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 when paired with a mentee, and what's expected of you. If you have additional questions or concerns, please send them to the Mentor Program Director at: 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. 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 can participate in the Mentor Program after completing one MPWW class. 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 can 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, which shares the deadline for your response. You will typically have one month to respond. **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 Program Director 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 margin comments on your mentee's writing and a typed letter in which you elaborate on your margin feedback, offer a more global critique, and include suggestions for revision. We also encourage mentors to assign writing exercises, prompts, and/or give reading suggestions as is appropriate for the mentee. You will have a lot of discretion in how you craft your responses to your mentee, though the Mentor Program Director is always available to offer guidance.

All mentor-mentee correspondence is facilitated by both MPWW and the Department of Corrections (DOC). You'll be responsible for emailing or mailing your response to MPWW. **If mailing, please make sure it will arrive by the response date**. Most mentors receive packets by email, print them out, make margin comments by hand, scan the pages, and email them back to the Mentor Program Director, along with their typed letter and any readings. If you don't have access to a scanner, you can send your response back by mail to:

MPWW
77 13th Avenue Northeast
Suite 204B
Minneapolis, MN 55413

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 can request a new mentee, if for any reason you feel that your mentee isn't a good fit for you, or decide 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.)

Mentor Program Frequently Asked Questions

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

Every mentorship is different, but 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. It's especially fulfilling for mentors to see their mentees working hard and improving. 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, ask them directly.
- **Flexibility.** We do our best to set up clear deadlines, but 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, they were unable to access the computers, or the DOC Education staff went on vacation. The Mentor Program Director will keep you in the loop, but 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 their writing, as well as concrete suggestions for revision. **We encourage mentors to consider the letter as the core element of every response.** Letter writing is an act of literary dialogue and partnership with you mentee. In addition to feedback about their work, you can share advice about the process of writing, broader questions about art and artmaking, examples from your own creative process, and ongoing encouragement. Letters should be between 2-4 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. However, we also suggest that mentors ask questions and follow their mentee's lead.

3. How should I approach the first letter and response to my mentee?

You will have their onboarding form and writing sample for your response. However, we suggest that you focus on writing an introductory letter and give more general feedback on the work sample. Think about your letter as a chance to open the dialogue and build trust. You want to get to know your mentee before offering a substantive critique. In this first response, you can:

- Introduce yourself, including your background as a writer.
- Offer global comments on the mentee's work sample. Please focus on encouragement.
- Ask your mentee questions about what they're looking for in the mentorship, or about what they wrote in their onboarding form.
- Share your passion for writing by offering a creative prompt, inspirational quotes from writers you love, or a short reading.
- Include margin notes on the work sample, but lean toward encouragement.

4. 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. 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 Program Director for advice.

5. 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. Many mentees have little to no experience with revision. For that reason, we suggest that you focus on two or three concrete things to try in revision but think more broadly about getting them to the next poem, story, or essay. **Too much critique can overwhelm and discourage a beginning writer.**

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!

6. 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 DOC.

7. Can I give my mentee book/reading recommendations?

Yes, but remember that prison library collections are fairly limited, and your mentee doesn't have internet access. If you feel strongly that your mentee should read a particular book, let the Mentor Program Director know. MPWW is able to donate books to the facilities and maintains a small fund to purchase books for mentees.

8. 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. Mentorships work best when a rapport develops between mentors and mentees. You should always be friendly in your

correspondence. As long as the content of your letters pertains primarily to your mentee's writing, a fairly casual tone can be appropriate.

9. What can and can't I disclose about myself in my letters?

We recommend that mentors use first names only. We also recommend that mentors refrain from disclosing any information that would allow their mentee to identify who they are (for instance, where you work, or the name of a particular publication, 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 Program Director.

10. 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 Program Director 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, as the Mentor Program Director about this possibility.

11. 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 Program Director. 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.

12. 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.

13. 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.

14. 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 Program Director know immediately. **Though we rarely have difficulties, we do stress that if a mentor feels they're seeing red flags, or just feels uncomfortable, there's no harm in checking in with us.** We'll work with you to determine the best response.

15. 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 Program Director 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.

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 Program Director will review your correspondence to ensure that things are off on the right track. We may give some feedback to either you or your mentee or both about how to make the most of your exchanges. 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. Things can and often do get delayed because of the prison-related logistical challenges.

The Mentor Program Director 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 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 ask the Mentor Program Director.

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 email the Mentor Program Director to let them know. If we don't hear from you, you can expect an email 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.

Mentees are often released well before that length of time. MPWW does support mentorships once writers return home, given both parties want to continue. If your mentee is released, we will check in with you both about continuing. The mentorship proceeds over email much as it did previously. We are happy to discuss appropriate boundaries as the mentorship transitions.

22. What else do I need to know?

Nothing! Thank you for bringing your expertise and passion to this program. By volunteering, know that you are joining a wider engagement of people working to bridge the divide between literary communities inside and outside of prison. Want to learn more? Check out the essay, "What Incarcerated Writers Want the Literary Community to Understand" on LitHub, which features the voices of several MPWW writers.

Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop

Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop
Volunteer Mentor Program Interest Form

Along with this application, please email your CV/Resume and a short writing sample (3-10 pages) to **mentorprogram@mnprisonwriting.org**.

Name:_____
Email: _____

Why do you want to be a mentor with MPWW? What do you hope to offer—and what do you hope to learn—from this exchange?

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?

□ Poetry □ Fiction □ Young Adult

□ Creative Nonfiction □ Fantasy □ Other:_____

□ Picture Book

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):

□ January	□ February	□ March	□ April
□ May	□ June	□ July	□ August
□ September	□ October	□ November	□ December

Are you able to mail, scan/email, or mail work to the MPWW office on a consistent basis?

□ Yes

What mentoring/teaching experience have you had?

How do you approach giving feedback on creative work? What is your philosophy on helping a writer develop their voice, style, or writing practice, especially across differences in background or circumstance?

What artists, authors, or social/cultural movements would you describe as important influences in your work?

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.

□ Yes □ No