



TOP 5 STEPS FOR EVALUATING ONLINE WRITING CONFERENCES

By Kelli Panique

You've just received another email for an online writers' conference. How do you know if it's right for you? Will it really advance your writing career? Is there such a thing as a free conference? I'm the host of [Picture Book Summit](#) and I've worked in the online conference space since 2011. (That's before anyone had even heard of Zoom!) There's A LOT that goes into planning an online conference. Let me help you choose the best writing conferences for you...

1. Who's Speaking?

The first and most important thing to evaluate in a writing conference is the speakers. Ask yourself these questions:

- Who are they? Have you heard of them before?
- What's their level of experience? Have they taught before?
- Have they been published? If so, by whom?
- In which genres have they published?
- Do they have other relevant experience?

You want to be sure you're learning from people who know what they are doing. So, do a little research. Check their website and social media networks. Look for reviews of other conferences where they've taught. You can do this by checking out a certain conference's hashtag or searching for attendees who have blogged about it. You might find they teach courses regularly or you might find they've never taught before.

If they've never published before, look for other possible qualifications. If you're writing picture books, perhaps this person is an elementary school teacher who's read thousands of books to their kids. Maybe they've worked on the publishing or agenting side of the business and know what editors and agents are looking for. They could even be a bookseller who knows what sells and what doesn't. The point is you want speakers who know what they are talking about and can give you information that moves your career forward.



Now, this seems like a no-brainer but look for conferences that focus on your genre or genres. The best speaker in the world could be talking about writing thrillers, but if you want to write picture books, their advice probably isn't going to do much to move your goals forward. Look for speakers whose success you'd like to replicate.

2. Are They Teaching or Talking?

Are the speakers teaching an element of the craft of writing or are they being interviewed by someone else? There is value in both approaches. If the speakers are teaching, you're more likely to get in-depth instruction on a single aspect of writing and probably go home with a few handouts you can refer to again and again.

Interviews can be insightful too—especially if they are with icons in your genre sharing their storied experiences. At Picture Book Summit, we've had the honor of interviewing Tomie dePaola, Jane Yolen, and (soon!) Julie Andrews. Hearing from people who have been in the publishing business for decades is like sitting at the feet of the masters. You feel smarter just by listening to them.

Do the interviews at the conference you're considering have iconic interview guests or will you be there to hear them promote their latest book? Overall, interview presentations tend to be more inspirational and motivational, which is why the best conferences will have a balance of the two: instruction so you know what to do and the motivation to go out and do it!

If a conference is all in-depth workshops or all interviews, that's okay too. All-interview conferences should cost far less than all in-depth workshops. Just make sure you know what you're paying for.

3. Traditionally Published or Self-Published?

Determine the focus of the conference. Are the organizers or speakers traditionally published or self-published? There's no right or wrong answer, but you need to know that their presentations will be informed by those experiences, and make sure that fits with your goals. If your goal is to be traditionally published, you'll want to seek out speakers who have gotten past the gatekeepers in publishing including agents and editors. They will be able to share experiences that demystify the publishing path for you and give you insight into their success.

Are you looking to self-publish your book? Then attending a conference with successful self-published authors can be a boon. There are many steps to being ready to self-publish from professional editing to eye-catching cover art to a well-thought-out marketing plan. Hearing



from authors who have traversed that path will give you have a clearer picture of what to expect. But there can be a wide range of quality when it comes to self-publishing, so be sure to do your homework. Find the books of the self-published speakers online. Look at the reviews and see what people think. Look at the cover and/or peek inside if a preview is available. Is this book of the quality you'd like for your own book? Then this person might have great advice. If not, find a different conference.

It's also important to note that different genres fit into different places in publishing. Picture books, for example, are much more successful in traditional publishing, so a self-publishing conference probably won't be a great fit. Novels, on the other hand, can work well in both arenas, especially if in a niche area such as romance or self-help.

Some conferences, like Picture Book Summit, focus mostly on writing. No matter how you want to publish, your writing needs to be in tip-top shape and writing-focused conferences will benefit you no matter what.

Keep your end goals in mind when picking a conference.

4. Live or recorded?

Sometimes this one is hard to tell but try to find out if the speakers will be teaching live or if their presentations will pre-recorded. Find out if there will be a live Q&A. Live Q&A is a great opportunity to get clarification on points brought up during the presentation. This doesn't mean that recorded presentations aren't helpful. They can be! Especially when it's a panel of speakers. Being able to pre-record lets the organizers edit out the pauses and filler words and ensure that you get more in the allotted time than you would otherwise. There's no right or wrong answer here—just understand what you're paying for.

5. How much does it cost?

Here's the big question! One of the biggest advantages of an online writing conference is that you don't have to buy a plane ticket, spend the night in a hotel, or eat lukewarm buffet food. This can make online conferences super cost-effective for writers. Even online conferences exist at different price points, and everyone has a budget, so just remember what your dad used to say: "You get what you pay for."

Let's look at what you can expect.

If you see a conference advertised for free or nearly free, chances are you will spend a good portion of the conference hearing about how you can upgrade your ticket or buy additional courses and products, because the conference is just a peek at what else the speakers offer.



Generally, free conferences come with replays for narrow replay windows and lots of follow-up emails to buy additional items. This doesn't mean you won't learn anything and if your budget is super-limited, then a free conference might just be what you need to get going in your writing career. Just understand that there will likely be a balance of content and sales pitches.

Next, check out the veracity of the organizers. Is this a fly-by-night activity for them or are they invested in the industry and helping others succeed? Just remember it costs organizers to put on an event; they've got to pay their bills somehow.

Conferences with higher price points generally offer more to you as a writer: higher quality speakers who are paid for their time and expertise, longer replay periods, and more opportunities. Just like an in-person writing conference, there may be chances to upgrade your ticket for submission opportunities or editor/agent feedback. You might be paying more, but the knowledge you leave with can shorten your learning curve and put you closer to your writing goals—if you've done your homework from step 1.

Many higher-end conferences return year after year and offer early bird pricing and exclusive offers for past attendees, so your first year could wind up being an investment in future learning opportunities. (At Picture Book Summit, our returning attendees get a deal that beats the Early Bird offer hands down!)

One last thing as far as cost: How many presentations are being offered throughout the conference? Divide the number of presentations by the cost of the conference and ask yourself if you would pay to see each of those individual presentations at the per-presentation price. If the answer is yes, then jump on that ticket and get ready to have a great time!

Writing conferences are an excellent way to learn and grow as a writer. I hope these five steps help you evaluate your writing conference options and determine which ones will best help you reach your writing goals.

Kelli Panique is the Project Manager and Host of [Picture Book Summit](#). As a founding team member since 2015, Kelli works on all aspects of the Summit including the podcast, program planning, and (her favorite) making attendees feel welcome. You'll also find Kelli supporting other literary entities including the 12 x 12 Picture Book Writing Challenge and The Complete Picture Book Submissions System. When she's not cheering on writers or managing a Facebook group, you'll probably find her looking up movies on IMDB, scrapbooking, playing word games, or reading a book.