Approaching Mentorship

The following guide to approaching potential mentors was developed by Reed alumnus Lev Navarre Chao ’12. It covers a number of topics that should be helpful for current students and recent graduates who are thinking about engaging a mentor in a particular career field, or are looking for general support from other alumni. If you’re looking for any other mentorship resources, just email the Reed Career Alliance at alumni@reed.edu and put “Mentee Assistance” in the title.

What does good mentorship look like, and why should I seek it?

It’s no easy thing to emerge into a post-recession world clutching only a bachelor’s degree. It’s fairly inevitable that the tight-knit social bonds you developed at Reed will dissolve, to one degree or another: you may move back home, or somewhere new, and feel relatively isolated—or you may stay in Portland and watch your peers move back home or somewhere new. However, you’re actually pretty far from alone; the Reed alumni community is far broader, deeper, and mutually supportive than is visible to undergraduates. In fact, if you’ve encountered this document during Reunions, the campus environment probably makes this distinction clear. The upshot of all this is that somewhere out there within the alumni pool, there’s someone who has shared your experience, knows what you want to learn, and would be very happy to teach it to you.

A good mentor will be to your post-Reed experience what a good academic or career advisor was to your undergraduate Reed experience. Typically, a mentor is an older confidante and guide who has the perspective to understand your immediate position and trajectory, the patience and know-how to walk you through processes like your first salary negotiation, and a sufficient level of personal investment in your success to put his or her references forward as necessary.

What will your mentor get out of a mentor/mentee relationship? Alumni who step up as mentors do so simply because they see reflections of themselves in their mentees, and they strongly believe in making the Reed community stronger on an individual-by-individual basis.

Although typically the common goal of a long-term mentoring relationship is the mentee’s continued professional advancement, the mechanism of support is primarily social and informal. The slow transfer of knowledge, judgment, and professional connections takes time; it generally does not develop overnight. The relationship typically builds over the course of
many meals, phone calls, emails, and glasses of beer, so it works best when both parties
genuinely like each other. To that end, both mentor and mentee should be prepared to
carefully vet and court each other. Patience is a virtue in the selection process.

Most Reedies prefer to march to their own drummers. If you’re not yet sure what you want to
do but you’re determined to find a non-beaten path, you are certainly not the first of us to feel
that way. That being said, there’s no need to reinvent the wheel every step of the way. A
mentor can guide you, and this document will hopefully convey the first steps towards finding
one.

Making the Ask

By far, the best way to begin a mentorship is to meet in person. Start the conversation by
introducing yourself as you would to anyone else you’d like to befriend—don’t come right at
your contact by asking for help. Instead, provide some context and seek his or her advice,
opening the door to an offer of help. In other words, make a deposit before you try to make a
withdrawal. If fate doesn’t drop a perfectly-matched mentor in your lap, cast your net broadly
by sending emails.

In your first letter, focus on wording intended to develop a long-term relationship with an
alumnus/a in your chosen field. Of course, obtaining an internship or job is important and may
very well be your current goal, but that’s only the first step in a much longer career. As you
progress from internship or summer job to competitive interviews, from handling interviews
to navigating the workplace, and eventually to negotiating promotions and moving laterally
between work opportunities, you might wish for a mentor’s advice at each stage. A
relationship that accommodates ongoing discussions and support is built on ongoing shared
experience, so be prepared to keep your mentor informed of your progress. Your first email
will hopefully set this precedent by framing your current position and your intended
trajectory.

If you’re starting from scratch and no alumni events are available in your area, IRIS is a great
place to start. First, search the IRIS alumni directory in your field, scanning for companies or
job titles in which you’re interested. For instance, let’s say a young woman studying econ
wants to find a finance internship in the Boston area.

She should search IRIS for State: Massachusetts
Type of business: Financial Services
Limit search to career network volunteers: yes

Then she’ll browse through the listings, and read alumni bios. If any individual seems
appealing, she’ll look up the alumnus/a on LinkedIn to check to see what the person is doing
currently. She can also Google the name + “Reed College” to look for other background info.
Due diligence on a prospective mentor not only shows that she’s genuinely interested in the
mentor on a personal level, but also allows her to ask specific questions. After doing her
homework, she’s ready to open channels of communication with a brief email.
"Dear Ms. or Dr. Alumna,

My name is XXXXX, and I'm a sophomore economics major at Reed. I'm interested in pursuing a career in finance, but I don't really know where to start. I found you on IRIS and I see that you did some work with Reed's Startup Lab. I was hoping that you might have some time to talk with me about your experience in the industry. Do you have any time for a phone or Skype call with me sometime in the next couple weeks? I've attached my resume, if that would be helpful. I'd appreciate any insights you are willing to share.

Please feel free to reach me via email or cell at XXX-XXX-XXXX. Thank you! Sincerely, XXXXX '17"

Guidelines for Contact

Don't ask for a job; ask to get to know each other

Don't directly ask for leads to jobs and internships; such positions are valuable, coveted, and not assigned casually. If one can demonstrate ambition and competence in person, references will follow. But before that point, any alumnus/a considering writing a referral for a younger community member needs to get to know the student well enough that the elder feels confident putting his or her own name behind the junior's actions. If a student flakes at an early career stage, the student doesn't have far to fall. But a well-established professional stands to lose quite a bit of credibility; don't put your mentor at risk.

Give your contact an easy out

If prospective mentee and mentor aren't a good personality match, that's not a big deal—there's no harm in backing out gracefully. If a mentor ultimately doesn't want to invest the energy or time, for whatever reason, that's his or her prerogative. That doesn't necessarily mean that the mentor dislikes the mentee; coaching a recent graduate into the working world is a serious project, and sometimes Reedies can be intense, anxious, intensely anxious, or anxiously intense. The mentor deserves a comfortable way to say no, and scheduling is always an inoffensive way out. Both for this reason and also out of general courtesy, the student should give the alumnus/a a broad window for returning contact.

Emphasize that you don't want to take up too much time

Some career network volunteers are reluctant to take on the role of mentor simply because they have a lot on their plates already, and additional volunteer work can be stressful or overwhelming. It is important to emphasize at the outset that you respect their schedules, and a short phone call or coffee meeting would be more than enough. Sometimes, they can only spare enough time for intermittent email contact. However, if you respect your mentor's time constraints, you may find that he or she will go beyond an initially-limited commitment and make your career development more of a priority.
Find something in common

Ultimately, it’s on the mentee’s shoulders to provide a compelling reason for the mentor to share advice and resources. Doing research in your mentor’s fields of interest can provide you with different topics to discuss and multiple ways to connect with the person whose assistance you seek.

It’s OK to be inexperienced and uncertain

You’re a Reedie. Your mentor will likely be a Reedie. You have almost certainly spent more time learning in the classroom than you have practicing business etiquette in the professional world. After all, Reed’s mission self-identifies as “an institution of higher education in the liberal arts devoted to the intrinsic value of intellectual pursuit.” It's okay to admit that you don’t really know how to get what you want in the work world, and to ask for help and guidance. Although the onus is on you to politely work your tail off, you aren’t also expected to have a perfect plan at this early stage. It’s okay to be open about a lack of a plan, because that’s the norm—and any alumni who want to help will remember their undergraduate days in that state of mind, too.

Responses to Expect

In an ideal world, your new mentor will respond enthusiastically to you, and you’ll have vibrant conversations in which you share your backgrounds and interests. However, your primary goal during the first few conversations should not be to share your entire story, but to listen and learn how someone else’s success story began. It then follows very naturally to ask: “so, if I want to get started the way you got started, what should I do next?” At that point, the alumnus/a can make a suggestion, or let you down gently, or—more likely—honestly respond that he or she can’t think of any immediate opportunities, but will ask around and circle back to you.

Following Up

By the end of the conversation (by which point hopefully you’ve shared a few laughs), you should have a plan for follow-up communication. That could be another meeting, a video call, an email to a recommended colleague, or a vague determination to keep in touch. If it’s the latter, the onus is on you to follow up. Once you’ve built a bridge, don’t burn it! Keep in touch with those who invested with you. Even a short note goes a long way towards maintaining a relationship.

There’s a lot of good will in the Reed alumni community, and a well-fitted mentoring relationship is very gratifying – but developing it from scratch can be tricky. Keep an open mind, be prepared to both receive and give polite refusals, and own your mistakes. Good luck! – Lev ’12