

# Did My Writing Offend You?

Workshop by Edwina Perkins

“As a push for diversity in fiction reshapes the publishing landscape, the emergence of sensitivity readers seems almost inevitable.” Katy Waldman

The number of books about ethnic characters has risen over the last few years.

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There’s a catch, though. \_\_\_\_\_

America—specifically young America—is currently more diverse than ever. As writers attempt to reflect these realities in their fiction, they often must step outside of their intimate knowledge.

Enter the sensitivity reader: \_\_\_\_\_

**Sensitivity readers aren’t new**, and they aren’t necessarily limited to publishing.

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## What is a Sensitivity Reader and what do they do?

1. As a sensitivity reader the job is to help non-ethnic authors avoid portraying ethnic characters in a way that feels inauthentic or uninformed.
2. Sensitivity readers are not police of free speech or intend to be censors.

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3. A reader who reads through a manuscript for issues of representation and for instances of bias on the page.

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A sensitivity reader is there to help make sure you do not make a mistake, but they are not a guarantee against making a mistake.

4. **A Sensitivity Reader is someone who specializes in a specific niche** and is a part of the specific marginalized community that the author is writing about. The Sensitivity Reader thoroughly reads over the material for bias, stereotypes, offensiveness, lack of understanding, etc. and creates a report for the client outlining their thoughts, why they feel something may be a problem, and offering possible solutions.

5. **Good sensitivity readers** \_\_\_\_\_

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You need only look at Publishers Weekly's [2015 diversity survey](#), which showed **the industry is nearly 80 percent white.**

6. **Most importantly**, good sensitivity readers create necessary dialogue between people who are different from one another in any way. \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Important to Note Concerning Sensitivity Readers:**

- **Authors looking to self-publish** may want to hire a sensitivity reader if they are writing about people and issues that are outside their own experience.

- **There's a difference** between books \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
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- Authors and publishers may send off manuscripts for sensitivity reads **at different stages in the writing and editing process**
- While sensitivity remains a positive value in most literature, and perhaps one of the greatest priorities for young adult literature, enforcing it at the expense of other merits, including invention, humor, or shock, might come at a cost. Cultural sensitivities fluctuate over time. What will the readers of the future make of ours?
- **The idea behind sensitivity** reading is not to \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- **Much of the content adults find offensive will fly over the heads of children and teens.**

That trend is what has to change. Much of the content adults find offensive will fly over the heads of children and teens. It's only as people marginalized groups come into adulthood that we realize how the content we read when we were young and impressionable impacted our view of ourselves and the world around us. Sensitivity readers bring to light aspects of the world that the book is coming into — aspects that may have been overlooked by **the author, who is, after all, only one person, with only one perspective.**

## When Representing a Marginalized Community

Excerpts from article by Marry Robinette Kowal

There are some things you need to understand about yourself and about how community works, before you approach a reader and truly, before you even start the project in which you plan to represent a marginalized community. It's good, and important, to want to represent people who are outside your experience, but it's hard work.

1. **You have to be willing to kill the project.**
2. **Culture is not a monolith (one single massive unit).**
3. **Internalized oppression is very real.** When you're asking your sensitivity readers to look at your work, it's important to choose people who are knowledgeable with controversies in their community.
4. **Kindness is deadly.** Try to get readers who don't know you, in addition to ones who do.
5. **It is exhausting.** Asking someone to just beta-read, that's one thing. But asking them to work with them to understand a culture that you don't belong to, is asking to be tutoring.  
**Sensitivity readers are paid.**
6. **You are in a position of power. As a writer, you shape the world. This is a position of power.** A single voice that is telling you "no" probably represents a larger number of voices.
7. **Own your mistakes.** When you screw up, and you will, you have to own the mistake. It's on you. It's no one else's fault for not catching it, or not having the energy to educate you. Apologize. Correct. Make amends.

8. **The controversy won't hit just you.** It's easy to worry about "What if I get it wrong?!?!" and "What if people get angry at me!?!?" What is harder goes back to bullet point #2. Culture is not a monolith. If you are writing about something that is outside your community and controversial, that controversy and the conversation surrounding it will hit all the people in that community. Worse than that, the things you got wrong are probably things that you inherited from a systemic system of oppression, which means that you are reinforcing that oppression in the public consciousness. And *that* doesn't hit you. That hits only the community you're writing about.
9. **It's not fair.** No. It's not. That's what systemic oppression is. The tiny little piece that you have to deal with, by putting in extra work, or money? Compare that to living in a marginalized community for your entire life. It's *not* fair, but you aren't the one being marginalized or oppressed.
10. **You have to be willing to kill the project.** You've done all that. You've done everything "right" and then you still get someone who says that the project is a problem. **The write of his article had this happen.**

**You're a writer. Writers have power. Use your power for good.**

What you need to know about yourself is if you can handle it. Can you handle the work? Can you handle deciding not to publish something? And if you're willing to do the research for spaceships, why not for people? If you're willing to not publish something because there's a structural flaw, why not for people?