

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF A WRITERS CONFERENCE:
SCHMOOZING THE RIGHT PEOPLE

By Beth Proudfoot

So, you've paid your fee, you've entered the contest, you've put on your "artistic" clothes, and now you're headed to a writers conference. You're taking the first step out of your chair and into the world of publishing. Good for you! But, listen, you paid big bucks for this experience. Be sure you get your money's worth.

The most important thing you'll do at the conference is meet people who can help your career. Sure, the workshops will be valuable and interesting, but you might get more from the people you chat with during the breaks. I encourage everyone who goes to a writers conference to embrace lines. Let people cut in front of you at registration. Wait outside the bathroom even if you don't have to go. Sneak to the back of the buffet line twice. But don't just stand there. Remember back in college when the standard get-to-know-you question was, "What's your major?" At writers conferences it's, "What are you working on?" Ask. Writers are fascinating people. You'll end the day thinking the lines were just too darned short.

Who might you meet? Many writers go to conferences with the express purpose of meeting literary agents and publishers, but don't get too upset if you can't work your way through the crowd to meet the exalted. All you need to get your query letter past a secretary is to say you were at the conference and you heard them speak. Actually talking to them is gravy. If you do happen to sit next to an agent or publisher at lunch, be thoughtful. They're usually very nice, but wary and weary. Don't pitch your book in an

informal setting. Ask them what they're excited about right now. Have they made any great deals lately? Who's their favorite author on their list? Of course, if you've done your homework, you can say things like, "Your client Blah Blah is one of my favorite authors." Or, "I saw that your client Blah Blah listed you in the acknowledgements of their latest book." Or, "That was a great article about your company in *Publishers Weekly* last month."

Naturally, as the conversation flows, you might be asked what you're writing right now. Be ready. Distill your complex project down into three syntillating sentences in the weeks before the conference and try them out on friends and strangers. Use no adjectives; let the work speak for itself. When everyone says, "that sounds fascinating," you're ready.

The members of the faculty who are published authors, especially if they're Really Famous, might be wary and weary, too. However, they tend to be a more accessible than the agents and publishers, so go ahead elbow your way into sitting next to them at lunch, especially if you've read their work. Everybody loves a fan. And, most of the only-relatively-famous faculty members love to give advice. That's why they're there. Be sure to take advantage of this—the seminars these people give are only the tip of their iceberg of knowledge.

Now we come to the last, best category of people you'll meet: The Great Unpublished. People like you. These will be the most interesting and helpful people there. Look for the bright-eyed dreamers, the contest winners, the ones who ask the interesting questions in the seminars. Meet, converse, talk about your project, and learn about theirs. Keep the relationship going after the conference by collecting business cards

and communicating by e-mail. Here's how I got my first agent: I met and "clicked" with one of the contest winners at a conference. We started an email correspondence, and I ended up editing a manuscript for her, critique-group-fashion. After she got an agent, the writer asked her agent to take a look at my work. *Voila!*

The writers who use conferences most effectively to further their careers don't go with the idea of telling as many people as possible about their book. They go to meet people, to be inspired, and to learn about how to take their writing to the next level. Try to listen more than you speak. Be generous! Offer whatever resources you have to whoever needs them. If you're like me, you'll walk into that writers conference and realize you've found your tribe. Have a great time!

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