

Sample Developmental Edit Letter and Feedback

Disclaimer: This sample has been anonymized to help protect the author's identity and pride. No one likes their problems aired in public, do they? Character, place names, and sample quotes are not what they are in the published story.

Background:

The story in this edit had already been published. The author received some not-so-favorable reviews and asked me to edit it with that feedback in mind. Much of the edit is focused on those issues, but I also commented on the other big picture items as I would in a regular developmental edit.

My goal is to present the feedback in an easy to follow, actionable way.

Hi Author:

You asked me to edit your story, keeping the negative issues the reviewers were pointing out in mind. The bottom line is I think most of them correctly identified issues with the story. I've done my best to offer detailed reasons why in the notes below and inline comments. I'm afraid I may have been too blunt sometimes, but I just wanted to be clear on the issues I see.

I honestly love the essence of your story. The concept is wonderful and I feel you have a lot of lore and history behind it all and would love to see some more of that on the page. The relationship between the protagonist and her companion is sweet and romantic without being overwhelming or making it all about romance. Jordan and Dina's brother-sister relationship feels authentic and real. You have moments of incredible description and insight as well, so I know you can bring forth more of the world these characters live in.

But the other issues interfere with the positive aspects. In the sections below, I cover them in detail and there are also inline comments that supplement and expand what is written in this letter.

NOTE: These comments are just my opinion. Take what works for you and toss the rest. It is your story and nothing I suggest should be taken as a recommendation for a literal replacement (though if you like the ideas, you may certainly use them). I'm just trying to get the little grey cells thinking a little bit out of the box about a story you know by heart.

Big Picture Items

These questions help us focus on evaluating the "big picture" of your story. It addresses:

- Characterization
- The hook
- Plot
- Setting
- Pacing

Characterization

Is the protagonist sufficiently described at the beginning?

The protagonist is presented as a dutiful daughter, performing her morning ritual with her mother. The description and word choice make it appear she is quite young. Initially, I thought she was between 8-12, 13 at the oldest. I reached this conclusion for several reasons. She's clearly a young child in the prologue, falling asleep while being read a story. In the first chapter, her behavior when her mother won't wake—deliberately making noise and chastising her—feels childish and not what one expects from a mature princess in her early twenties. Also, there is the discussion of not having grandparents and how Pertz fills that role because she doesn't have one "like the other kids in the kingdom" (5). Using the word "kids" here implies she also is a kid. It isn't until page 17 that we find out her actual age and it comes as a surprise.

There is no physical description of the protagonist in the beginning except that she is wearing a skirt. We're shown long coal colored hair on page 17. On page 40, chapter 5, she has golden eyes which might be from her fire power that is kicking in at that moment. That isn't clear, since it is the first mention of eye color. But what I think is the first real description of her skin and eye color comes in chapter 12: "The burgundy color of mourning was bold and proud against her pale skin but brought out her sky blue eyes more than she had ever seen before" (69). Just a note that her mother is described as having "pale brown face" in chapter 1, so I had assumed the protagonist also had brown skin, but "pale skin" alone makes me think she is white.

Her other physical characteristics (height, build, etc.) aren't described until Chapter 6: "Stepping behind one of the columns on her balcony—one of two that were big enough to hide her small frame" (45). Before this, the reader will fill in whatever their expectations for a princess' general appearance. That may fit, or jar, with this description.

Chapter two, when Jordan is getting her ready for the announcement, is a perfect time to describe her more. You can use Jordan's actions of dressing her to include an adjective here and there to paint the picture of the protagonist without feeling like a character description dump. Like when she pulls the top and skirt, or is lacing it, you can add if it is a small waist or frame or not. She's also in front of a mirror so she can look at herself and see her swollen eyes and cheeks from crying and also notice her eye color or skin color. Using a mirror to see the character is often considered cheesy or cliché, but in this case, there is a reason for her being there and also a reason for her to care how she looks, so it could work if you wanted to do that.

Is the protagonist sympathetic?

I was about three quarters of the way through the story when I announced to myself that I don't like the protagonist (before that I wasn't sure if I did or not). The negative feedback you shared hits on many of the reasons. The protagonist feels kind of useless for most of the book. She vacillates emotionally for over the first half of the story, and even after it continues to a lesser degree. Not that she doesn't have reason to be emotionally unsteady, it's just much of her reaction is repetitive, which makes it seem like she isn't moving forward or growing as the plot moves around her.

Another reason is that her memory issues make it seem like she is too naïve. Like she never went to school, or learned the history of her land, or even where things are in her castle. We find out that her memory was wiped by Pertz after seeing her father's death. But I am confused about the extent of her memory loss. It seems she's forgotten many basic things that I would expect her to know, like where her father came from, or the geography of her world. And it appears her mother lived for some

time after her father died, so wouldn't she also be concerned about that memory loss? As it is, the protagonist feels kind of like an empty shell, or a very small child, but not a sympathetic one.

Has the protagonist changed over the course of the story?

The protagonist definitely changes from an uncertain, lonely young girl into a woman who claims her power and responsibilities. The issue with this transformation is that it doesn't feel deserved. Because most of the book is spent with her going over and over what happened to her mother and whining about it (this is how it comes across after a few times because the reader already knows how she feels and what happened), the change in her character in the latter half feels like it is forced or happens by plot convenience rather than through experience and growth.

Another issue for her character growth is that she still doesn't have her own agency by the end of the book. She goes from being totally identified with her mother to being a devoted sister. She takes on her role as queen, but it doesn't feel that she really is the queen since she sees herself as a sister first. I think she can have both roles obviously, but consider if there is a way to show her either conflicted with both roles (other than asking her sister if it's ok for her to be queen) or to choose one that is more important (she's been so determined to be a good queen that a sister thrown at her at the end might confuse her, torment her, but would it really put her off her duty as queen and to her mother?) to show that she accepts both as responsibilities.

Another change is that she appears entirely to reverse her opinion on how her mother ran the kingdom. She knows next to nothing about magick even at the end of the book but decides her mother was wrong to keep the light magick locked up and announces she will unleash it (or already did?). This action, I'm sure, has consequences in later books, but it feels like an enormous decision to make with so little thought (maybe a conversation or two but no real learning or consideration that the reader sees).

Are motivations clear for important characters?

The protagonist's primary motivation is clear: her mother was murdered, and she wants to find and bring the murderer to justice. She also is motivated to replace her mother as queen and to preserve all the good she believes her mother did. Her memory issues often feel like they are interfering in these goals, but not in a way that provides an interesting complication, but rather causing confusion for both the protagonist and the reader. I point out some of these bits in the inline comments and in this summary.

Pertz's (you've also called him Perts, not sure which is the one you want) motivations are suspect from the beginning. He seems to want to help the protagonist get on with becoming queen, but his actions also make it clear he has no respect for her, or the sanctity of the royal family before her. But it is hard to tell if any of this is from the protagonist's inability to function (as she vacillates with her emotions of loss and lack of any memory) or from his own motivations as her mother's killer. I will say he is the only suspect that I ever believed was the guilty party, but there was enough doubt in the beginning that someone else might show up that it held my curiosity.

Jordan's motivations aren't clear to begin with. Neither are her brother's. Even though they are stated upfront (well Dina's are once they meet in Chapter 3), the reader isn't sure he is telling the truth since the protagonist is so suspicious. Here I think is another place that her lack of memory is a problem. Or maybe it isn't lack of memory here, but information her mother was so paranoid about that she

didn't share it with her daughter. Her daughter is the future of not only the kingdom but we later find out she is someone special with the ability to control/capture/whatever all the magick. Why in the world would the mother not be confiding in the protagonist, even if paranoid? Was she suspecting her own daughter? There was no hint of that being an issue from the protagonist's point of view. It is mentioned several times that she needs to be twenty-six before she can take on any responsibilities, which seems old. Consider if you want to add some world building to explain that limitation or requirement, because I would think standard matters of state would be part of the upbringing/education of the future queen. The age restriction, as it is now, feels like a bit of plot convenience.

Once it is revealed that Jordan is a trained assassin and was supposed to be the queen's bodyguard, the story takes a turn and Dina's and Jordan's motivations are believable, though it still feels like something is being withheld (and it is). But the base motivation that they want to secure an alliance with the protagonist is clear.

The protagonist's sister is a character that I'm not sure what to make of. I suppose her motivation is to get free and find her mother until she finds out her mother is dead. Though she isn't named, it is clear in her first appearance in chapter 7 that this is the protagonist's sister. The whole subplot around her just doesn't feel like it fits as is. I suspect maybe this has something to do with the memory loss and perspective we see from the protagonist. According to the protagonist, she never knew her sister, and she died from illness when young. Then she conveniently overhears a conversation that her sister may have been killed because of magick. But her sister is also said to be the same age as the protagonist. However, the sister later recalls seeing her mother being "fat" (implying she was pregnant). This makes me confused about the ages as the sister would be less than a year old and not likely to remember anything about her mother being pregnant with the protagonist. Also, it raises questions of why the queen would shackle her baby—what powers was she manifesting so early that she had to be put away? What did her father have to say about it? I know there are more books planned, so maybe some answers are in there, but the sister's life was hell and without knowing some reasoning behind it, it makes the king and queen feel like bad/cruel people. Later, we discover both daughters played together and for some reason one got locked up. Why would the sister say she only remembers her mother being pregnant if she had actually played with the protagonist? Did Pertz change her memory too? The details here just don't feel consistent. I encourage you to look at the parts I've commented on inline and search for other references to their age and memories. Making these consistent will help keep the reader in the story and not get pulled out trying to figure out the timeline or who remembers what and who is right.

Also, being locked up would have a tremendous psychological effect on a young girl. Much more than you show. It seems she's freed and then just is all better, acting like a perfectly normal twenty-something that is a little shy about talking. The epilogue hints she might not be perfectly stable, but the impact of what happens to her needs to play out more in the first book to make her feel like a real person. She could be a very sympathetic character once the details about her and the protagonist's past are cleared up. Since she is the protagonist of book 2, consistency and believability are even more important.

Are "other" characters necessary? And are they described enough/appropriately?

There are a lot of characters in Chapter 15, when Dina goes to his kingdom, that don't seem to really matter. It seems he could have sent his assistant as the man suggested (and we don't even know about him until chapter 14). I suspect that the purpose of this trip is to lay the groundwork for later novels that have events happen in Dina's kingdom. Consider if it is necessary to move the plot of this story forward, and if it is, what elements you need to keep to make it relevant. If you really want to let the reader know about his kingdom, you have many opportunities to bring it in if you give the protagonist back that portion of her memory. They can discuss his kingdom, or the parts of it you want revealed, or she could even go over the information herself because she suspects him in the beginning.

I'd also suggest going over book 2 since it is already written and seeing if you need this level of detail to foreshadow or introduce the kingdom from book one. I can see how that the entire scene could be moved to book 2, with minimal changes.

The Opening/Hook

Is the beginning intense/intriguing/interesting enough?

The mystery of why her mother isn't answering her door is a good hook. Having her go back and forth to get keys carrying a cup of tea isn't that interesting. Consider if cutting that bit would lose anything important and just have her open the door and it is unlocked as usual. This could help in the mystery too as now literally anyone could be the murderer since there was unfettered access to her (though this may conflict with the idea that her mother was paranoid someone was trying to kill her so would she really leave her door always unlocked? Maybe the alternative is that Protagonist brings the keys with her, knowing her mother recently started locking her room. Just ideas.)

Does the beginning sentence/paragraph reflect what is to come?

Your style of writing and how you set things up in the beginning are consistent throughout. Your writing is easy to read and there are no changes in voice or style that might give anyone problems.

Plot

Is there enough action, obstacles, conflict?

This question is answered better in other sections. But in summary, yes and no. There is little to no real action in the first half or more, then the back end is loaded with it. Most of the obstacles seem to be of the protagonist's own creation for the first half as she struggles with her emotional state. There is conflict, but I left comments on the places where it could use more, or at least conflicts that aren't interior to the protagonist.

Does each chapter move the plot forward?

Chapter 15 is from Dina's point of view and is the only one not in the protagonist's POV. I think its purpose is to reveal the boon he has, but later he says he can't do anything with it, so would he really be able to see the true nature of the people around him? Because later on it feels like he is just a vessel and doesn't have access to the power.

This chapter, since it is the only one in his POV, and only reveals he has the boon, I don't think pushes the story along because the really important part of the boon is when he tells the protagonist

about it. So we see him explain it to her, making this chapter not that useful. Just a few lines saying he's sent instructions to his most trusted allies at the castle would protect his kingdom while in the protagonist's kingdom.

But, how cool would it be to have his POV more often? I'd love to see how he is thinking and handling this princess he finds and why, even with the boon, he can't see Pertz's magic staff? I think you could add a lot more world building by adding his POV throughout, especially if his family's history (brothers and murdered father) come into play in the later novels.

If you go back and look through the comments and take a critical eye to the first half of the book, I think you could merge a lot of what happens into fewer chapters. I make some recommendations on how to fill out the story and build the world in other sections.

Are there mcguffins or any deus ex machina? Do they work or are they cliché or unsatisfying?

The two guards showing up to talk about her family's history randomly the one time we see the protagonist on her private balcony (and they conveniently remain anonymous) is a deus ex machina. Consider what your purpose is in dropping this information here (make her question her mother, her own ability to rule, that magick exists, etc.) and see if you can weave it into the narrative more naturally. Just a note that I love the moment between her and Dina here!

The character of Madam Barna is a deus ex machina. She conveniently shows up just in time to give all the background and information the protagonist needs, plus she's a mage! Someone who taught her mother but apparently ignored the protagonist (at least for training her in her magick). Her appearance is unsatisfying and feels forced and doesn't seem to fit the larger narrative of magic being gone (except for the rulers).

Are there plot holes, big or small?

Jordan never saw the rune on the protagonist before while dressing her. Why?

Why doesn't Pertz just kill the whole family outright? Why pretend to be a servant and friend for decades rather than take revenge and give his daughter the kingdom? Why wait for his granddaughter (who I assume is actually the protagonist's half sister, or did Pertz's daughter remarry after her father ditched her for the protagonist's mother)? While there is an attempt to explain this at the end, it doesn't feel like it works. There are more comments on this later.

The memory loss is an issue, probably one of the biggest issues that drags the story down and impacts how people feel about the protagonist. While we find out later that Pertz erased the memory of seeing him kill her father and, apparently, the first ten years of her life, where did the rest of it go? Did Pertz just do a crappy job? Why didn't her mom notice something had changed about her over all those years? As a parent, I'd be concerned if my daughter suddenly forgot about her childhood or parts of our house. Consider if the story would be better served if she only forgot that moment, or if her memory of just that moment had changed. The protagonist remembers finding her father dead (just not seeing the murderer) so wouldn't her mother do something for her like get therapy or something since she'd obviously suffered trauma as a young child (like she suddenly forgot her entire childhood)? And there is no conclusion or explanation on why Pertz would want the protagonist to forget her sister, or why he'd

want to keep her sister alive or why her mom would agree, etc. Some of these might come together in later novels, but some need to be wrapped up in book one to make the reader feel satisfied.

The protagonist never answered Dina's marriage proposal! Even if the answer doesn't come until book 2, I think it needs to be touched on again to let the reader know an answer is coming later (for whatever reason, it has to wait). As it is now, it feels like a forgotten plot point.

And what was that voice in the protagonist's head? It couldn't have been all her sister because it was directing the protagonist and her sister didn't even know she existed until later. So even if we don't discover who that voice is in book one, I think you need to circle back to it somehow and either explain how it was all her sister or that there is still a mystery about it.

Setting

Is it there?

You have some lovely details about some parts of the setting, and other parts are just brushed over. Some complaints you had were about world-building, so consider going back through and seeing if you can add more details to make the castle (basically where everything happens) more unique and reveal more about their world. If the protagonist could actually remember where she lived, more of it at least, you could easily have more world building naturally.

Is it detailed enough to be unique or recognizable?

The hidden floor is unique because of the floor tiles being a different color. Her father's office and her sister's room had secret entrances (one from her mother's bedroom). Much of the rest of the castle/rooms I don't really remember any specifics that would make me able to identify what room they might be in. I've filled in with my vision of the various rooms and hallways. This isn't necessarily bad unless it impacts how the story plays out—such as them traveling through a room or door that isn't described and it confuses the reader and their vision of the castle.

Pacing

Is it a consistent pace?

The pacing is inconsistent. The first half of the book feels slow. We spend much of our time going round and round over the same things with the protagonist to the point it makes her unlikable. You do a good job of showing her uncertainty and paranoia of being alone and not knowing who to trust, but after the first time or two you need to trust the reader to know that is where she's at and move things forward. I'd suggest identifying places where she goes into the cycles of her thoughts and emotions and choosing which ones to keep, then adding in either another POV (Dina's, for example) or action scenes. Late in the book, it says she is a trained warrior. Could she perhaps take some of that emotion and direct it into training? Have her out in whatever training place, firing arrows as fast as she can and maybe have an encounter with Pertz or even Dina? It would be fun to see her firing arrows and then suddenly have one catch fire. I don't know, I'm just throwing things out, but if you could add bits of action that move the plot along or foreshadow things to come, the story would feel more complete.

The end of the book happens so fast that it's hard to take it all in. This speed makes it feel contrived and unreal. There's no reaction when Dina's is thrown out the window. They are at the top, or

near the top of the castle. He should be dead, right? But no one says anything about him. The protagonist and Jordan just have a conversation and never even mention what happened to him. He just shows up with a limp. There's no "How are you?" or "Oh thank god you're alive" or anything. This is one bit where the emotional connection you've built between the characters is let down.

Another issue is that the protagonist somehow instinctively knows how to shoot arrows at the gems and have them be destroyed even though the evil queen is much more skilled in magick than she (it works when she defeats Pertz because she has help from Jordan, but not here). Why didn't the queen use a simple defense shield like Pertz? It feels too convenient and the big battle ends quickly. It's also a little convenient that the evil queen breaks windows right where they are. Why would she choose there to go? It seems like some random stairwell. Was she drawn by the magic in the room? Had Pertz told her that was where her sister was? I think if you slow this moment down and give more information, it will be more satisfying.

The protagonist's sudden ability to use the magick or to be a warrior feels too contrived. You show her struggle to contain her powers and to understand them to some extent, but adding in more scenes where she is practicing, seeing what she can and can't do, would help towards the end. Like maybe when she's practicing she tries to manifest the arrows in that way and she fails, or it doesn't go well. But then, when she needs it, she has the faith and strength to make it work (still doesn't help to explain why the evil queen didn't use a shield though and survived being riddled with arrows). But at least her victory will feel well earned rather than merely convenient.

The rest of the comments are included in the Word document. To help identify what section the comments apply to, I've started each one with the area of focus. For example "PLOT:"

Take some time to digest all this feedback and let me know how you want to have our follow up. I'm available for a call, email or chat. I recommend scheduling this soon, so your story is fresh in both our minds.