

# LEADERSHIP



## ***Creating a Mentoring Program for Speech-to-Text Services***

Kim Thiessen & Brian Buma

### **Abstract**

Mentoring is, in effect, an effort to decrease the learning curve for pre-professionals (speech-to-text providers with little or no experience), putting more qualified service providers into classrooms in a shorter period of time, and ultimately to give clients the best service possible. Pre-professionals have a difficult time in what many consider to be a very intense situation, with extensive responsibilities, a fast flow of information, and a physical skill requirement which may, or may not, be attained prior to going into an actual classroom. To counter that pressure, and to ensure better services for the clients, a mentor (professional transcriber with training in mentoring techniques) can serve as a one-on-one educative resource for the pre-professional, answering questions, sharing tips and techniques, providing moral support, and functioning as a liaison between the pre-professional and the site administrator if necessary. This article attempts to illustrate what one program, at Western Washington University, has developed in an attempt to create an optimal mentoring system for new hires. Not everything in the following material will apply to all programs, and some programs will undoubtedly need additional preparation and plans. While there will be differences between programs and locations based on different site policies and the particular service being provided, a mentoring program will greatly ease the transition from “pre-professional” into “professional service provider,” and ultimately improve quality of service. At the end, a sample order of mentoring priorities is presented.



### **Introduction**

Mentoring, in the sense that will be used throughout the article, is an attempt to create a productive learning relationship between new speech-to-text providers (the pre-professional) and experienced professional service providers. The goal of the relationship is fostering better service faster, turning the pre-professional into an experienced service provider in a timelier manner. Ultimately, this means a higher standard of service to the students. While it is possible that these relationships will occur naturally, the mentoring program described here is an attempt to formalize and standardize the methods of mentoring at one university, extending the benefits to every new service provider. Mentoring is explicitly *not* teaching; professionals are not meant to didactically impart knowledge in this system. Mentoring is more of a guided process of self-exploration and analysis, with the professionals' main role found in probing questions and critical analysis. At times, the mentoring

relationship might lean more towards the teaching arena, especially with physical skills, tips, and techniques, but the central role of mentoring is guiding, not direct instruction.

It is extremely important to realize that good mentors are made, not born. It is not sufficient to simply be an experienced, capable service provider; training in good mentoring techniques is a prerequisite to good mentoring. We do not simply send physics professors into a high school classroom, nor should we. Teaching requires a specific skill set which is quite independent of the subject material. This is why even competent mathematicians must learn to communicate to a classroom to be an effective teacher. Many people have experienced a brilliant professor with little to no “people skills,” and the experience is rarely positive. Often, those teachers leave their students in a muddle because they are unable to articulate what, at this point in their careers, comes naturally. To the student, the result is either overwhelming or incomprehensible.

At Western Washington University (WWU), we learned these lessons first-hand. Our early attempts at a mentoring program met with scattered success. Those professionals with teaching experience often reported good gains, and the pre-professionals grew faster than they would otherwise. Unfortunately, we also had professionals functioning as mentors who were very talented at service provision but lacking any formal teaching experience. The pre-professionals working with these individuals were often frustrated or bewildered, wondering what they were supposed to be getting out of the mentoring experience. While working with these “non-trained” professionals certainly didn’t hurt their development, the experience did not result in any gains, and did take valuable time.

### **Mentoring the Mentors**

We find it vital to engage in a pre-mentoring “professional training” program for the future mentors. We emphasize the importance of learning to mentor, thinking of mentoring as a technique, not a job shadow or passive experience. Administrators bear the brunt of this particular responsibility. Each professional has a different skill set (and skill deficits), which should and must be addressed prior to setting up a mentoring situation with a pre-professional.

Western Washington University uses its own testing system to first determine, objectively, the skill level of the professional. Only those that reach the highest level of ability qualify. This can exclude some otherwise excellent mentor candidates, but also ensures that each mentor will also model excellent service provision, not just adequate service provision. After this initial screen, the administrator must provide instruction in “the art of mentoring.” Undoubtedly different site administrators will approach this in different ways, and each professional will have her own personal style of mentoring. This is to be expected and is perfectly acceptable. In fact, one of the major strengths of mentoring is the individualized attention each new hire gets to aid her professional growth. In the end, the professional should feel equipped to adequately guide the pre-professional in his journey towards becoming a professional service provider by whatever path necessary. More on the responsibilities of the mentor are found in the following sections, as well as some techniques for new mentors to use.

The site administrator needs to assign professionals and pre-professionals together, on the basis of both personality compatibility (to the extent that is possible) and available times. In our experience, mentoring is most effective if done immediately following a class in which both the professional and the pre-professional are working (i.e. class from 10:00 to 11:00 AM, mentoring from 11:00 to 12:00). Mentoring done later in the day or week is still of value, but the benefits of immediate feedback are lost. This means two service providers in the same classroom, “teaming” the class. While more expensive in terms of man-hours, we’ve found that mentoring when the mentor and the pre-professional do not share a class is of little value.

### Mentoring as a Process

Mentoring, in this program, is not an evaluative program in the traditional sense; there is no benchmark the pre-professional needs to achieve before “passing” (although there is certainly some informal, formative evaluation ongoing throughout the process). WWU uses a more relational approach, preferring to let the pre-professional guide the conversation. If there are any ethical concerns, procedural issues, or new techniques to learn, the pre-professional should ask. In our experience, most of the questions come from situations arising in class: “What should I have done there,” or “Would it have been better to...” Sometimes, however, the pre-professional isn’t even equipped to ask the right question. During the mentor training, the professional is taught to use leading questions, evoking thoughtful responses from the pre-professional and hopefully causing some self-exploration. While we prefer the mentoring relationship to be learner-guided, there are some general pathways and skill progressions that we have found common across all new hires, and therefore we have developed a “curriculum” for mentors to use if needed, listed at the end of this article.

The professional must be aware of several things if he is to provide a good service to the pre-professional. First, the professional needs to remember the stresses of being a new service provider—some will, some won’t. Often times a mentoring session might be nothing but a 50-minute encouragement seminar. That ties in with the second vital piece of mentoring – direct praise and criticism. Untrained professionals tend to notice only the negatives when evaluating somebody, because the good things are assumed (“Well, of course you did that right, that’s your job!”). To a new service provider, however, those good things must be pointed out specifically. Likewise, the mentor should focus on only one or two things which need improvement, and use precise vocabulary when describing those behaviors. A simple “That was good” and “That was bad” is not sufficient for the pre-professional to learn. Overwhelming a pre-professional is of little value, and likely to cause more burnout than progress. The mentor needs to be open and transparent about his own short-comings as well, modeling appropriate behaviors in the classroom. This means assessing what could have been done better, even if (especially if) the professional was responsible.

The underlying goal of a mentor’s action is creating a meta-awareness inside the pre-professional; the new service provider needs the skill of *self-analysis*, knowing what she did and how to improve. Self-criticism, but not self-abuse, is a difficult skill to learn; the mentoring relationship should model that behavior. Once the pre-professional can take on responsibility for her own growth and skill development, and the resultant independence, she will be ready to go out on her own. By no means is she ready to be a mentor herself, of course. Rather, the professional slowly fades out of the picture as the pre-professional assumes more and more of the responsibilities for good service provision, including self-critique, assessment, and problem solving.

### The Pre-Professional

The role of the pre-professional must not be lost in all the preparation of the mentor; indeed, a willing learner is required for any progress to be made. The new hire needs to be comfortable asking questions, probing for better methods, asking “Is there a better way to do that?” and thinking about his own performance in critical ways. Not only that, the pre-professional must be willing to stretch himself and avoid fostering dependency on the mentor for support or encouragement. The site administrator must make this clear at the outset, so all expectations are clear. Mentoring exists for the pre-professional (and ultimately for the person receiving services), and should be treated as professional development by everyone concerned.

### **Sample Mentoring Program**

While mentoring exists primarily as a pre-professional, learner-centered program, the mentor will also have the opportunity to guide the conversations and focus areas. If the pre-professional has no

immediate concerns, or does not know how to articulate any questions or skill related issues, the professional will need to take the lead as a “teacher.” While the traditional role of a teacher is explicitly not identified with the mentoring program, sometimes teaching techniques are useful. At WWU, we have tried several different approaches (and sequences) to teaching the various skills required for excellent speech-to-text service provision, and have created the following standard curriculum based on the needs we see most commonly in new employees. While it is designed around meaning-for-meaning speech-to-text services (Typewell specifically), the general layout and order of priorities are potentially transferable to other services. It is also vital to remember that mentoring is individualized (indeed, that is the main strength) and therefore realities of mentoring, on a person-to-person basis, may differ. This list describes how and why we teach specific skills in the particular order we do. Everything is, as always, designed with the best possible service provision to the student in mind, and presumes that the mentor and pre-professional are working together, in real service, at least a few times a week.

Sample Curriculum

*Order of Priorities:*

- Professionalism
- Readability – spelling/proper expansion
- Readability – grammar
- Chunking
- Completeness
- Readability – phrasing
- Editing
- Professionalism/Dealing with teachers
- Equipment Issues

Justification of Each

*Professionalism:* Service providers frequently come across unplanned and new situations for which there has been no specific training. Dealing with those situations requires a student-centered mindset, confidence and assertiveness, and knowledge of the general guidelines and policies of the site. These need to be practiced, if possible, even before the pre-professional gets into the classroom because even in a mentoring situation unexpected situations might occur where the pre-professional may need to take on full service provider responsibilities on her own.

A second vital skill associated with professionalism, and which could potentially need to be addressed at this stage, is self-analysis. Professionals constantly need to evaluate their performance in order to improve, and this is equally true, if not more so, for pre-professionals. Generating an awareness of both their internal thought processes and outputs will be necessary for pre-professionals to succeed in both the training and the job.

*Readability – Spelling/Proper Expansion:* The largest barrier towards an understandable transcript is spelling. Pre-professionals need to be near-perfect in properly spelling the correct word, and by extension, not spelling the wrong word (via mis-expansion). This skill will vary between incoming hires, some will be excellent spellers, some will not. These issues need to be addressed in class, by the team (preferably the hire acting as the mentor) for two reasons: First, the student needs to receive accurate information in class. Second, immediate correction of mistakes is more effective at preventing future mistakes than delayed feedback. If the pre-professional needs extra training, drills can be conducted for spelling, vocabulary words, or other issues.

*Readability – Grammar:* Commas, colons, dashes, and proper capitalization (among others) greatly increase readability and flow of ideas, even in poorly worded sentences. Once the pre-professional

is properly spelling words, he needs to arrange them in a grammatical fashion. Again, this issue should be addressed in class, immediately, for the same reasons as listed before; poor pronoun use, for example, is the second most common complaint from consumers. Grammar drills can also be conducted if necessary.

*Chunking:* Chunking is the true essence of “meaning-for-meaning” service provision, and a difficult step for pre-professionals to make. However, it is vital to address proper chunking relatively early in a training program, because reliance on speed (and therefore more word-for-word transcription) will only develop bad habits. Proper chunking decreases the necessary word count and allows for the inclusion of more ideas in the same length of time. A good chunking technique is vital for readability as well, because written language is far different from the spoken language; to provide equal communication access, professionals must translate between the two. This requires mental effort, not just good typing technique, and therefore takes time. Proper chunking will be addressed outside of class, with questions such as “How could you have typed this differently?” or “How do you think this reads to a Deaf individual?”

*Completeness:* Only at this point in the training does the pre-professional have the necessary skills to obtain 100% of the main points in a lecture. Prior to this, the team/mentor is most likely taking notes for inclusion later (during editing), which while necessary, is not preferable. At this point, the mentor should be able to move to in-class prompting, via whatever means the team finds most agreeable. This skill is vital for good teaming, and the pre-professional should be able to perform the same service for the mentor (if necessary).

*Readability (phrasing):* This skill is vital to a professional-looking transcription, and while difficult, is a distinguishing characteristic between a good hire and an excellent, certification-level hire. Awkward phrases and sentences need to be eliminated so the student need not spent time interpreting the transcript. Sentences should be transparent and quickly readable in class. This skill will be worked on outside of class so ample time is available for discussion of mental processing and techniques to ensure the best possible phrasing.

*Editing (if applicable):* Once the hire is performing adequately in class, editing can be discussed. Prior to this point, the mentor is performing all the editing duties (with or without the pre-professional’s help). At this stage, the pre-professional has the tools necessary to properly edit a transcript, and the mentor can aid the pre-professional with tips and techniques on the specifics of editing (proper order of editing priorities, site-specific policies, etc).

*Professionalism (dealing with teachers):* Throughout the training, issues with instructors will likely have come up, and so the pre-professional will have seen the mentor deal appropriately with those situations. Ideally, the pre-professional has taken the lead in various situations in the classroom with the mentor serving as a backup/support role. As the mentoring period comes to an end, however, the pre-professional needs to be able to deal independently with those situations, and so time must be spent dealing with specific questions, site-specific policies, and whatever else is necessary to properly equip a pre-professional to deal with instructors on her own.

*Equipment:* In the same vein as the previous section, the pre-professional needs to be confident in his ability to handle equipment malfunctions, problems, and situations, such as linking issues. Since this requires some technical experience, not all hires will be immediately comfortable with the instruction; however it is vital for any hire who will be working independently. Depending on site policies and service-specific equipment, the pre-professional should be given the tools required to deal with unforeseen situations as they arise.

Specific Techniques for Mentoring

*Professionalism:* Role-playing situations are excellent ways to get pre-professionals into the proper mindset, and while they can't simulate a classroom exactly, stimulating questions like, "A professor addresses you in class, asking you not to transcribe some vulgar joke he is about to make, what do you do?" can get pre-professionals at least considering the variety of situations they will experience in the classroom.

*Readability – Spelling/Proper Expansion:* While most training programs will ideally cover proper spelling, expansion, or any other skills specific to the type of service being provided, it is highly likely that pre-professionals will be deficient in some areas, and therefore intensive practice should be provided on an individual needs basis. Drills, practice transcripts, and video practice are all useful. If the anticipated content in a future class appears to be a difficulty, attending a similar class, finding documentaries on the same subject, or reading a preparatory book on the content would also be useful in mastering the vocabulary which will likely be a problem.

*Readability – Grammar:* Grammar is a skill which, depending on the pre-professional's background, may require practice. Worksheets, drills, and intensive analysis of the pre-professionals work are all valuable in both seeing what improper grammar looks like and developing a sense of the best way to word a given statement according to grammatical rules. Books like *Eats Shoots and Leaves* by Lynne Truss and the online Purdue writing center (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>) could be useful as well.

*Chunking:* Most universities have a video library with collections of videotape or DVD lectures available to students and staff. Using these actual lectures simulates a classroom situation far better than typing a documentary or other television show, and allows the pre-professional the freedom to pause, rewind, and otherwise self-analyze her work for the best modes and options for chunking available.

*Completeness:* There is little substitute for completeness training beyond practice, practice, and more practice. Videos of lectures and in-class time are the most important contributors to the pre-professionals success in this area.

*Readability (phrasing):* Sets of sentences to reword for practice are very useful from a meta-analysis standpoint. An intensive, critical look at the pre-professionals work will be helpful in getting the pre-professional to look at his work in the light of "When the student reads this, how will she understand it?"

*Editing:* Many editing policies (if there is any editing of the transcript at all) are site specific, and therefore training techniques will necessarily be individualized to the specific location. Some general ideas, however, include using simulated transcripts with single-error types of mistakes (only grammar errors, only spelling errors, only formatting errors, etc) to focus on a particular kind of correction, examples of real transcripts (before/after), and intensive focus on small sections of the transcript with a "How would the student read this passage?" mentality.

*Professionalism (dealing with teachers):* In terms of direct instruction, the pre-professional can practice hypothetical situations as set up in either a discussion or a role-playing situation by the mentor. In the classroom, the mentor can place responsibility on the pre-professional by saying, "If something comes up, you handle it." Even if nothing happens, there is some benefit to putting the pre-professional in that mindset – she will anticipate possible responses while in class, a valuable practice.

*Equipment.* Obviously equipment issues are related specifically to the type of service and the institutional policies. Instructions for setting up linking, repairing linking problems, perhaps a checklist of things to look at when computers fail to link, and other instructions can be useful reference material. In addition, the mentor could purposely “break” the equipment so the pre-professional has a chance to attempt a fix in a controlled environment.

### **Conclusion**

The mentoring program should provide a faster route to an experienced service provider than a new hire could achieve on her or his own. Rather than learning all lessons the hard way, a mentor can encourage, guide, and aid the pre-professional through the process. Often, in places without a formal mentoring program, this role is filled (sometimes consciously, sometimes not) by the site administrator. The professional mentor allows for direct instruction and advice, in the classroom, in real time – a convenience that a site administrator, with all her other duties, simply cannot match. A professional mentor can also identify directly with the pre-professional, and aid his growth in an individualized manner. It must be remembered, however, that experience is no substitute for training when it comes to effective mentoring. Mentoring is an art, and basic teaching techniques must be learned. When creating a mentoring program, the site administrator must first train the mentors.

While a basic curricula has been presented, the strength of mentoring lies in its learner-centered approach. If there are questions or concerns raised by the pre-professional, those should be addressed; an atmosphere of constructive self-criticism must be encouraged. The “teaching” aspect of mentoring should only be used in absence of any pre-professional questions or concerns. When implementing a mentoring program, everyone must treat it as professional development, a tool to create better service providers in a timelier manner. Given enthusiasm from all participants, a willing attitude to learn (from both the professional and the pre-professional), and a site administrator committed to the mentoring idea, better service provision should result.

