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# HOW TO HIRE AN Artist Coach

BY GIGI ROSENBERG

1 Artist mentor Brainard Carey speaks to artists in New York City. Photo by Claire Lo.



**T**he first time I hired a coach, my writing career was at a standstill. I had reached a place where I wanted to realize more of my ambitions, but I didn't know how. I was spread thin over many endeavors, applying for grants and residencies with little success, isolated from a community of writers and had no more than a muddled vision of my next year.

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~ Gigi Rosenberg

So, I paid the fee, booked the first appointment and did the hours of required homework. This coach came highly recommended. We talked on the phone for two hours, and I took copious notes.

But something was amiss. After I hung up the phone and in the days and weeks that followed the call, I felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I didn't feel excited and inspired; I felt more like I'd been reprimanded by a stern schoolmaster.

What had happened? Now, many years later, I realize that this coach was lacking two qualities I need in a coach — chemistry with me and a style that motivates me. No amount of knowledge, good advice or goal setting was going to make this coaching work for me.

Fast forward to now. I've since hired a few coaches to help me in my career at various times who have made all the difference. Now, as an artist coach myself, I work with literary, performing and visual artists to help them define their ambitions and carry out the steps to reach their goals.

Having sat on both sides of the table, I wanted to explore what it takes to hire an artist coach and have it work. In my inquiry, I interviewed several coaches from around the country to find out how to make the most of this investment — not only of money but also of your time.

#### DISPEL THE MYTH

When I was younger, I believed that if only I found the right coach, my career as a writer would be easy. I felt convinced that the “magic” I was missing could be found in the secret

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~ Alyson B. Stanfield

key they might share so that riches and success would come pounding at my door.

Now I know better. Success in any career takes persistence and hard work. Success in the arts takes even more stamina.

So, the bad news is that there's no secret handshake. That also turns out to be the good news. A coach who's a good match for you can help you take your career to where you want to go if you're willing to do the work.

It's simple but it's not easy.

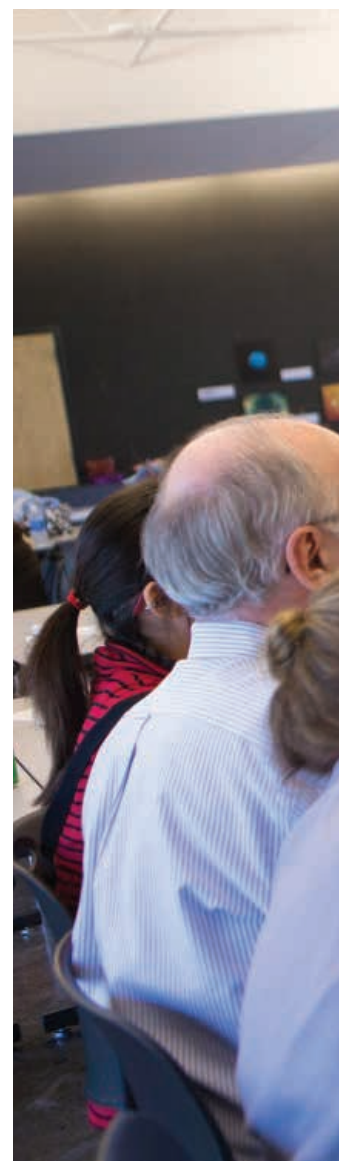
Coaches can't make promises (and if anyone does you should head for the exit). When coaching works, a coach can help you show up more often and more effectively. The coach can also edit a grant application, help you write and rehearse your artist talk, teach you how to approach a gallery, help you create and implement your marketing plan, and so on. But in the end, it all comes down to you doing the daily, weekly, monthly and yearly work with support from many places: your colleagues, your family, your friends, your artist group and at times, your coach.

Hiring a coach will cost money and doing the work will require you to get out of your comfort zone for the rest of your career. The pain of leaving your comfort zone will only be worth it if you want it badly enough.

When I was in my 20s, I wanted to be an actress. For years, I took acting classes, auditioned for plays and even scored a few roles, but the more I experienced acting as a career, the more I realized that it wasn't for me. I didn't want to be an actress badly enough to do the things that actors have to do. I hope



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[2] Artist coach Gigi Rosenberg speaks at CUE, a non-profit contemporary art space in New York City.



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someday I will act, just for fun, but not as a career.

■ **FOR MORE** on why not to follow your passion, read Alyson Stanfield's *Think Before You Leap* on Page 18 of this issue.

Now, as a writer who wants to see my work in the world, I'm working everyday because I want it badly enough. I also work with coaches on different writing projects and to help me sustain and grow my career as a writer.

### START WITH A VISION

Before you contact a coach, do some visioning work on your own or with an artist friend. Your vision, like your artist statement, will always be a work in progress, growing and evolving as your career and your life change and grow. Check in with your plan now.

Some questions to ask:

»» What would you like to have accomplished by the end of this year? When you raise your champagne glass next Dec. 31,

what do you want to be celebrating?

»» Where do you see yourself in two to five years? Be specific. What city are you living in? Who are you with? How are you making money? What are you doing?

■ **MORE** on visioning can be found on the back page in this issue's *Revitalize Your Dreams* by coach Renée Phillips.

You can only judge a coach's ability to help you get where you want to go if you have some idea of where you're going.

3 Artist Coach Alyson B. Stanfield works with artists on their marketing plans during a live art business workshop. Photo by Rafael Aguilera.



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~Brainard Carey

An exception to this advice: Sometimes it's easier and more fun to explore and define a big dream when you work with someone who asks provocative questions, pokes at assumptions and holds the big vision while you're creating it. So, you might consider working with a coach for a few sessions just to explore what your next year or several years might look like.

For example, I remember when I was finally able to admit my dream of writing a memoir and being interviewed by Terry Gross on NPR. I couldn't have admitted this big ambition to a friend. My dream felt so big, it was embarrassing. But when I was finally able to admit it to a coach, I could start writing the memoir that might eventually land me in the sound booth on

the radio show *Fresh Air*. (I haven't made it yet. But working toward that dream has been a satisfying part of my career, only possible after I came clean with the dream.)

I believe in making both outrageously big goals (for me it's being on NPR) and small, doable goals (for me that's committing to submitting one piece of writing a week for a year). If I work back from the big goal of being on a radio show, the next thing to do is to write the next chapter in my memoir. That outrageous goal prods me to the daily work of sitting at the writing desk.

This goal-setting work is essential not only at the beginning of your coaching but as a practice at least once a year for the rest of your career.

4 Artist mentor Brainard Carey lectures at the Sculpture Center in New York City. Photo by Amy Bassin.

## WHEN TO CALL A COACH

Most people contact a coach when they've reached a place in their careers when they want to move forward but don't know how. They want to up their game, make more money, receive more recognition, win more grants, revamp their marketing materials and take themselves more seriously. And they want the one-on-one help that you can't find in a workshop.

"If you have an ambition that's not being met, you need a coach," said New York City-based artist mentor Brainard Carey (theartworlddemystified.com). "If you have a reason to sell more work or exhibit more or do what a professional artist does, then a coach helps you chart that path."

Most artists contact San Francisco-based artist advisor Aletta de Wal (artistcaretraining.com) for one of three reasons: "They are stuck, they want to

expand their range or they want to take a leap," she said.

Career coach Caroll Michels (carrollmichels.com) finds that "lack of self-confidence" is the main reason artists seek her out. The second biggest reason is to overcome "low pricing syndrome" and the third reason is to learn to "talk or write about what their work is about," said the Sarasota, Florida-based coach.

Artists contact Colorado-based coach Alyson B. Stanfield (artbizcoach.com) because "They're floundering with their business or creative production and understand that it would be helpful to have a partner," she said.

## HOW TO FIND A COACH

After you've reflected on what you want to accomplish in coaching, it's time to start interviewing coaches. Make inquiries with up to three. To find good candidates:

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5 Gigi Rosenberg consults with a coaching client in Portland, Oregon. Photo by Christian Columbres.



Are you willing to take an honest look at your work, your habits, your goals and make changes, take risks and give your art business your best shot?

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**Ask around** – Fellow artists might not be forthcoming that they're "getting help" from a coach because of the shame artists sometimes feel that they're not succeeding all by themselves. So, you may need to be forthright and ask artists in your network if they know anyone who's worked successfully with a coach.

**Take a workshop** – Many coaches teach workshops either in person or online. Check their websites for when they might be teaching in your city.

**Read a book or watch a video** – Many coaches have also written books. You can get a feeling for their approach, their style and their experience from reading their books. Many also have podcasts, webinars and teaching videos. This is a chance for you to see your potential coach in action.

Most of the artists who hire me have read my book, taken a workshop or listened to a teleseminar. All the coaches I interviewed provide many venues for getting to know them before you need to inquire about coaching.

### PREPARE FOR THE COACH

By the time an artist knocks on a coach's door, she's usually ready. Are you ready? Being "ready" doesn't always feel confident. Sometimes being ready feels jittery like the way you feel as you're about to leave for a big trip.

Is your career ready for artist coaching? Are you willing to take an honest look at your work, your habits, your goals and make changes, take risks and give your art business your best shot?

Coaching can benefit artists at all stages from emerging, mid-career to established. Your career needs to be advanced enough for most coaches to agree to work with you. For example, de Wal coaches artists who have a "signature style." She explained: "If they are still experimenting I prefer that they know that they have the ability to create a body of work before investing too much in the business."

Carey concurs. He works with artists

whose work is "developed enough" and who will be able to support their success. "For example, if they don't continue to make enough work, the marketing and strategy is for naught," he said.

"I don't take on clients who don't have a regular studio practice," Stanfield said. "I am a business coach, and they will never have an art business without a regular studio practice."

Before or during your first consult, a coach may ask you questions. Michels' questions include:

"If you won the lottery, what would you do to enhance your career?"

"What are your career goals for two years from now?"

"What is your level of patience and perseverance?"

"Are you ready to invest in your career?"

Stanfield has prospective clients answer a questionnaire, which helps both her and the artist assess a good match. "How they fill it out shows me how committed they are to the process," Stanfield said. "A quick follow-up phone call tells me even more. I'm feeling them out as much as they're feeling me out. It has to be the right fit."

I usually correspond first by email with a prospective client to find out her goals for this year. I will also work with an artist on discrete projects such as applying for a grant, writing and rehearsing an artist talk, or planning and executing marketing for a particular event. Most coaches offer a first, brief phone call at no charge. A respected coach doesn't want to take on a client unless he or she feels that the client is ready to benefit from the coaching.

### DIFFERENT COACHES FOR DIFFERENT NEEDS

These days you can hire a coach for almost any goal. So, think deeply about the kind of coach that's best suited to you now in your career. For example, if you're not spending as much time in the studio as you need to be, maybe you



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need a “creativity coach” to get the juices and the practice flowing regularly again.

■ **FOR MORE** from a creativity coach, read Eric Maisel’s column *Balance Your Dreams with Reality* in this issue on Page 23.

Fees and the services offered vary from coach to coach. Many list options and prices on their websites. Some charge a monthly fee for a set number of in-person or phone sessions with emails in between. My advice is to start small, first engaging with a coach as a workshop leader, listening to a webinar or reading a book they wrote. Then if both you and the coach agree that you’re a good match, sign up for a limited number of sessions.

When you have the right fit, coaching can leave you empowered, motivated and clear on your next steps. The choice of coach should be made weighing both what you can afford but also what you will get in return for your investment.

Among the coaches I interviewed, we had many successes: grants written and won, thousands made in art sales and ventures, acceptances to galleries, and much more.

Coaches can make a difference, even when you’re rejected. This month, I received a rejection for a piece of writing that crushed me. Fortunately, the rejection also came with detailed feedback on why my writing didn’t work for this particular venue. With my coach, we went point by point through

the feedback. My coach helped me discern what advice was worth listening to and what was just one person’s opinion.

I learned a lesson I often teach: how to use feedback to help inform the art and the business and how to accept rejection with grace. With the help of the right coach, I could take even a rejection and use it to help me grow. **PA**

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*Gigi Rosenberg is the editor of Professional Artist. She’s also an artist coach and the author of The Artist’s Guide to Grant Writing (Watson-Guptill, 2010). She’s been a guest commentator on Oregon Public Broadcasting, performed at Seattle’s On The Boards, and been published by Seal Press, Poets & Writers, and Parenting. For the latest, visit [gigirosenberg.com](http://gigirosenberg.com) or reach her at [grosenberg@professionalartistmag.com](mailto:grosenberg@professionalartistmag.com).*