



## Going Public: Five Book-Signing Essentials for Authors

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AFTER THE MONTHS (YEARS?) OF INTENSE WORK – revising, negotiating, proofreading, waiting – the big day finally arrives: you get your first copies of the real, live, printed-and-bound book. The one with your name on the cover.

*You're an author.*

This passage from the private toils of writerhood to the public persona of book authorship is an exciting moment, one full of opportunity and promise. And as with most of life's transitions, the more prepared you are to make it a success, the better you'll thrive in your newly assumed role.

One of the first opportunities that come with the territory is the public book signing (lecture, reading, panel, etc.). It's also the one new authors are most likely to underestimate. Following a few guiding principles will help you lay the groundwork for a great event.

**1. Find out the event's parameters, and fit your presentation to them.**

It seems elementary, but knowing what to expect from each particular event is vital to ensuring that you arrive on time and in the right frame of mind, and that you deliver what your audience is looking for.

- What are the details of date, time, and place? (Print out a map and directions ahead of time if you're not familiar with the location.)

- What is the length of the event, and how much of it is your responsibility? Some events may include preliminary announcements or official business; some may feature multiple speakers. If you can get an agenda ahead of time, however informal, you'll have a better idea where you fit into the scheme of things.

- What is the venue like? Your event may take place in a meeting hall where you're the only focus of attention—or it may be scheduled for a corner of a busy, noisy bookstore. Will you be standing at a lectern, or sitting? Using a stool or chair? What are the lighting and sound conditions like? Will you have, or need, a microphone? You may not be able to learn all of these details in advance, but they become keenly important when you step up to read or speak. See more in point four about preparing for these variables.

- What is the anticipated audience? Ideally, your event will have been scheduled with the best match of book, audience, and timing in mind. Regardless, it helps to visualize the size and makeup of the crowd—and the possibility that it may vary wildly from expectations. You don't want to betray disappointment to the two people who *do* show up at a bookstore on a rainy night, nor do you want to appear overwhelmed or ill at ease when your reading turns out standing-room-only.

Are there going to be children in the audience? Students? Senior citizens with hearing difficulties? A disproportionate mix of men and women? Anticipate how to tailor or adjust your event and content to such eventualities.

## **2. Prepare and rehearse your words.**

No matter how outgoing a personality you are, how brilliant in wit or expert in your subject, it's best not to wing it. Even if you're an experienced public speaker, it's a good idea to practice aloud ahead of time to identify crowd-pleasers and dull spots, to discover pronunciations that might give you trouble (even from your own book!), and to

time yourself. If you tend to ramble or stammer when you're nervous, or if you tend to be shy in front of an audience, rehearsal is even more important.

- If your event is a *lecture*, discuss your topic with organizers to make sure it's pitched to the right level. Select an intriguing title that can be publicized well in advance. Single-author lectures or subject talks usually run twenty to forty-five minutes. Write out, or at least outline, your talk ahead of time, practice it, and take written notes with you for cues. In academic settings lectures may be formally structured, delivered by reading a paper word for word, but most book-related talks will be shorter and more extemporaneous. In either case, you owe it to your audience to be engaging, organized, and not overlong.

Figure out a strategy for a graceful ending and a transition to the question-and-answer session. (Your host or emcee will likely assist here, but that isn't always the case.) Try to anticipate the usual questions and have honest but interesting replies at the ready; try to anticipate the offbeat so you won't be nonplussed. It can actually be fun to prepare by playing the Q&A game with a patient friend. See how many curveballs they can throw – and how well you connect.

Last, think through how you'll segue to the book signing portion of the program. Leave plenty of time for this: it's the payoff you came for!

- If your event is a *multimedia presentation*, advance preparation is a bit more technical. You should find it easier to speak and present with confidence, with your cues and visuals right at hand, but you must be certain the computer and setup are functioning properly or your composure can break down as quickly as a faulty network connection. Most experts advise planning on one slide per minute. It's best to stick to an understated design and minimize text on the slide; you want your audience to focus on the words you are saying, not the ones on the screen. You may need to practice advancing the slides, whether directly from the computer or from the remote control. If at all possible, have an A/V professional on hand to help set up the projector and presentation materials and to stick around until you actually start. If you can develop a bit of proficiency and comfort, images can greatly enhance your spoken presentation.

- If your event is a *reading*, your choice of subject is easier, but preparation is no less important. There's a true skill involved in giving an effective reading: experienced writers know that a reading is a bit of solo theatre.

Choose your selections with the venue, audience, and event length in mind. Some writers mark passages in their own copy of their published book, using sticky notes or highlighter; others prefer to print or photocopy enlarged pages of their text for easier reading in doubtful lighting conditions. Whether your material is fiction, nonfiction, or poetry, plan to give your audience sufficient introduction for context—a few sentences explaining a character or an image, or an entire anecdote that sets the stage for the passage.

Rehearse! Read your material aloud for a practice audience—at a measured pace, just as you will on the real occasion. Take note of different conditions. Can you read as comfortably when you're required to stand at a microphone and hold your book open as you can when you have a lectern to lay your pages on? Is the binding of your book stubborn, wanting to snap shut every time you turn a page? How do you find the best angle for your pages so that you don't block eye contact with the audience while comfortably reading, yourself? For larger venues, you'll want to get some practice using lectern or lavalier mics (beginners tend to back off too far or overcompensate by speaking too quietly).

For an ending, select a passage or poem that leaves the audience fulfilled but wanting more—a sense of drama, or an intriguing question, or a particularly satisfying image. A gracious “Thank you” to your audience is a customary close to an enjoyable experience for all.

- Your event might be a *signing* that does not involve remarks to a group. In large bookstores during regular hours, or at book fairs or other shows, you might be stationed at a table with your books and promotional materials, alone or alongside other authors. (Try to make sure you're situated in an appropriately high-traffic area.) Events like these give you the chance to chat one-on-one with fans and new readers. Be engaged and polite, looking for the opportunity to connect the visitor's interests with something in your book. Don't allow either friends or strangers to monopolize your attention—you want to encourage others to break in and, above all, leave with a copy of your book.

- In addition to thinking about what you'll say, think about what you'll *write*—how you'll sign your name in books, whether you'll add the date or any additional words, and even whether you'll sign objects other than your books. (Fans have been known to make some strange requests.) Authors customarily inscribe the title page (the

one where their names are printed). Check ahead of time to see what sort of pen works best on your book's paper – use an extra-fine permanent marker for slick sheets where other kinds of ink don't dry fast enough, but use a rollerball or ballpoint on uncoated pages that might bleed through. An assistant can help by having purchasers write out their desired names in advance on sticky notes (a misspelled inscription is a spoiled book!). You may also want to sign stock ahead of time, to minimize time and mistakes in line. Take this all with grace and good humor, but don't allow long-winded fans, or those with a stack of books brought from elsewhere, to hold up the line when others are waiting.

### **3. Take things that are necessary – or might be.**

At the top of this list is to take an assistant to handle situations like the one mentioned above. It's surprisingly challenging to deal with myriad questions and logistics yourself, when you're the one on public view. And since you can't always count on the bookstore manager or your emcee to deal with every detail, a spouse or friend or a student will do nicely for the purpose. Your assistant can help meet and greet, collect money, park the car, carry and open boxes, locate the restrooms, anything else you can think of – depending on the extent of their goodwill or obligation.

Your assistant should remind you to bring the next most important item: extra books. If your venue is a bookstore, the store should have sufficient stock on hand – but why take the chance? A couple extra boxes in the trunk of your car could save you from a missed opportunity.

Remember to bring a few extra pens of the kind that works best for you.

Bring promotional materials for the event – posters, in case the event organizer hasn't thought of this, and giveaways such as flyers, author biography and credits, business cards, bookmarks, imprinted items, food where appropriate. You may want to include an order form in each book, for readers who later decide they'd like to get more copies. If you like to be more flashy about your display, several writers' guides list lots of creative ideas for getting attention and making fans happy.

If you are handling your own book sales at your event, write out a chart of prices including tax and figuring in any discount as appropriate, for 1, 2, 3 (etc.) copies. Take a cash box with necessary change on hand.

Take a camera and have someone take pictures for your clip files. Get copies of papers and magazines in which pre-event news has run, while you're in the neighborhood.

Bring a bottle of water to sip. Many venues are thoughtful enough to provide a glass of water for the speaker (no ice, which clinks and sloshes; a straw is nice). Carry your own just in case.

Oh, yes. An umbrella. Even if you don't mind getting wet if it's raining when you leave, your books will.

#### **4. Always have a Plan B.**

What do you do if a smaller-than-expected (or larger-than-expected) audience shows up? If the sound system doesn't work? If you lose your marked copy of your book? Only experience will help you keep your composure in a wide range of unexpected situations. But to the extent that you can predict a variety of scenarios, think through how to steer each one to best advantage. If the crowd of a hundred you've expected for a lecture in an auditorium turns into a group of five, invite them all down to the front and pull up a chair with them for a more intimate discussion. If your bookstore event doesn't draw, for bad weather or scant publicity or whatever reason, recognize that book signings are *always* chancy – and take the opportunity to chat one-on-one with the host and learn something useful about the book business.

Don't be afraid to change your seating arrangement if you can't see your pages or the audience. If you encounter hecklers in the audience, respond with a sense of humor. If no one asks questions at first, have a few of your own ready: "You know, one thing lots of people want to know is . . ." If you truly have nothing sensible to reply to a good question, admit that it's something you've wanted to look into further and thank the reader for bringing it up. And don't fret when things don't go as planned: ad libbing is a skill that will come with time.

#### **5. Don the mantle of authorship and wear it gracefully.**

Perhaps most important of all is seeing *yourself* as an author. You are now, on some level, a public figure: not an egotist or prima donna, but a person with something worth saying – and worth hearing and reading. While you don't want to boast about the

greatness of your accomplishment or dwell too much on your process of creating it, you should feel a genuine confidence in the work you have published and pride in presenting it to an audience. Your dress and manner should convey this confidence and should be in keeping with the level of formality of the event. It's smart to wear something comfortable in a dark, solid color that doesn't distract from your face – unless your personal style is deliberately more flamboyant.

Don't belittle your book or disparage your credentials for writing it. If it's appropriate, briefly recognize those who helped make your book possible, but you are the star and your book is the focus of an eager audience's attention. Give them a good show – enough of your book's style and substance that they are amply rewarded for their time – and they'll open their wallets to reward you for yours.

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