

The Rewrite Letter

Dear Writer:

You *are* a gnarly Betty! What a fun story about snowboarding—your enthusiasm shows and it’s nice to see. The context is especially good—your family’s impatience for learning new skills, your own initial disdain of snowboarding, your misgivings about letting the kids see you as inexperienced. Several of your devices work really well, such as the imaginary skiers’ dialog about snowboarders, which gives us an overview of the sport, and Robbins’ comments on the family members’ learning styles coupled with the “translations.” Thanks for doing a good job.

Stroke, show respect, and tell the writer specifically what works about the story.

I have, of course, lots of comments and suggestions for sharpening the piece. Generally, try to make your sentences quicker and more direct. You do this so well in a lot of places—like the “skiers’ dialog”—and that makes it more obvious when you don’t, as in the first paragraphs and the part where John’s joking with Robbins. Similarly, apply the you-are-there approach of the section on everyone’s learning styles to the rest of the piece. What did everyone say while they were learning the basic principle? What happened at the chairlift? What were the moments of success like that you and Becky experienced? In general, we should hear more of the kids’ reactions—like the stuff you give us in the morning-after scene of the boys practicing in their underwear. What did the kids say at various points during the day?

Use the rewrite letter to sketch out general or overall reactions. When you emphasize what works and how to apply it to other places, the writer gets a clearer idea of how to make the changes you’re suggesting.

More specifically, the lead and/or the conceit of the story needs some work. The hook of your family’s impatience is a good idea, but we really have no evidence that any of them are impatient learners. In fact, Nick’s comment in the second paragraph makes it sound as if he’s looking forward to the day—it detracts from your thesis. What does work is the nicely written summary of your initial reactions to snowboarding and fears of learning—these ideas seem more real and on target. Because the family impatience idea isn’t supported, the stuff about your own feelings actually has more prominence—and weakens the lead and ending, and, in fact, threatens the coherence of the story. So, I have a couple of suggestions.

Give reasons for your reactions, so the writer understands *why*, not just *what*. Often, this helps the writer come up with the solution.

Note “suggestions”—not “here’s what I want you to do.”

1. You could set the story up as you have, but provide evidence of the family’s impatience with learning new things. Maybe a scene where everyone comments with trepidation about the day ahead. Or a flashback to a fiasco when you all tried to learn the polka or something. If you decide on this route, you should

probably use Nick’s first comment and your delight in the lightweight gear as the foreshadowing of the change of heart to come. And you should add some other comments, say after the learning styles section, to let us know that the family is coming around. Also, we should learn why you all decided to attempt this new skill, since it goes against everything the family likes. (We learn this about you—you didn’t want to become an old poop—but not for the family.) In this scheme, the bits about your own fears and feelings become further, personalized support for the lead idea.

When you ask for a major change, it’s good to think through the implications for the rest of the story. This helps the writer follow your thinking and make a better decision about the changes.

- 2. You could use your own feelings as the backbone of the story. In this case, you’d move the stuff on page two up to the front and use it as your springboard (snowboard??) for how the family got into this mess. Then we’d want to hear more later about your own change of heart. This has the advantage of probably being shorter, and possibly easier to handle since it’s just you speaking from your own experience.

Let’s discuss this—I think it would work either way, but you need to make the decision. Perhaps you were trying to get at something that I’m just not seeing. And I’m sure you’ll have other good ideas for solutions.

Help the writer understand any difficulties you’re having with the story, and then leave the solution in her hands. A good writer will come up with a fix you never thought of.

The only other big thing is that we need to get a better sense of the mechanics and culture and feel of the sport. I’ve marked a couple of different places where it feels as if we need some expansion. Where does that wild lingo come from? How exactly is a person situated on the board and what is the equipment like? Are the bindings like downhill ski bindings? How big is the board? And we don’t really get a clear picture of the principle involved. How does it feel when you do it right? Just be very deliberate in describing this stuff. I know it’s hard to judge how detailed to be in this sort of discussion, but I think you’ll have to assume that our readers haven’t even watched a snowboarder.

Act as the intermediary between the reader and the writer

That’s it for now. I know this seems like a lot, but I wanted to get down to the fine tuning right away. We should talk after you’ve had a chance to absorb all this. I’m happy to clarify, explain, listen, and hash out anything. And thanks again for a fun piece.

Indicate your willingness to work as a team—you’re the coach, and your job is to give the writer the room and encouragement to write the best story she possibly can.

Best,