

great expectations

A Conference Crib Sheet

by Hope Vestergaard

We were all first-timers once. Remember the adrenalin rush? Your first chance to connect with other writers . . . your first sighting of a real live editor . . . your first shot at a big break and bestseller status?

Come on, admit it. We all attended our first writers conference with **Enormous Expectations**. Some were so huge, they clouded our better judgment and convinced us that Just This Once, Mr. Hotshot Editor really *would* like to tote our 300 page manuscripts back with him on the plane. Our high hopes allowed us to ask detailed questions about our own pending projects even when panel facilitators asked us not to do so. And those enormous expectations encouraged us to ask published authors to read our manuscripts, refer us to their editors, or (blush) tell us how large an advance they got on their last book. *What were we thinking?!*

We weren't.

Nobody thinks being rude is going to get them published. These gaffes, and many other classic conference faux pas, are born of earnestness and naiveté. Even seasoned conference attendees and published authors can lose their cool in the excitement of the moment. In the interests of a relaxed and embarrassment-free weekend at our upcoming conference, the staff here at Faux Pas 'R' Us would like to remind attendees of some basic conference truths.

You will not sell a book at the conference.

Everyone has heard of authors who have, but this is HIGHLY unusual. We remember these stories because they're so glamorous. You might learn that an editor who's speaking likes your kind of book. You may even be asked to revise a manuscript you submitted for critique. Or you might realize that your masterpiece is a commonly done manuscript in need of a serious makeover. Editors don't hand-carry manuscripts back to the office with them. If they want to see your work, they'll ask you to send it.

You will meet people who will further your career.

But you will probably find them where you least expect them. You may meet writer friends who will support you through your ups and downs. You may meet critiquers who will help you polish your work until it shines. You may meet someone who knows that Editor X loves stories about talking dogs. You **will** meet people whose struggles and successes will inspire you. You never know who will become a V.I.P. in your publishing career. So don't dismiss the "little people."

You will be tempted to break a rule: foist a manuscript, ask a personal question, beg for a referral. There are two schools of thought on how to get ahead in the publishing game: the "break all the rules" school, and the "follow the rules" school. I'm willing to wager that the vast majority of published SCBWI MI members have followed more rules than they've broken. (We can take a poll in a future newsletter, if you don't believe me.) The vastness of the slushpile can make us think we are relatively anonymous in our submissions and rule bending and all that jazz. But publishing is a small world, indeed. Editors move from house to house. Authors speak with their editors and agents about the people they meet. And would you rather be remembered for your tact, or lack of it?

Some specific suggestions for first-timers and seasoned attendees:

If you are asking a question of a panel or speaker, **make it useful for the entire audience**. For example:

- Bad: "Can I send an adoption story based on real life to you?"
- Better: "Are you open to fictionalized true stories?"
- Better: "I'm having a hard time finding a publisher open to my kind of story. Do you have suggestions to narrow the field?"
- Better: "I noticed you have an adoption book on your backlist. Does this mean you would be more likely to look at another one, or less likely?"

Do your homework.

- Read articles about attending conferences, getting published, etc. You can find these on many websites and in market guides.
- Do a google search (www.google.com) on speakers to find their websites, the books they've done, or interviews with them.
- Read **Writers Market** entries on the agents and publishers who will have representatives (authors or editors) attending the conference. Read books by the authors, illustrators, and editors. It will help you understand their perspective and have an intelligent conversation with them, should the occasion arise.

Bottom line? The more you know going into a conference, the more you will get out of it. Be **prepared**. Be **wise**. And be **brave**. Attending a conference is an exciting and important step on the path to publication!

Check out more conference crib sheets!

Approaching Editors, Authors and Agents:

<http://verlakay.com/index62.html>

No More Piranhas! Editors' Thoughts on Conferences

http://underdown.org/no_piranhas.htm

What to Expect When You're Conferencing

<http://debbimichikoflorence.com/index.2ts?page=successfulconf>