

Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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Ten Ingredients for a Successful Book Talk



1. Find the best venues for you. Look around your community for bookstores, community centers, and other places where authors speak. Ask a friend to host a book party for you. Then expand to other locales farther afield. I've spoken at houses of worship, universities, a book festival, an adult education program, community centers, an embassy, libraries, genealogy societies, and a staff training program at a hospital.

2. Make your pitch. E-mail a very brief description of your book, your talk, and yourself, including other places you've spoken, if any. Tailor the pitch to the venue. For a Jewish genealogy society, I begin my message like this: "We Are Here takes readers to the kitchen tables and archives where my family story revealed its secrets." For a university history class, I might say: "We Are Here explores how a nation scarred by genocide is engaging with its past...." The talk itself doesn't change much, but the pitch does.

3. Negotiate. Once invited, communicate with the contact person about logistics:

- **Honorarium:** "Do you pay an honorarium? If so, I'd like to receive what you've paid similar speakers in the past."
- **Directions and transportation:** "Can you cover or contribute to my travel expenses? Pick me up from the station?"
- **Publicity:** Send the host your headshot and book cover in jpeg format, a one-paragraph description of the talk, and a one-paragraph bio.
- **Audience:** Ask: "How many participants do you expect? May I invite people myself, too?"
- **Room set-up:** Podium? Sit in a circle? Around a table?
- **PowerPoint:** Evocative images or brief, clear text can enhance your talk. Ask: "Do you have a projector? May I bring a flashdrive or laptop? Will I be able to control the slides from the podium?" (After some bad experiences, I always bring a sheet of instructions for connecting a laptop to a projector.)

- **Book sales:** Ask: "Will you order books to sell, or should I bring them myself?"
- Length of talk: I like to speak for about 25 minutes, but I'm flexible.
- **Introduction:** Ask: "Who will introduce me?" I email a very simple intro (exact words, ending with "Please join me in welcoming Ellen Cassedy"), and bring a copy with me, in a large font.

4. Help bring out the crowd. See my "[How to Fill an Empty Room](#)" for tips on making a contact list, putting together a recruitment team, sending invitations, and more.

5. Prepare a great speech. Use a "topic paragraph" early in your talk to let listeners know what they're going to hear. Read briefly from the book at one or two points. Create some "scenes" in your talk, to bring listeners into close contact with your characters or other vivid material. Signal the structure of your talk by using phrases like "let me give you three examples" (generally, three *is* the right number). Use a phrase like "in closing" or "before I stop" to alert people that the end is near. And try for a smashing ending!

Time your speech by reading it out loud. Rule of thumb: most people speak at a rate of 120-200 words per minute

6. Deliver it well. Eye contact and good posture are most important. Practice ahead of time. I print out my talk in 26-point type and make sure I never have to turn a page in the middle of a sentence, familiarize myself with the material so that I don't have to look down much, and make sure to look at people in all corners of the room.

7. Allow time for Q & A. Either call on people yourself or have your host do so. Restate the question briefly if necessary. Be kind, especially with difficult people. For *really* difficult people, consider: “What is your question?” or “Let’s hear from those who haven’t spoken yet.”

8. Sell and sign.

- **Bring** a cash box, a sign with the price and “cash or check made out to...,” and change if necessary (I sell my book for \$15, so I bring a few \$5’s).
- **Decide** ahead of time *how* you will sign. “With best wishes” is fine. Since the name of my book is “We Are Here” I sometimes write “Thank you for *being here*.”
- **Put out** a sign-up sheet so people can stay in touch or join your mailing list.
- **Have a friend** with you, if possible, who can talk to people who are holding up the line – or ask those people to step aside until you’ve dealt with others.

9. Follow up. Do not delay! Send an immediate thank-you message to the host. Ask for a blurb you can use in approaching future venues. Enter names of audience members into your mailing list, and contact those to whom you promised further communication.

10. Plan. Can you strengthen your talk? Where will you speak next?

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.