

Go Your Own Way

Forget what you've been told about how to get the most out of writing conferences. The best experiences come when you make your own rules.

BY TANYA EGAN GIBSON

You've saved up money and vacation days. You've hoped and daydreamed. You've rewritten pages and pitches. And you've absorbed countless conference "rules" from websites, publications and fellow writers about "making the most of it." Only one problem: Those rules can sabotage you.

If taken too literally, the "making the most of it" rulebook, while full of well-intended advice, can actually encourage self-serving, short-sighted and inauthentic behavior that can end up leaving you feeling empty and disappointed at the conference's end. Consciously looking beyond these rules, on the other hand, can leave you feeling like you're part of something—a literary community that promises collaboration, ongoing connections and career-long support.

THE RULEBOOK APPROACH: Get as much face time as possible with Famous Somebodies.

THE BETTER APPROACH: Spend more time getting to know fellow attendees.

Sure, it's fun to eat lunch at the same table as an editor who's telling a behind-the-scenes story about a bestseller. But getting acquainted with fellow attendees is more important to your writing career. Some of these folks are Future Famous Somebodies. More important, they are your present writing community, people with whom you can trade manuscripts, exchange tips and find support.

"Your peers are your best friends, supporters ... [and]

resources," says author Molly Giles, who has taught workshops at the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley, and whose own conference roommate later became an editor at *Playgirl*—the magazine that first published Giles' fiction. "Many of your fellow writers are going to get discouraged long before you will and will go into editing—which is just where you want them. So be nice. To everyone."

THE RULEBOOK APPROACH: Put yourself out there every chance you get.

THE BETTER APPROACH: Listen more than you talk—and be willing to share the floor when you get it.

While listening to participants practice speed-pitches at the San Francisco Writers Conference this year, I kept interrupting to ask why they were planning to talk for nearly all of their allotted *three minutes*

with each agent. "Be brief," I suggested.

"Then be quiet."

You're at a conference, after all, to get feedback and advice. So make time for listening. If the agent or editor wants to hear more, he'll ask. If an author thinks your work might be a good fit for her agent, she'll offer. Don't ask. And don't force things.

If you do end up chatting with a Famous Somebody at the

conference bar, make an effort to include fellow attendees (see *Future Famous Somebodies*). Rather than expounding further upon how Proust's work influenced your zombie novel, you might say, "Dave here wrote a hilarious yet touching story about Shakespearean vampire iguanas. Our workshop adored it."

People who celebrate and support their peers project confidence. So share the floor, take it slow and leave people wanting to hear more. Who knows, Mr. Famous Somebody might just seek you out later to learn more about your ennui-riddled undead.

THE RULEBOOK APPROACH:
Be assertive.

THE BETTER APPROACH:
Be human.

"People make the mistake of trying to make 'connections' happen instantly instead of trying to connect over time," says author Kim Culbertson, a frequent conference presenter. "It's that instant gratification thing that gets them into trouble. And if they only have 15 minutes, they think they need to cram everything in and forget to act like a person."

Twice, when I was a conference attendee and it was time for my one-on-one manuscript evaluations, I offered the editor and agent I was meeting with a chance to take a break—putting their needs before my immediate desire for their time. The first time, the editor had just been dealing with an attendee who was loudly objecting to her feedback. The second time, the agent was running behind with appointments and it was past lunchtime. Both reacted with surprise at my suggestion—and

took me up on it. And both later spent much more than the required 15 minutes with me. Treating presenters the way you'd want to be treated can set you apart from the pack—especially if the pack is acting rabid.

THE RULEBOOK APPROACH:
Always aim to impress.

THE BETTER APPROACH:
Be yourself.

While it's important to put your best self forward, that self should be real (even if that self is awkward or shy). Creating a conference persona is counterproductive to making genuine connections. Plus, pretending to be something or somebody you're not is uncomfortable. Don't be afraid to act, talk and even dress like you.

"I once heard a conference speaker say you should dress to impress," says writer Amanda Conran, who attends Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators conferences. "But that's just not me. If I try to dress up, I just end up feeling self-conscious." Conran, who has a flair for jewelry, pairs her jeans and casual tops with distinctive pieces that reflect her personality—and she's been rewarded when her selections have drawn editors who complimented them into conversation. "If I want to approach them again later that weekend, I wear that piece again so they'll remember me," she says.

Even more off-putting than a fake persona is someone who tries to impress by defending his writing. "As somebody who enjoys reading work and takes careful time to comment on it, reread and attempt to offer humane, respectful and positive feedback, I have been on

occasion interrupted by participants who, feeling defensive, tell me, suddenly: 'Oh, that piece was already published!' or, alternatively, 'I forgot! I have made significant changes to the version of the manuscript I gave you,'" says Andrew Tonkovich, an author and editor who's on the Writers Workshop staff at the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley. Since the point of a professional critique is to learn to improve your work, such reactions short-change you—and impress no one.

THE RULEBOOK APPROACH:
Focus conversations on what you've written.


THE BETTER APPROACH:
Focus conversations on writing.

Don't know what to talk about? No worries. You're at an event where everyone shares an interest: You love words on paper. So talk about what you've read lately, what moves you, what you're really into. A shared passion is magnetic.

You know what's not magnetic? A 10-minute recitation of your writing credits. Also uninteresting: how

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many Facebook, Twitter or blog followers you have, and other explanations of your “personal platform.”

Save it for your query or proposal. “People who think *platform* end up pelting you with their résumé without coming up for air,” warns Culbertson, who enjoys helping writers who try to build relationships naturally. “They forget to have a conversation.”

THE RULEBOOK APPROACH:
Make a plan for the conference and stick to it.

THE BETTER APPROACH:
Do as much research as possible, then prepare to be flexible.

Spend plenty of time at home learning about the presenters. Knowing which agents represent what (and whom) and having read work by authors in attendance allows you to ask more meaningful questions when the opportunities present themselves.

At the conference, ask returning attendees about sessions you’re interested in attending so you can learn which Famous Somebodies are famously fabulous (or notoriously bad) presenters. If your conference includes appointments with staff members of your choice, ask past participants about their experiences. (Very Famous Somebody may be known to give not-so-thorough manuscript evaluations. Less Famous Somebody might have a reputation for being generous with her time and feedback. Aim for quality of the experience you’re likely to have over perceived quality of its source.) And if you’ve been pre-assigned for a consultation and are disappointed

by the pairing, go into the appointment with an open mind. You may have been assigned to this person because he can best provide you with what you need right now in your writing career.

THE RULEBOOK APPROACH:
Learn to pitch, and do it at every opportunity.

THE BETTER APPROACH:
Confine pitches to appropriate settings.

There are so many bad ways, bad times and bad places to pitch that some publishing pros, like Andy Ross of Andy Ross Literary Agency, hope you won’t do so unless asked. “I prefer to hear about a project in a writer’s own words,” Ross says. “Pitch in a can” sends me the message that the writer doesn’t have enough confidence in the project to speak about it candidly and with authority.”

Chat, rather than pitch, at meals. And avoid the disguised-as-a-question pitch at presentations and panels. “If you hijack a conference Q&A to talk about your book, the agents in the room will be on Facebook.” When agent Gordon Warnock, of Andrea Hurst & Associates Literary Management, posted this line to his Facebook page during the San Francisco Writers Conference, he got an immediate “like” from another agent in attendance. (Is that how you want to “make an impression”?)

When faced with a tempting opportunity to pitch, stop for a moment and ask yourself if this is the appropriate place. Should you “elevator pitch” an unsuspecting agent in an actual elevator?

(No.) Should you pitch in the restroom? (Of course not, yet people do.) “We pay attention to more than just the book idea,” Warnock says. “[Inappropriate pitching] speaks volumes about how a person would handle the author/agent relationship.”

THE RULEBOOK APPROACH:
Make sure you get what you paid for.

THE BETTER APPROACH:
Be a gracious guest.

What if something goes wrong? Of course, it’s appropriate to speak to the conference directors or staff if the food keeps running out before the waiters get to your table, or the agent you were paired with for your one-on-one keeps referring to your manuscript as “a horror novel,” when it’s in fact a picture book about a puppy. But even if your experience isn’t everything you had hoped it would be, spend far more time on thank-you notes and emails than on complaints.

Monte Schulz, author and director of the Santa Barbara Writers Conference, suggests participants bring sticky situations to an administrator discreetly during the event rather than afterward, when it’s too late to rectify the situation. He emphasizes that everyone appreciates and remembers writers who navigate problems with graciousness, patience and humor. By acting this way, you advertise yourself as flexible and easy to work with—qualities attractive to fellow participants and Famous Somebodies alike. **WD**

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