

Mentoring The New Writer

The Contract You Didn't Know You Were Signing

You cannot teach what you have not earned.

You cannot give what you do not have.

I. The Weight of Yes

Most writers who become mentors do not think of it as a decision. Someone asks. They say yes. It seems like a small thing — an act of generosity, an afternoon here and there, a willingness to share what they know. It does not feel like signing a contract. It does not feel like a long-term obligation that will require more of them than they anticipated.

But it is both of those things. The moment you agree to guide an emerging writer, you have entered into something that cannot be half-done. Not because the novice will hold you to it — they may not even understand enough yet to know what they need from you — but because the work itself demands it. Mentoring done poorly is worse than not mentoring at all. A writer pointed in the wrong direction, given false confidence in weak work, or handed rules without the judgment to know when and how to break them, has been harmed by the very relationship that was supposed to help.

This essay is about what you are agreeing to when you say yes. Not to discourage the agreement — the world needs more serious mentors and has too few — but to make the weight of it visible before you pick it up.

II. Before You Begin, Know What You Have

The first question is not about the emerging writer. It is about you.

What have you produced? Not what do you believe about craft, or what have you read about craft, or what workshops have you attended — but what have you actually made? The mentor's authority comes not from years or credentials but from the evidence of work. A writer with ten finished novels and a clear sense of what it cost to write them has something a writer with one promising draft and a lot of opinions does not have: testimony from the far side of the difficulty.

Know your limits honestly. There are genres you have not written. Structures you have not attempted. Areas of craft where your own work is still unresolved. These are not disqualifications — no mentor is complete — but they must be visible to you, because the emerging writer cannot yet see them. You will be tempted to speak with authority across the full range of craft because you know a great deal. Resist that temptation in the areas where your knowledge is more theoretical than earned. Point them toward those who have done what you have not.

Know what you have learned and how you learned it. Not just the conclusions but the failures that produced them. The mentor's most useful currency is not the rule but the story behind the rule — the draft that went wrong in a specific way, the mistake made repeatedly before the lesson finally arrived, the discovery that changed how you work. The emerging writer cannot use the abstract principle. They need use the concrete example, because it shows them not only what to do but what the doing actually looks like. Share your failures.

III. The 150 Percent Problem

Here is the arithmetic of mentoring, stated plainly: the work requires half encouragement, half correction, and half demonstration. You are already doing the math. That is 150 percent. You are correct. Mentoring an emerging writer genuinely costs 150 percent of what you expect it to cost, and the gap between what you expected and what you spend is where most mentoring relationships quietly fail.

The encouragement is real work. It is not cheerleading. It is the ability to find, in a piece of writing that has serious problems, the element that is genuinely working — the instinct that is sound even if the execution is not — and name it specifically enough that the writer knows it is not flattery. A writer who cannot be shown what they are already doing right has no foundation to build on. The mentor who only corrects is not teaching craft. They are teaching the writer to distrust themselves.

The correction is real work of a different kind. It requires a clear distinction, inside yourself, between what you know to be a craft problem and what is merely your preference. These are not the same thing. A dialogue attribution style different from yours is not an error. A scene structure that would not be your choice is not a failure. A voice that sounds nothing like the writers you admire is not a weakness. Before you mark something for correction, ask yourself honestly: is this wrong, or does it simply differ from what I would have done? The answer to that question changes everything about how you deliver the feedback.

The demonstration is the work almost no mentor thinks to do. It means showing the emerging writer not just what to fix but how you would approach fixing it — in your own work, in published work

you can analyze together, sometimes in a revision of their own draft that shows rather than merely describes the possibility. A writer who has only been told what is wrong knows they are failing without knowing what success looks like from the inside.

IV. Start Where They Are

You cannot help someone from where you are. You can only help them from where they are.

This sounds obvious. It is almost never practiced. The mentor who has been writing for twenty years walks into the relationship carrying the accumulated understanding of twenty years, and the natural impulse is to share it — to give the emerging writer the benefit of the full range of what experience has taught. But the emerging writer cannot receive most of it. Not yet. Not because they are not intelligent but because the understanding of craft is not transferable as information. It is earned through specific failures at specific stages, and the stages must be encountered in sequence.

Understand where your writer actually is before you say anything about where they should be going. This takes more time than it seems. A writer who presents confident prose may be concealing a fundamental uncertainty about story structure. A writer who cannot yet write a clean sentence may have an instinct for character that is genuinely remarkable. The surface of the work does not always map accurately to the depth of the understanding. You must read carefully and ask before you conclude.

Determine their level of commitment early, and be honest with yourself about what you find. Not every emerging writer is ready for the investment that serious development requires. Some want

encouragement for work they are not ready to revise. Some have written one piece and want to be told it is finished. Some are committed in exactly the way the work demands — they will do the reading, attempt the exercises, revise without resentment, and return with harder questions each time. These are different relationships, and they require different things from you. Trying to give a writer who wants encouragement the same mentoring you would give a writer who wants development is a waste of both of your time.

V. The Noise Problem

The emerging writer today is surrounded by guidance. It arrives in an unbroken stream from social media, from writing communities, from accounts and newsletters and podcasts generated by people with varying levels of qualification and production. Some of it is excellent. Much of it is repeated convention with no examination of whether it is true. Some of it is actively wrong, promoted by people who have confused what works in their own limited practice with what works as a general principle.

Part of your job as a mentor is to help the emerging writer develop a filter.

The filter is not cynicism — not a reflexive distrust of all guidance from all sources. It is the habit of asking, before accepting any rule or principle: who is saying this, what have they produced, and what is the evidence for the claim? A novelist with a long body of serious work who says that dialogue attribution is a place where invisibility serves the reader has earned that opinion through the making of many books. An account with a large following that posts daily rules for better writing may or may not have earned the same standing. The numbers do not tell you which is which. The work does.

Teach the emerging writer to look at the work behind the advice. Not to dismiss advice from writers at an earlier stage — every stage produces real learning — but to calibrate how much weight to give it. The person two steps ahead of you on the trail can tell you about the next two steps accurately. They cannot yet tell you about the terrain at the top of the mountain, because they have not been there.

VI. The Shared Journey

Here is the thing that is most often forgotten, and that makes all the difference when it is remembered.

You are not standing still while the emerging writer develops. The mentor who believes they have arrived — who has accumulated enough understanding of craft to guide others and no longer needs to push their own learning further — has stopped at the exact moment the job requires continued motion. Mentoring is not a position above the work. It is a position in the work, alongside someone who is earlier in it.

You will learn from what your emerging writer brings to their work. The instinct they have that you do not recognize, the question they ask that you cannot answer, the choice they make that you would never have made but that works — all of this is information. A mentor who is still genuinely learning will find the mentoring relationship sharpens their own understanding in ways that the solitary practice of writing cannot. Teaching craft is one of the best ways to discover the limits of what you know about it.

Stay in the reading. Stay in the making. Approach the craft with the same commitment you are asking of the person you are guiding. The mentor who has stopped learning cannot give the most important thing: the example of a writer who is still hungry.

VII. The Long Contract

When the relationship is working, it does not feel like 150 percent. It feels like the natural extension of caring about the work and about the person doing it. The conversations go somewhere neither of you anticipated. The emerging writer makes a choice that surprises you with its confidence. You say something you did not know you understood until you heard yourself say it.

This is what the contract is actually for. Not the structure of it — the check-in schedule, the critique format, the agreed-on goals — but the sustained presence that the structure makes possible. A writer develops across years, not months. The things that matter most cannot be transmitted in a single conversation. They accumulate, slowly, through the repeated experience of being taken seriously by someone who knows the work from inside it.

Say yes, if you have the work behind you and the willingness to keep working. Say yes knowing it will cost more than you expect. Say yes understanding that you are not giving the emerging writer your wisdom — you are giving them your sustained attention and your experiences, which are the rarer and more valuable things.

The contract is long. Sign it with your eyes open.