



Handbook for Volunteer Mentors

Welcome! We're delighted that you've joined us at Fighting Words. No one is more qualified to mentor students than you are, even if the thought terrifies you.

There's no need to be nervous. Even if you have never done this before, you're about to become an instant expert. This handbook will walk you through the way we work, introduce our basic principles and offer some tips for tackling the issues that come up regularly. Afterwards, if you have any questions, we are happy to answer them. In the meantime, reading this handbook is all you need to start what we hope is a long Fighting Words mentoring career.

We hope that you will enjoy it. Our mentors are lovely, dedicated, handsome and helpful people but most of them are not here because they are selfless. They are also here because they enjoy it. We hope that you will, too.

So let's get started.

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The Basics

General Tips – Primary School

1. **Listen carefully and be patient.** The most important things are the words, ideas and opinions of the child.
2. **Be positive!** Read or listen to their work and offer comments and praise regarding specific parts. This can boost confidence and encourage children to continue with their writing.
3. **If a child is confident and happy to work independently, don't feel you have to talk to them.** Remind them that you are there if they need you, check in occasionally and ask them how they found the session when it is nearing to a close.
4. **If a child becomes frustrated while writing,** encourage them to take a break. Talk to them about what they have written so far by asking open questions, such as:
 - How does the character feel when that happens?
 - What do you think that the character would do next?
 - Have you ever felt like that? What did you do?
 - Where is your story set? Where might your character go next?
 - Do you want your story to end happily, sadly or at a cliff-hanger? Why?
5. **If a child is struggling to write but has plenty of ideas, offer to scribe for them.** Take it in turns to write or write for a few minutes before encouraging them to take over. Make sure that you write only their words and avoid the temptation to add your own ideas.
6. **Encourage children to read their own work aloud and/or to read each other's work.** Encourage expansion and reflection by asking questions such as
 - What is your favourite part of the story?
 - Is there anything that you would like to add or change?
 - What does it look like when that happens?
7. **Never insist on perfect spelling or grammar while a child is writing.** If they can read it, it is fine! Encourage children to use the dictionary and thesaurus if they wish to check spelling or find new vocabulary.
8. Occasionally a child may want to write about an inappropriate subject, such as extreme violence. Ask questions or make a suggestion to offer an alternative. Remember that our guiding principles are **creativity and respect**. For example, if a child wishes to write about a gunman, ask what the gun shoots – marshmallows or paintballs can make a fun alternative!

Tips for helping a child who is struggling to get started

1. Ensure the child understands the task. Explain it to them and answer any questions that they might have.
2. Ask the child what they thought about the story at the beginning, if they had any favourite bits or if there was anything they would like to change.

3. Ask the child about their ideas for the next part of the story, asking open questions to help them develop their ideas.
4. Suggest the child imagine themselves as one of the characters and ask them, "How might you feel?" or "What would you do next?"
5. Remind the child that they can take the story in whatever direction they wish – as the writer they have full control over their own story. Ask them, "What would you like to see happen?"
6. Ask the child about their favourite story (book, film, video game, etc.) and discuss what happens in it.
7. At times it can be helpful to encourage two or three children who are all finding it difficult to get started to discuss their ideas with each other for five minutes.
8. Suggest a couple of ideas and encourage the child to add or change them. Sometimes a starting point is needed and once offered, the task becomes far less daunting.

General Tips – Secondary School

Many of the tips above apply for older students as well. Below you will find some information about working with teens, whether it is at one-off workshops, on-going projects or at Write Club.

1. EVERY PIECE OF WORK HAS POTENTIAL

Our philosophy at Fighting Words is that work, not magic and thunderbolts, makes good writing. All writers need to revise and even the most problematic story can be fixed with good editing and diligent re-writing. If a student knows little about punctuation or grammar but has an ear for language, then focus on that as your writer's strength. "I love the sound of that," you might say. "Let's see how we can get it onto paper." If the story is not coming to life, say something like, "The plot is going well. Let's get to the end, then go back over it and add the details and the dialogue. We can make it even better."

2. LET THE STUDENT KNOW HOW GOOD HIS/HER STORY WILL BE WITH SOME WORK

Giving the student an idea of just how great his or her is coming along during the course of the workshop will give them the strength and endurance to keep at it: "You're really getting there. I really like the way the plot is developing – keep going and it'll be brilliant." Students will be more ready for the work ahead if they know that it will improve the story. Encourage self-confidence: ask them which passages that they like best.

3. USE THE OUL' SOCRATIC METHOD

In brief: do not just give the answer, help the student arrive at the answer themselves. Suggestions and corrections are ideally best by asking questions: "Is there a livelier word we can use here?" "Should there be a question mark at the end here?" Of course, it's not always possible to phrase a comment in the form of a question but students will learn and retain the knowledge better if they come up with the answers themselves.

4. BREAK THE WORK INTO PIECES

Often, students are overwhelmed by the thought of the size of the exercise. Finishing the story feels impossible when they do not know where to begin. Your first step: put them at ease by breaking the exercise down into manageable pieces. So, take it one step at a time, say, paragraph by paragraph, and see how it goes.

5. BROAD STROKES FIRST, DETAILS LATER

Chances are that there will be only a short amount of time to work. You should concentrate on getting the first draft done; let the student get the plot down on paper. As time permits, you can focus on particular sentences and words.

6. THE DETAILS - GO EASY AND EXPLAIN YOUR REASONS

For longer term projects, there will be time for more precise editing. If and when you do start editing grammar, explain to the student what the rules and logic are behind your suggested changes. Provide reasons for any correction: "The its/it's rule is confusing. 'It's' is a shortened version of 'It is'. So is 'it's' what you want here?" Try not to overwhelm students with a long list of corrections – a sea of ink can be intimidating. Particularly during those longer-term projects, you can always fine-tune during the next round of editing.

8. THE WRONG GRAMMAR IS OFTEN RIGHT

We often break the strict rules of grammar when we speak to each other. So, when writing dialogue on paper, we often break the rules – 'Know wha' I mean, like?' The story's narrator, if there is one, may break or bend the rules. Good creative writing is often about bending the rules. CLARITY is vital, inside or outside the rules.

9. READING ALOUD HELPS

It is often a good idea to ask the student to read the piece aloud to you – or to read it aloud to him or her. This can be a great way to start a mentoring session. It can help point out an awkward sentence, or an unintended repetition. Hearing the work spoken can make clear problems not seen on paper.

7. MAKE IT ENJOYABLE

The process will not be great craic the whole time, but it should not be painful or boring. It's our job to impart the lesson that writing and editing, and re-writing, improving the work is enjoyable and rewarding. Try to show that you enjoy the work and learning from the student. Chat about it. Show enthusiasm; praise the changes that you think improve the work.

8. ONCE THEY'VE BITTEN THE BUG

Encourage the secondary students to come to join **Write Club** – secondary school students aged between 12 and 18 are welcome to take part at our online sessions

or in person at certain locations. Mentors are available to help or provide feedback if they need it. **Before telling a student about Write Club, tell a member of staff. Details are on www.fightingwords.ie/writeclub.**

9. DO NOT BE AFRAID TO ASK FOR HELP

Quite often, students will be writing about very personal things. We need to respect the emotions and truth revealed and the courage it took to write it down. However, if there is something disturbing in the text, or if the student says something that raises a red flag, please let one of our staff members know; they can follow up.

The Not-So-Basics

What You Might (and Might Not) Expect

Every child and young person is different. All of them have a story to tell. Some are bilingual; some have learning differences; some are unusually gifted; some get bored easily; and some (most, really) would rather sit around eating crisps and watching TikTok while the dog finishes their homework.

At Fighting Words, we frequently work with children and young people who have been identified as those with additional needs – sometimes they are in a mainstream class, sometimes they are in a group from a special group or support service and sometimes they come to us at summer camps.

The advice that follows is provided to support our volunteer mentors to support these young writers. If you have any questions about individual children, please ask a member of staff. Teachers and parents are usually very happy to provide advice about how best to support individual children.

Remember, all children and young people are individuals - don't expect them to behave in a certain way. Some children and young people may present as very socially able and chatty. Others may appear withdrawn or quiet and may have difficulties communicating.

Meet each individual as you find them. The advice below also applies to all children, regardless if they have additional needs or not – they are great approaches for working with everyone who attends our programmes.

Most of all, don't worry! As with any child or young person we work with, be enthusiastic, patient and kind.

Here are some tips for tackling individual issues.

The student can't focus: This, by far, is the most common problem. Often it is because the students simply do not understand the exercise, so the first step is to make sure they comprehend what they are being asked to do and know how to do it. If you are encountering a child struggling to engage, you can:

- Check they understand the task. Explain it to them and answer any questions that they might have.
- Have a chat! Sometimes a child cannot focus because they are nervous. Ask them about their day so far, smile and make a joke – let them know that you are there to help.
- Sometimes a child will start out very focused and become distracted later. Encourage them to read their work to you and offer lots of encouragement and suggestions.

- Suggest a movement break or a glass of water and then bring their attention back to the story.
- Suggest sharing their work with a friend.
- Give a relaxed deadline by saying, “Great, get those ideas down and I’ll check with you in x minutes.”

Boring!: Sometimes the student may not like the sound of the task set. Discuss what aspects they don’t like and help them to find their own version of it that they can engage in and enjoy. Or find out what they are interested in and adapt the exercise accordingly – they may be much more interested in writing about what interests them. Try making a game out of the work. You can set a time limit on writing a sentence or take turns to come up with sentences.

The student has a learning difference: As with all participants, the main point to remember is to have patience. Volunteer mentors will be made aware of students with learning differences in advance and be provided with any information required so that the task is enjoyable and fulfilling for everyone.

The key is adapting to the participant’s style of working and finding an activity or pace that is right for them. Again, as with all participants, listen carefully, be patient and give plenty of encouragement.

Remember that students with learning differences may see things in a different way that will, in some cases, help them to solve problems. Dyslexic students, for example, often have very advanced oral skills, so you may want to spend a lot of time talking out their ideas and discussing how the story will proceed, before starting to write. Autistic students or students with ADHD often do well with a lot of repetition.

Students who require additional support: There are many students who require additional support, such as students who use English as an additional language or autistic students.

Some tips:

- Use simple, clear language – avoid idioms or slang.
- Encourage informal conversation before any writing takes place.
- Offer to scribe for them, listening carefully to their ideas and helping them to structure sentences.
- Encourage them to draw or make a storyboard of their ideas if they are finding it difficult to express a particular idea in words.
- Avoid telling them what they have written or said is incorrect. Demonstrate the appropriate English by repeating back what they have said or writing it down.
- Find out what the student is interested in and adapt the exercise accordingly. If they like football, for example, suggest that they write about that.

- Writing – and thinking about writing – can be tiring. Offer to take a movement break and come back to the table if necessary.
- Use a bilingual app or dictionary to translate when confusion arises. If you need more help and there are no bilingual mentors around, ask another bilingual student to help if possible and/or check with staff and/or the class teacher.

The student demonstrates challenging behaviour: Almost always, Fighting Words students are very well behaved. Occasionally, however, they might get a little disruptive.

This can be for a variety of reasons – perhaps:

- They are finding the exercise difficult.
- They are tired.
- Something has happened recently to upset them.
- There is a problem at school or at home.

Don't worry – there are strategies for managing those situations. **Always seek help from a member of staff or a group leader.**

- If you feel certain that children are not getting along, or are simply distracting each other too much, ask the workshop leader or a member of staff about reshuffling the room.
- Gently remind participants that they should listen to each other and avoid talking during the sharing part of the workshop in order to demonstrate respect for everyone's creativity.
- Model positive behaviour by listening when the workshop leader or other children are speaking.

Our mentors are here to mentor, not discipline, so staff members - or the teachers who always accompany class groups - will handle serious situations.

The student tells you something disturbing: This is a *very* rare occurrence, but should a student tell you anything that causes concern, please tell a staff member **immediately**.

We will take it from there, in line with our child protection policy and procedures. See the Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy for full details.

Tips for working with a group

1. If one child requires more attention than the others, don't worry about giving it to them. Check in with the rest of the group regularly and remind them that you are still available if they need your help.
2. Encourage a whole group of paired discussions if you feel they will benefit from hearing different ideas - but set a time limit, something short and manageable.

3. If you feel that one child is causing problems in the group, suggest that you work with them separately, or tell them that you will focus on them within a certain time frame, e.g. four or five minutes. Avoid having the child feel that they are “in trouble” by explaining that you want to hear what they have been doing and work with them on their ideas.
4. Suggest to other members of the volunteer team that they step in to provide extra help if necessary.

Fighting Words Positive Behaviour Policy

What does “positive behaviour” mean? At Fighting Words, we aim to ensure that the individuality of each child is accommodated while acknowledging the right of each child to take part in our programmes.

At our summer programmes and other workshops outside of the school time, parents and guardians are provided with our Positive Behaviour Policy, which sets out the standards of behaviour we expect from all the participants in our programmes.

Finally, enjoy yourself!