

The Long Distance Mentor: Avoiding Burnout

By Jeanette Windle

“Would you look at my manuscript?” “Can you help me write my book?” “Will you teach me to be a writer?”

Mexico. Peru. Croatia. Bahamas. Guiana. Spain. U.S.A. Some I know, participants from past writers seminars. Others are strangers, my email address passed on to them.

Sure, I’d be happy to read their writing. That is, after all, the end goal of a ministry to develop Christian writers around this planet. But evaluating manuscripts, answering questions and mentoring a new writer through a project, take time. Time that must inevitably be taken from the mentor’s own writing hours. How do you balance demands of the mentoring relationship with other ministry and time constraints? Or communicate effectively half-way across the world?

The answer is as individual as God’s call on our lives. But following are guidelines by which experience has taught me to maximize my own effectiveness and time investment.

1. Leave initiative to the trainee.

Discipline and self-motivation are in themselves vital elements of a successful writer. I leave every participant in my writers seminars the same resource—my website address. I don’t hand out follow-up assignments. I don’t track down writers to inquire about their present project. But those who take the initiative to send me a manuscript will receive a prompt reply and evaluation.

Again, I don’t take the initiative to follow up. Inevitably there are those who industriously rewrite and email me a fresh draft within weeks. Others from whom I never hear again. Still others who months, even years, down the line send me that long-simmering manuscript. By leaving the initiative to the trainee, I am able to focus my mentoring most on those who demonstrate the discipline and drive to become a successful writer.

2. Don’t do their homework.

A mentor is neither line copy editor nor grammar teacher. The greatest frustration and time-consumer for the mentor is getting bogged down in correcting the trainee’s work. Unfortunately, the long-term result is no different than a parent doing his or her child’s composition. A mentor’s task is to push the trainee to personal proficiency in writing and self-editing.

I offer a detailed evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. Either they follow up on my advice and get back to me, in which case I am happy to offer further evaluation. Or they don’t. The willingness to head back to the drawing board is part of the development—and elimination process—of a successful writer.

3. Use the Internet.

I do virtually all my mentoring by email, preferably an attached Word file. Keeping evaluations to a short email overview streamlines the process. Then as I read through the manuscript itself, I type in comments and questions (in all-caps and bold or another font color). This gets emailed back with the evaluation.

4. Develop a check list.

It took the first few dozen manuscripts to recognize I was writing the same comments over and over. The bottom line is that writing errors fall into the same categories: not enough foundation, too much detail, etc.

Develop a check-list to return with the amended manuscript. Keep on file observations that can

be pasted to the next review with the same shortcomings.

5. Recommend other available resources.

Don't reinvent the wheel. There are countless resources available to writers, especially by Internet. Point trainees to these before expending your own time. If you have a website, create links to useful websites and articles (see www.jeanettewindle.com for examples).

6. Watch the language of your critique.

I will never forget the first professional evaluation my editor forwarded. I was devastated by the list of negative comments. My editor, in contrast, considered it an exceptionally positive review. In editorial circles, one assumes approval for anything not specifically singled out for criticism.

To the novice writer, this falls into the same category as assuring a wife her husband loves her because he's never informed her otherwise. A better option is the 'sandwich' critique. Begin with a statement of praise and encouragement (bottom slice). Follow with that honest evaluation (filling). Finish with another positive statement.

If there isn't yet much positive to say, sharing your journey through mistakes and learning will be an encouragement.

Is it all worth the undeniable investment of time and energy? When I read the third draft of a young writer, I knew I had witnessed the birth of her country's first Christian novelist. It may be that my investment in writers scattered across a dozen countries will touch this world for Christ far beyond anything I myself will ever write. Oh, yes, it's worth it!

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