

How to Make the Most of a Virtual Writing Conference

Writing in the Time of COVID-19

The reality of the time we're living in has caused most in-person events to be sidelined until it's safe for us to again gather in groups. Because the risks of travel and physical interaction are high, event postponements and cancellations have become the new norm—with virtual formats becoming the go-to solution. For the safety of attendees, speakers, and staff, writing workshops and conferences are rapidly converting at least part of their planned content to what they hope will be a uniquely immersive and engaging digital experience, many with either reduced or free registration.

Depending upon event scale, some have opted for a hybrid meeting, comprised of socially distanced in-person programming as well as virtual, while others have decided to go completely online. This often means greater access to virtual components such as panels and readings via livestreaming to meet the needs of not only those who already registered for an event, but perhaps new online attendees. Writers can delve into sessions they otherwise might not have from the safety and

comfort of their own homes. And, it's a chance to be with a community of like-minded individuals in a time when people are missing that interaction.

While webinars and video broadcasts have been around for years, the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a global crash course in becoming tech-savvy as virtual meetings have almost completely replaced both modest and large scale in-person participation. Although some may at first be intimidated by the technology, many platforms are very easy to use. Some events offer a "tech check" to familiarize attendees with the process and make sure they're comfortable. And for those who prefer to just listen to sessions, there is the option to simply dial-in with your smartphone and bypass the computer.

We spoke with two conference organizers to get their take on key issues. Teri Rizvi is the founder of the Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop at the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio (HumorWriters.org). And Maya Spikes is the executive director of Triangle Association of Freelancers

(TAF) in Raleigh, N.C. and helps coordinate Write Now! (TAFNC.com/WriteNow).

What are the best ways to make a virtual conference meaningful or valuable to attendees?

TERI RIZVI: Your content is gold, and the sessions should appeal to writers of all experience levels. That's why we offer five concurrent sessions in each time slot. Not interested in humor writing? How about finding your writer's voice or creating memorable stories in fiction or creative nonfiction?

MAYA SPIKES: It helps to cast a wide net, especially if an online conference is offering multiple tracks. I suggest putting the greatest focus on sessions that specifically address the genre you are most interested in writing, but also consider sessions outside that primary interest. If you write mostly nonfiction, consider attending a session on crafting your first novel. If you're primarily a fiction writer, know that craft sessions specific to nonfiction can provide insight and tips you may not have considered. The more you know as

a writer, the better able you are to advance your career.

What are some tips for staying focused during a virtual event?

TR: Walk away from your laptop during the breaks. Throw in a load of laundry. Get some fresh air. Brew a fresh pot of coffee. Be gentle on yourself knowing that you can go back after the conference and listen to any recordings again—or watch sessions you may have missed.

MS: Focus on gleaned as much information as you can from the presentation itself, while jotting down questions to ask the presenter at the end. Your questions can help fill in any gaps in information lacking from the presentation itself—questions that likely will benefit other attendees as well. To stay focused, it also helps to be fully rested (so you don't doze off), have a bottle of water handy to stay hydrated, and know a bit about the presenter in advance of the session. A quick online search can reveal much, and perhaps even inform the questions you ask.

What are your recommendations for finding value in session recordings if you can't watch live, rather than letting them get buried in your inbox?

TR: The key is to block out time after the conference while you're feeling the wave of inspiration to take in more of the sessions. The writing community is hungry for connection with one another during these times of social distance and isolation. Beyond the educational component, our workshop is highly entertaining.

We all need to laugh these days. It's a great stress reliever.

MS: Try to watch/listen to recorded sessions as soon after the event as you can. The longer you put it off, the less likely you are to finally get around to it. Listen closely, and take notes as you do, especially tips and advice that may come in handy later. And don't ignore audience questions—they often reveal valuable information.

What's the best way to find networking opportunities in a virtual event?

TR: The chat function builds community and helps writers establish a rapport with one another and the presenters. We invite attendees to join a private Facebook group that helps them get to know one another before the event and provides a platform for sharing work with each other after the virtual gathering. We already have a virtual writers' community, even though this is the first time we've taken our biennial workshop virtual. Consider similar options in your selections.

MS: If you have the opportunity to hang with fellow attendees online, be friendly and encouraging. Talk about what you are working on, but don't hog the conversation—let others share as well. Be a cheerleader for others, and if doable, suggest a post-conference online get-together with your new friends to discuss what you learned and how to help each other moving forward.

How do you decide which virtual events to spend money on when so many are free?

TR: Again, it comes back to content. We're offering the same event at a greatly reduced price to compensate for the lack of meals and refreshments and create greater accessibility for writers during difficult economic times. This year, our writers can be inspired by six keynote speakers, participate in 25 sessions, and an attendee stand-up comedy show and Pitchapalooza billed as “*American Idol* for books, only kinder.” With Emmy Award winners, celebrated authors, and comedians on the virtual stage, it's an amazing value. Seek out your must-haves when comparing conferences.

MS: Many free online events have much value to offer, while others provide only the basics or less. When considering whether to spend money on an online conference, see what sessions are being offered, who the presenters are, and their level of expertise. Larger conferences typically bring in better-known writers and charge more than a smaller conference would. But just because a presenter is a big name in the industry doesn't mean they are a good presenter. If only one or two sessions interest you, that particular event may not be for you. However, increasingly, online conferences are going à la carte, meaning you can select and pay for only the sessions you want to attend. This often brings the price down and could make the event a better fit. **WD**

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