

✎ Beta-Writer Ladder Theory ✎

A Meta by Rickey_A ☺

A little intro, please...

Over the past few years, I've developed a sort of statistical view of looking at fanfic and that has recently transformed into this wee little Beta-Writer Ladder Theory. It's a look at the match up of skill, ability and talent between Beta and Writer that will provide the best benefit to the Writer and least stress and beta enjoyment to the Beta. If anyone has checked out my Holiday Fest Season reccing posts the past two years, you already know that I'm a math geek and believe in the Gaussian Curve (Normal Distribution) like a religion. That view feeds into the Beta-Writer Ladder Theory.

So, I've been thinking about this for quite some time, even before the Beta panel at Azkatraz. That discussion at that panel was great, and a lot of folks contributed good ideas and shared experiences, but it is was mostly specifics like "what do you do when...?" or "this is how I Beta", or "this is what I look for in a Beta." The mismatch of writing level was briefly touched on, but only the case where you've been asked to beta a fic that is just, well to be polite, a beginner's effort. I've also read a number of metas on finding a Beta that you communicate with, you understand and respect each other, get along, have similar taste in fics (i.e. fluff lovers don't usually beta for darkfic lovers), and that your Beta should understand what it is you want from them. All those metas are absolutely applicable and full of great thinky thoughts. This meta will instead focus on Writer and Beta skill and experience levels – the technical aspect and not the interpersonal issues or methods for giving constructive criticism and editing.

Aside: You've probably noticed that I'm capping Writer and Beta in this meta. I've done it so they'll stand out and also, in this instance I'm thinking of them in terms of formal titles. ☺

Who is this Beta person?

I think people beta for much the same reasons as people write fanfic. They enjoy the process. Otherwise, why do it? It is part of the whole fandom hobby for them. They like getting advanced looks at fics, they like editing, and they like to discuss fanfic and writing.

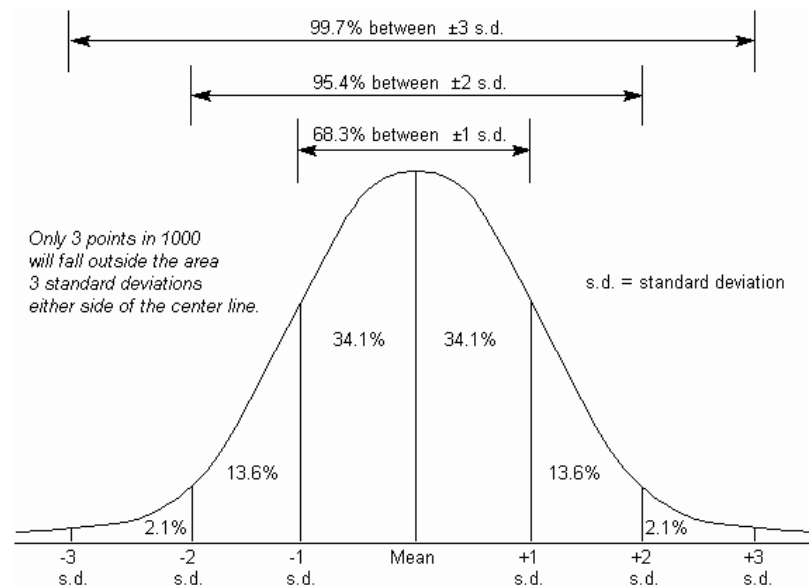
Most Betas fall into the category of a SPAG (spelling, punctuation, and grammar) Beta and /or story editor type Beta. Some people can do both quite well. Some people are total SPAG mavens (oh, how I love them) and some folks are great at looking at a story and seeing POV, plot points, characterization, flow, pacing, emotional tone, themes, motifs, subplots, word selection, dialogue, descriptions, and other technical writing issues and can give you suggestions and ideas of where you need to fix your fic. Both Betas will also catch your typos, canon misspellings, repetitive words and phrases, and other blunders. I almost always work with more than one Beta and make sure that both SPAG and story issues are covered. Depending on the Writer's skill level, sometimes they just want one or the other. When I'm talking about the Beta ladder, it could apply to either Beta type of even multiple Betas concurrently working on your fic.

I'll also mention that there are people who think they're good Betas, but what they really try to do is to rewrite the fic in their own writing. A good story Beta, sure might edit a line here and there, but mostly they'll tell you what's not working and give you concept and examples of ways to fix it, not rewrite paragraphs for you. A good Beta knows the difference between editing and rewriting.

Occasionally, I'll use a Gamma reader. If I've got a complex fic, am unsure about a Beta's note, or have made changes, I'll sometimes give the fic or section to a fresh reader (who hasn't been entrenched for weeks in the fic) to get their temperature. I'm not including Gammas as part of the match up. They're usually friends who generally like your writing and will give you the honest thumbs up or thumbs down or perhaps answer a specific question in terms of what a particular scene made them think or feel.

Lies, Damn Lies, and Statistics:

Below is possibly one my most favorite things about nature: The Normal Distribution



Isn't it pretty? I've found that it can be applied (albeit loosely) to so many things in life. When you have a randomized population you often get such a spread with regard to a specific occurrence. I like to apply it to skill level. When I worked in industry, I felt quite strongly that it applied to the general population of employees. In a small start up, sure you can cherry pick and select to get the cream of the crop, and ditch the slackers, but once the company reaches around 200 employees and there's big expansion and loads of positions to fill, eventually the make up of the employee population begins to resemble the Gaussian Curve.

I also think the curve applies to fanfic quality and Writer talent and skill level. We have a large random population of writers from many countries, of various ages, different socio-economic, education, and life experience backgrounds.

So you're saying, "Hey, I'm no scientist! What do you mean by this?" *You big dork!*

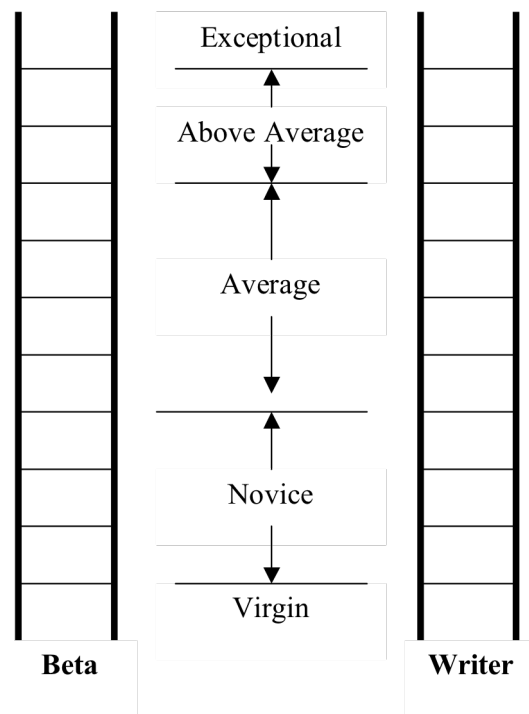
Well, when a population follows the Normal Distribution, the majority of that population will fall within one standard deviation of the average. Most fics and writers are a little above or a little below average. Now before people throw stones, there's nothing wrong with average fic. Average fic can entertain, make us laugh, make us cry and be very enjoyable. We probably won't remember much of it a few weeks later (maybe a special moment or two), we may have noticed a handful of errors, or felt there could have been some things written better, but it was certainly worth the read. Most of us are amateurs and this is a hobby, so let's keep that in perspective.

Also, if you look at the curve, you can see that half the population is below average – I repeat, half. There is a smaller percentage of the population that significantly above average and even smaller percentage that would be exceptional. On the other end of the curve, there's a well below average group and the very small group that many fanfic readers will refer to as "bad fic."

I think Beta ability, Writer ability, and fic quality distribution follow the Normal Distribution.

So, What About These Ladders You Keep Mentioning?

Tada!



Looking at skill level Betas and Writers will fall somewhere on a ladder with the number of rungs per level influenced by the Normal Distribution. People start out as Virgins and then move up to a Novice level. Most folks will write and read for a while and slowly move up the rungs and into the average range. A smaller percentage will eventually move into the Above Average range. (Yes, folks who notice, I think there's a bit more overlap with the Average/Novice range) There are a scant few Exceptional fan fic writers out there, just as there are a scant few experts of most fields (art, science, sports, etc.) The goal is not to be Exceptional. The more realistic goal is to keep growing and learning to the best of your potential.

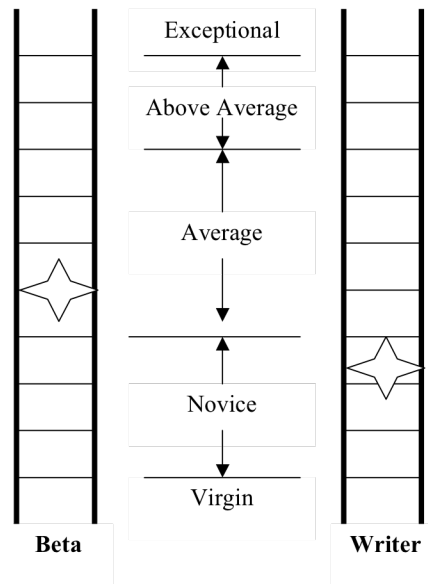
I also think that reading level can correlate with the writing and/or beta skills level. People who have higher technical skills level will prefer to read fics of higher caliber and certainly, the more you read, the more you grow just as the more you write, the more you grow.

Most people as Betas, Readers, and Writers will grow and climb ladder rungs concurrently, although some people are better Betas than Writers and vice versa. With most Betas, especially SPAG Betas, their proficiency grows with knowledge of SPAG rules, technical writing issues and experience. Writers climb the skill level rungs with both the increase of knowledge and experience, but the growth is also dependent on innate talent. Some people are just inherently more creative and better at writing. Thus many amateur Writers will hit a plateau, and truly there's nothing wrong with that (see "average fic" discussion above).

The rungs of the ladder are not discrete. People's work (both Beta and Writer) will range, as in sometimes an average writer can churn out a magnificent piece and sometimes an above average writer can have an off fic and put out a clunker. Sometimes a Beta just might not be that into a particular fic so maybe they don't give their best.

Beta-Writer Ladder Theory:

For maximum compatibility a Writer should work with a Beta within +/- 2 rungs. The ladders below would be a good match. It doesn't always happen this way, but ideally you want to be of similar skill level. Working with someone who's a little better than you always sounds promising, like playing with a better tennis player, but if the skill level difference is too much, then it's not much fun for the better player, unless of course they're just trying to impress you to get into your pants. ;P



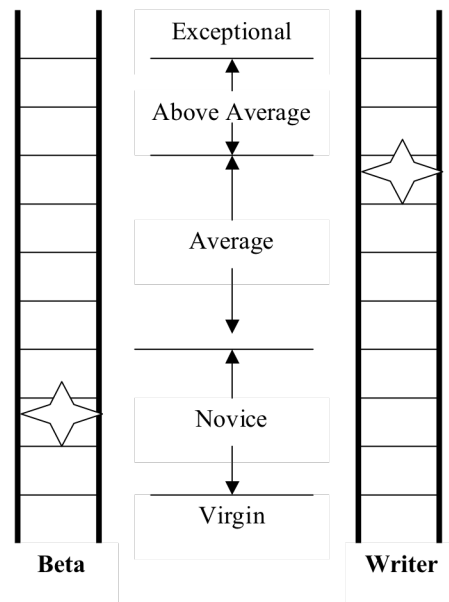
So you might say, "Well, shouldn't they always be a little better?" Yes, but not necessarily. There are a wide variety of skills and the Beta may be a little less experienced than you, but perhaps they possess a very proficient skill in an area that you lack. Also, many people like to trade beta services so it also provides a good match for that.

Again, I like to work with multiple Betas (because I need it), and when you do so, you get a good range of skills.

The main concept here is that as you move up in writing skill, you need a Beta in an appropriate skill range. Perhaps your Beta and you are moving up your ladders in parallel, but quite often, you may need to find some new Betas.

If you give your fic to your Beta and it comes back with a handful of typo corrections and couple of added commas with the note "I love it!", but you don't get much of a reception to it, you might need a new Beta. Of course the caveat is that you want to grow. Many folks are quite happy where they are, writing and reading with friends and aren't interested in all the technical mumbo jumbo. (Although I suspect those folks aren't reading this meta.)

Bottom line (and rather obvious) is that this dog won't hunt. (ladder match below)

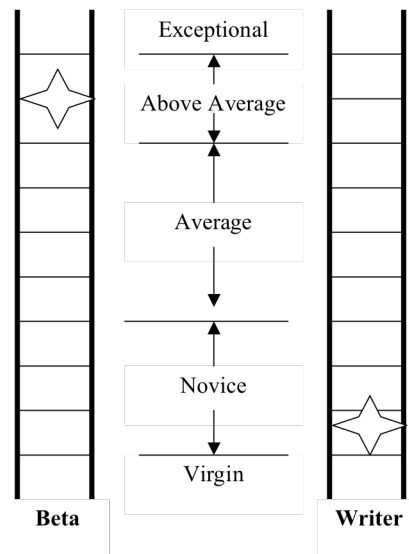


The opposite ladder match is the one I often see folks chit chatting about behind F-Lock on their journals. You're a good solid upper end of Average Writer and Beta and have been asked to beta by a Novice. Perhaps, you didn't know their skill level or perhaps you did, but in either case, you get the fic and *gasp* there are barjillion things wrong with it. It's barely readable. You can't imagine where to begin.

Now, I would say that as a Beta, you should try to avoid this, but sometimes... you just can't say no and the person is so sweet, etc.

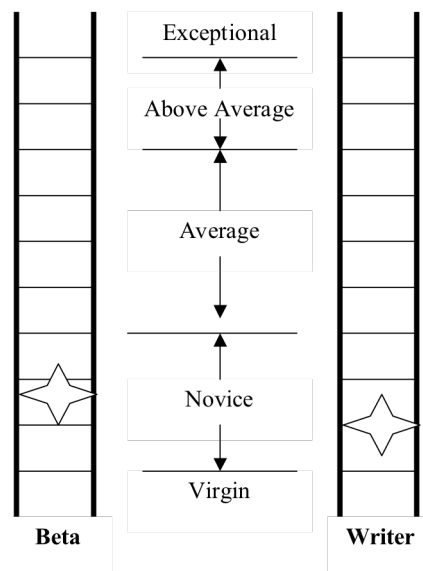
So what now? I would double check with them that they want your honest input and aren't just expecting you to fix four commas and squee with them. Do they really want it?

If they do: DON'T give it to them. Don't redline and write tons of notes and try to make massive corrections. Really, don't. In ladder theory, one can't go up 5 rungs in one fic. They can't. They have to progress at their own (and realistic pace). So what if you do get the ladder match below?



If the SPAG isn't bad, do the whole thing. If it's atrocious, SPAG beta the first 1-3k words to give them enough of a flavor and tell them to apply all those edits as much as they can to the rest of the fic. Now what about the rest? Pick one issue (maybe two) to help them improve, no more. It's too much at once. POV is a good place to start. Highlight a bunch of examples of where their POV is moving. If their plot makes no sense, maybe tell them an area of where they need to let the reader know what's going on. Or perhaps their dialogue is very stiff and unnatural - give them suggestions to improve. Maybe just start by getting rid of the 40 epithets they used. Just don't give them every last note you can think of. It's too much, too soon. Be honest and say that you think they have a lot of areas they can improve on, but perhaps they should just concentrate on this one and try and edit the fic for improving just this one issue. Rome was not built in a day.

I would also recommend trying to steer your Novice towards finding other Novice friends to do Beta swap with. They can write together and enjoy each other's stories without the pressure, and in the interim they'll gain experience and improve at their own pace. Truly, they should seek out this match up:



My other recommendation is to encourage your Novice to go and read fics by well-respected writers. Give them a list of fics that you think are impeccably written. Reading helps your writing on so many levels.

Because some fandoms (HP in particular) are so huge, if you're new, it's hard to find the good stuff. I've seen people answer fic rec requests with fics in which the plot (to me anyway) looks interesting and the reccer swears it's their favorite fic and it's incredibly well written. I'll check out the fic and it's awful, like serious "bad fic", and I'll wonder that the reccer really thought it was well written. My theory is that the Novice simply doesn't have enough reading and writing experience to know better. (I don't mean that you can't love a fic that isn't well written, but you should recognize that the writing quality isn't there, even if you love the story.) If you steer the Novice towards some good stuff, they'll begin to see the difference.

To Sum it up

The world of fanfic reading, writing, and beta-ing is huge. We all want different things out of our fandom participation. Some folks just wanna have fun. Others are here because they love writing as a hobby and want to grow and improve. They enjoy the interactions, discussions, and technical aspects. The best way to grow is to find the people with common writing/reading interests and work with those who are of similar skill level to you but perhaps have different strengths than you do. As you feel your writing develop, seek out new Betas with additional skills. Keep writing and keep reading. Don't be discouraged by edits and suggestions. Also don't be discouraged if you try a few different Betas and it doesn't work out or you don't connect. Move up your ladder at your own pace. Don't worry. Be happy. Live long and prosper. _\\//