

# Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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## How to Fill an Empty Room



Reading from and signing your book at a bookstore, library, or other community venue is one of the pleasures of being an author. But unless you're famous, even a bookstore (in fact, *especially* a bookstore) is just an empty room – and it's your job to fill it.

Here's my checklist for how to fill an empty room, based on what I did when I read at Porter Square Books, an independent bookstore in Cambridge, MA.

### **At least eight weeks ahead:**

**Set a goal.** Given the size of the room, I set a goal of 40 attendees, of whom I hoped 15-25 would buy books. In the end, 100 people came – standing room only – and the store sold its entire stack of pre-ordered books.

**Make your contact list.** Wrack your brain for every single person you can think of. I haven't lived in the Boston area for decades, but I was able to draw up a list of 100 names, including high school friends, old roommates, and former coworkers. It took me a few hours to sleuth out their email addresses.

**Send the venue** your headshot, cover photo, and a brief description of your book. I also sent (and later also brought with me, in big print) a one-paragraph introduction for the staff to use on the night of the event.

**Arrange with your publisher**, if possible, to “co-op” publicity with the bookstore or other venue. The bookstore placed ads on local radio and in local newspapers, and my publisher helped pay for them. (I also arranged to speak at a local college, which covered my travel expenses.)

### **Six weeks ahead:**

**Create a recruitment team.** I picked out five friends from my list of 100 contacts and asked if they would draw up their own lists of five or ten people to invite personally. (And I thanked them by name at the event.)

**Design an e-mail invitation** for use by yourself and your team. Include a brief description of the book, the time and place of the reading, and the restaurant invitation. Add: “If you can’t attend the reading, you can buy the book [here](#),” with a link to your website, your publisher’s website, or a bookseller of your choice.

**Add an after-talk gathering.** On the Internet, I located a casual-seating restaurant near the bookstore where people could gather informally after the talk. My Team of Five and I invited our contacts to come to the talk *and* to join us afterwards for conversation. This added a warm note to the invitation. We asked for RSVP’s for the gathering, which gave people an opportunity to make a commitment (albeit non-binding) to come.

**Notify organizations** whose members will be interested in your talk. Email them a notice to post on their website or bulletin board. And/or, track down Facebook pages of organizations, “friend” them, and post a notice yourself.

**Email a press release** to local newspapers, radio, TV. I send an opinion article (including a notice about the talk) to a local newspaper, which ran it close to the time of my reading.

### **Three weeks ahead:**

**Send email invitations.** I sent to my list of 100, and my Team of Five sent to their lists. As RSVP’s began to trickle in, I kept a tally, so I could get a sense of whether there would be enough people or whether we needed to work

harder. I also kept a list of those who sent regrets, so I could exclude them from the reminder email that went out just before the event.

**Let EVERYONE know**, even people who don't live in the target area. They will tell friends who do. I posted on my Facebook page, tweeted, and wrote an "e-blast" to my full list of contacts.

**One week ahead:**

**Send a reminder email**, and ask your recruitment team to do likewise. (Send them a ready-to-go text, so they won't have to compose one themselves.) Remember to exclude people who've already said they can't come.

**At the event:**

Enjoy!

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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](http://www.ellencassedy.com).