



## Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop

### MPWW Mentor Program Guidelines

Thank you for your interest in volunteering as a writing mentor through MPWW's Mentor Program. We often say that our mentors are the connective tissue that holds our organization together, and we're very grateful for your time and interest. This document lays out what you'd expect if and when you're paired with a mentee, and what would be expected of you. If you have any additional questions or concerns, please feel free to send them to [mentorprogram@mnprisonwriting.org](mailto:mentorprogram@mnprisonwriting.org)

#### What it is

MPWW's Mentor Program pairs incarcerated writers with experienced writers, editors, and teachers outside of prison for monthly exchanges of creative work and feedback. Every two months, mentees send their mentors up to 30 pages of creative work, along with a cover letter, and mentors respond the following month with personalized feedback, critique, encouragement, reading suggestions, writing exercises, prompts, etc.

The Mentor Program is an opportunity for incarcerated writers to hone their craft and grow artistically outside of a classroom environment, and mentors are encouraged to challenge their mentees while also supporting their expressed goals and needs. It's also an opportunity for incarcerated men and women to build a positive, productive artistic relationship with a writer outside of prison.

#### How it works

Incarcerated writers become eligible to participate in the Mentor Program after completing an MPWW class, pending the approval of their instructor. MPWW's Mentor Coordinator maintains a list of all approved prospective mentors, and when we receive an application from a prospective mentee, we attempt to make the best possible match with a mentor on that list. When matching mentors and mentees, we consider a range of factors including genre, style, experience level, goals, gender, and race.

Mentors use first names only and be able to choose a pseudonymous first name if they prefer. MPWW never provides mentees with personal information about their mentors.

Unless another arrangement has been made, you should expect to receive a new packet of work from your mentee every two months. Packets can include up to 30 pages of writing (there is no minimum page number). Each packet will include a cover letter from MPWW, on which is printed the deadline for your response. You will typically have one month to respond to your mentee. **It's very important that you send your response on time. If you can't commit to responding within one month, please**

**don't volunteer.** We can almost always accommodate short, occasional extensions on mentor deadlines, but these should be requested in advance so that the Mentor Coordinator can inform your mentee. The amount of time mentors spend on their responses varies from month to month and mentor to mentor, but in general, you can expect to spend 4-8 hours responding to each packet.

As a baseline, each response packet should contain marginal comments on your mentee's writing and a typed letter in which you elaborate on your marginal feedback, offer deeper analysis/critique, and make suggestions for revision. In your letter, you can also assign writing exercises, offer prompts, and/or give reading suggestions. Additionally, you're encouraged to include short readings for your mentee, which you can also discuss in your letter. You will have a lot of discretion in how you craft your responses to your mentee, though the Mentor Coordinator is always available to offer guidance, should you want it.

All mentor-mentee correspondence is facilitated by both MPWW and the Department of Corrections (DOC). You can choose to receive your mentee's packet by either email or physical mail. You'll be responsible for emailing or mailing your response to the Mentor Coordinator. Most mentors receive packets by email, print them out, make marginal comments by hand, scan the pages, and email them back to the Mentor Coordinator, along with their typed letter and any readings. If you don't have access to a scanner, you can choose to send your response back by physical mail, instead.

**If matched with a mentee, you will be asked to commit to:**

- Complete a minimum of three back-and-forth exchanges with your mentee. This will take approximately six months. After three exchanges, you'll be given the option to request a new mentee, if for any reason you feel that your mentee isn't a good fit for you, or to step away from the program entirely. Your mentee will be given the same options.
- Return your responses to your mentee by the set deadline.
- Take your mentee's writing seriously and engage deeply with their work.
- Meet your mentee where they are. Your primary job as a mentor is to help your mentee achieve their artistic goals.
- Maintain a polite, professional, and encouraging tone in your correspondence with your mentee.
- Have fun! (Okay, this is not a "commitment," but we do find that the most successful mentorships are those in which both parties look forward to their correspondence.)

**Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop (MPWW)  
Mentor Program Frequently Asked Questions**

**1. What are the elements of a successful mentorship?**

Every mentorship is different, but in general here are a few things we often see in thriving mentorships:

- Deep, thoughtful engagement. Mentees will learn and grow more as artists if their mentors engage deeply and thoughtfully with their work, and it's especially fulfilling for mentors to see their mentees working hard and improving. Try hard to get to know your mentee as a writer and a learner. Try different feedback techniques and see what they respond to the best. Listen closely to what they tell you about their own work and goals.
- Clear, constant communication. It's important for mentors and mentees to communicate with one another about goals, preferences, timelines, and what is and isn't working. It's equally important that both sides are comfortable asking questions. If you aren't sure what kind of feedback your mentee wants, the best thing to do is ask them directly.
- Flexibility. We do our best to set up and maintain a clear schedule of deadlines, but for a variety of reasons, mentees sometimes have trouble meeting them. When this happens, it likely has nothing to do with how much they value their mentorship or how dedicated they are to their craft; more likely, their wing was locked down, or they were unable to access the computers, or the DOC staff that facilitates the program at their facility went on vacation. The Mentor Program Coordinator will do their best to keep you in the loop but often we aren't even sure what the situation is, so it's best to be as flexible as possible.
- Reliability. While it's important to try and stay flexible, it's also important that mentors are reliable. Mentees often know to the day when to expect their response. People in prison are generally very familiar with people being unreliable or fading away, so it's important that they can count on their mentors to follow through reliably.
- Have fun! A mentorship is a rare opportunity to have conversations that revolve entirely around a shared passion. It's incredibly fulfilling to work with a dedicated writer and watch them grow as artists. In the most successful mentorships, both sides look forward to hearing from each other.

## **2. What kind of feedback is my mentee expecting to receive from me?**

Again, every mentorship is different, so the type of feedback mentees will want will vary. However, all mentees will expect:

- Written comments on the margins of their manuscript, including line edits.
- A letter in which you lay out your larger thoughts about the work your mentee has sent. The letter should include a discussion of what they're doing well in your writing, as well as concrete suggestions for how they might revise it to make it more effective. Letters should be between 1-4 single spaced pages in length.

Additionally, it is often helpful to give your mentee writing exercises to practice specific craft skills and assign short readings that illustrate a particular technique, angle, voice,

style, etc. If your mentee has trouble generating new work, you might send along generative prompts, as well.

We encourage mentees to communicate with their mentors about the kind of feedback they'd like to receive. Your mentee might request that you concentrate on line edits to their poems, or ask what you think about the structure of an essay, or ask for help with grammar, etc.

### **3. How do I know what kind of feedback my mentee wants?**

If you have questions about how you might be more helpful to your mentee, the best thing to do is to ask them. Again, all mentorships will be different, so it's important that both mentors and mentees communicate about what kind of feedback is and isn't helpful. Over time, we hope you'll develop a rapport with your mentee and cater your feedback to their specific goals and learning style. If you have questions about how to support your mentee with a specific issue, you're also always welcome to ask the Mentor Coordinator for advice.

### **4. What's the right balance of encouragement and critique? How critical should I be in my feedback?**

All feedback should include both encouragement and critique, and all critique should be framed in a constructive, respectful way. Like everything, the right balance will depend on the mentorship. In general, we advise that mentors err on the side of encouragement during the first few packets, which they build a relationship with their mentee, and shift the balance as appropriate later on. However, some mentees do specifically request critique from the outset.

When giving critical feedback, remember that your goal is to help your mentee improve their writing concretely. It can be difficult, especially for less experienced writers, to respond to many substantive suggestions at once. For that reason, we recommend that rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of what is and isn't working in a particular piece of writing, mentors focus on two or three concrete things that the writer might improve in revision.

Remember, too, that incarcerated people only rarely receive positive feedback, and it can be very valuable both in furthering your relationship with your mentee and in encouraging them to continue with their writing. If your mentee has done something particularly well, or improved in some particular way, let them know!

### **5. Am I allowed to include readings by other writers in my packet to my mentee?**

Absolutely! We encourage all mentors to include readings, so long as the total page number of your response does not exceed 40. Please feel free to include individual poems, stories, essays, or chapters that you think would be particularly relevant for your

mentee. It often helps if you note the reason you included a specific piece in your feedback letter (i.e., what you hope your mentee will pay attention to or get out of the reading).

If there are online craft articles you'd like your mentee to read, you're also welcome to include those as PDFs. If your mentee has requested information on a specific subject they're writing about, you can also include PDFs from the internet (Wikipedia, etc.).

Please do not include readings that include graphic violent or sexual content, or are pointedly political in nature, as these may appear irrelevant or inappropriate to the Department of Corrections.

## **6. Can I give my mentee book/reading recommendations?**

Yes, but remember that prison library collections are fairly limited, and your mentee does not have any internet access. Your mentee is able to request that their library order specific books, but there's no guarantee that they'll get them, and if they do, it will likely take several months. If you feel strongly that your mentee should read a particular book, let the Mentor Coordinator know. MPWW is able to donate books to the facilities and we maintain a small fund to purchase books for mentees.

## **7. How friendly or casual can I be in my letters?**

Your relationship with your mentee is a professional one. However, like most professional artistic relationships outside of prison, it's also a personal relationship, and mentorships work best when a rapport develops between mentors and mentees. You should always be friendly in your correspondence and, so long as the content of your letters pertains primarily to your mentee's writing and it's clear that you're taking their work seriously, a fairly casual tone can be appropriate.

## **8. What can and can't I disclose about myself in my letters?**

We recommend that mentors use first names only. If you'd prefer to use a pseudonymous first name, you're able to choose one at the outset of your mentorship. We also recommend that mentors refrain from disclosing any information about themselves that would allow their mentee to identify who they are (for instance, where you work, or the name of a particular publication of yours, etc.).

Outside of these parameters, you're welcome to disclose things about yourself that are relevant to the conversation you and your mentee are having about writing. For instance, many mentors discuss what they've been reading lately, or things they've learned from their teachers. You can also disclose hobbies, past experiences, significant life events, etc., so long as your correspondence is primarily about craft and your mentee's work.

If you're ever unsure about whether a particular piece of information is appropriate to disclose, ask the Mentor Coordinator.

**9. My mentee is working on a large project, but needs support with basic craft issues. How can I support their goals while helping them to build fundamentals?**

Many mentees are interested in working on large projects - novels or memoirs, for instance - which can create certain challenges. It may be difficult to provide feedback on a single chapter without seeing the entire book, for instance, just as it may be difficult for a mentee to incorporate your feedback on a single chapter even as they strive to finish their manuscript.

If you're not interested in working on a longer manuscript, you should indicate that to the Mentor Coordinator as soon as possible. Otherwise, both you and your mentee will generally need to do the best that you can within the parameters of the program. If your mentee is sending you parts of a larger project, you can affirm the larger project while also providing general feedback that will help them improve their overall craft. For instance, if your mentee sends you a memoir chapter that is written mostly in summary and contains few concrete scenes, you might describe the distinction between scene and summary in your feedback letter, point to specific examples of both in their work, include a reading that demonstrates moving effectively between summary and scene, and give them a scene-building exercise to try in their next chapter.

If you see that your mentee is learning from and incorporating your feedback in their future chapters, revising the work they've already sent to you might not be immediately necessary; it might be more important that they follow their momentum to the end of the manuscript. However, if they continue to struggle with the same issues you've already identified in subsequent chapters, you may want to ask them to revise a chapter they've already sent before sending you new chapters.

In some cases, it may be possible for you to receive a manuscript from your mentee that is longer than the usual 30 pages limit. If you think this would be a better arrangement in your situation, ask the Mentor Coordinator about this possibility.

**10. What if my mentee isn't incorporating my feedback in their writing / isn't revising?**

It's important that you feel that your mentee is reading your feedback closely, taking it seriously, and, over time, implementing it in their writing, whether they are revising pieces you've commented on or applying lessons learned to new work.

If that isn't happening, especially after 3+ exchanges, you might try adjusting your feedback technique a bit. For instance, if you've been primarily making small suggestions on their work, try giving them a writing exercise aimed at a particular skill. Ask them to include it in their next packet. You might also try sending along readings

that demonstrate the point that you're trying to make. And it never, ever hurts to ask your mentee what would be more useful to them.

If that fails, consult with the Mentor Coordinator. We really, really don't want the mentorship to feel like a waste of time to either side. It's possible you and your mentee aren't a perfect fit, which is fine; not everybody will be. But, if your mentee appears to be enjoying the mentorship, we'll want to explore other possible avenues before determining that you're at a dead end.

### **11. Can I share my mentee's work / submit it for publication of their behalf?**

Please do not share your mentee's work, even informally, without their permission.

DOC rules absolutely prohibit you from submitting your mentee's work on their behalf or publishing it in any capacity.

There are still some ways to support your mentee if they are interested in pursuing publication. See below.

### **12. My mentee is interested in publishing their work. Am I able to support them and how?**

While you can't submit their work on their behalf, your mentee is able to submit their work themselves through the mail. Some mentees may also have friends and family members on the outside that can submit for them online (again, you cannot do this).

If your mentee is interested in publication, feel free to share any publication opportunities you think might be relevant to them. In doing so, though, please keep in mind that they do not have internet access, so please include a mailing address, if possible. Also keep in mind that high submission or contest fees are likely a large barrier.

Your mentee might ask you for help finding a publisher or an agent. You can let them know that you won't be able to help much with that side of things. Mentees are told at the outset that the Mentor Program is not a fast-track opportunity to get published. Your primary job is to help them improve their writing, which is probably the best way to help them publish in the long term, so it's generally better to focus your attention on that job.

### **13. My mentee has submitted some work that makes me uncomfortable. What should I do?**

Your mentee has been informed about guidelines for appropriate content. If you feel that content they have sent is inappropriate in any way, please let the Mentor Coordinator know immediately. These situations are rare and we take them on a case-by-case basis. We'll work with you to determine the best response.

**14. Will my mentee write about their crime? If not, can I ask them about it?**

Possibly. We ask mentees to refrain from including any graphically violent or sexual material in their work, but otherwise we encourage them to write about whatever they want.

If you're uncomfortable reading about your mentee's crime, please notify the Mentor Coordinator immediately, preferably before you begin working with a mentee. In general, we do not know what crime mentees have committed, so it isn't something we take into account when making a match with a mentor.

We recommend that mentors refrain from looking up their mentee's criminal history. We also ask that you respect their privacy and not ask any questions about why they're in prison. They may choose to let you know, but that's their decision. If you don't think you'd be comfortable knowing, it's important to let us know that, because it may be very difficult to pair you with a mentee.

**15. I have some boundaries about the kinds of content I'm comfortable responding to. Can I request that someone reviews my mentees' work before it's sent to me?**

Yes, if you'd like the Mentor Coordinator to review your mentee's packets before sending them along to you, we are able to do that. Please feel free to request this, and mention any specific boundaries. If we do find material that crosses one of your boundaries, we'll let you know and discuss with you how to proceed.

It's also helpful if you let us know about any such boundaries before beginning a mentorship.

**16. Who is reading my correspondence with my mentee?**

You should always assume that your correspondence with your mentee is being reviewed by the Department of Corrections.

Additionally, for the first 2-3 exchanges, the Mentor Coordinator will review your correspondence with your mentee to ensure that things are off on the right track. In those early exchanges, we may give some feedback to either you or your mentee or both about how to make the most of your exchanges. Unless you request that we review it, once we feel confident that the mentorship is established, we try to allow for at least a semblance of privacy in your correspondence, and we only review correspondence briefly to check that all the relevant pieces are included, ensure that scans and handwriting are legible, etc.

**17. My mentee sent me work well before their deadline. Do I still need to respond in a month?**

Nope. Sometimes mentees are overzealous :-) If that's the case, you'll generally have a month from *their deadline*, which means you'll have two months from the date you sent your last feedback, regardless of when they send their next packet.

#### **18. What happens if my mentee is late in sending a packet?**

Most mentees adhere pretty closely to their deadlines. However, as discussed in question 1 above, flexibility is important in a mentorship, as things can and often do get delayed because of the prison-related logistical challenges.

The Mentor Coordinator keeps close tabs on deadlines and will be aware of any late packets. Mentees automatically receive a two-week grace period, at the end of which we send them a past due notice with a new deadline, usually two weeks later (giving them an additional month in total). If we have not heard from them two weeks past their second deadline, we'll inform you and repeat this process a second time.

In the rare case that we don't hear from a mentee by the third deadline, we'll inform you and also attempt to determine the cause of the delay by communicating with DOC staff and other students in their facility. Long delays may result from transfers, health problems, policy changes in a specific facility, or other factors.

We'll do our best to keep you in the loop throughout the process, but if you ever want a status update, just as the Mentor Coordinator for one.

#### **19. What if I need an extension on my mentee's response?**

That's generally no problem, especially for short extensions. If you need a longer extension (i.e., a week or more), it's helpful to let us know in advance, if possible, so we can inform your mentee.

If you are going to be more than a couple of days late, please just email the Mentor Coordinator to let them know. If we don't hear from you, you can expect an email from the Mentor Coordinator asking for a status update 2-3 days after your deadline.

#### **20. What if I am consistently late with my mentee's responses?**

As we discussed in question 1, reliability is extremely important in maintain productive relationships with men and women in prison, especially mentorships. If you repeatedly miss deadlines, we may want to pair your mentee with a different mentor.

#### **21. How long can my mentorship last?**

Four years. After that, you will need to stop working with your mentee, though you can be paired with a new mentee, if you want to continue participating in the program.

## Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop Mentor Program Interest Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Please list the formal writing experience you have had in academic settings (ie. college courses/major, MFA, etc.) or community workshops (the Loft, writing groups):

Have you worked/volunteered in Minnesota prisons before? If so, in what way and when?

Which genre(s) would you like to read and critique?

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Poetry              | <input type="checkbox"/> Fiction       | <input type="checkbox"/> Screenwriting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Creative Nonfiction | <input type="checkbox"/> Fantasy       | <input type="checkbox"/> Young Adult   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Picture Book        | <input type="checkbox"/> News articles | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____  |

In which month would you be able to start? (You must be able to commit to three exchanges, with typical time of a month between each exchange):

- |                                    |                                   |                                   |                                   |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> January   | <input type="checkbox"/> February | <input type="checkbox"/> March    | <input type="checkbox"/> April    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> May       | <input type="checkbox"/> June     | <input type="checkbox"/> July     | <input type="checkbox"/> August   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> September | <input type="checkbox"/> October  | <input type="checkbox"/> November | <input type="checkbox"/> December |

Are you able to mail, scan/email, or drop-off critique work to the Creative Writing Programs office at Hamline University on a consistent basis? Any concerns?

What mentoring/teaching experience have you had?

If a student were interested in working on a larger project (a manuscript, for example) that exceeded the 30 page limit, would you be interested/willing to work on it? You would be given more time to work on turning the material around.