

# How to Produce and Promote A Literary Event

## A NEW LETTERS GUIDE

### THE SET UP

1. The invitation: Always follow up a verbal invitation with a letter – hard copy or e-mail, and be precise:

\* Check to see if the sponsoring entity (English department, for example) has an "agreement" form that the visitor needs to fill out. Get that done well in advance, if possible.

\* Include in your letter the date, year, time of event, sponsorship, your contact information, honorarium and who pays travel expenses.

2. Request from the visitor updated bio information and (if you want) a photo for publicity. Sometimes, you can get this off the Web, but you want to make sure you aren't missing some important new book or award.

3. If you will pay a speaking fee or honorarium, get the visitor's social security number and address right away.

4. Have the honorarium check in hand *at the time of the event*. Hand it to the visitor after the event. For this you will need to get the paperwork rolling at least three or four weeks in advance.

5. Avoid conflicts with other literary events in town by checking local events calendars. See [www.newletters.org](http://www.newletters.org). Do not "step on" other events. Avoid bringing a major writer to town even *close to* the date of a reading by another major writer.

6. Book sales. If sponsoring a major event, you want to arrange for a local bookstore or university bookstore to order books and handle sales at the event. Don't try to order books from publishers yourself; it's messy. Some local writers can just bring their books (in Kansas City, BkMk Press will happily supply its own authors' books directly, however). Have change on hand.

### FOUR WEEKS BEFORE THE EVENT

7. Press release. Send out a press release three or four weeks before the event. For major events, send the draft press release to the university public-relations office (Angela Turner at UMKC) by e-mail, and ask that office to send the release to local

media. Check to make sure the release goes where you want it to go.

\* For less high-profile events, you might skip the PR office and send the release by e-mail directly to the books editor. In Kansas City, *The Star* is crucial. Send this three weeks in advance.

\* Send a separate, short statement of the event to *The Star's* "Literary Datebook" [literarycal@kcstar.com](mailto:literarycal@kcstar.com). The books editor will *not* automatically give your press release to the datebook. Check the *Sunday Star* or its Web site for the ever-fluctuating contact information for the datebook.

\* Send redundant notices to the same newspaper – don't assume that one editor will pass on the information to a calendar editor, for example.

\* For major events, request listings at [www.newletters.org](http://www.newletters.org) (*New Letters* Web site) and The Writers Place Web and print calendars.

8. Sponsorships. Accurately identify sponsorships and co-sponsorships of events on all press releases, flyers, and brochures. Be sure that co-sponsors approve of the copy for press releases and flyers.

9. Flyers. Hardcopy flyers matter greatly, beyond any publicity you do by e-mail. Have flyers produced and printed at least two weeks before the event, and distribute them to faculty mailboxes and classes, and anywhere else you care to.

\* This flyer can be adapted for e-mail notices.

\* Ask your co-sponsoring organizations to mail the flyer and/or include notices of the event in its membership materials.

\* Cite the *day of the week* in this publicity, not only the date.

10. Recordings. If you plan to audio-or-video record the event, get the guest's permission ahead of time – don't surprise him or her at the event.

11. Hotel. For out-of-town guests, make hotel reservations early and, if possible, have a direct-bill set up through the university department (ask for nonprofit rates). In Kansas City, we mostly use The Quarterage in Westport, or Homestead Suites (on Main Street), or the Raphael Hotel in the Plaza.

12. Travel. It's best if the guest makes his or her own air arrangements; then be sure to get complete airline details, including flight numbers, so you can check online or automated arrival times for any change in the status. Meet the guest at the gate; don't ask the guest to take a shuttle bus. If the guest drives from another town, photocopy a convenient map and highlight the best route to the meeting spot.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

13. Time of event. 7:30 or even 7:00 p.m. is best for evening events. Also, try afternoon or mid-day events on weekends; audiences have tired of routine scheduling and appreciate alternative days and times.

14. Venue. Always check out the event room in advance for conditions that could ruin or disrupt the audience's appreciation of the reading – blower fans too loud, noise in adjoining room, poor lighting, excessive heat, uncomfortable chairs, etc.

\* Avoid inviting writers to read where espresso machines, margarita blenders, or p.a. announcements (many bookstores, bars, and coffee shops) are going to intrude.

15. P.A. speaker system. I have seen many major events ruined by bad audio systems. This is the event director's responsibility. Check it out ahead of time.

\* Set up the equipment and test it the afternoon before the event – not two minutes before the guest steps to the podium.

\* If possible, have a sound technician on hand at the event.

\* People want to hear without strain. Make sure it's loud enough.

16. Master of Ceremonies. The audience takes its cue from the host of the event. Somber it up and don't cutesy it up. Tips:

\* *Start on time.* Audiences have gotten tired of literary events that start 15 or 30 minutes late.

\* Choose a host who will welcome guests with a lively but grown-up style.

\* If an event features more than one reader, *do not schedule a "five-minute" break* between readers. Audiences want the event to move along. Many audience members will use a break as a chance to hit the door running.

\* The host/m.c. should step in *if a reader goes on too long*, especially for multi-reader events. There is a long and tedious history of writers who have read for 40 minutes, with three more readers in line to read. The best solution is to make sure ahead of time that each reader is clear about the time frame – be firm and clear ("You each have 12 minutes"). Step in with a hand signal if a reader goes too long.

– Robert Stewart

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