:

Must be at least 100,000 words, written in English, and submitted as a part of a three-book commitment.

Query Letter:

A compelling pitch explaining why MoonQuill should choose your work. What sets it and you apart? What are your publishing goals?

Synopsis:

A clear, one-page summary of your story's arc and major plot points.

Since you primarily publish web serials... how much does an author's existing audience influence your decision to contract them, and would you consider publishing someone without that built-in fanbase?

We don't exclusively take webserials, but the majority of our catalog originated as a serial. Since we mostly get stories from Royal Road, we do consider follower and view count for genres like LitRPG and Progression Fantasy. For the less-popular genres on RR, those metrics have a lesser weight. Right now, we look for a balance of quality and potential versus flat follower counts, but many other publishers still believe high follower count is the only way to success.

What we've noticed is that specifically for Royal Road and even other serial sites, follower counts and views don't necessarily equal high sales. We had a book with nearly 9k followers that didn't do well on Amazon at all with a large marketing campaign. We've seen the same happen with recent releases from other publishers in the community too. Those stories worked well on RR, but didn't exactly hit the right notes or quality standards to be Amazon successful. Whereas some books with much lower followers (sub 1k) went on to be successful.

I think a lot of people forget that places like Royal Road are hard to break into for new authors. Not everyone understands the value of ads, shoutouts, etc. for the early success of their book, and so there's many hidden gems on RR that have great potential. That's something that we consider if there's a book we are interested in that doesn't meet our usual submission metrics.

I would like to thank Jyorin for taking the time to answer our questions. You can visit MoonQuill's website at the link below, or by any of the links to the right.



MOONQUILL

REVISING VS. EDITING

*Some questions to ask yourself as you write.
Check out our Best Practice course on [Kl Learn!](#)*

REVISING

Intentions

Will my readers understand why I am writing this?

Themes

Are my ideas coming across?

Structure

Do I have a good balance of scene and summary?

Plot

Are all of my characters' actions accounted for in the overall story?

Tone and Mood

Do my words match the atmosphere and evoke the right emotions?

Characters

Are their conflicts resolved and can the reader follow their development?

Setting

Do the locations impact the narrative?

Point of View

Can the readers follow the perspectives of the characters in charge of a scene?

EDITING

Word Choice

Is every word necessary and optimized for each scene?

Sentence Structure

Do they communicate what I want?

Transitions

Is the reader able to seamlessly move from one scene to the next?

Repetition

Are ideas presented intentionally without unneeded fluff?

Dialogue

Are conversations natural and in alignment with each character?

Continuity

Does any part of my story not contribute to the overall purpose of the story I'm trying to tell?

Clarity

Are my ideas confusing for the reader?

Show, Don't Tell

Is my writing a sensory experience or a lecture for the reader?



TROPE OF THE MONTH

Deus Ex Machina
(Latin for “god
from the machine”)



What is it?

A plot device where a contrived solution suddenly appears to resolve an otherwise unsolvable problem. Named after ancient Greek theater where actors playing gods were literally lowered onto the stage by machinery.

Examples in Media

The Eagles from The Lord of the Rings
Ark of the Covenant from Indiana Jones and the
Raiders of the Lost Ark
Batman's Survival from The Dark Knight Rises
Luke Skywalker from The Last Jedi

...basically every Greek myth

Did you write a plot device... or a Deus Ex Machina?

Does the solution logically follow from the established rules of your story's world?

Could an attentive reader reasonably anticipated this solution?

Does the solution require the protagonist(s) to sacrifice something or take a meaningful risk?

YES

NO

Plot Device	Deus Ex Machina
Plot Device	Deus Ex Machina
Plot Device	Deus Ex Machina

Writing Contests



**Indiana Review
Bloomington**

General fiction, poetry,
and non-fiction. All
genres are considered.

DEADLINE

Nov 30

[Apply](#)

**McNeile Writing
Competition**

Short story opening
inspired by the theme
“Absent Friends”. UK
Only

DEADLINE

September 5th

[Apply](#)



Folk horror short stories
with an “authentic Folk-
Gothic atmosphere”.

DEADLINE

October 1st

[Apply](#)

Tadpole Press

Uplifting short of 100
words or less.

DEADLINE

November 30

[Apply](#)

Lascaux Review

Previously published
works allowed in non-
fiction, short fiction, and
poetry.

DEADLINE

December 31st

[Apply](#)



Nine award categories
including Thriller and
fictions set in Greece.

DEADLINE

December 31st

[Apply](#)



CAUTION



While Kitsune’s Inkwell has done its best to find contests that are legitimate, authors should perform their own due diligence and research before applying to any of the above contests.



Kitsune's Inkwell