

Mentors and mentees in medical writing: A very particular set of (soft) skills

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Abstract

Being a mentor or a mentee can be fulfilling and rewarding. In this article, we look at the role and relationship of mentors and mentees, and the importance of using soft skills within the mentor/mentee dynamic. Individually tailored and productive mentor and mentee sessions will furnish the mentee with enhanced soft skills to carry forward into their day-to-day work, which will, in turn, give rise to being a well-rounded and agile medical writer.

What is a mentor in the field of medical writing? We can consider them to be somebody specifically assigned on a one-to-one basis to guide and support a more junior writer. It is a role that goes beyond being somebody's "buddy" or person assigned to help with onboarding activities for somebody new to the role. The mentor would hold regular, pre-arranged meetings to talk through their mentee's work and activities, with the mentor providing guidance on the project work and more broadly on topics such as in-house company processes and how to handle meetings, communication, difficult situations, and tight timelines. Above and beyond this, the mentor will work holistically with their mentee, looking at their soft skills and how to enhance them via the mentoring process, to then apply them during their day-to-day work.

The mentor acts as a guide, rather than as an instructor or manager, encouraging open communication during the meetings between the mentor and mentee. A mentor needs strong soft skills because they need to listen actively and

understand the needs of their mentee, and adapt to these needs.

A mentee should feel comfortable in asking for any kind of support or guidance, irrespective of whether they think they should already know how to do it or are asking a "silly" question. Everybody has their skillset and knowledge, but nobody knows everything, so it's important for both the mentor and mentee to remember that.

Who can be a mentor?

Typically, a mentor would be in a senior role and have more work experience compared to their mentee. We might assume that a mentor would be from the same organisation as their mentee, but this doesn't have to be the case; it could be somebody in a writer's wider network – former colleagues, connections through the industry who know the role of a writer; even potentially somebody working in a different industry. Potential benefits of a mentor being outside the mentee's organization could be that the mentor has an outsider's view of the working environment of the mentee, which can reduce potential bias and provide a fresh perspective. Also, the mentee might feel more able, and comfortable with, opening up about any concerns or issues they may have, without feeling worried that their mentor may know of, or hold opinions about, anything (or anybody) raised. Particularly in the case of freelancers seeking a mentor, casting the net wide for potential matches would be key to finding a good candidate.

How to be a good mentor (and mentee)

The skillset of a mentor needs to be a combination of different abilities.

Apart from having a breadth of knowledge around what it is like to be a good medical writer, and how to do the job of writing a high-quality document (if indeed, the mentor is or has been a writer themselves), the softer skills are important too. A mentor needs to be

reliable – arranging, and sticking to a pattern of regular meetings, and, if taking away action items from those meetings, delivering them in a timely manner. The conversations with the mentee need to be pitched at the right level of formality – the meetings are not like those between a manager and their direct report, but not like a chat between two friends either. The mentee needs to be in a position where they find their mentor easy to talk to and approachable, without fear of saying the wrong thing, but still knowing that they will receive sound and useful guidance.

A good mentor should have the ability to truly interpret what the mentee is saying in order to identify their specific need(s). They should listen deeply – is the mentee in a situation where they have received negative feedback from a client on their document? The mentor needs to be able to get to the crux of the issue – the reasons for the client's feedback, the root cause, and what solutions are available for an improved next draft and restoration of the client's faith in the writer's capabilities.

Mentors need to carry a certain amount of confidence – with the mentee being less experienced and likely in a more junior role, they will consider their mentor to be somebody to look up to; someone who "knows their stuff". Subconsciously, the mentee may hold an expectation that their mentor is confident and self-assured enough to provide solid advice.

When a mentor speaks to their mentee with confidence, it instils encouragement and motivation within their mentee. This is another soft skill that arises from the mentor/ mentee relationship; that throughout the process, the mentee is learning the confidence and self-assurance to apply in their day-to-day role.

Remember though, that if you are mentoring somebody, don't only use examples from your personal experience and perspective to *tell* your mentee what to do. For one, your personal

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experience may not fit exactly with the guidance your mentee needs. Secondly, mentors should guide and encourage mentees to find *their own* path, rather than dictate what they think the next actions should be.

Mentoring (and being a mentee) has the potential to draw on so many soft skills – it should be a reciprocal relationship with both participants showing trust, respect, and willingness to listen and learn.

Resources

Mentors should direct mentees towards resources to help them with their work – information sources, software packages, etc. However, they should think more broadly too – what if a “resource” could be a person? A mentee could have a question or requirement which somebody other than their mentor is best suited to address. A good mentor provides the mentee with the ability and

confidence to reach out to others for further guidance. When a mentor and mentee work for the same organisation, it would serve the mentor well to have a good understanding of the resources available within the organisation – broadly, the expertise available across the different departments that the mentee might need to work with, company-wide information sources or platforms/applications, and whether company policy or guidelines exist to support their mentee’s need.

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What about line managers and peers?

When might a line manager become involved, in addition to the support provided by a mentor? It is likely that a writer is in regular contact with

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their line manager, but the function of a line manager is different from the support the mentee receives from their mentor. The mentee could arrive at a situation where discussions with their mentor are covering particularly difficult scenarios with a project or a client, in which case the mentee’s line manager is better-placed to give more structured and process-driven instructions on how to move forward.

When might mentorship assume a different form? So far, we’ve looked at a more senior writer being assigned the role of mentor, outside of the role of being somebody’s line manager, and unrelated to any one specific project or task. However, there may be an experienced writer leading a team of other writers in the production of a large document or set of documents for the same project or client. Here, the writer leading that work is also leading the writers who are supporting the delivery of the document(s), and the soft skills needed for mentorship as discussed



above also come into play. Beyond the fundamentals of leading a group of writers on a shared task (e.g., providing the templates, sources, timelines, etc.), the lead writer needs to consider that the team supporting the collective effort will likely vary in experience, be it in terms of years in the role, or whether or not the writers have experience in writing the document to which they are assigned. Further to that, the lead writer should remember that each individual writer has their own situation and personality traits – does the lead writer need to adapt to having writers spanning time zones? Do the writers prefer to receive continuous support and guidance, or do they prefer to take the instruction and work independently? The opportunity is there for the lead writer to draw on their own soft skills – being aware of others’ needs, listening and responding to their requirements as the work progresses, and adapting to changes in the team’s requirements when necessary. The more cognisant the lead writer is about the personality traits of the writers, the better. Some writers may be much more inclined than others to shoulder the burden of the work, while others assume a less involved approach. There could be writers in the team who are much more prone to feeling stressed under pressure than others – lead writers being in tune with these differences helps the work run more smoothly.

Well-rounded writers

With the passing of time, the relationship between the mentor and mentee should become solid and symbiotic, with both parties refining

their soft skills during the mentoring process.

The evolution of their soft skills will be transferable to the day-to-day work of the mentor *and* mentee, making each person better at what they do. A writer who has strong soft skills becomes well-rounded and better at working with others – clients, colleagues, and other professionals. The mentee (and mentor) will elucidate a stronger sense of self-awareness, and this will enhance many aspects of their work – if we understand ourselves, we understand others.

Perhaps you haven’t considered yourself to have been a mentor so far in your career, but if you have guided a team of writers in the authoring of a set of deliverables as described above, you may have acted in a similar way to a mentor. The skills you learned in that situation might have developed and refined your ability to become a mentor outside of leading a project.

Consider seeking opportunities to mentor somebody or become a mentee yourself – it will benefit you by building on your soft skills and perspectives. Mentorship is a rewarding and fulfilling role that enhances your capabilities and will be an asset to a writer’s skillset. I recommend giving it a shot!

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