



# Setting up for success: An overview of why mentoring matters for aspiring medical writers

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## Abstract

The most successful people attribute their success to an effective mentoring network. Developing a great mentor network is critical to ensuring long-term professional development and growth. This article presents an overview of the mentoring process, finding the right mentors and building a lasting relationship, and making the most of the mentoring journey.

The most successful people credit their success to the guidance they received from their mentors. Great mentors can be a source of invaluable insights into career challenges and how to overcome them, building soft skills, and advancing professional networks.<sup>1,2</sup> Seventy-six percent of people working in industry say that mentors are important for their professional development, but only 37% of professionals have at least one mentor.<sup>3</sup>

PhD students and postdocs generally receive research-specific training and mentoring from their supervisors and thesis committees. However, most do not have access to a mentor outside of academia to support them in navigating their careers, or to make job transitions outside of academia.<sup>4</sup> Lack of information or resources, or a reluctance to seek out potential mentors outside of their primary network are some of the reasons why PhDs find their career transition journey challenging.

This article is an attempt to simplify the process of seeking out and building a relationship with a mentor.

## What is mentoring?

Mentoring is about helping people develop professionally.<sup>5,6</sup> It can be used for a variety of goals and at various points in a person's career, including:

- Navigating career transitions (e.g., moving from academia to industry)
- Learning new skills as part of continuous professional development
- Networking
- Working toward a promotion
- Managing various professional situations

## What is a mentor?

In Homer's *Odyssey*, a mentor is someone who provides mental strength, thereby empowering the receiver into taking positive action. The

Oxford Dictionary defines a mentor as an “experienced and trusted advisor”. A good mentor aims to guide and support the mentee in their professional development goals to enable them to navigate and advance in their career. A mentor may be an expert in the role the mentee carries out (or aspires to transition into), but this is not always the case. A mentor may:

- Support the mentee by asking questions that will challenge the mentee to identify the course of action they need to take to further their development
- Help the mentee avoid common mistakes and

pitfalls in their career decisions

- Transfer expert knowledge to junior professionals
- Use mentoring as part of succession planning
- Provide advice on career development
- Offer support and encouragement
- Serve as a sounding board
- Share professional contacts

There is a difference between a mentor and a coach. According to the International Coaching Federation, “Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that

inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential.”<sup>7</sup> A coach offers dynamic guidance to clients, and the process of coaching is goal-oriented with specific and measurable outcomes to reach within the programme. A mentor is usually an experienced and successful professional who is open to sharing insights to help the mentee make smarter decisions and grow as a professional. A coaching relationship is usually short-term (6 months to a year), while a mentoring relationship may last a year or more. A typical mentoring relationship is an informal one, however, structured mentoring

**Table 1. A sample list of structured mentoring programmes**

Azur Medical Writing Programme <sup>8</sup>	A ‘Mentor Me’ programme offering 1:1 training to professionals who are looking to transition into a medical writing career. Suitable for PhDs and postdocs seeking medical writing training.
Cheeky Scientist Association <sup>9</sup>	The largest PhDs-only association in the world, the Cheeky Scientist Association provides information, training, and support to PhDs and postdocs seeking an industry career in diverse fields including medical writing.
Medical Writing Organisation <sup>10</sup>	A special programme by the Cheeky Scientist Association for PhDs interested in a medical writing career. Offers job transition support and mentoring to PhDs and postdocs.
Health Writer Hub <sup>11</sup>	A ‘Build Your Portfolio Masterclass’ programme offering 1:1 coaching with special focus on health writing for the web. Suitable for professionals (including freelancers) looking to polish their communication skills.
Elemed Mentoring Programme <sup>12</sup>	A structured seven-month programme for RA/QA/CL professionals in the medtech, IVD and pharma industry. Suitable for mid-career professionals seeking to advance in their careers.
Healthcare Businesswomen’s Association Mentoring Programme <sup>13</sup>	A structured, 9-month, 1:1 mentoring programme to support the career development goals of mentees from diverse backgrounds. The programme places special focus on advancement of women in the healthcare industry, but is also open to men.
Australasian Medical Writers Association Mentoring Programme <sup>14</sup>	A free-of-charge mentoring programme for members of the association with focus on professionals seeking to transition to a medical writing career.
American Society for Cell Biology Mentor Match Programme <sup>15</sup>	An international programme open to members of the association. Focuses on career development goals of mentees.
The OPED Project Mentoring Programme <sup>16</sup>	This mentor-editor programme connects young professionals seeking a career in journalism with experienced journalists.
The Council of Science Editors Mentorship Programme <sup>17</sup>	The programme aims to support editorial professionals in advancing their careers by providing a career development network, education, and resources for best practices.
Publishers Association Mentoring Programme <sup>18</sup>	A range of mentoring schemes to support professionals in various stages of their careers

Abbreviations: RA: regulatory affairs; QA: quality assurance; IVD: in vitro devices.



To teach is to  
learn twice

programmes are increasingly available to support career development of professionals from diverse backgrounds (see Table 1).

## Building a relationship with your mentor

**Set goals and expectations.** Individuals enter mentoring relationships with certain expectations, and it is important to define and discuss these at the start of the mentoring journey to avoid frustration at a later point. The onus is on the mentee to drive the relationship forward, so defining goals and expectations early on will also serve to guide the mentoring journey. A simple way to get started is by listing your SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based) career goals and the obstacles you face in achieving them.<sup>19</sup>

**Choose a mentor.** A mentor can be from anywhere, including your own network.<sup>20,21</sup> A typical mentor may be a senior colleague (within or outside of the mentee's workplace), a peer, or even a family member. Mentors may also be people you have met at conferences, or were introduced to by someone. Ideally, your choice of mentor should be guided by your goals. For example, if you wish to change fields it may not be helpful to have a mentor who is an expert in your current area of work.<sup>22,23</sup> Once you have your goals mapped out, seek out professionals who can help you navigate the challenges you

face in achieving them. You may need different mentors at various stages of your career, so be prepared to build your own network of mentors to support you in various facets of your professional development. When you approach potential mentors, make sure you convey the reason why you are approaching them. People are more willing to help when they realise you know what you require and have your goals mapped out already.

**Set up an action plan.** Once you have secured a mentor, the onus is on you to drive the relationship forward, to build trust and credibility as a professional. A simple mentoring agreement outlining what you wish to accomplish together can be helpful in guiding the relationship. Discuss your goals and plan of action with your mentor. Be open to their feedback and be willing to modify your plan of action based on their input. Create a structured accountability process that includes a follow-up schedule, plan an agenda for each meeting you have with your mentor, measure progress at every meeting, and celebrate your successes with your mentor. Continue to appreciate your mentor and follow up even after the mentoring agreement comes to a close.

## Become a mentor

To teach is to learn twice.<sup>24,25</sup> Mentoring can be a rewarding experience not only for the mentee but also for the mentor. In addition to being recognised as an expert in their field, a mentor gains improved interpersonal skills, leadership ability, and an enriched professional network.

To become a mentor, you must first be clear about your own goals: do you want to pass on your skills and expertise to junior colleagues? Or do you want to give back to the community through mentoring professionals from minority groups? How much time can you commit to mentoring? What are your expectations from the mentee? How would you define a successful mentoring relationship?

Finding the right mentor and becoming a mentor can both be a daunting process. Many mentoring relationships develop organically, for example, through networking during conferences. Structured mentoring programmes run by professional societies periodically open calls for mentors. These mentoring

schemes match mentors with mentees based on the needs of the mentee and the expertise of the mentor, provide a broad framework for the mentoring relationships, as well as regular check-

ins to ensure the relationship is progressing well. Mentoring programmes within companies can facilitate transfer of knowledge and resources between employees, improve collaboration and teamwork, create a culture of learning, reduce employee turnover, and help in succession planning.

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## Conflicts of interest

Surayya Taranum is a scientific writer at 4Clinics.

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