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## How to Be (or Find) a Truly Great Teaching Mentor

*Real-Life Tips and Stories for Mentors and New Teachers* Being a teaching mentor is an incredible chance to make a difference. You can make a new educator's transition into a multifaceted and truly effective professional better and easier. And you [...]

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### Real-Life Tips and Stories for Mentors and New Teachers

Being a teaching mentor is an incredible chance to make a difference. You can make a new educator's transition into a multifaceted and truly effective professional better and easier. And you help a whole class of children (besides your own!) have a successful year.

Mentoring is not always easy. What works for one teacher might not work for another. Well-intended criticism can easily sound a lot like negative criticism. But there are ways to get better at mentoring, and if you're a new teacher, there are things you can do to ask for the help you need.

Deb Bowles, a teacher mentor who works for the Great Books Foundation, remembers working with Elsa, a fifth-grade teacher in New York. Elsa had a large class and was struggling to engage all of her students in discussion.

"She was so critical of herself. I just kept telling her that it's a process and she would get there and so would her students," said Bowles, who mentors around the Shared Inquiry™ method of learning.

"It's simple and yet challenging. Shared Inquiry means managing and guiding the thinking of a community of students. Absolutely, it takes practice," Bowles added. That's true for almost everything we do as teachers. Having a mentor who can be another set of eyes and serve as a sounding board (or a shoulder to cry on) can profoundly impact the teaching experience.

If you're a new teacher, you may find yourself assigned a mentor. If you're a more experienced teacher, you may *be* that mentor. Or perhaps you're starting an unofficial mentoring relationship with a teacher you admire or want to take under your wing. Either way, here are eight ways to become a truly great mentor as well as ways that new teachers can make the most of the opportunities they have.



### 1. **Build the relationship first.**

Kimberly Long had been an ELA teacher at Daniel Wright Junior High in Lincolnshire, Illinois, for seven years, but she didn't see herself as a mentor. "Don't you have to be a wise master teacher first?" joked Long. But she soon realized that when you work with new teachers, you need to be open to mentoring. "New teachers need a comfort level before they can ask for help." It was the sense of camaraderie Long developed that created mentoring relationships. "It can be nerve-wracking to receive feedback," says Long. "It's important there's a relationship before someone is open to come to you." Building a

relationship doesn't mean dinner invitations or spending weekends planning lessons. It's as simple as inviting a new teacher into your room to meet other teachers. Says Long, "It's making that person feel he or she is a valued part of the team."

### 2. **Pick one goal at a time.**

Teaching is complex work. As Lee Shulman famously wrote: "The only time a physician could possibly encounter a situation of comparable complexity (to classroom teaching) would be in the emergency room of a hospital during or after a natural disaster." There will always be skills to work on and improve. Pick one juicy goal at a time, one that has instructional consequences, recommends Randi Stanulis, professor of teacher education at Michigan State University. Classroom management is always going to be first. Next might be improving your writers workshop, facilitating strong classroom discussion or establishing math centers—instructional goals that provide opportunity for you both to learn together.

### 3. **Be there as often as you can.**

Even with all the other mentor duties—showing new teachers the ropes, helping them meet deadlines, being a sounding board—observing instruction makes a huge difference, says Stanulis. It's hard to help fix what you can't see. Try to give your newbies as many chances as possible to observe other teachers at work. Observing and debriefing lessons provides models of instruction and strengthens reflection. Plus, it evens the playing field.

### 4. **Give bite-size feedback.**

Helping new teachers grow into the best teachers they can be, of course, means giving feedback. But your feedback shouldn't be a sea of red ink. It's easy to make the mistake of listing everything you would change about a teacher's lesson, says Mike Wolfkiel, another teacher mentor with the Great Books Foundation. Instead, give plenty of positive feedback first, then limit yourself to one or two pieces of constructive feedback that in the end will have the greatest impact on students.

### 5. **Ask the big questions.**

As a new teacher, it's so easy to get overwhelmed by all the details. Danielle Sullivan, former special education teacher and founder of [Extraordinary Teachers](#), found the informal mentorship of her two co-teachers to be life changing. In particular, Sullivan's mentors helped her eliminate negative habits, like focusing too much on the little,

insignificant things that her students did rather than keeping her eye on the big picture. They accomplished this by continually asking: What do you see for your students two years from now? And how is what you're doing today getting them there? Questions like these help teachers stay focused on what's most important.

**6. Listen, listen, listen.**

As they're learning to teach, it's important to provide mentees with time to process what they're going through. Often, says Stanulis, mentors find it difficult to not give advice and just listen. But it's important to let new teachers come to their own realizations and conclusions. That's all part of helping them find their voice as teachers.

**7. Track progress.**

Change happens over time, so new teachers often can't see how much they've grown—they truly can't see the forest for the trees. You can be that mirror. Remind them to give themselves credit. Help your mentees see how they're better at teaching than they were last month or last semester or last year.

**8. Show your weaknesses.**

You've been there. We've all been there. Tell your mentees about the time you were so tired you wore two different shoes to school. Tell them about the grading that piled up or the lesson that bombed. Be real. When a lesson that Wolfkiel models doesn't go as planned, it's an opportunity. It puts the mentee teacher at ease and gives that teacher a lot to work with in terms of reflection.

**How to Make the Most of Your Mentor (If You're Lucky Enough to Have One)**

Great mentees have many of the same qualities as great mentors, says Wolfkiel. They're ready to listen, reflect and learn new things. Here are three mentee-specific ways to make the most of a mentor-mentee relationship.

**1. Ask specific questions.**

Ask your mentor for support around specific questions or ideas, suggests Andrea Giunta, senior policy analyst of teacher quality with the National Education Association. The more specific your questions, the more help your mentor can be. Questions like *Am I calling on an equal number of boys and girls?* or *Are my questions eliciting critical thinking?* will get more actionable information than *Am I doing this right?* or *What's wrong with this lesson?*

**2. Focus on respect and values.**

As long as your relationship is respectful and professional, your mentor doesn't have to be your friend. Keep the conversation focused on what's most important. If you're focused on the students, says Whitaker, you'll never disagree about the big things, even when you're not on the same page about smaller issues.

**3. Know when to say "I don't know."**

New teachers often feel like they have to be perfect right away, says professor Randi Stanulis. But failing (or feeling like you're failing) often means that you're trying something new. The point of mentoring is to improve, so resist the temptation to say everything is fine when it's not. Mentoring can be one of the greatest experiences of your teaching career—either working with a teacher you admire or expanding your influence across a school. It is work, and it takes time, but it's worth it.

## My Best Mentoring Moment: Teachers Share Their Stories

Teacher mentors have listened, offered a shoulder to cry on, bought pedicures and beers, and showered us with advice and school supplies when we needed it the most. For some of us, they're the reason we're still teachers today or the reason we made it through those first months and years. We asked the teachers on the WeAreTeachers Facebook page "What is the most important thing you learned from a mentor teacher?" Here are some of their answers.

"My mentor told me I should not grade every single piece of work students do. Thank goodness I listened or I'd still be grading papers from my first year in the classroom!" —*Maggie M.*

"She celebrated with me on the great days, listened to me vent on the bad days, and was my shoulder to cry on through a rough time. ... And she still answers all of my questions a year later!" —*Turner*

"When I started my first real teaching job, my mentor prepared everything for my first two weeks of school down to sharpening pencils to prepping copies and lesson plans. It was unbelievable. Thanks to her, I got to really enjoy those first two weeks with my new second graders." —*Allison S.*

"My mentor had a mantra: 'Teachers need sustenance.' She was always bringing in healthy snacks, surprise lunches, cups of tea, and even gave us random afternoons off." —*Nancy M.*

"When I was a student teacher, my mentor had each of my students write me a special letter. I still look at those letters when I'm having a bad day." —*Iona M.*

"I got a job at the school where I student-taught, thanks in part to my amazing mentor. And after teaching fifth grade there for a few years, I transitioned into third grade to take over my mentor's classroom when she retired." —*Kimberly R.*

"When I was student teaching, my mentor really let me take over the classroom. Even better, after work she treated me to a pedicure!" —*Samantha E.*

"He could easily and quickly elicit what I knew about the children and my good ideas for working with them. After every interaction I had with him, I ended up knowing more about my strengths and disposition than I had beforehand." —*Te Kiira P.*

"My mentor always told me to think outside the box and she kept my confidence up, especially when I thought I'd never survive that first placement." —*Lozzy L.*

"I debriefed with my mentor every Friday at happy hour. He never let me pick up the tab, and still doesn't." —*Zoe W.*

"My mentor always asked me: *Did you do something to change a student's day today, no matter how small?* If I answered yes, then I'd done my part for the day. I still ask myself that question." —*Kelly H.*

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Join our Facebook group [WeAreTeachers—First Years!](#) to connect with other new teachers, and learn more about how you can navigate your classroom and life.

# Testimonials

What TCOE Induction Candidates are saying...

*"My mentor was able to help me navigate an education career and balance new responsibilities at school!"*

*"The most valuable aspect of my Induction experience was meeting with my mentor once a week. The meetings weren't so much about completing my Induction documents, but rather about my lessons or how I could help particular students understand the content better. We would spend about 2 hours every time we met just talking about what she would do as a teacher to help ELL's or how she would use notebooks in her classroom."*

*"Being able to use my mentor as a sounding board after reflecting on why something did or did not go as planned, helped me to clarify how I might improve a lesson going forward."*

*"The unstructured time with my mentor was most valuable to me because it allowed us to organically work together and focus on the specific needs of our department, site and/or district. It also gave me some space to ask questions and vent about my frustrations."*

*"The most valuable aspect of my Induction program was being able to discuss one-on-one with my mentor regarding curriculum and classroom management. We spent hours talking about different teaching approaches that would specifically benefit my students in their unique environment."*

*"I think that just having someone to collaborate with allowed me to grow as an educator and think outside the box in situations where I might have played it safe and I am thankful for that."*

*"The knowledge and experience that my mentor provided allowed me to build on my own strengths but have the courage to try something new in the classroom. And because of the informal atmosphere, I felt comfortable to ask those questions that seem silly but worry you."*

*"Working with my mentor was very valuable. I was able to brainstorm ideas and get advice when I needed it. I also appreciated the feedback I received after lesson observations"*