

## Ann Whitford Paul's TIPS ON ATTENDING YOUR FIRST CONFERENCE



You're going to your first writing conference. Maybe you have second thoughts and wonder what you've gotten into. Maybe you're thrilled you've finally taken the first step towards your dream. Both reactions are completely normal. In fact it's not unusual to feel elated and terrified at the same time. Here are six simple tips to make your first conference so enjoyable you'll return home and immediately go on-line to look for another.

1. If you haven't already done so, do some research on the internet, at the library or your local book store about the speakers and their work. This is especially important at the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators two national conferences where seven or eight meetings happen at the same time. Your knowledge will help you decide which sessions will be the most helpful to you and your career.

2. Overcome your shyness. It's easier said than done, but you'll get more out of the meetings if you also make new friends who might evolve into the beginning of your writing family. See an empty seat next to someone you don't know? Ask if you can take it. Strike up a conversation. Guess what? This might be his first conference also. He might be feeling shy, too.

3. Go to the conference with a manuscript you've been working on. You don't need to physically carry it, but be sure you have one in your mind. The speakers will be more helpful if while you're sitting next to your new friend, you can apply their suggestions to your manuscript. Suppose you've struggled with your opening. Then when you listen to the speaker, you can think about how her comments relate to the opening in your story.

4. Take notes. But don't put them in a drawer for several years before you look at them again. Reread your scribblings (while you can still decipher them) before the week is out. Type up the important points for future reference. Apply any helpful tidbits to your manuscript(s.) Share them with friends who might not have been able to attend.

5. If there's an opportunity to have a manuscript critiqued, do it. NO! You beg. PLEASE DON'T MAKE ME TO THAT. But I urge you, even if it costs a bit extra, to take advantage of this service. First of all you will learn how your words are coming across to an outsider. But second, and most important, is that you'll get professional feedback either from writers, editors or agents. These are future contacts. Perhaps an editor will love your story and ask you to submit it. Maybe an agent will offer to represent you. Maybe none of those things will happen, but it will still be a valuable educational experience. Some critiques are fun. Others are painful. I've had both kinds in my career. It's hard when you've put your heart and soul into a story for it not to be well-received. But better to get feedback before you send it to a publishing house. Keep in mind that a critique is not a criticism of you, but an opportunity to make your *story* the best it can be.

6. If the conference was all you imagined it would be, join the organization that put it on. Volunteer to work on future conferences.

That's it: Just six simple things to get the most out of your first conference.  
Have a fabulous time!