



MABEL'S FIRST READERS HAVE QUESTIONS

Article Series 9 of 10

Published 31 October 2026 · 5 min read

Read online: fogbottom.com/learn/mabel-s-first-readers-have-questions/



Mabel printed four copies of *A Crumb of Suspicion* at the library, at ten pence a page, and tried not to work out the total. She failed. She had been a wages clerk for thirty-one years.

The copies went to four people.

Doreen from next door, because she read more crime novels than anyone Mabel knew, and because she would say exactly what she thought.

Hazel Quayle from the Thursday book club, who read several cosy mysteries a week and was, Mabel realised, precisely the reader the book was written for.

Mr Leonard Abernethy, also from the book club, because he had asked.

And her nephew Theo, because he had asked too, and because he was family, and because Mabel had a small, unworthy hope that he might finally be impressed.

The responses arrived over three weeks in December and January. Mabel opened each one at the kitchen table with the expression of a woman checking her exam results.

What came back

Doreen's notes fitted on one side of a sheet. She had enjoyed it. She liked Iris and wanted to be friends with Dot. She had guessed it was Constance in chapter twelve.

Hazel's notes ran to four pages. She loved Iris. She had kept mixing up Gerald Finch and the vicar, because both of them seemed to be in charge of things. Chapters fourteen to sixteen had felt slow. She hadn't guessed the ending and found it moving. And she wanted to know who had written the note that said LEAVE IT, IRIS, because the book never told her.

Mabel read that line twice. She knew perfectly well that Constance had written it. She had worked it out in October. She had simply never put it on the page.

Mr Abernethy had found forty-seven semicolons and circled every one.

Theo's verdict was enthusiastic and brief. Great characters. The middle dragged a bit. Could the stakes be higher? For example, he suggested, a dragon.

The first rule: don't reply yet

Every writer who shares a manuscript feels the urge to explain. The reader didn't understand; if they had only noticed the line on page ninety; it was meant to be like that.

Resist it, at least for now. Thank your readers, sincerely, and then give yourself a few days before deciding anything. First reactions to criticism tend to be defensive, and defensive decisions are rarely good ones. Arguing with a beta reader also teaches them to be less honest next time, which is the opposite of what you need.

Mabel thanked everyone, put the notes in a folder and cleaned the oven.

Choose readers for a reason

Not every reader is useful for every question, and it helps to know what each is likely to offer.

A reader who loves your genre can tell you whether the book delivers what such readers expect. A sharp general reader can tell you where they were confused or bored. A reader who enjoys a different genre may still spot real problems, but their suggestions for fixing them may pull your book towards a kind of story it isn't trying to be.

Giving readers a few specific questions also helps: where did you lose interest, who did you suspect and when, was anything confusing? Open praise is pleasant. Specific answers are more useful.

Look for patterns

One reader's reaction is information. Two readers independently noticing the same thing is a signal.

Hazel found chapters fourteen to sixteen slow. Theo said the middle dragged. They were very different readers who had never met, and they had put their fingers on the same stretch of the book.

That was the clearest message in the whole pile.

Separate the problem from the solution

Readers are usually reliable about where they felt something. They are less reliable about how to fix it, because fixing it is your job, and you know the book far better than they do.

Theo's dragon was not going into A Crumb of Suspicion. But his boredom was real, it matched Hazel's, and his question about stakes pointed at the right thing. Those chapters were the stretch after the midpoint where Iris questioned people again. Mabel had trimmed the interviews once already. Clearly she hadn't trimmed enough.

Theo's suggestion was wrong. His instinct was right. That happens more often than you might expect.

Weigh what doesn't fit

Doreen guessing the culprit in chapter twelve was worth thinking about but not panicking over. Seasoned mystery readers often guess, and a solution some readers can spot is a sign of fair play. Hazel, the target reader, hadn't guessed. Mabel decided to soften one clue a little rather than remove it.

Mixing up Gerald and the vicar was a quick fix: Mabel cut the vicar's two scenes and gave his single useful line to Gerald, who was delighted to have more to say.

The note was a genuine hole. Hazel had done exactly what a good beta reader does: noticed a promise the book had made and failed to keep.

Put feedback in the right queue

Mr Abernethy's semicolons were not wrong. They were simply early. Line editing and proofreading belong later, once the structure is settled. There is little point perfecting the punctuation in a chapter that may be cut.

Mabel kept his notes in a separate folder labelled LATER, which pleased him when she told him.

Decide, then act

Mabel made a list with three columns: the comment, whether she agreed, and what she would do. Some she accepted, some she adapted and some she set aside. Every decision was hers.

That is the real purpose of beta readers. They don't tell you what your book should be. They show you how it reads, so that you can make it more like the book you meant.

Theo phoned the following week, having heard she was revising.

"Once it's finished," he said, "I'll paint you a cover. I've got an idea already."

Mabel, touched, said that would be lovely.

She didn't think to ask what the idea was.

From Fogbottom: practical writing guidance and free creative software for independent authors. The original article, with any updates, is at fogbottom.com/learn/mabel-s-first-readers-have-questions/.