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THE DO'S AND DON'T'S OF CONFERENCE ETIQUETTE

By Donna Bowman Bratton

SCBWI conferences are wonderful for networking, staying up to date on the ever-changing publishing industry, and absorbing craft-related instruction. To some, the most important benefit of attending a conference is the potential to connect with an agent or editor. The vast majority of conference exchanges are enjoyable and enlightening, but ask veteran editors and agents, and you'll likely hear about occasional attendees who, through their desperation, anxiety, and momentary lapse in judgment, sabotage their own efforts. A few anecdotes serve to remind us that there is a presumed canon of conference etiquette.

Erin Murphy of the Erin Murphy Literary Agency recalled a frustrating and awkward situation when, during a conversation with a writer, something landed in her eye, which immediately turned red. Tears streamed down her face. "I kept trying to pull away to go to the restroom," she says, but the woman "would not let me go." Murphy adds that, in other conference situations, she has been followed to the ladies room where a writer pitched her projects through the stall door.

Egmont USA editor Elizabeth Law agrees. "I have had people corner me and point to their list of manuscripts until I was sure I wouldn't get away until I agreed to look at one."

A few eager writers have employed unconventional tactics to get noticed. Julie Ham, associate editor with Charlesbridge Publishing, recalls a conference where a writer gave her an article of clothing that was identical to what the character from her picture book was wearing. That might be a cute idea during a school visit or book signing, but it is not advisable in professional settings where first impressions counts.

Those first impressions often come during conference critiques, those much-coveted opportunities to receive feedback on your work. No matter how friendly and well-balanced the critique, emotions can run high. Literary agent Erzszi Deak of Hen & Ink recalls a three-minute speed pitch session at a conference where the nervous woman across from her "was perspiring profusely, almost hyperventilating." At least a third of Deak's time was spent making sure the writer was breathing normally.

Fast forward to another conference critique where Deak's session with a writer was interrupted by a loud woman standing too close, who "plopped her bags down on our table and pushed them toward us as she continued to gesture largely." Rather than leaving a positive impression, the woman was asked to take her distractions elsewhere.

Elizabeth Law encourages attendees to be open-minded and prepared during critiques. "The most heartbreaking and frustrating thing for an editor is when a writer or artist can't hear what we're saying," she said. "I have taken my glasses off, stared a writer in the eyes, told them one clear, simple thing, and had them keep talking as if I hadn't said it." To avoid missing constructive criticism she suggests writers and illustrators ask their critiquer, "Is there anything you want to leave me with, or anything you think I need to know?" at the end of a critique session. "Even ask 'Am I hearing you correctly?'" Take notes, to avoid post-conference memory loss.

Law has one final piece of advice regarding your manuscript, "Please don't tell me about your class or other children and how much they like it." It is best to let your story stand on its own merit.

Cautionary tales remind us that the Golden Rule applies to conference settings. Do unto your fellow attendees and faculty speakers as you would have them do unto you. With that in mind, I give you the Do's and Don'ts of Conference Etiquette.

Don't:

- Don't stalk the editor or agent. Let them go to the restroom in peace.
- Don't sneak your manuscript into the agent's or editor's bag, folder, or turkey sandwich.
- Don't wear or bring gimmicks in the hopes of getting noticed. Remember, rock stars never fall in love with the over-zealous groupie.
- If you are asked what your book is about, don't whip out your manuscript. Revert to your rehearsed elevator pitch.
- Think one or two minutes, tops.
- Don't ask current clients of agents or editors to deliver your manuscript in person.
- Don't call yourself the next J.K. Rowling, Stephanie Meyer, Rick Riordan, etc. Be original.
- Don't disrupt a critique in progress. And don't exceed your own time limit.
- Don't record a speaker's session without first asking. It's generally frowned upon because presentations are proprietary and directly relate to the speakers' incomes.
- Don't forget to enjoy yourself.
- Don't forget—the featured agents, editors, and award-winning authors are people, too. Be respectful and friendly. Remember the golden rule.

Do:

- Read books by featured authors in advance. It will make their presentation much more meaningful to you.
- Familiarize yourself with books agented by or edited by speakers. You'll gain insight into their tastes and be ready with conversation starters if the opportunity presents itself. Here are a few places to find such information:
 1. Agent's or editor's websites and blogs and online interviews.
 2. Acknowledgment sections in books.
 3. A good ole Google search by name will often reveal author/agent/editor connections (be prepared to scroll.)
 4. AgentQuery.com
 5. Casey McCormick's fabulous blog Literary Rambles, which spotlights different agents. (<http://caseymccormick.blogspot.com/>)
 6. Publisher'smarketplace.com, which lists editors and agents for specific titles and newly reported sales.
 7. The Children's Writers and Illustrator's Market Guides.
 8. SCBWI.org
- Sign up for conference critiques. Remember to keep an open mind. Leave emotions at the door. Take notes. Ask for clarification.
- Dress accordingly. Most conferences are casual to professional casual. Wear comfortable shoes and dress in layers. You never know if the room temperature will be tropical or arctic.
- Practice your elevator pitch out loud. Think one-minute summary.
- Be prepared to take notes and bring a highlighter.
- If you are attending alone, befriend someone right away. Get out of your comfort zone and mingle.
- Bring plenty of business cards to share. You never know where you'll meet your next critique partner or supportive fan.
- Leave your manuscript at home. Editors and agents are traveling and don't have the space to lug around pages. If an agent or editor asks to see your work, they'll let you know how to submit.
- Come prepared with questions for Q&A sessions, about featured books, about process and craft, about submission possibilities. Be brave and raise your hand.
- When appropriate, shake the speakers' hands and strike up a casual conversation. Feel free to ask general questions, but do not pitch your book unless the agent or editor asks what you write.
- Be your genuine self. Remember that agents, editors, and award-winning authors are people, too. They appreciate a friendly chat. But at the end of the day, respect that speakers are tuckered out.
- Thank the conference planners. They're writers and illustrators, too. After planning for months, they're probably working behind the scenes, missing all the wonderful action.
- After the conference, follow up: touch base with your new friends. Send thank you notes to your critiquer.
- Harness your new found inspiration and vigor and dive right into your projects.

Armed with a little pre-planning and a clearer understanding of conference etiquette, you'll make the right impression, ask the right questions, and take another step toward writing your own best seller.



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