

Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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Without Whom:

Why I Always Read the Acknowledgments First



The first thing I do when I pick up a book is flip to the acknowledgments page.

I love acknowledgments. I like standing next to the author as she lifts her book out of the oven, fragrant as a holiday roast. She's bursting with pride, awash in gratitude. Who wouldn't want to be there to share the love?

Acknowledgments pages can forge a special connection with readers and prospective readers. So how do we writers make the most of this opportunity? Herewith, my highly idiosyncratic rules:

1. Never thank a pet. Maybe it's just me, but when I see a cat or dog thanked in the back of a book, I feel totally turned off. Especially if the pet's name is mentioned. Eww.

2. Thank a librarian. I love that.

3. Thank partners, children, and research assistants. But don't overdo it by gushing too much about their favors. I hate getting the feeling that the author is the emperor of a small kingdom revolving around the precious book project. Pick up your own laundry.

4. Be dignified. "Thanks to Editor X or Agent Y for taking a chance on me." Enh. "Thanks to Friend Z for rescuing me when I thought I couldn't go on." Not great. I don't like to see mentions of writers' groups or MFA programs, either, even though I've found them helpful in my own writing life. I don't want to see the gears grinding. I want to feel I'm in the hands of a master.

5. Thank *everyone*. I adore reading through page after page of names, even if I've never heard of any of them. I revel in the feeling that the author is part of a big, warm gang of comrades who go the extra mile for one another.

6. Go easy on family members among the readers of early drafts. I like to know that such readers brought credentials or a special expertise to the project. That way they function like back-cover blurbers.

7. When thanking your agent, if you have one, use restraint. “So-and-so, the greatest agent on the planet, has become one of my dearest friends.” Sounds dubious, even if it’s actually true. I’m more likely to believe expressions of love directed at editors. But maybe that’s just me.

8. Communicate *why* you’re so pleased to be presenting the book to the public. Not simply because you’re proud you finished it, but because the content or theme of the book matters deeply – to you and, you hope, to your readers.

Follow these rules, and by the time your readers turn to Page 1, they will already feel positively toward you and your book.

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.