

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WRITING CONFERENCES



“The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you’ll go.”

—*Dr. Seuss*

“I am a writer. If I seem cold, it’s because I am surrounded by drafts.”

—*Unknown*

**I**n the last chapter, you learned that I’m a published author because I attended writers’ conferences and learned from them. Let’s look at that a little deeper.

The first conference I attended was the White County Creative Writers Conference in Searcy, Arkansas, more than twenty years ago. I chose that conference because it was economical, only one day, and about an hour’s drive from my home. What I didn’t know about writing at that time could have filled multiple books.

And yet, this conference was a blessing to my life in many ways. The attendees welcomed me and made me feel special,

even though I was new to everyone. Now, many of those I met there are my dearest friends and associates. I'm thankful God gave me the willpower to attend.

The door prize I received at that conference was a sure sign. It was a book entitled *Writing for Dummies*. How appropriate. I was a dummy who wanted to learn how to write. I learned two lessons that day: Writing conferences are important, and keep learning. Both are key to the success I've had as a writer.

I also joined Ozark Writers League, an organization for writers that has a quarterly meeting, set up like a writing conference. They have knowledgeable speakers and members who are eager to learn. The dues are affordable, and members come from a multi-state area to meet in Branson, Missouri.

A man wearing an enormous cowboy hat, string tie, and vest was at the first meeting I attended. He was loud and funny. Dusty Richards was a genuine cowboy and a Western author. He wrote more than one hundred books. The Western Writers of America organization awarded Dusty three Spur Awards, and he was inducted into the Arkansas Writer's Hall of Fame. Dusty became a mentor to me, as well as dozens, if not hundreds, of other writers pursuing their dreams.

At conferences, I learned from mentors like Dusty to journal, to read and study books about the craft written by successful authors, and to join a critique group. Those mentors taught me to put in the time *and* to allow my desires to lead me.

Many people say things like they "wished they had time to write" or that they "would write if they just had the time." I believe this shows writing is not a priority to them. My advice to you is to *make* writing a priority. If you want to write, allow it to be important. Don't talk down your desires to yourself or anybody else. Explain to your family and those around you that you *need* to do this. Then do it.

At another conference many years later, I met the owner of a small press, Linda Fulkerson. At that conference, Linda heard my name being called several times as they announced contest

placements. Note the placements ran from third honorable mention to first place. She recognized that receiving multiple awards was a good sign I knew how to write.

Later during the conference, she approached me and told me about her company, Scrivenings Press, which sponsored two types of contests. One contest, “Get Pubbed,” was for unpublished completed works of fiction, while the other contest, “Novel Starts,” was for unfinished novels. I realized I had pieces that would fit the “Novel Starts” criteria. One was an unfinished mystery novel, and the other was a short story that could be considered the first chapter of a historical novel. After the conference, I took a chance and entered both of them in the “Novel Starts” contest, each in a different genre.

I was shocked and thrilled both entries won their genre categories. Those wins allowed me to submit the first twenty-five pages of a manuscript for additional feedback. The judges critiqued my pages and encouraged me to complete either entry into a full-length novel for publication. Eventually, I was offered a three-book mystery series contract. My dream had come true, and it *only* took just over twenty years of work. But, since you’re reading this book, you may be able to accomplish your dreams faster.

Dusty Richards once told me, “As long as you write, you need to be prepared to learn something new. Whether it be style, character, verbiage, or something else entirely. Learn a new way to express it or write it and incorporate that into your work. It will keep your writing from becoming stale.”

There are many affordable writing conferences out there with experts who can teach you a new technique in plotting, or word use, or a trick to eliminate clichés—and so much more. Many conferences also offer low-cost contests with fun and inspirational contest prompts.

To succeed in this business, you must accept that there’s a lot to learn—and then get on about the learning. Experts can only teach you if you attend their presentations. Take notes. Ask

questions. Get to know what they are looking for in manuscript submissions. Discover what's selling well and what isn't.

At conferences, you will mingle with editors, publishers and agents—people who make their living in the business of writing. Some conferences have book influencers, sometimes called reader influencers. They offer reviews and critiques of books for their followers through social media and websites.

Best of all, conferences bring writers together. If you have writer friends in attendance, they can help you feel at home at a conference. Not only do you make friends, but you can also have those odd conversations about writing techniques with people who understand. You'll pick up tricks of the trade, share laughs over mistakes made, and recharge your batteries for another span of solitary writing.

I've even received an unexpected book idea at a conference. A judge from a short-story contest I won the previous year approached me at a conference and suggested I could write a book inspired by that winning short story. It was a brilliant idea and used a storyline I'd never thought of pursuing. With help from this contest judge, I have a solid, interesting manuscript idea. Would I have thought of it myself? I doubt it.

Harlan Coben is a best-selling thriller author. His "overnight" success took more than ten years. Harlan's wife agreed to let him give this "writing thing" a try. He was to take care of the house, dinner, and the kids while she supported the family. It was his eighth or ninth published book that got him on a best-seller list. He credits some of his success to attending writing conferences where he learned what he didn't yet know about the craft of writing and publishing. He always gives credit to his wife for being patient with his goal to write, thus giving him a chance to succeed.

Writing awards can give writers media exposure in several ways. The sponsoring entity of the award will have publicity about their winners, which will introduce the winners to a new and extensive audience. If there is an award seal or call out about

the award on the cover of the book, purchasers will see this and know it's been vetted and found to be outstanding. Awards will also prompt reviews in various media, which will introduce your work to a wider audience of readers.

### **Conferences expose you to your tribe**

Because of my experience of being mentored, I jump at the chance to mentor others. A friend asked me if I would talk to her friend, who is a writer. She felt her friend needed some guidance with his writing goals. This opportunity allowed me to “pay it forward” in writing mentorship. I received a lot of education, encouragement, and confidence from Dusty Richards. It was a thrill to similarly help another writer.

Writers don't always realize how important the writing community is to their writer's heart and soul. Writing is a solitary business, but it doesn't have to be a lonely one. I would never have developed faith in my writing abilities without the encouragement of others. There is power in making friendships with people who think the way you do.

In my conversation with my friend's writer friend, he related his interest in historical fiction. With both journalism experience and as a Research Fellow for the Air Force Academy, he'd been involved with two book publications. He was looking for more. His self-published book was well-received, even award-winning, but he hoped for a better reception with his current manuscript.

I encouraged him to attend a writing conference. Turns out, he'd never been to one. Here was a man with the discipline, the ability, and the drive to write but without a community of writers with which to share the hard journey of writing. We met at the conference. He was delighted with the friendship offered by other writers, the quality of speakers, and the expert advice he received from an editor. The editor worked for a publisher of historical works and provided great career advice.

Sharing ideas for stories with other writers is beneficial. We

all have a unique style, so I don't worry that I'll help someone beat me out of a contest placement. I'll be proud if an idea I gave them helps them win. And the friends I have would be happy for me if an idea they gave me helped me win. That mutual support is priceless.

Don't keep yourself on such a solitary path that you write in a vacuum. Be persistent with your writing, but also seek writer friendships. They are essential food for the writer's soul.



**Takeaway One:** Writing conferences are a great way to meet people who care about writing as much as you do. Find your tribe there and gain education about the craft.

**Takeaway Two:** Publishers, editors, and agents attend writing conferences. Many conferences allow you to schedule pitches to agents, editors, and publishers. Some provide contests that are judged by industry professionals. These things are great opportunities to meet these people in person and impress them.

**Takeaway Three:** Writers need other writers. Although writing is a solitary business, you ought not seclude yourself from other writers. Hunt them down and befriend them. You'll be glad you did.

**Takeaway Four:** Always try to help a fellow writer to the best of your abilities. Your kindness will be a reward you'll cherish.