

Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

www.ellencassedy.com

A Writer Walks into a Conference



Even for a seasoned author, a writers' conference can be daunting. Making your way into the hall crowded with chattering conferees may feel a bit like stepping into the cafeteria on the first day of junior high school.

But don't be deterred! A writers' conference can be a great place to learn about the craft of writing, meet people who can help you, check out trends in the industry, and garner inspiration. Here's what I've learned:

Before:

- **Study the schedule.** Which sessions will be most useful to you? Write to a few attendees to propose meeting for coffee – or just say you look

forward to bumping into them. Can you act as an informal facilitator, bringing together several people who are interested in meeting one another?

- **Print up business cards or small flyers** with your name, contact information, and a brief description of your book or writing project.
- **Prepare your “elevator speech.”** Be able to describe your book or project in a few enticing words.
- **Can you appear on a panel?** If you have a publisher, ask for help in being offered a slot. If you don't have a publisher, don't give up. Think through what special expertise you have to contribute and seek out others to propose a panel.

During:

- **At panel discussions:** Bring a notebook; take notes. Don't be shy about standing up and asking a question. Approach the front table afterwards to ask a question or simply shake hands.
- **In the exhibit hall:** Be systematic. Go up and down the aisles of publisher displays looking for books like yours. When you find relevant publishers, speak to the staff, describe your project, and ask whom to be in touch with.
- **Make a friend** or two. Introduce yourself to others. Introduce people to one another.
- **Pace yourself.** Make sure you do a few things just for fun. Leave time to walk around an unfamiliar city, eat alone, watch a movie.
- **Expect to feel envious** or on the outs. During those moments, remind yourself that it's a privilege to be part of a literary culture. It's wonderful that

so many people care passionately about the written word. Prod yourself to approach the next panel or display table in a spirit of curiosity.

After:

- **When you get home**, go through your notes and highlight what you learned. Follow up right away by e-mailing people you met.
- **Spend a few minutes thinking** over the gathering you've just been part of. Reflect on how your experience can nurture and inspire you.

Then get back to work!

Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at www.ellencassedy.com.