

Mentoring Basics

Mentoring is a way of teaching that dates back to ancient times. LTA students and library support staff can benefit from finding a mentor to help them “learn the ropes” at their library. Here are some questions to ask yourself before asking someone to be your mentor.

1. **What is a mentor?**
2. **What do mentors do?**
3. **What are the characteristics of your ideal mentor?**
4. **What are your goals in working with a mentor?**
5. **What can you do to be an effective mentoring protégé?**
6. **What can you do for your mentor?**
7. **Tips for mentoring protégés**

1. What is a Mentor?

A mentor is a person who agrees to help teach and guide another person. Historically, the relationship between the mentor and the person seeking a mentor (sometimes called a “mentoring protégé”) has been voluntary, informal, and mutually-agreed upon. A person may seek out a specific mentor; or a mentor may select a specific protégé—the best relationships often happen with self-selection (rather than through a formal assignment).

2. What Do Mentors Do?

Mentors teach through

- Sharing
- Modeling
- Guiding
- Advising
- Supporting
- Networking

Mentors **share** their own experiences—both successes and failures. They teach through stories and anecdotes, and offer insights that can only come with experience.

Mentors **model** professional behavior.

Mentors **guide** people through the learning landscape of their particular library; they teach people things that cannot be taught in school.

Mentors **advise** people on complex situations that may not have a single right answer or approach. They offer observations and explanations that help people learn.

Mentors **support** people and offer reassurance when learning becomes difficult or overwhelming.

Mentors **network** with other library staff and professionals for their own professional growth and development, and provide people with the opportunity to do likewise.

3. What Are the Characteristics of Your Ideal Mentor?

First, consider the characteristics of a good mentor. These may include:

- A desire to help
- Broad-based and up-to-date knowledge and technical skills
- Life-long learner with aptitude for teaching
- Strong people and communication skills
- High energy levels (and not the first person out the door at closing)
- Positive outlook and sense of humor
- Good manager of time and resources

Next, decide what characteristics you value most in a mentor. This will vary from individual to individual. One person may value a friendly, easy-going relationship with a mentor most, while another may value knowledge and technical skills over people skills.

4. What are Your Goals in Working with a Mentor?

Determine how a mentor could best help you, and what you wish to learn. Set specific learning goals, whether they are tactical (learning how a particular job is done) or strategic (learning what and why something is done). Also set a specific time period to achieve your goals.

5. What Can You Do to Be an Effective Mentoring Protégé?

Effective mentoring requires that everyone involved be committed to learning. Once you have determined your goals, you must also:

- Accept responsibility for your learning
- Be open to new ideas and ways of learning
- Communicate effectively
- Accept feedback and act on it
- Cooperate
- Be able to ask for help when you need it

6. What Can You Do for Your Mentor?

Effective mentoring requires time and effort on the part of the mentor. You will get the most benefit out of a mentoring relationship when you are proactive and responsible. You can help your mentor out by:

- Communicating regularly and efficiently
- Being helpful and supportive in return
- Keeping trust levels high through confidentiality
- Holding yourself to professional standards
- Staying positive
- Addressing problems as they arise

**Tips for Mentoring Protégés:
How to become less tactical and more strategic**

Strategic thinking considers why a job is done. It involves thinking, planning, and actions.

How to think strategically:

- Consider the big picture
- Recognize patterns and trends
- Honor priorities
- Anticipate issues
- Predict outcomes
- Have smart alternatives to fall back upon
- Deal with issues
 - o Understand the overriding mission and purpose of library
 - o Know why library exists
 - o Know what library does that other libraries do not or cannot do.
 - o Visualize where the library will be in the future

Tactical thinking concerns how to get the job done:

- Knowing the hands-on skills necessary.
- Making sure strategic goals are met.
- Performing each task with quality and efficiency.

How to get your mentor to help you become more strategic:

- Interview your mentor about strategic versus tactical approaches to your job.
- Ask your mentor to help you develop strategic approaches to your job or learning activities.
- Ask your mentor to be frank about your strengths and weaknesses.
- Do a self analysis using past projects or learning activities.
- Research the literature and report to your mentor.
- Shadow someone with a reputation for being strategic and learn from them.
- Network with your manager and your peers.