

# THE WRITERS' CONFERENCE **HANDBOOK**



A FIELD GUIDE FOR  
**AUTHORS**

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# 1. Should You Go to a Writers' Conference?

People frequently ask me whether they should invest the time and money to go to a writers' conference. In my opinion, it can be a valuable experience whether you're agented or not, published or not. But especially if you're neither.

It comes down to a personal decision about how to spend your time and money. Here are some things to think about:

1. If it's a financial hardship, then it's usually not the right thing to do. There will always be more conferences, perhaps at a better time financially.
2. Making a commitment to attend conferences regularly (once a year if you can) signals to yourself and your family that you're taking this writing thing seriously; that you're treating it as a business and a profession, not just a hobby.
3. The workshops available at conferences are valuable for continuing to improve your writing, learn about the publishing process, and get ideas for promoting your books and growing your platform. Even authors who are multi-published attend workshops because they want to keep growing as writers.
4. The intangible value of networking and making friends with other writers can be life-changing. Interacting with like-minded people is validating, encouraging, and downright fun.
5. The opportunity to meet with agents and editors is, of course, a major draw for most writers. Conferences are pretty much the only place you can do this.
6. I think it's important to feel that you're part of something larger than yourself. Going to a conference helps you to feel like you're part of the writing and publishing community at large.

## 2. Why Agents Go to Writers' Conferences

Most people think agents go to writers' conferences strictly to find new clients to represent. For a few agents this might be the case, but it's not true for most of the agents and editors I know.

There are five main reasons most of us go to conferences:

### **1. To meet the people behind the queries.**

At a conference, I can make personal connections with writers, hear them talk about their books, and learn more than I could in a 400-word query letter. It's part of the process of finding new authors to represent, and it's one reason we're there.

### **2. To meet with my clients.**

Most of my clients are spread across the country and we have few opportunities to get together in person. A conference is a great place to do this, especially if both the agent and the author have other reasons for being there. There are some conferences where I'll be able to get together with numerous clients.

### **3. To meet with editors and other industry professionals.**

In order for conferences to be worthwhile and cost effective for us, we use them as prime networking opportunities. I meet editors to whom I might sell a book someday, and strengthen relationships with those I already know. I pitch them books I'm currently shopping and get their response in person. Several times this face-to-face conversation has led to a sale for one of my clients. At a given conference, I might have a dozen or more of these meetings.

### **4. To give back to the writing community.**

Agents and editors understand how difficult it is to be a writer pursuing publishing these days, and we recognize the value of helping authors get informed, learn more about writing and marketing, and meet industry professionals. So we go to conferences to help writers do all of that. We don't believe in the faceless, mysterious, scary publishing paradigm of the past. We want to be accessible.

### **5. To maintain visibility in our industry.**

Yes, there can be a bit of self-promotion involved, simply in the act of showing up. We want writers and publishers to know who we are and what we're doing.

### 3. What to Bring to a Writers' Conference

Here is a handy checklist of things you may want to bring to a conference.

1. Concise and fascinating answers to questions like, "So, what do you write?" and "Tell me about yourself."

2. Organized thoughts about the book(s) you're pitching, so you can easily give a 10 second pitch, a 30-second pitch, or a 2-minute pitch if asked.

3. One-sheets for each book you're pitching—several copies in case agents or editors want to keep them. You should have a separate one-sheet for each book. Don't attach anything to it, such as a proposal or sample chapter. Make sure your one-sheet includes:

- Your book title (obviously)
- A brief pitch for the novel similar to flap copy or back cover copy
- An image that somehow captures the novel
- Your contact information
- Your agent's contact information
- A small headshot of yourself
- A pleasing design that is clear and easy to read

Go to [this post on my blog](#) for some examples of one-sheets.

4. Business cards.

5. A printout of the first chapter of your novel (or a book proposal for non-fiction). You just need one or two copies since you might show it in meetings but it's not likely you'll need to leave them with agents or editors—most will ask you to email it to them if they want it. Make sure your pages include your contact info, too.

6. A camera if that floats your boat.

7. A tote bag or brief case (not too big) to carry around your stuff, or simply a folder to hold your papers and keep you organized.

8. A professional-looking, business-casual wardrobe with comfortable shoes. A nicer outfit if there is a banquet or other special occasion as part of the conference.

9. A clear set of personal goals for the conference... and an open mind so that you don't miss opportunities and connections that come your way unexpectedly.

10. A big smile, since it's the best way to forge connections with others and keep yourself relaxed.

## 4. General Conference Tips

### **Go With A Goal**

Know why you're going (and this will be different for each of you) and then conduct yourself at the conference with the idea of reaching your goal. Are you going to get an agent? To get three publishing houses interested in your book? To learn about the industry? To meet other writers? To get a break from the family? Always wanted to visit San Diego? All of the above? Decide. Then do it.

### **It's Not All About You**

At a conference, or in any social situation, the key to lessening your insecurity and self-consciousness is to stop thinking so much about yourself—how others might see you, what they're thinking of you—and focus on others. Realize they're more concerned about themselves than about you. To lessen your own discomfort, you can ask people questions about themselves, about their writing, about how their conference is going, etc. You can be genuinely interested in them.

With people who tend to make you more nervous (agents and editors?) you can remember their humanity. They have good days, bad days... even bad hair days. They have families and kids and the same stresses you do. You can also remind yourself that the whole reason they're at the conference is to meet YOU. Yes, you.

You can see things from others' perspectives, making the experience "not all about you." You can even adopt the attitude of "How can I bless others while I'm here?" Putting the emphasis on others.

However, try not to take this too far. Only do it as far as it's actually genuine for you. And don't take the focus off yourself at moments when the focus is appropriately on you. In an editor meeting, it's nice to begin with a tiny bit of small talk, asking them how they're doing or some other innocuous question. But don't let it go overboard so that it seems like you're (1) trying too hard to be flattering so that it feels fake or obsequious, or (2) trying too hard to avoid the reason you're there—your pitch.

Keep reminding yourself we are all at the conference for a common purpose. We all love books! Agents and editors are there specifically to interact with you, so try to remember that when you feel nervous.

### **Pay Attention to Your Appearance**

Appropriate conference-wear is business casual. Woodsy or camp-type settings are more casual, while the ones taking place in nice hotels tend to be a bit more business-y. You



want to present a professional look that says "I am serious about being a writer. And if I am in public at a book-signing or doing a television appearance, I will make you proud."

It's an individual thing. But please don't make the mistake of thinking, "All that matters is what's on the page." It's just like a job interview. Sure, it's your skills that count, but the image you present has an effect on people's opinion of you. It's not about designer clothes. It's about making your outside accurately reflect to the world who you are on the inside. Smart, professional, funny... whatever image you want to convey, make sure your exterior helps you instead of hindering you.

### **Quick Tips – General Conference Advice:**

1. If you've brought anything with you like a one-sheet, a business card or a proposal, ASK the agent/editor if they'd like to take it with them. Some will, some won't. Personally, I tend to just say no to carrying anything extra. Whatever you do, DON'T bring your entire manuscript. You don't want to lug it around, and neither does anyone else.

2. Make a point to stop and talk to anyone you see standing or sitting alone, especially if they have that "lost" look on their face. Conferences can be intimidating and everyone needs a friend. (If you see a faculty member sitting alone, feel free to join them! Especially if you just want to have conversation rather than give them a pitch.)

3. Remember that one of the reasons agents and editors like going to conferences is to see their friends, i.e. all the other faculty members. We often only see each other at these events. Therefore if you see a couple of faculty members hanging out and talking, consider whether you might want to give them some time rather than interrupting to give your pitch.

4. If you have an agent but no publisher, you should meet with editors at a conference. (You should be talking this over with your agent ahead of time.) This is a relationship business, and the more you can get yourself in front of editors, the better. Your agent may have already submitted your manuscript to an editor... and once the editor meets you, they might be impressed enough to go back to the office and take another look at your proposal. (Be sure you tell the editors that you're represented by an agent.)

5. If you have an agent AND a publisher, you shouldn't be meeting with editors at a conference.

You don't want your publisher seeing you out there pitching other publishers. You are free to talk with them at meals, etc., but no one-on-one meetings unless you and your agent have worked it out ahead of time.

6. If your work is under consideration with one or more agents and/or editors, but nobody has committed to you (offered representation or a book contract), you are completely free to continue pitching yourself and your work to whomever you like.
7. Avoid the bathroom pitch. It's okay to pitch an agent or editor in a one-on-one meeting, or at a meal, or any other situation in which they express interest. Agents and editors EXPECT to be pitched, they expect you to try and impress them with your wit and brilliance. But not the bathroom.
8. Don't pitch a novel unless it's complete. Wait until it's ready. This doesn't hold true with non-fiction. A completed proposal and some sample chapters are enough.
9. Review all of the online information about the conference in plenty of time before your arrival. You'll want to be familiar with schedules, events, workshops, and conference guidelines.
10. Bring your laptop or plenty of note paper, and take copious notes throughout the conference. You will be overwhelmed with information and won't remember it all!
11. If you sign up for a critique, be prepared for anything. It's important to remember that each critique is coming from one individual, whose opinion may not represent that of others'. At the same time, have respect for the fact that these publishing professionals have informed opinions based on years of experience.
12. Eat healthy meals—try not to either overeat or skip meals. Take it easy on both the caffeine and the alcohol.
13. Try to take different workshops each time you go to a conference. Also, tailor your workshop choices to exactly where you are in your career. If you haven't finished a manuscript yet, then favor workshops on writing rather than the ones on marketing.
14. Be kind. Be polite. Cover your mouth when you cough. The usual.
15. Go to a conference to learn about writing, learn about publishing, and to make friends—not just to score a publishing deal (which probably isn't going to happen at the conference).
16. Go to make some professional connections that may help your writing career in the future.
17. Don't isolate yourself—talk to people, get involved, get to know people.

18. Don't let your “introverted writer” side take over or you'll waste your time and money.

19. Have fun!

## 5. Mistakes to Avoid (the DON'Ts of Conferences)

1. Don't stalk agents, editors, or famous authors. Let them go to the restroom or talk with their friends in peace.
2. Don't throw a tantrum upon receiving a tough critique. Save it for your hotel room.
3. Don't call yourself the next JK Rowling, Stephen King, George R.R. Martin, or \_\_\_\_\_ (insert favorite author here).
4. Don't let your introverted side rule the day. Get involved, talk to people! It's the only way to make it worth your time and money.
5. Don't neglect to do your homework before the conference. This includes learning the basics of the industry, researching the agents and editors who might be right for you, preparing your pitch, and knowing why you're there.
6. Don't show up without knowing anything about the genre of your book, or what other books are comparable to it.
7. Don't develop a bad attitude, especially a grudge against agents, editors, and "the industry."
8. Don't get depressed because it doesn't feel like agents or editors are "wowed" by your work. Remember that this is a learning experience.
9. Don't say "God told me to write this." Or even worse, "God told me you would be my agent."
10. Don't neglect to follow up with agents and editors with whom you met, especially those who requested materials from you.

## 6. Should You Pitch At A Conference? Or just seek feedback from agents & editors?

People frequently ask me whether a "newbie" unpublished author should pitch during their one-on-one appointments, or simply use the time to get to know an agent/editor and learn more about the process.

In the past I've advised newer writers, who don't have a project ready to sell, to spend the one-on-one time telling about their project, and asking for feedback about story or marketability, rather than simply trying to sell it. In other words, use the meeting to learn more about how your own writing fits (or doesn't fit) into the larger publishing arena.

However, I'm aware that some agents have a different opinion. They are more likely to say:

"Don't take up my valuable appointment time if you don't have something to pitch me that's ready to sell. I am spending my time and money to be at this conference, I'm here to find new clients, and those one-on-one meetings are my only chance. Use other times—panel discussions, mealtimes—to get your questions answered. The appointments are for pitching only."

So there is no definitive answer to the question. There are bound to be editors and agents who don't mind if you use the time to pick their brain. There are also going to be those who prefer to take appointments only with people who have something to pitch—something that's ready to sell.

Here's a reasonable approach:

**Editors:** It's probably safe to pick their brains, ask for feedback, etc. In other words, probably okay to make an appointment with them even if you're not ready to sell your project.

**Agents:** Probably safer to make an appointment only if you are ready for agent representation.

You are ready for agent representation if you have a completed, polished manuscript (fiction), or a completed, polished book proposal and 3 sample chapters (nonfiction).

If you have an incomplete fiction manuscript: Be aware that an agent or editor can't do anything with you or your project until it's finished. The best you can hope for is someone will say, "Send it to me when it's finished."

What about pitching at meals? It's usually best only to pitch at a meal if you are invited to. But in all cases at conferences (as in life) try to use your best judgment. If an opportunity presents itself where it seems an agent or editor would be receptive to your pitch, go for it. Look around you, gauge the situation, figure out if you will have both the time and the attention of the agent/editor, and make your decision.

And don't be too hard on yourself if somebody tells you that you "did it wrong." If you are a polite, smiling, kind person, that goes a long way toward smoothing over any (perceived) protocol breaches.

Sorry if all of this is confusing! Conflicting advice is everywhere and there is not always a single right answer.

## 7. Your Meetings with Agents and Editors

I frequently receive questions such as this:

"I am focusing my efforts on finding an agent. However, I will be attending a conference where I will have the opportunity to meet with agents and editors. If I have not yet signed with an agent by the time of that conference, would it be wise to make appointments with editors?"

If you are NOT published, NOT represented by an agent, and NOT contracted with a publisher, you should use any and all possible methods to get your work seen by the right people. Make as many appointments as you are allowed at the conference, with both agents and editors. Use your meeting times to gather feedback. Really pay attention to their responses.

If agents and editors request to see more of your work, the first thing you need to do after the conference is determine if your project is complete, polished and ready to be sent. If you need to work on it and there's going to be a delay in sending it out, simply send "thank you" emails to the people with whom you met, letting them know you appreciate their request to see your book (include title and genre) and that you will be sending it as soon as it's ready. Then get it ready!

Be aware that there's not a huge "rush" to get it in their hands immediately after the conference. Yes, there's always wisdom in "striking while the iron is hot." But believe me, nothing cools that iron faster than sending out a piece of work that is not publishable. You've got to do everything you can to make your work the best it can be.

Decide if your primary intent is to work with an agent, or if you feel comfortable dealing directly with publishers in case of an offer. If you prefer to work through an agent, you may want to send your project FIRST to the agents who requested it, then give it some time to see if any of them respond with an offer of representation. Hold off sending it to the editors for a time. That way, if an agent does want to represent you, they can help you polish your project for submission.

I'm working with a client right now who had met editors at a conference, they'd requested to see the manuscript, she sent it, and they passed. She subsequently became my client, and together we worked on editing and polishing her book. In my opinion, those publishers who previously passed would probably be more interested in the manuscript now that we've kicked it up a notch; but it's too late, we can't resubmit. So those publishers are no longer options for us. This is why, if you want to work with an agent, I suggest you try to secure one first.

However, if you send your project out to the agents and no offer of representation is forthcoming within a month or so (not surprising considering agent timing) then go ahead and send your project out to the editors who requested it.

If you don't have any interest from agents at the conference, but you DO have interest from editors, then send it to them. But again, make sure it's ready to go before sending! It's very difficult to rewrite and resubmit. It happens sometimes, but it's more of an uphill battle.

It's a matter of getting your manuscript into the hands of the right editor or agent who happens to click with it... but you have no way of knowing who that person is!

So think through each step of your process, trying not to get so excited about requests from agents and editors that you lose the ability to be strategic about your own work. There will always be variations and differing circumstances, so I can't tell you what to do in every single situation. Look at your long term goal and strategize accordingly.



## 8. Secrets of a Great Pitch

We can probably all agree on the "don'ts" of pitching your project. Don't pitch in the bathroom. Don't pitch a novel that's incomplete. Don't pitch with your mouth full. What are some positive tips we can all use?

I think the secret to making a great pitch is to start with a bit of context or background, then tell me about your book. It doesn't have to be in-depth, considering your time restraints. But take a moment to introduce yourself and your project before pitching it.

Too often, people sit down and nervously launch into some kind of story and I find myself dizzy with confusion. I sit there like a deer in the headlights and then I say something like, "Let's back up. What's your name? And is this fiction or nonfiction?"

To me, the best pitches include the following information without me having to ask for it:

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I wanted to meet with you because \_\_\_\_\_.

I'm writing \_\_\_\_\_ (fiction or non-fiction, what genre).

My publishing history includes \_\_\_\_\_ (number of books, genres).

Today I want to tell you about my book called \_\_\_\_\_.

Then, launch into your pitch. This should be 2 to 3 minutes long if you're in an appointment; shorter if you're at a meal.

**Important:** Always end your pitch by throwing it back to your listener—with a question or a “call to action.” You don’t want to just stop talking and then awkwardly wait for them to respond. Have a few appropriate closers ready for different situations. Some ways to end your pitch might include:

“So those are the basics. Does it sound like something that might interest you?”

“That’s the overview. Would you like to hear more, or do you have any specific questions?”

“Is this a genre you might pursue?”

## **FICTION pitching guidelines:**

→ Don't try to tell the whole story. Start with the plot catalyst, the event that gets the story started.

→ Then give the set-up, i.e. what happens in the first 30 to 50 pages that drives the reader into the rest of the book. Include the pressing story question or the major story conflict.

→ Fill out your pitch with any of the following: plot elements, character information, setting, backstory, or theme. You want to include just enough information to intrigue your listener. Note that your pitch doesn't have to be all "plot." If your story is more character driven, then fill out your pitch with interesting character details. If the setting is an important element, talk about that. If the backstory plays heavily, round out your pitch with that. Be intentional in how you structure your pitch.

→ Finish by giving an idea of the climactic scenes and the story resolution.

→ Try not to tell too much of the story in the pitch. The pitch is supposed to get somebody interested, not tell the whole story. Stick to the high points, but be sure to tell enough that you don't leave your listener confused.

→ Include only a couple of characters.

→ Include one plot thread, or two if they're closely intertwined. You can hint at the existence of other characters and plot lines.

Be prepared to answer questions that could include things like:

- How does your story end?
- What published author's style would you compare your writing to?
- Who are your favorite authors in your genre?
- Is this a series? And if so, what are the subsequent books about?
- Have you worked with a critique group or a professional editor?
- Have you pitched this to publishers in the past? If so, what was the response?

**Important:** Know all the key points of your pitch, but don't memorize your pitch verbatim. You want to be ready to speak it aloud and sound natural, whether during a planned meeting, a meal, in an elevator or a random encounter. Having your pitches prepared ahead of time (and adjusting them as necessary if you learn new things in workshops) will raise your confidence level.

**NON-FICTION pitching guidelines:**

- Start by saying, “My book is titled \_\_\_\_\_ and it is about \_\_\_\_\_. The target audience consists of \_\_\_\_\_.”
- It’s crucial to convey that you know your audience. To whom are you writing your book?
- Give a brief description of your book and what it covers.
- Finish out your pitch by giving a quick overview of how your book differs from the other major books currently available on your topic.
- Whatever you do, DON’T say your book is for “all audiences” or “everyone.”
- Under NO circumstances should you say, “There are no other books like this on the market.” You must address the books that come closest to your topic, to show that you have a complete understanding of where your book fits and what competition it might face.
- Be prepared to discuss your qualifications. Why are YOU the one to write this book? Why should someone buy your book instead of another one on the same topic?
- Be prepared to discuss your platform. You will NOT sell a non-fiction book if you haven’t established a platform based on the subject of your book.

## 9. Crafting Your Pitch

Close your eyes and imagine you're at a writer's conference, waiting for the elevator up to your hotel room. The agent of your dreams walks up and stands beside you. He/she smiles and says "Hi." You offer a charming "Hello" in response. "Enjoying the conference?" the agent asks. "Yes, it's great!" you respond.

The elevator doors open and you both step in. The agent presses 15. You press 17 (even though your room is on the 5th floor).

Agent looks you squarely in the eye and asks, "So what are you writing?" You now have 15 floors to make an impression.

What will you say?

This is the scenario that inspired the name "elevator pitch." So let's talk about creating a good one.

I had a reason for starting with "close your eyes and imagine..." I want you to grasp the fact that you are going to be talking to someone. This isn't a written pitch. There's a huge difference between the way people speak and the way they write. Many people respond with, "But we're writers, not speakers." But as a writer, you need to be able to capture on the page the way people speak.

**The purpose of your elevator pitch is to get someone to want to hear more.**

That's IT. There is no other purpose. The corollaries are: (1) You most likely won't get someone to request more if your pitch is less than 40 words and it sounds like a canned tagline from your proposal; and (2) You most likely won't get someone to request more if your pitch is too detailed, too long, and their eyes glaze over after 15 seconds.

Of course, if the content of a pitch is uninspiring or uninteresting, it won't matter if it's well-delivered and the perfect length. Sometimes an uninspiring pitch is merely evidence that you haven't figured out how to convey the unique and exciting essence of your book in a few words. This is a solvable problem. Unfortunately, if it's due to an uninteresting book, there's not much you can do to save it. If your pitch isn't generating interest, it's your job to determine if the problem is the pitch or the book itself.

Here are some tips about elevator pitches:

1. Always be prepared. You never know when you're going to come across someone who will ask, "So what's your book about?" At conferences, there are mealtimes, hallway chatting times, elevator times, and countless other times when someone might ask you The Question.
2. Know your goal. Your elevator pitch should end with a question, "call to action" or other appropriate closer. Know your desired outcome, and craft your closing line accordingly.
3. Show your passion. Act like a parent showing off pictures of their newborn or their star little league pitcher. If you're not excited about your project, nobody else will be.
4. Use your time wisely. Agents and editors are just like you—they're way too busy and constantly overloaded with information. They have to make quick decisions about what deserves their attention and what doesn't. Your job is to immediately grab their attention and don't let it go. Work hard at making your pitch as compelling or intriguing as possible.
5. Don't get ahead of yourself. The purpose of a pitch is not to close a deal. It's to interest your audience in continuing to talk. I've been in situations where I received an elevator pitch and immediately responded, "Do you have time for a cup of coffee?" That's what you want.
6. Act natural, even though it's difficult to "sound natural" when you've practiced your pitch to death. Get your pitch down so that you understand the basics of what to convey in a brief amount of time. Learn the difference between telling too much and not enough. Avoid taglines that sound "canned." Once you've gotten the feel for how a verbal pitch works, try writing a few variations of yours. Then when the time comes, you'll be able to rattle it off naturally because you're not only comfortable with the format, you're comfortable with your project. Plus it will be easy to vary your pitch depending on your audience. You may never be totally at ease with a verbal pitch, but you can become comfortable enough that your conversation flows naturally.
7. If your pitch is a one-liner, sounding like a tagline and less than about 50 words, chances are it's too brief to incite interest, and it may sound "canned." Work on expanding it to at least 30 seconds of verbal delivery.
8. If your pitch is longer than a couple of minutes, it's probably too long and too detailed or convoluted, so that a listener wouldn't be able to follow along. Work on paring it down, and remember that you don't have to tell the whole story.

## The Process of Crafting Your Pitch

Now let's talk about the process of crafting the pitch. I think your best chance for success is to take it seriously as a multi-step process and put some time into it. The effort will allow you to overcome shyness, discomfort with verbal presentations, and even nervousness around publishing professionals. Preparation always boosts confidence, and if there's one thing I see writers struggling with, it's confidence. So how do you prepare?

### 8 Steps to the Perfect Pitch

**1. Write it.** Craft your pitch 10 or 20 different ways and different lengths. Don't skimp on this step. Challenge yourself to get out of your mental box when it comes to the way you think of your own manuscript. Even if you'll never use some of your attempts, it will tap your creativity and help you figure out what might make your project interesting to someone else.

**2. Record it.** Speak all your pitches aloud into a recording device.

**3. Wait.** Let some time elapse before going back to your recording.

**4. Listen.** Take notes as you listen to each pitch. Which parts work, which don't? What do you need to improve about your delivery? Piece together the best parts and...

**5. Rewrite.** Try to come up with at least five good pitches based on what you've learned.

**6. Record again.** And let some time elapse before listening.

**7. Final edit.** Take one more shot at revising. Finish with at least three good pitches tailored for different situations or audiences.

**8. Practice.** Now's the time to begin using the mirror, your spouse, your kids, your friends.

Don't get so “polished” that you sound unnatural, but DO get to the point where you know your pitch so well you can rattle it off without thinking much.

### Note:

See the last section of this e-book, “Sample Pitches and My Responses,” for examples.

## 10. Why A Verbal Pitch Is Valuable

Why pitch verbally at all, when it's the writing that matters?

A verbal pitch is the equivalent of a written query, but with some advantages. Your verbal pitch (just like a query) can tell me whether or not I like the idea of your book enough to want to see the writing. But the face-to-face connection also allows you to express yourself not only with words but facial expressions and gestures. It allows a conversation to develop, in which the agent can ask questions and probe for more information if needed. If you get lost in your pitch or you're not being clear, the agent can redirect you or help you get focused. There's also the possibility that you'll "click" with the agent and she'll really want to work with you, secretly hoping your manuscript is awesome so she can rep you.

None of this is possible with a simple email query. The verbal pitch is usually more memorable than a query too. Both the query and the verbal pitch serve as an introduction to you and your project, leading the agent or editor to make a decision about whether they want to read some of the manuscript.

The in-person meeting also allows agents and editors to see how you present yourself. As a published author, you'll need to be able to talk to people about your book. You may be interviewed, you might do book signings, you'll probably have some events in which you'll need to interact and discuss your book. Taking into account that you're probably nervous at the pitch meeting, agents and editors can still get a good feel for the "public persona" you'll have as an author. It probably won't be a deciding factor in whether to request your manuscript, but it's one piece of information contributing to the whole picture of "you."

Some agents and editors find it helpful if you have the first pages of your manuscript available during the pitch meeting. We can take a glance, read a few paragraphs, and between that and the verbal pitch, we'll know if we want to see more.

Some agents/editors ask almost everyone to send their manuscript after the conference. This is an acknowledgment that it really is about the writing. Writers are nervous when they pitch and might not be presenting their book in the best light, so by requesting pages from everyone, an agent ensures she doesn't miss something. She wants to make the most of her conference attendance.

From my perspective, the one-on-one pitch meetings at conferences are definitely valuable. I have several clients whom I wouldn't be working with except for conferences. So yes, things do happen because of those verbal pitches.

## **11. Should Published Authors Go to Conferences?**

If you're an unpublished/unagented writer, then you probably know that writers' conferences are a great place to meet agents and editors. But there are plenty of other good reasons to attend a conference — even if you already have an agent and/or a publisher.

First, the workshops can be valuable. It's like doctors and lawyers who are many years into practice but are still required to take a certain number of hours per year of ongoing instruction. You might be brushing up on some skills you already have or you might learn something new; you might get updated information on the latest trends in your industry; you may hear interesting discussions about the future and what to expect. You can gain new insights in your writing, and gather interesting marketing or social networking ideas. At the very least, you can get inspiration and encouragement.

Second, since writing is such a solitary endeavor, I find it helps when authors are reminded that they're part of something bigger than themselves. It's not a big scary impersonal thing, it's a community populated by real people who are passionate about writing and publishing. When you spend most of your time sitting alone at your laptop, it helps to feel like you're part of this community. Conferences are one of the best ways to become a part of it.

Third, and closely related, conferences are the best place to make real long-lasting friendships with other writers, and when you go back home, you can stay in touch via the Internet. Many writers don't have anyone in their "real life" who gets it—who understands what it means to be a writer. It's crucial to make those friends who can be there for you, year round.

Fourth, even if you have a publisher, never underestimate the value of ongoing networking with writers, publishers and editors. If you go to conferences repeatedly, your face and your name may become familiar to people in the business. And you never know what might come of that. One day your publisher might decide they don't want to publish your genre anymore; being on a first-name basis with a dozen other editors can't hurt.



Of course, there is some protocol involved. If you have an agent and you're happily contracted with a publisher, you may socialize with other agents and editors, but you may not want to be seen in those one-on-one appointments with an agent or editor. (Except for your own.) Tongues will wag and your loyalty will be questioned and you may get a negative reputation. (Even if you're looking for a new agent, this is best done discreetly.)

If you're an agented author, it's a good idea to discuss the conference with your agent before you go. She'll let you know if you should be having meetings with editors, and if so, she can help you determine which ones to target.

## 12. Tips For Fiction Authors

What makes an agent NOT interested in offering representation?

When you pitch your project at a conference, the person to whom you are pitching will make a quick decision about whether they see potential in your book. If they think they see promise, they'll ask for more information, or they'll look at some pages, or ask you to email your manuscript after the conference.

But what if nobody seems interested? Here are the five biggest problems that will keep agents and editors from wanting to pursue your book:

**1. The story itself.** This is by far the biggest factor separating the projects that interest me from those that don't. My personal impression is that many people are writing about everyday characters, in everyday situations, with everyday results. Unfortunately those kind of stories tend to make readers' eyes glaze over. Something about the characters, situation, setting, or result has to be different, bigger than life, surprising. Something about it has to be intriguing. Not every book has to qualify as "high concept," but it does have to be intriguing.

For example, recently several people pitched me stories about a couple in marriage crisis, with the story being about their journey through struggles and back to reconciliation. I wasn't particularly drawn in by most of them. However, one writer took a couple in marriage crisis, dropped them down into a fascinating setting and situation that involved adventure and danger, threw in a mystery to be solved... and immediately all my synapses were firing and I was dying to read the book.

**2. Taking too long to get the story started.** As we've discussed before, the first pages of your novel are crucial and they tell an agent or editor a lot about where your writing is, in terms of readiness for publication. I saw several projects that sounded interesting, but when I began to skim through the first few pages, found myself mired in detail, backstory, interior monologue, and other things besides an actual start to the story. I need something intriguing to get the ball rolling, whether it's an unusual character or an immediate plot development. There's got to be some hint of conflict right away, some suggestion of a big story question to which the reader wants the answer.

**3. An uninteresting or cliché opening.** Related to the above, this is often when the book opens with a character doing some unimportant task while thinking about or mentally reviewing their current situation. Some characters speak to themselves out loud, a device which rarely works unless your protagonist is schizophrenic (in the literal sense). Cliché openings can also be a character waking up in the morning, a character driving somewhere, a phone call, long descriptions of the setting or the weather, a prologue that

is a thinly veiled excuse to get some backstory in at the beginning. However, any kind of opening, even if using a cliché device, can be written in such a compelling way that readers don't think of it as cliché.

**4. Weak fiction technique.** This usually includes things like: immediately giving the reader too much information; telling details that could more effectively be shown; unclear or mixed-up POVs; ineffective proportion of narrative and dialogue; unsophisticated prose. This also could be the lack of a distinctive authorial voice.

**5. Unpolished dialogue mechanics.** It's evident fairly quickly if your characters don't sound realistic; if attributions are clunky; or if dialogue isn't pointed and fails to move the story forward.

The projects that most interest me will avoid these readily apparent pitfalls, and make me want to see more. If you're pitching at a conference and nobody requests more, then I applaud you for being there where you can learn so much, and I encourage you to keep writing, keep learning, and be persistent.

## 13. Advice for Agents

There are plenty places to find advice to authors for how to behave at conferences... but for some reason, we never see advice for agents! I guess we're just supposed to know this stuff by osmosis or something. So I wanted to remind myself of some important things to remember when I'm doing those one-on-one meetings with writers.

### **Secrets for a Great Pitch Meeting: Agents' Version**

1. Sometimes it's not easy sitting through pitches one after the other. But it's important to remember that the writer not only paid a lot of money to be at that conference, they also used up their precious "agent meeting" slot on you. They've probably been thinking about this meeting for days or even weeks. They deserve your very best, even if it stretches you. Even if you're tired. This is not about you. It's about the writer. So here are a few things to remember.
2. Everything you say will have an impact on a new writer. Good or bad, it will stick with them. Be careful with your words.
3. Writers are getting conflicting advice from other agents, editors and workshops. Don't berate them for doing something "wrong" like bringing a proposal. Or not bringing one. Give them credit for trying. Don't sweat the small stuff.
4. This may be the most vulnerable a writer has ever felt. This may be the first time they've brought their baby out to show the world. If their baby isn't cute, find a nice way to say it.
5. Cultivate a spirit of humility. See yourself not as above others but as a servant to them. Use your words carefully. Speak the truth, but with kindness.
6. Many writers are nervous. They're afraid they'll babble on and on incoherently, they're afraid you're going to make them feel foolish. They've actually had nightmares about this moment! You can put them at ease by simply asking some questions to get them started. No need to let them stew in their angst.
7. A smile goes a long way. Use it to make others feel comfortable.
8. Offer helpful advice. If you need to say, "It doesn't sound like this project is for me," then try to follow it up with, "but can I offer you some input?" Then you can give them some helpful advice, either about their project, about the market, or about their pitch.

9. Be kind. If you're having a rough day... if you're exhausted from giving of yourself in workshops and meetings one after the other... you still need to remember how much a kind word of encouragement can help a writer, and how a rude or dismissive word can wound them—and come back to haunt you.

10. Represent the publishing industry well. Yes, you're there to find good writers. But you're also there as representatives of the publishing industry. You are comfortable there, while many writers are not. You have nothing at stake; they might feel like everything's at stake. This is just another 10 minutes of your time; for the writer, this may be the most worrisome 10 minutes of their week or month.

11. Your next great client might be the person sitting across from you. Of course, this one's not hard to remember. That's why you're here!

12. Treat writers well, practice good karma, remember that your words will be remembered. And you will draw to yourself the kinds of writers you want to work with. Be nice, and everybody wins.

## 14. Sample Pitches and My Responses

On my blog, I asked readers to submit their “elevator pitch” for me to critique. Following is a selection of the pitches people offered, and my thoughts.

**The Pitch:** “Hunted across the galaxy by a powerful religious cult, an amnesiac searches for clues to his past and the forgotten knowledge of a prototype weapon that has the power to enslave billions.”

**My response:** Try as I might, I can't imagine you letting loose with this in response to the question, "So what are you writing?" Why not start with something more conversational like, "I'm writing a sci-fi about an amnesiac who is being hunted across the galaxy by a powerful religious cult, because he..." Make this into a verbal pitch, a dialogue. First, put it in context by saying what it is. (A sci-fi or whatever.) Then fill it in with some of the story. Why do we care about this amnesiac? What will he do with the weapon? And why does the cult want him? Then put a finish on it. You could have a concluding statement like, "The novel is finished and I have sample chapters available" or you could ask a question such as, "Are you interested in sci-fi?"

**The Pitch:** The story is about a wealthy businessman facing retirement with no grandchildren, who is visited by a con-artist claiming she is raising a granddaughter he didn't know he had and demanding that his son marry her; believing she only wants money, he seeks to discredit her, with the help of his son's socialite girlfriend, but when they discover the con-artist is telling the truth, he must learn that social status isn't important, before his son leaves the family business, to prevent the homeless con-artist from joining his family.

**My response:** That is a l-o-n-g sentence. My eyes glazed over about 30 words in, and I began wondering what we were having for dinner and why the heck couldn't we get a decent glass of wine around here. It's too detailed and convoluted. The point isn't to wow me with your intricate plot. Give me the genre; give me the exciting pieces that spark my imagination; give me an overview that makes me want to read the book. "A wealthy businessman becomes involved with a con-artist who may or may not be trying to con him..." What's at stake? Why do we care?

**The Pitch:** I have a non-fiction to share: My working title is "Majesty" and it's about finding God's footprints around the world. I invite the reader to travel with me to such places as the magnificent glaciated mountains of Alaska to see His majesty; dive beneath the waters to wonder at His provision for the small detailed creatures of the Great Barrier Reef, and sing Amazing Grace in the middle of a small quiet river in China.

**My response:** This is a terrific start. I like that you opened it with "I have a non-fiction." Many conferences are both fiction and non, so this is helpful. Your summary gives me a good basic idea of what the book is about, but I'd encourage you to fill it in. Right now it's hard for me to envision anything beyond the big idea... could it be a photography book? A gift book? Or are you going to try and capture all these places with words only? Give us something concrete. There are so many genres of non-fiction; we need to know if it's self-help, Christian living, devotional, or whatever. But you're on your way to a successful pitch.

**The Pitch:** "Well, I'm glad you asked, because I didn't want to be an annoying person who traps editors and agents in elevators! My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and my story is set in Glasgow, Scotland in 1837. My heroine awakens, violent and bloody, in an asylum with no memory but linked to a murder she can't recall. The hero, a shy young reverend, anxious to end the guilt of turning his back on his mentally ill sister, promises to protect this fiery woman. But, by doing so, he forfeits any chance of the quiet, well-respected life he so desires—a life no longer shadowed by family madness. On the run, they begin to discover truths about each other—terrible truths that free them, but may force them apart forever. The only way to prove she is innocent is to find the murderer themselves. [The pitch goes on for 115 more words.]

**My response:** The first three sentences are perfect! Conversational, relaxed, witty... and you segue naturally into your story. I like how you give it a setting right away so I can picture it. And by saying "My heroine..." you've established it's fiction. The sentence about the heroine awakening bloody definitely captures my attention. After that you get a little too detailed and the pitch is too long. Time yourself saying all of your pitch aloud, and determine exactly how many words you need. In any case, you have a great beginning, you just need to wrap it up shortly after this first part.

**The Pitch:** [Title], the first in the \_\_\_\_\_ series, is an 80,000 word women's fiction about four generations of women who head south to fulfill a dying wish. Their road trip, filled with unexpected detours and misadventures, becomes a journey of self-discovery.

When hearts are opened and secrets exposed, God uses His garden of grace to draw these women together and closer to Him.

Told in third person past tense using multiple viewpoints, my novel explores the trials and triumphs of mother/daughter relationships and encourages today's women to tear down emotional walls and find healing. They are and always blooming, no matter their season in life.

**My response:** I like the story and want to know more about it. But this pitch feels vague. The only actual "story" I can envision is a group of women on a road trip. How am I to envision detours, misadventures, journey of self-discovery, hearts opened? Those are all non-specific, non-visual words. Work on making this more concrete. Use words that help me wrap my mind around what this journey looks and feels like. As for your second paragraph, that's definitely not something for the verbal pitch. Sounds like something from your proposal or suggested back-cover copy. It's a "written" style of language and would sound awfully stilted if you spoke it aloud. You have a nice way with words. Keep working on the best ways to capture your book in spoken language, in a way that makes someone really want to read it.

**The Pitch:** Well, I write Contemporary Romance, and my novel is about an introverted, shy accountant who meets a single dad in an Internet chat room. After she falls into 'like' with him, she senses she's being followed, and becomes convinced he's an Internet stalker. Her best friend convinces her to take a road trip to find out his true identity. Of course, this is a romance, so he isn't really an Internet predator as she fears, and they end up falling in love, but not before she's attacked by the REAL stalker.

**My response:** That's pretty good. Nice and conversational. Just enough information, never becomes so detailed as to lose me. Plus, the plot sounds fun and a little suspenseful. If you pitched me this, I'd say, "Hmm, sounds interesting. Do we have a meeting scheduled? Or can I get some pages?"

**The Pitch:** It's a historical based on true story about a devout preacher's daughter who marries a hard-drinking, brawling Irish riverboat captain. They go on to build a sprawling cattle empire against a Civil War backdrop.

**My response:** This isn't enough to get me interested. It's not bad, but it's not really a story either. It's more of a premise. What is the unique, compelling aspect of this that would make me want to read it? What actually happens as they build the empire? And



why should I care? These are the questions you'll need to answer, succinctly, to create a pitch that accomplishes your goal—a continued conversation with the agent.

**The Pitch:** Well, my WIP is about a foster care social worker suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. She's trying to get her life back on her career path while coping with her mental disorder, but a severe flashback raises questions about her competency from a handsome attorney who has a client on her caseload. She's also struggling with understanding why God would have allowed something so traumatic to happen to her in the first place. (Hopefully the agent would be somewhat interested here...and I would go on to explain my qualifications in writing such a book, *Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist*, and how mental disorders affect 1 in 4 adults but are largely left untouched in Christian fiction.)

**My response:** This is a nice, conversational style, is a good length, and I like the way you plan to explain your credentials. The problem is the lack of story. It's very vague, and I can't easily imagine an exciting tale about a woman "trying to get her life back on her career path..." What does that mean? And how much drama or action could that possibly entail? You reference a handsome attorney, but only in passing, which is a bummer because he was the most interesting thing in the pitch. I'm wondering why you've left out the most potentially dramatic and attention-grabbing details: What traumatic event is she suffering over? What was the nature of the "flashback" she had? I'd recommend you go back to the drawing board and work to convey the story, not just the themes, not the internal struggles of your protagonist, but what would make me want to read the book.

### **Examples of Pitches that Work Pretty Well**

The following are some pitches that were submitted to my blog that I felt were very close to being “there.” With a few small tweaks, each one would be a good, strong pitch. I did not offer responses to these.

**The Pitch:** 52 Zoos in 52 Weeks. My hubby, 3 young daughters and I hit our first zoo on August 1, last year, and we'll end on August 1 of this year. We've done 24 already, and we're having a blast! The book is a story of our adventures and inspiration to other families to seize the day, live LARGE and do it all on a very small budget. Times are tough, but that doesn't have to stop you from living a full—and FUN!—life. Don't waste a single day!

**The Pitch:** My book is a baseball thriller, the story of a Kansas farm boy who makes the big leagues, then becomes an unwitting pawn between two Mafia Dons who have a long-term bet involving his team. After persevering through a swirl of strange events orchestrated by the Dons, he finds himself in a cross-fire in Yankee Stadium at the World Series.

**The Pitch:** My story is about a beautiful, intelligent, 22-year-old judge's daughter named Allie. She has breezed through life, a success at everything she attempts, and the apple of her Daddy's eye. Her parents push her into law school, but she gets there and realizes that as successful as she is, she's miserable. In the midst of this realization, Allie's 16-year-old sister is in a horrific accident and falls into a coma. At her sister's bedside, Allie has to decide if she's going to follow her parents' dreams for her or if she's going to break out of the mold, find her own dreams, and in the process, maybe inspire her little sister to do the same.

**The Pitch:** My finished novel, *The Impossible Choice*, explores the impact on faith and family when the opposing beliefs of siblings are challenged by anti-religious terrorists. The practical themes of terrorism and love balance the emotional questions of identity and spirituality in this 75,000 word Christian suspense novel.

**The Pitch:** I'm writing a novel about Monarch butterflies and terrorists. I know that sounds weird, but it's really fun! My main character is a CIA agent who was double crossed by his friend in the DEA. Nick, the CIA agent, is in love with a lady in West Virginia who is hiding his two daughters for him. You know, since terrorists are out to kill him. He's been pinned for murder, and even the CIA is after him now. Sound interesting? It's a mix of suspense, romance, and things that explode.

## 15. About the Author

Rachelle Gardner

Rachelle Gardner is a literary agent with California-based Books and Such Literary Agency, representing both fiction and nonfiction. In the publishing business since 1995, Rachelle previously worked for two publishing houses in positions encompassing marketing, sales, international rights, acquisitions and editorial. She has also edited over 150 books. As an agent, she loves helping authors strategize and build their careers, and takes great joy in sharing the important milestones in a writer's journey. She never tires of talking about books and publishing, and working with authors is her dream job.

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