



Perspective/Opinion

## What makes an exemplary writing mentor?

*By William Henk, EdD*

*Dr. Henk explores what matters most for effective mentoring of writers seeking publication of their scholarly work. Patience and consideration of a writer's vulnerability, in tandem with their need for candor, are all a part of it. But there's much more...*

Success in writing for professional publication requires a complex set of skills and dispositions. Those who must publish as a job expectation, especially emerging scholars, can find the process extremely daunting (Dixon, 2001). It's no wonder.

Oftentimes, their graduate programs provide little to no mentoring in writing for refereed forums (Barrett, Mazerolle, & Nottingham, 2017). These forums utilize a unique textual genre that is difficult to master, and engaging with the journal review process itself carries emotional risks. How so?

Authors invest themselves deeply in their work, making notable sacrifices along the way. They submit manuscripts for review, laying bare their egos to the prospect of rejection -- a professional gut punch. Then they wait months in hopeful suspense for a definitive verdict, aware that their treasured work is undergoing intense scrutiny.

With so much uncertainty, and as false starts mount, the process can give rise to a range of negative feelings including disappointment, discouragement, frustration, anxiety, anger, despair, denial, embarrassment, and even impostor syndrome (Day, 2011). Consequently, only accepted manuscripts can pre-empt or remedy these emotions, and more fundamentally, advance an author's scholarship.

To those ends, an exemplary writing mentor can be instructive -- from identifying a publishable idea and arguing for it, to word choice, paragraph structure and cohesion, transitions, ideational flow, and overall coherence.

### **A Necessary, But Insufficient Condition**

Even the most prolific scholars have endured at least some of the regrettable emotions associated with the pursuit of publication, a journey rooted in trial and error and baptism by fire.

Those who succeed do so largely of their own volition through lessons learned the hard way (Keen, 2007). Their success derives from a range of positive character strengths such as

perseverance, curiosity, creativity, judgment, perspective, self-regulation, and love of learning, among others.

Over the years, these scholars accumulate keen insights about publishing, both skill and art, as well as the joy and pain. At this career stage, many report pondering a familiar adage—namely, *if I knew then what I know now*—and conclude that this rite of passage would have been kinder if that was the case.

On the face of it, senior scholars figure to make robust mentors for aspiring authors. Who better to advise protégés on writing for publication than those who have enjoyed significant success in their own right? In that sense, *publication productivity almost certainly qualifies as a necessary condition for expert mentoring*. The cognitive guidance a mentor gives can drive writing improvement, and if they bring experience as journal reviewers or editors to mentoring, then all the better.

*But is scholarly productivity a sufficient condition for mentoring writing?*

In fact, not all accomplished writers thrive in the mentor role. The important work of helping inexperienced colleagues share their ideas with a wider audience somehow falls outside their interests or forte. While most senior scholars contribute to their fields in various meaningful ways, mentoring may not be one of them. In some cases, it's a matter of an unwillingness to assist; in others, it's a question of unavailability or other limits on capacity.

At any rate, although these scholars clearly possess both keen powers of insight and the publication wisdom to benefit mentees' writing, they may lack other key attributes associated with exemplary mentoring.

### **The Exemplary Writing Mentor**

Whether you're searching for an exemplary writing mentor or are an accomplished professional who seeks to become one, the question remains the same, "What additional attributes, beyond promoting cognitive clarity, warrant consideration?"

In many respects, *the affective nature of the relationship sets a ceiling on the effectiveness of a writing mentor/mentee match*. The model mentor situates the relationship around care for their mentees. The commitment to be present to them is firm and elevates accessibility to a priority. When it comes to individual writing consultations, these mentors listen respectfully and actively, respond thoughtfully and graciously, and brainstorm when necessary. They instill trust by exercising patience, interacting in considerate ways, acknowledging emotional vulnerability, and avoiding judgmental behavior.

Ideally, writing mentors are trustworthy, as well as sufficiently enthusiastic and empathetic. Overall, they are affirming, but not too much so. Whereas effective mentors encourage and support mentees by offering honest and astute advice as constructive feedback, they will

explicitly cite a paper's deal-breaking properties, however awkward that might be for the duo. In short, candor is essential, because anything less disserves the mentee.

In large measure, the way the critiques of written products are delivered often determines the health and trajectory of the mentor/mentee relationship. Most especially when effective mentoring demands major changes to a paper, the criticism should always be directed at the writing itself, never the writer (Lingard & Watling, 2021). And difficult comments should be doled out gingerly, accompanied by reaffirmations of the mentor's commitment to help.

And lastly, in my estimation, the best writing mentors go beyond supplying incisive feedback and even creating a safe and intimate sanctuary for aspiring authors. They inspire them.

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