

# 36 TIPS FOR CONFERENCE ORGANIZERS

*Gathered over 25 Years at Oodles of Conferences, Workshops, & Seminars*

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As an author, writing instructor, editor, and literary agent I've experienced a multitude of writers conferences and workshops of all types and sizes as an attendee, an organizer, and as a speaker. I've been fortunate to have seen all sorts of situations from different perspectives, some of which worked well, others not so much. Having had the privilege of serving as a volunteer conference director myself, I appreciate everything conference volunteers do and I wish I'd had some of these tips to keep everything running smoothly. Perhaps you'll pick up a nugget or two that'll work well for your group.

1. **DATES:** Picking a date can sometimes be difficult as there are lots of other events already happening on the best weekends. Rather than try and compete, try working with them. Several conferences have joined with book fairs, art shows, and conventions. It increases the PR and exposure for both groups at no additional cost. One conference I attended several times made it a point to have the conference at a big hotel concurrently with an annual city street dance with live bands right outside the hotel's doors. It provided all-day first-class entertainment the conference didn't have to pay for. Many writers came from all over the country and returned year after year because it was such a fun conference.
2. **WEBSITE:** Every conference should maintain their own separate website year-round including your conference logo, an overview of the upcoming conference, scheduled speakers, session descriptions, endorsements from past attendees and speakers, registration info, and photo galleries of past conferences. Some sites also feature short video descriptions, attendee endorsements, and speakers in action. You may also wish to maintain a Facebook page, Twitter account, or other such social media.
3. **LISTINGS:** Be sure to list your conference on internet writer sites, especially [www.shawguides.com](http://www.shawguides.com). You might be surprised how many writers look for conferences online and travel to different parts of the country for a different conference experience. I've met many small groups of 4-12 writers who use conferences to meet periodically, each time at a different part of the country, returning to their favorite conferences.
4. **DISCOUNTS:** Some conferences offer a small discount for multiple registrations sent in together, such as from the same writers group or for roommates. This increases the number of attendees (and the fun). Offer a discount to volunteers. Even saving 10%, or 20 bucks, will bring out a lot of invaluable help. Most writers would help, but they don't know how to ask

how they can. Naturally, key volunteers, receive complimentary registration, and some, like the director, would also receive all expenses, including hotel.

5. **VENUES:** A successful writers conference doesn't have to be held at a fancy hotel. It's convenient but other venues can work well, too, especially if you book them for their off-season or downtimes. I've been to conferences held at schools (colleges, high schools, and elementary schools), churches, historic mansions, gardens, museums, resorts, scout and church camps, any place where a large group can gather, with local eateries, the PTA, or church women's circle handling the catering. Think creatively. Try a call to your local mall marketing manager to check the possibilities of meeting in an empty store front using rented chairs and tables, and having one of the restaurants cater the event, or just turn everyone loose on the food court for lunch.
6. **SIGNAGE:** Be sure to have brightly-colored signs stuck up everywhere for everything, directing writers (a confused writer is an unhappy writer who may not return next year.). Hang signs high in hallways so they can be seen above people's heads, and at eye level on the right side of doorways so they know they have the correct room upon entering. Paper signs will stick up on any surface and not mar it if you use teacher's putty (about a buck at office supply stores next to the tape, and it's reusable). Use your conference logo and put it on everything as you may be sharing the hotel or facility with other groups. At one huge conference a fellow agent and I went into a jam-packed hotel ballroom for dinner as we had the night before, picked up cocktails and appetizers, went through a receiving line, were interviewed by a local reporter, then schmoozed for several minutes before we realized we didn't see any familiar faces – we were in the wrong dining room. The writers conference had switched to a bigger ballroom; we had mistakenly wandered into a funeral directors' convention!
7. **CONTESTS:** Many conferences offer writing contests as a fundraiser, open just to attendees or open to anyone. Establish your criteria, rules, categories, deadline, judges, prizes, and entry fees, then post it all on your website in great detail. Change nothing once it is posted. Be cautious about awarding prizes in person at a dinner ceremony; it can be extremely time-consuming and ultimately boring. I was the keynote speaker at a banquet at one conference, seated at the head table, where they awarded 237 prizes to winners, snapping individual photos of each writer accepting their certificate (Yes, I counted; what else could I do? It took *hours*).
8. **NAMETAGS:** Be sure nametags can be read from about 3 feet away, at least first names. The reason? I've had more than one insensitive guy with bad eyesight shoving his nose in my bosom to try to read some small fancy font... 😊 I laugh, but I've seen some women go ballistic, or crumple in mortification... Also, forget pins; they tear up fine fabrics. The best I've used were on a lanyard, like airport security. Adding the city or type of writing under the name fuels networking. Also, a simple thing that doesn't cost a dime more: Have one color nametag for attendees, another for speakers, and a third for volunteers. Make sure the volunteers' nametags are a really bright color, like fluorescent orange. One conference also had huge neon "Ask Me" stickers plastered on every volunteer's chest and back as they



circulated through the conference all weekend; no questions went unanswered there. Another conference put their volunteers in bright yellow vests. Of course, at the close of the conference recycle nametags for the next year by positioning a large box or basket by the door with a big sign so everyone can toss their nametags in.

9. **TOTE BAGS:** Make sure every writer goes home with something in hand from the conference. Book bags, imprinted with the conference name and logo, are the most popular and writers' use afterwards is excellent free advertising as they use them for everything from shopping to library runs. They are worth the additional trouble and expense, which can be minimal, or get the bags donated by your bookstore or local grocery. Fill them with the conference packet including schedules, hotel maps, speaker bios, etc, plus various donated goodies, such as pen and paper from the hotel, authors' bookmarks, peppermints to quiet scratchy throats, etc. Local businesses will often donate small advertising items that writers like, such as pens, pencils, or notepads. Plastic shopping bags aren't a viable alternative to cloth totes, however. They can't handle the weight, cause noise, and just end up getting tossed.
10. **BREAKS:** Have at least 20 minutes between sessions, 30 minutes if meeting rooms are far apart. Make sure there's plenty of room in lobbies, hallways, patios, or on lawns for sitting, milling, eating, whatever, to fuel the networking. Many writers learn more between sessions than in them. (But then, providing a venue for all the writers to get together and learn and network is the point, after all....)
11. **RUNNING OVERTIME:** Build emergency flex points into your schedule so you can make up lost time. Distinguished speakers sometimes run long, the hotel is slow serving, equipment can't get working, whatever. It happens. Avoid chaos by having a backup plan. Get back on schedule as quickly as possible. The easiest way, but the one which could bring grumbling, is to simply cut the time from the next session. Alternately, make it up in breaks. However, keep one-on-one interview appointments as close to the original time as possible. An experienced agent can speed things up and get back on track in no time, without writers feeling shortchanged.
12. **END OF DAY:** If it's possible, have an orchestrated social time immediately following the last session each day when writers can talk about what they learned while it's still fresh on their minds. Most conferences have a wine and cheese or coffee and cookie sort of thing for a half hour or so, sometimes sponsored by a local business or group, sometimes as a recruitment effort for a local writers group.
13. **ROOM MONITORS:** Assign a volunteer for each session to simply attend it and take care of small details: watching the clock, sound check, distributing speaker handouts, seeing if the speaker needs anything, getting extra chairs, running for hotel tech staff if there's a problem, etc. Station them with a nametag and at the same place in every room, usually just inside and to the left of the door.

14. **AGENT IDOL EVENT:** A very popular and valuable event I've been a part of at several conferences is Agent Idol, which usually last 1-2 hours, although I've seen them go for several hours after dinner. It is best done before a very large crowd. Writers anonymously submit the first 5 pages of their manuscript, being sure to indicate the genre or type of book (a children's book is, after all, far from an adult novel). A panel of agents listens while a moderator (usually a local freelance editor or author) reads the manuscript aloud after announcing the genre. At the point the agents would stop reading and reject the book, they raise their hand. When all hands are up, the reading stops and the agents explain why they stopped at the point they did. It's incredibly enlightening to everyone in the audience, not just the poor brave souls on the guillotine. The usual consensus about the rejected work is that the writers have submitted too soon; they simply have more work to do.
15. **BIG EVENT:** Think creatively when it comes to the Big Event Saturday night. Look what The Mystery Writers of America Florida Chapter's Sleuth Fest did: They replaced the could-be-boring and definitely-is-expensive banquet with an educational trip to the shooting range, complete with box lunch. Other conferences have also had luaus around the hotel pool, mystery dinner theater, and field trips to outstanding local spots, bar-b-ques in a park, dinner and a play at the local theater, etc. Other successful ideas I've seen include concerts by a local singer-songwriter, performances by musicians from the local high school or college, dances complete with a live band and salsa lessons, and talent shows featuring some of the volunteers and attendees (screened and selected ahead of time). One conference even featured the FSU Flying High Circus of college student gymnasts after dinner.
16. **BUFFETS:** Buffets do work best. They give everyone their choice, including vegetarians, without making it a big deal, eliminate costly special dietary restrictions, and provide another vehicle for people to network over the day's activities. You can move crowds through quicker if each buffet line is double-sided, with additional buffets set up for larger crowds or for desserts or beverages. Plus, you can generally offer a better meal per dollar than with sit-down service at a hotel. Posting the menu conspicuously next to the beginning of the line also helps speed up dawdling food choice contemplators.
17. **BOXED LUNCHEES:** For one-day workshops for smaller groups, boxed lunches can be perfect. One clever conference I attended worked hand-in-hand with a local sandwich shop to give attendees boxed lunches to order. When the writers registered in the morning they were told to fill out their lunch order and return it before leaving the registration table. It went quickly because the order forms were preprinted with all the choices and all the writer had to do was put their name on the top and check off their choice of bread or salad; meat, cheese, toppings, and condiments; side order; cookie; and bottled soda, juice, tea, or water. The sandwich shop picked up the orders by 9:30 and delivered the custom lunches at the lunch break, spread out on tables in alphabetical order, the order forms taped to the top of the boxes, with everything including utensils, napkins, and drink inside. The pickup line went smoothly and quickly and everyone had exactly what they liked, and nothing they didn't, thus keeping costs down.



18. **FORGET THE FOOD:** Especially for one-day workshops in an urban setting, don't feel compelled to provide food. Sure, have coffee, tea, etc. available all day, maybe even a tray of cookies mid-afternoon, but instead of all the hassle of serving lunch, give them an extra half hour and send them out to neighboring restaurants (provide a written list in their packets with directions) and encourage them to go together. Some conferences assign speakers to groups for mixing over lunch. Some attendees may also choose to bring their own lunch so be sure to announce where the brown baggers can meet, such as a patio, on the lawn, or even in one of the meeting rooms. Just be sure attendees know ahead of time that lunch is on their own and not included in registration.
19. **LUNCH OR DINNER SPEAKERS:** Try not to have a speaker while people are eating – before or after, but not during. It's just too damn confusing, and hard on the speaker. A nifty alternative to a luncheon speaker is to make up table signs with different types of writing so romance writers sit together, sci-fi writers sit together, etc. and get to know one another, sometimes with one of the conference speakers readily directing conversation. This has been the beginning of more than one after-conference critique group, too.
20. **WATER:** Be sure each speaker has a fresh glass or bottle of water. Also, having glasses and a pitcher of water in each room all day can be a blessing for attendees. Some conferences put a bottle of water in each tote bag. I was speaking at a conference in Tucson which had a local company co-sponsor the conference, donating dozens of cases of bottled water which were stacked in the hallways adjacent to meeting rooms; everyone grabbed a bottle as they needed it. Also, small bowls of inexpensive hard candy or mints in each meeting room keep coughs from distracting the audience.
21. **WALKIE-TALKIES:** Walkie-talkies can really come in handy in a big hotel for the director and key staff or the conference desk. Sometimes old-school technology works better.
22. **RESTROOMS:** If it's a large conference and there's more than one men's room, let the women take over one of the men's rooms during the conference. It speeds up breaks. Just place a nice big sign on the men's room door that says "WOMEN – TODAY ONLY" or something like that. Also, assign one man and one woman to check throughout the day that the paper products are staying in sufficient supply in all facilities.
23. **FIRST AID:** Be sure to have a first aid kit on hand, at least one volunteer in charge of medical emergencies, and that all volunteers know your emergency protocol. Also, at registration identify any doctors, nurses, paramedics, among attendees and try to keep track of their locations. Yep, I've been at a conference where a woman had a heart attack, one where a young man collapsed in a seizure, and another where a woman went into labor. And many more where someone got sick, cut, fell, fainted, etc. You can't rely on the hotel, either; some are prepared, surprisingly, most are not.
24. **BOOKSTORE:** A bookstore is always a good idea. Independents are your best place to ask first. They should carry not only the speakers' books, but also those on writing. To assist the

bookstore many conferences poll their speakers for recommended books. Perhaps you can interest your bookstore in donating a portion of sales to the conference to fund a scholarship for the next year's conference, or perhaps to a charity, such as the local library. It's a great way to increase sales as attendees know a percentage of each purchase goes to a good cause. Some large conferences also rent tables to other businesses, such as freelance editorial services, computer sales, independent publishers, writers associations, etc.

25. **BOOK SIGNINGS:** Most larger conferences, especially those with a bookstore, also schedule book signings for all attending authors to sign their books, providing tables and chairs. These are usually held at the end of the day as a social time and are set up in the lobby, a broad hallway, or perhaps in a separate room. Be sure to publicize this event in the local media and open it to the public. Some conferences also set up a cash bar in the corner to lubricate the networking.
26. **A THOUGHTFUL TREAT:** A popular addition is asking a local massage therapist or massage school to come with massage chairs and offer massages in a corner of a hallway or lobby. A 10-minute massage for a small fee usually works best. Sitting all day can really bring on aching backs, necks, and other problems so the attendees line up for them. One conference had a coupon in their speakers' packets good for a free massage. Boy, did we all appreciate that!
27. **SPEAKERS:** Be sure to send speakers an informal agreement, basically a list, specifically stating what you are offering them, what's expected of them, and what they can expect from you. For returning speakers send a new written agreement each year. If you decide to change up the speaker roster and not include speakers who have come year after year, be sure to use good manners and let them know as soon as possible so they can clear their calendars, as they have saved those dates for you. The more details you cover upfront, the less room there is for misunderstandings later. Remember: ASSUME makes an ASS out of U and ME.
28. **NO-SHOW SPEAKERS:** Have a backup plan for last-minute speaker cancellations. Speakers miss planes, get held up at customs, get the flu. Know ahead of time which of your speakers can fill in at the last minute. One poor conference I attended five speakers got sick, one had a death in the family, plus one got lost for a while coming from the airport, and another just never showed. It happens. The rest of us just doubled up on our workshops and kept moving all weekend. And I once subbed for an author who missed his plane because he was stuck in a Mexican jail. If you have any last-minute speaker cancellations, be gracious and understanding – after all it wasn't their fault and they feel bad enough about it. Be sure speakers aren't out any expenses and invite them to come the following year.
29. **AGENT PITCH FEES:** Some conferences can afford to have many agents at their conferences by charging a small \$10-35 fee for each 10-minute one-on-one interview, fees easily covering the budget for agents' expenses. Unless you're planning on a speedy 2-hour pitch slam with 3-minute pitches, 10 minutes is the optimum amount of time, allowing for 6 an hour. Any longer than 10 minutes can become awkward if the agent just is not interested. Be sure to schedule a 10-minute break for agents every couple of hours. Another very popular spin on



one-on-one pitches is to offer group interviews too (for those who are shy or just not ready to pitch yet) for 4-10 people at half the fee and for twice the time. While opinions vary on whether to charge extra for one-on-one interviews, those conferences that haven't charged said they probably would start, simply because not everyone attending the conference wanted, nor was ready for, an interview with an editor or agent. Many of these attendees feel they are being needlessly charged if interviews are included in the conference fee.

30. **AGENT PITCHES:** Agents should be able to conduct formal pitch interviews just about anywhere it's comfortable and is easy for the writers to find them. All that's really needed is a quiet corner of a room and a couple of chairs; I consider everything else a pleasant surprise. Like most agents, I have my own watch and bottle of water. Don't let diva agents con you into private rooms, personal monitors, extravagant timers, fancy fizzy waters, or limited schedules. This is a fundraising event for the conference offsetting costs, and agents should respect that and expect to take interviews most of the day. (However, it is a treat when I can snatch a bit out of a conference day to hear one or two of the speakers. I can't tell you how many conferences I've attended where I was closeted the entire time in the pitch room and never heard a single speaker and felt I had missed something.) How many interviews should you schedule? Between 12 and 24 a day is not unreasonable. Remember, agents are also very popular session speakers offering a unique perspective on publishing so don't look at them as only a pitch machine.
31. **MANUSCRIPT CRITIQUES:** Some conferences also offer writers the opportunity to send in a sample of their work (usually 10-25 pages) to be read and critiqued before the conference by a selected author, agent, or editor, and then discussed in a 15-30 minute one-on-one interview. For this intense bit of work, writers pay \$50-\$150 (a bargain as freelance editors can charge from \$8-\$20 a page), and the fee is split between the conference and the reader since a great deal of specific work and professional time is required.
32. **SPEAKERS' COMPENSATION:** You have next to no budget, am I right? Few writers groups do. So every dime spent is important. But you also know that writers come to hear and learn from well-known authors, agents, and editors – in short, successful professionals. So for you it's a balance of spending as little as possible, yet getting a draw, which increases the attendance and thus the budget. And the more attendees you have, the lower the cost per person and the higher the budget, which can be used for more extras and more speakers. Basically, here's what I've found is the bare minimum to keep most speakers happy: invite them, show them a good time, show them respect, treat them well, and make sure it doesn't cost them to come. And if they can go home with a little something in their pocket for those extras such as cabs and meals while traveling, that would be excellent. We do this for many reasons: to find clients and publishers, to network, for PR, but mostly for love of writers and the written word. Make sure you don't insult us by making us pay to come. After all, we're taking time from our business to be there – in other words, we're spending our vacation time. We give freely of our time, energy, and expertise to inspire and teach writers. Do you have to fly us first class, meet us with a limo, and put us up at a 5-star hotel? Fun, but not needed. I've slept on bunk beds, sofas, and boats; and in guestrooms, lofts, mansions, cabins, and yes,

5-star hotels. The main thing is that you treat all your speakers equally, compensating us with the same honorarium for the same work. Yes, because of the intensity of the preparation and work, those giving a keynote address should get more, those giving a workshop more than those on a panel, etc. Remember, publishing is a small community and we talk to each other. I mean, how would you feel if you found out someone taught a workshop, just as you did, and was paid expenses and an honorarium of, say, \$300, and you only received hotel and airfare – but your incidental travel expenses, like cabs and meals, cost you nearly \$100 out of your own pocket? Would you take time out of your busy work week to go again when invited the next year? Would you recommend the conference to your peers? Be sure to ask speakers if they'd like to provide anything for the swag bags, such as bookmarks for their latest book, or perhaps one of their books for a door prize.

33. **SPEAKER EXTRAS:** Want to make a really fine impression on your speakers (while not costing the conference)? Ask them if they'd like to stay over an extra night or two with one of your volunteers and see a bit of your part of the country or to sign books at local bookstores. You'd be surprised how many fascinating cities I've been to that all I've seen of it is the airport and inside of the hotel. Volunteers will compete for an opportunity to host a speaker and act as chauffeur and tour guide. And, yes, we are happy to try to repay our hosts by giving them personalized benefits of our experience and expertise. I have many treasured memories these volunteers have given me of hours filled with stimulating conversations on fabulous adventures such as hiking in the mountains, attending plays, sailing on a tall ship, flying over Glacier National Park, attending a movie premier, visiting art galleries, walking in the desert, visiting a spa, dancing to a hot band, touring wineries, riding in a racecar, target shooting with an Uzi, and listening to music in the nation's oldest jazz club. And yes, I've found more than one client this way.
34. **EVALUATIONS:** Most conferences have attendees fill out anonymous evaluation forms so they can see which session topics attract the most writers, which speakers were the most valuable, which experiences the most rewarding for the attendees, where things need improvement. You'll learn valuable things you wouldn't know otherwise, too, such as a volunteer's over-the-top assistance or that the restroom ran out of paper towels. But it can be tricky to get attendees to fill them out. One effective method I've seen is to have a box at the registration table and upon depositing a completed evaluation form, an attendee receives a numbered coupon good for a drawing for a donated prize, such as a gift basket of speakers' books or a huge discount off the next year's registration. The bigger the prize, the more motivated they are to complete the forms and the more valuable info you'll have for planning the following year. Employ simple, short, anonymous, checkbox, multiple choice, and fill-in-the-blank evaluation forms. Avoid essay questions, it's intimidating; if they feel like writing, they'll use the back. If you choose to have individual session evaluations, have the session volunteer hand them out beforehand and collect them afterwards.
35. **CONFERENCE LOGS:** To really help in future years, have all your volunteers document and keep records, databases, copies, and samples of everything, then compile it all into a big fat binder, or series of notebooks (like Registration, Hotel, Publicity, Contest, Speakers, Travel,



etc). Include copies of things like email rosters, hotel contracts, supply lists, menus, press releases, planning calendars, invitation letters, and thank you notes in hardcopy and digitally. Then next year as you divvy up jobs, no one will think they have to start from scratch; they simply follow the "easy" instructions, adding their own input into that section of the binder, or that separate notebook. Bottom-line: It makes it so much easier to get volunteers if they think they have an easy guide and don't have to reinvent the wheel.

36. POST MORTEM: Immediately after the conference the director and key volunteers should all go out for dinner while everything is fresh in your minds so you can compare experiences and make notes for the next year. It should be someplace nice, preferably quiet, maybe in a separate dining room, with good food (perhaps with lots of wine). Treat yourselves to a fine dinner; you've earned it, it's a small price for the conference to pay for all your hard work. Bring along any lingering out-of-town speakers whose flight is the next morning; they'll appreciate it and may have fascinating input from a different perspective. This is the perfect time for decompressing, sharing thoughts about the conference, planning for next year (plus, it'll spare your spouse listening to it). Then, all you have to do when you get home is take a long soothing bath and go to bed with a good book.

I hope all of this proves helpful. If you have a question, or a tip that worked for you that you'd like to add, please e me: [cricket@cricketfreeman.com](mailto:cricket@cricketfreeman.com).

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