

Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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What Makes a Perfect Book Party?



When my friend Jackie hosted a book party for me at her home near Chicago, she did everything right.

No surprise, given her background. As the director of [The Midwest Academy](#), Jackie spent years teaching people how to organize for social change. She brought all those skills to bear as she planned and executed the book party. It showed! (P.S. A lake was involved.)

Here's what Jackie did:

- 1) She stepped up and volunteered to host the party in the first place--without my asking. What a gift!
- 2) She knew 25 guests would fill her living room, so she figured she needed to send out more than 100 invitations.
- 3) She put together a short but terrific invitation. Subject heading: "Invitation to a book party." Date, time, address, directions, plus this link: "Books will be available for purchase at the party. If you if you can't make it, you can order the book here." Brief description of me and the book (provided by me).
- 4) She thought hard about the guest list. Who would want to come, and why? Jackie lives in a close-knit community where neighbors like to share experiences. She talked up the book party as a happening. New neighbors came to meet people. Old-timers came to see their friends.
- 5) She asked people to RSVP. This helped her plan the food, and she knew that once people say they're coming, they're more likely to do so.
- 6) She followed up with a reminder one week before the party.
- 7) She borrowed a projector so I could show PowerPoint images. She made sure she knew how to use it.
- 8) She jury-rigged a podium using a plant stand and an upside-down cardboard box. It worked!

9) Before the party, she insisted on a dry run. We turned on the projector. We plugged and unplugged lamps to make sure people could see both the slides and my face. We moved furniture and set up chairs.

10) Most important, she didn't make me feel weird for caring about every detail. And believe me, I did!

11) I didn't know a soul at the party, so she stood with me at the door and made introductions as the guests arrived.

12) She put out simple food and drinks--cheese and crackers, a dip, wine, and water. People milled about, noshed, and chatted.

13) She kept track of the time. About 40 minutes in, she asked everyone to sit down.

14) She gave a short introduction, using a few sentences I'd sent her, plus a few of her own.

15) I'm always gathering names for the book-related e-newsletter I send out, so Jackie had a clipboard and a pen ready. As I spoke, she circulated the sign-up sheet from guest to guest.

16) My book is non-fiction, so my talk was something of a lecture. Jackie had me speak for 35 minutes, then take questions. A fiction writer or poet might have balanced the talk differently, and perhaps kept it a bit shorter.

17) She set up a stack of my books on a small table and took cash or checks. She had change on hand. I signed.

18) After everyone left, we cleaned up and talked over who came, who didn't, who asked what questions.

19) The next day, we stopped by the house of a neighbor who wanted to chat about the book in greater depth.

20) What about the lake, you ask? Jackie happens to live near a small one. She made sure I brought my bathing suit, and we put the finishing touch on a great visit by going for a dip.

Perfect!

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.