



First Draft

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Appearing on a Panel? Some Rules for the Road

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As a newly published author of a few on-line mystery short stories and a hard-cover fantasy novel, I gathered my courage and decided to participate in my first panel at a fan conference. My time that particular weekend was limited, so I agreed to sit on only two panels – “Publishing Alternatives Today” and “Adventures in Editing” – although the organizers were gracious and would have been happy to include me in a few more sessions. The following suggestions will hopefully help you avoid mistakes while maximizing the experience when it’s your turn in the spotlight.

Pick panels that suit your travel schedule. For this particular convention, since I could only participate in the morning, I agreed to join the two panels mentioned above. However, if you have sufficient lead time to plan out your schedule, and the time to devote to the conference, be sure to participate in as many sessions as possible. Although I haven’t yet done a reading of my work, I do hope to do so at the next conference. These different types of opportunities allow you to give both your book and your credentials as much exposure as possible – particularly since you don’t know who’s who in the audience.

Pick panels on familiar topics. I chose “Publishing Alternatives Today” because of my recently published novel from ArcheBooks, a small publisher that distributes each book in both a cheaper e-format and a more expensive hard cover edition. Although I was familiar with the basic pros and cons of working with a small publisher, I wasn’t as well-versed in the intricacies of the topic as I might have been. Yes, I’ve been writing for about thirteen years, but I’m still a “puppy” when it comes to the experience of actually being a published author. Some of my co-panelists had more experience under their belts and had statistics, facts, and figures at their fingertips that helped put their comments into perspective (although, I have to admit, some of those statistics were disheartening).

I also chose “Adventures in Editing” because it sounded like fun. My present full-time job involves managing client publications for a consulting company. Since I wear two hats – writing and editing

– I was able to contribute to the discussion from both sides of the desk. As an added boon, I was the only writer on the panel!

Arrive early. It’s important to scope out the size and “feel” of the venue, be it a classroom, an auditorium, or some other setting. Arriving early allows you to pick the best seat for yourself (I sat in the center... others may choose either end for a quick get away). It also provides a terrific opportunity to chat with early arrivals who are either on the panel or in the audience. Remember to network, make friends,

and develop contacts. If the venue allows for some intimacy, chat with various people in the audience while you’re waiting for the session to begin. Appearing personable and open to casual conversation may not only help you develop a fan base, but also provide audience feedback on the genre – or, your book, if you’re lucky enough to have a fan in the audience (or unlucky

enough to have a critic).

Display your book. I wasn’t sure whether or not I’d be able to even show anyone my book, as some conventions don’t want you to get involved in direct sales, but instead leave it to the vendors. That said, I decided to bring the book along, anyway. Talk about being naïve. When my co-panelists proudly propped their books on the table, I was glad I’d brought along my novel – not to mention how proud I was at the work the publisher had put into the cover art to make it look really cool.

Be ready if a moderator doesn’t show. My two panels, for some unfortunate reason, lacked a moderator. As a newbie, I didn’t think it was my place to take control, but in future, if no one rises to the occasion, I will. We operated without the traditional moderator questions or introductions, so I had to briefly compose (on the spot) a list of my credentials and a sentence or two about my book. I was lucky because I wasn’t sitting at the end and had a few moments grace, but I’ll be prepared next time. Fair warning: Even if you’ve been writing and published for a lifetime, limit your introduction. It cuts into the presentation time, and isn’t fair to other panelists. Think bullet points, not rambling paragraphs.

**Be sure to
create a list of
key points about
your topic.**

Have speaking points. Long before your panel starts, be sure to create a bullet list of key points about your topic. Although you may not get a chance to discuss all your points, they'll come in handy if there's a lull in the discussion. It also allows you to comment on other panelists' remarks so you can participate at appropriate points that make you sound intelligent – and not as though you're scrambling to come up with something to say.

Bring promotional material. If you have bookmarks or postcards of your book, as well as business cards with your e-mail and website listed, set them up in the "freebie" table. This particular display is usually located somewhere on the premises, not far from participant registration. It's also advantageous to distribute promotional material to the audience after the panel has concluded. People always like getting things for free. With luck, you'll also make some sales.

Treat your audience with respect. Whether two people show up to listen to your panel or a hundred, be polite and interested in their questions. My first panel had five people, which was an intimate group, allowing a lot of free discussion. The second panel had roughly twenty-five attendees. One very patient woman was extremely grateful when I was the only one (the only woman on both panels, by the way) to politely intervene and recognize her raised hand before one of the other panelists made what looked to be a long-winded comment.

Stay a while and chat. People often come up after the panel and ask questions, whether they're readers, writers, or editors. Hang out for a while, as long as you're not blocking the next panel; if you are, take the discussion outside the room. Two college-age (and, therefore, cash poor) women who seemed interested in my novel were happy to hear that the book was released in an e-format, particularly as it's a trilogy. Since I get royalties on e-books, too, I was happy to let them know that a cheaper version was available. After all, a sale is a sale is a sale - and you look like a hero for saving them a few bucks.

Above all, enjoy yourself. I wasn't sure how comfortable I'd be in the spotlight, but I found myself enjoying the experience and not at all nervous about speaking. After all, I was there to talk about something I love doing.

So don't forget to have fun! And if things don't go so well the first time, give yourself a break and consider each new experience as a learning opportunity. You know you'll do better next time.

Ginny McMorrow, author of *Mage Confusion*, Book 1 of the Tuldamorán Trilogy, has had several mystery stories published by Shred of Evidence and Writers E-Zine. Visit virginiamcmorrow.com.