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An Essential Guide

From Literature Wales

**The Role of a Mentor**

This Essential Guide from Literature Wales explores why writers can benefit from working with mentors. It suggests some of the forms mentoring might take, with tips for getting the most from the relationship between mentor and mentee.

**What is mentoring?**

In a very general sense, a mentor is someone who has the knowledge and skills to support someone else achieve a goal, and the person being supported is usually referred to as a mentee. It’s a professional relationship rather than a friendship.

In the context of writing, a mentor is usually a writer who has reached a professional level, e.g., publishing a book or writing a script that has been performed. They will have experience of being a professional writer and will be in a position to help less experienced writers develop their writing and professional knowledge. It’s important to note that having a mentor is not an essential requirement for developing as a writer, but for some writers it might be helpful at certain points in their career.

Having a mentor is one way to help you achieve what *you* want to achieve as a writer. Mentoring should be a process of support rather than the mentor imposing their vision on your work. However, mentors can also suggest ways of thinking that you might not have considered before, expanding ideas, which you can then reflect on and decide if they’re right for your project.

**Why do writers have mentors?**

Here are some reasons a writer might decide to have a mentor:

* To achieve a specific goal.
* To learn new skills.
* To have a supportive ‘sounding board’ to test and develop new ideas.
* To help shape a programme of reading, listening, watching that will develop a new writing project, or perhaps advise on a specific research area.
* To keep a project progressing by setting writing goals, deadlines, and accountability to another person.
* To have support during a specific period of a writing career. Mentoring isn’t just for writers starting out – writers who have many publications might decide that mentoring will help them with a new challenge.

**As a writer, what kind of goals could I set with my mentor?:**

It’s important to think carefully about what having a mentor could achieve for your writing and to set clear goals. However, ideas and goals can change over the course of a project – don’t be afraid to let your mentor know if you change your mind about what you’d like to achieve and how you see your writing taking shape. An open and honest dialogue between mentor and mentee is essential.

Here are some examples of writing goals that a mentee might work towards with the support of a mentor:

* Finish a draft of something, e.g., a novel, a group of poems, a play script, a short story, a section of a memoir, a computer game narrative.
* Get a new project off the ground with idea generation and development.
* Develop strategies to maintain a writing habit, set targets and keep going.
* Work on specific aspects of writing craft.
* Learn about forms of writing or genres which are new to you, e.g., shifting from writing memoir to trying fantasy novels.
* Build confidence as a writer and / or a performer of your work.
* Learn about the professional side of being a writer such as performing our work in front of an audience or applying for grants.
* Learn about the process of submitting to literary agents and editors, and get a submission pack ready.

**What form can mentoring take?**

If you decide that a mentor would be helpful for your writing, the format of the mentoring needs to work for you and the mentor to ensure that your time together is efficient and helpful. Here are some of the ways mentoring might take place:

* In-person meetings in a venue which is comfortable and safe for both parties, accommodating any accessibility requirements.
* Meetings via online platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Hangouts. Geographical proximity of mentor and mentee isn’t as essential as it once was.
* Some mentors and mentees might prefer in-person meetings while for others this will be less important. Discussing meeting preferences with a potential mentor is a key element of forming a working relationship.
* Meetings, whether they are in-person or online, might be used to discuss general aspects of a writing project, or they could focus on the mentor’s feedback on a piece of writing sent to them in advance of the meeting.
* A mentor might support a writer through emails, without meetings. Or the support might be given through a combination of meetings and emails. The format of support might change depending on the specifics of a writing goal at any one time.
* It’s always OK to ask for clarity about something your mentor has said. If something proves confusing or you’d like more detail, just let them know. A good mentor will be open to providing clarity when needed and will be able to communicate their knowledge effectively.

**How do I organise my mentoring?**

* It’s extremely important for both mentee and mentor to be clear about their expectations for mentoring as well as the specifics of what will be achieved and by when. For example, if you’re agreeing dates for meetings, make sure you both make a note of future plans, and whether the mentor will read any material in advance of the next meeting. If they are going to read some material, how much? And when will it be sent to them to ensure they have enough time to read it?
* If your mentor will be giving their thoughts on a section of your writing, think about the kind of feedback that would be helpful and how you best process information. For example, would you prefer to read a mentor’s feedback before meeting with them, so you have time to digest it and then prepare any questions? Do you like an agenda for a meeting, or do you prefer to keep things more casual? Letting your mentor know things like this is extremely helpful.
* It’s a good idea to discuss this kind of practical detail at the start of a relationship with a mentor so that each party knows what the other is expecting and can plan around it.

**How do I find a mentor?**

Some writers will advertise that they offer mentoring services, e.g., via their personal websites or their social media profiles. They might list their fees and the kinds of writers they work with. Other writers might not advertise that they take on mentees, but they might have a track record of providing this service on behalf of a cultural organisation such as Literature Wales or Spread the Word. Some writers might never have mentored anyone before but may be open to the idea. With all three of these categories, a good place to start is by doing some independent research to see if they would be a good fit for what you would like to achieve in your own writing.

Some things to think about when choosing a writing mentor:

* Does the writer have any previous experience of mentoring other writers? Are they likely to be supportive in helping you develop your writing?
* Does the writer have a track record of publishing their work, or their work being performed?
* Does the writer work in a similar area to you or in the area you are looking to learn more about? For example, a writer who has published novels in the genre you are working in, or a poet whose interests overlap with your own. On the other hand, it can sometimes be helpful to have a mentor with a different outlook on writing as this can lead to some fresh perspectives.

Once you have identified a writer who you feel would be a good fit for your project and your aims, send them an email letting them know you’re interested in finding a mentor and asking if this is something they would consider. Give them as much detail as you can at this stage, e.g., what kind of project you are interested in developing, your specific goals, why you feel they would be a good fit for your writing.

**What do mentors gain from the relationship?**

* As writers we’re always learning about our craft and mentoring is another way to achieve that.
* Spending time with other writers, no matter their level of experience, can help us gain new insights into forms of writing we might feel we already know well. Mentoring can be a powerful form of refresher.
* Mentoring can offer writers new professional skills to help them supplement their income.
* Mentoring is extremely rewarding and helps the writing community flourish, supporting new talent which ensures the writing ‘ecosystem’ is fresh, dynamic and interesting.

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Resource content by **Katherine Stansfield**