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AUSTRALIAN

AUTHOR ONLINE

Volume 6 | October 2015



Mentoring writers

What makes a productive mentoring relationship?

Alison Manning investigates.



Without sustainable writing income, many writers keep afloat by mentoring new and even experienced writers. At best, mentoring writers can be a nuanced creative relationship, as beneficial to the mentor as to the writer. At worst, however, this relationship can become a hell-hole of mismatched expectations, resentment, frustration, pressure and disappointment. Just ask a writer who's accepted a request to "mentor" another, only to find that the person expects manuscript editing, counselling, writing lessons and a direct, guaranteed path to publication. All for little or no payment.

One experienced mentor, Shelley Kenigsberg, describes her job as "delicate work of the soul", hinting at the complexity beyond the craft and technical skills. "It isn't the words on the page," she says, "it's how they actually got there, and what the person feels about the words."

And although writing skill and publication experience can be valuable attributes for a successful mentor, neither automatically means a writer will be an excellent mentor. So what skills does an author need to improve their mentoring relationships?

Mentor trainer and supervisor, Melissa Richardson, teaches mentoring best practice, mostly in the corporate sector. Richardson says there are some general mentoring principles that should apply across professions. Differentiating the mentor role from those of teacher, coach or consultant, she said, "I see

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Richardson says the fundamental step in building the necessary rapport and trust with a client is having thorough conversations early in the relationship, so each person knows what to expect.

"[Setting expectations] is critically important," says Richardson, explaining that this is often the step left out of those relationships that go off the rails. "A good mentor will spend a lot of time asking questions. [To understand] what the mentee wants from them, skilled questioning is required ... a lot of good, active listening, and a lot of shutting up!"

Australian children's author and long-time mentor, Nette Hilton's experience bears out the need for setting up clear expectations. Early in her mentoring career, Hilton found herself overcommitted, resentful and ultimately feeling like a mentoring failure, all because she agreed to mentor a writer without clarifying what the writer needed and what she herself was prepared to give.

"I [...] didn't know how to be clear about what I would and wouldn't do," says Hilton. "I now know that it is not rude or offensive to put boundaries in place."

Kenigsberg agrees that setting and sticking to clear boundaries is vital for mentoring relationships to succeed. "[It can become] ... too easy to read something twice that you said you'd read once; you can too easily say 'Don't worry that we have gone over time with our session.'"

As well as placing too great a burden on the mentor, Kenigsberg says that this kind of over-servicing ultimately is not in the mentee's interest either. "Not keeping boundaries [...] builds dependence. Over-reliance on others. Inability to come back to themselves,

to find their own resources and confirm that those resources are there. Early on I overran myself because I didn't understand the delicate nature of feeding, and not over-feeding."

Author Charlotte Wood has also learnt from early experience to avoid fostering dependence when mentoring. "I thought back then that 'support' meant hand-holding. By making myself too available, inadvertently I once created a very unsustainable relationship that was exhausting and frustrating for me and, more importantly, failed to allow the writer to develop the resilience she needed to operate in the real world of fiction writing."

These days, Wood is fastidious when choosing writers to work with. "[Mentoring] can be a powerfully enriching collaboration between two creative people – but only if the pairing is right. This is why I take great care in selecting mentorship participants, to make sure the writer and I can work well together, that we share similar writing values, that there's clarity about expectations on both sides, and that I really believe I can actually help this writer, now, with this book. I also make sure there is an easy way for both of us to break the relationship if it's not working."

Wood says it's important for her to limit the number of writers she works with, to avoid overload and burnout. She also writes clear agreements – with the opportunities for both parties to write in clauses – setting out things like mutual responsibilities, costs, payment schedules, what the mentorship will and won't cover. This agreement is signed before any work proceeds.

"As well, I have thought very carefully about my rate of pay, looked around at other mentoring programs and set my rates so as not to undercut my fellow writer-mentors, but also to make sure I have an estimated hourly rate that I feel good about. Basically, if I am paid at a high enough rate – to me that's between \$80 and \$120 per hour – it means I don't have to take on too many mentees which can lead to resentment and poor work on my part

Mentoring dos and don'ts

Do:

- Create a simple written contract that states precisely what the mentoring involves. Specify costs, meeting times, confidentiality clause, what is being offered, what is not included;
- Spend time at the beginning of the mentoring relationship asking your client specifically what it is they are seeking from you;
- Pre-empt difficulties and address them in advance. For example, state clearly how much between-session contact is okay; what will happen if the mentee misses sessions without notice or doesn't perform agreed tasks between sessions;
- Understand your strengths and limitations and promise only what you can and are happy to deliver;
- Calculate fees that honour your skill and capacity;
- Stick to agreed session lengths. If your sessions are one hour in length, start winding up at 50 minutes;
- Put clear boundaries around all arrangements: contact terms and times, reading work or not, manuscript editing or not;
- Spend time early in the relationship understanding the writer's expectations – this can be in writing and/or through discussion;
- Set up review processes about the mentoring so both parties can let the other know what is and isn't working for them;
- Become familiar with signs of mental health difficulties and have a referral network in case a client needs psychological help;
- Respectfully say no to unreasonable or unwanted requests that are beyond the written agreement.

Don't:

- Try to be all things to all people – know your limits (skills and time), make them clear and stick to them;
- Overcommit or over-function;
- Assume you have to fix the writer's problems;
- Get involved in lengthy between-session emails or phone calls, unless this is part of your agreement;
- Take responsibility for the success or failure of the writer's work;
- Start without a clear, preferably written agreement;
- Foster dependency on you.

and dissatisfaction on theirs."

Having established the benefits of boundaries, the question remains, how does a mentor maintain them at times when the pressure is on to deliver more than is feasible or desirable? Richardson and Kenigsberg agree that the therapy model can offer guidance for mentors, providing them with professional support systems to help manage the normal complexities of working closely with people.

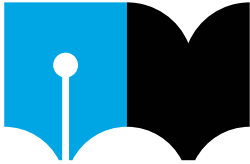
Richardson says, "Ideally this would involve speaking confidentially to someone else, perhaps an experienced peer or a professional supervisor. At the very least, I think it is essential to set aside regular time to reflect on and write about the feelings and difficulties that arise in mentoring work."

As for the rewards and responsibilities of mentoring writers, Shelley Kenigsberg is in no doubt. "Being involved with words and

their exquisite mercurial nature is a privilege, truly, so ... to keep [mentoring practice] clean and beautiful, it comes down not only to the integrity of the practice, but the integrity of the mentor."

About the Author

Alison Manning is a creativity consultant with A Mind of One's Own, a boutique practice specialising in helping writers overcome the psychological and emotional barriers to working at their best. She has worked for the Australian Society of Authors as a course leader for writers and writing mentors, as an independent facilitator and workshop leader and has appeared at the Sydney Writers' Festival to talk about her work. Her work with writers includes virtual groups, one-to-one creativity coaching and face-to-face workshops.



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