

Getting Gigs the Book Fair Way: 4 Steps

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This entry is part 5 of 5 in the series [Bologna Book Fair 2016](#)

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Getting Gigs the Book Fair Way: 4 steps is my tack on how to best approach the book fair experience. I've been getting some questions lately from writers and artists who have never been to a book fair and aren't sure what to do or say. What's appropriate? What isn't?

Here's how you prepare for a successful book fair experience and even land a writing or illustrating gig.

If you've never been to a book fair, you might not understand the sort of crazy buzz at those places. Surrounded by beautiful books and interesting people, it's a haven for [creatives](#).

What's even more amazing is that if you are diligent and patient, the book fair can lead to your getting a paid art and/or writing gig. This is perhaps the most "practical" reason to go, but not really. When you get down to it, you go for the experience of gleaning as much as you possibly can. You go to learn and be inspired and meet great people. If you get a paying job – or even better, a contract offered to you – that is pure cream.

(If you're wondering, yes - I got a writing gig while at the fair! But that's another story... and it isn't finished.)

At the [Frankfurt Book Fair](#), as a writer you hear about the Big Book Deals that got closed during the fair. You hear and read about bidding wars and you drool a little.

At the Bologna Book Fair, you get to have more time to talk with people on a personal level. So you

don't just hear about deals or read about them. People share their personal wins right as it happens, and it's very exciting.

You cannot help but be happy for someone who gets an offer. You can't help but be happy for someone whose [portfolio](#) was well received. These are the triumphs of the newcomers in the business but that doesn't mean you should stop going once you have some success.

I would argue just the opposite. Most writers and illustrators stop attending book fairs after they get an agent, and knowing this makes me a little sad. Too, I feel it is a mistake.

Book Fairs are a special kind of book event. [Book Readings](#) are great – for a whole different set of reasons. You'll meet fellow readers there, maybe even fans of your work. You won't get the crazy fun energy that comes from being around creative people. (Well, maybe you will, but it isn't as likely.)

If you want to get massive access to the latest and upcoming book releases on an international scale – you must go to an international book fair. There is no other way. There are many wonderful bookshops out there, but they cannot provide the insane access that a book fair does. It isn't physically possible because no bookshop on the planet is as large as five warehouses. No bookshop (at least, not that I'm aware) is as large as a compound.

Researching on the internet? Sure. It's important, but it isn't as revealing as Being There, standing in front of a publisher's latest projects and in front of the people who helped put those books on the shelves. It's a completely different level of research and tangible experience that a monitor cannot touch (even if you strap the thing to your face - a startlingly absurd techie-development).

So how do you get a paid gig the book fair way?

First, you show up... *prepared.*

You've got to know as much as you can about who is showing there. If you go in knowing absolutely nothing, you'll get overwhelmed. Researching beforehand will help you keep your head.

Book Fairs are bombastic on every level. Everything is big and new and many. You can't really prepare for that if it's your first visit (not fully), but you can ease the shock of stimuli-overload by at least trying to be as informed as possible.

Find out who is going, figure out what they do, take notes, and plot-out where you want to go and when. Both Bologna and Frankfurt offer book fairs that schedule more events than you can possibly attend, and they house so many [publishers](#) and organizations - it's easy to get lost.

Business Cards.

You need [great business cards](#) if you want industry professionals to contact you about a project. You probably won't need more than 50 cards (the fairs are usually 3-4 days) unless you are super-ultra-social, so spend more time on their design and more money too. Make the cards high quality (read: not fast and

cheap) so that you won't feel shy or ashamed to hand them to people (a big mistake I made in the past!).

Use the space provided on both the front and the back of the card. Design the card so that it reflects your creative style. If you're an artist, this is probably easier to do. If you're a writer, go for visuals that reflect the kind of writing you do. If you're already published, this is a little easier: use illustrations of your favorite characters (that you created!).

Your card must have (really, seriously) your picture on it. I know you hate the idea. It makes you feel like a real estate agent! A sell-out. Just toss that idea out – it isn't working for you.

Consider this: after an agent or editor returns to their office after such an event, they've probably spoken to a hundred people or more. How will they remember which card is *yours*? Your face is the easiest visual aid you have to offer.

You need to have your elevator pitch rehearsed.

What is an elevator pitch? If you've done screenwriting, this is your bag. It's the under-3-minute explanation of your story, the one you need to write and rewrite until it's polished and then memorize it. Rehearse it in front of the mirror.

That way, when someone asks you, "What's your story about?" You can answer it in 1-2 sentences. That's the first phase. Then if they ask you questions, you also have ready answers. I learned this in a screenwriting seminar, but I've needed it at the book fairs I've attended.

Be prepared with your elevator pitch so that you never wind-up looking into the air for answers, mumbling through an overlong explanation that gets interrupted. If you're unprepared, you will get interrupted.

If you do artwork, you need a portfolio prepared.

This is the case at any book fair, but at the Bologna Book Fair, there were people with portfolios at every turn. You absolutely can get paid illustration gigs by attending a book fair. If you don't have an agent already, I would highly recommend giving this a try.

Most of the artists I spoke with at the fair either had an agent and didn't need to show their portfolio, or they got a paying gig. If they didn't get a gig, they at least got some promising contacts and feedback on their portfolio.

It's all amazing.

Whether you go to just check things out or you go to get a contract, you will always leave the book fair with a wealth of knowledge and inspiration.

What about you? Have you been to a book event that affected you, inspired you? Have you landed a gig while at the fair? Write below, let me know - or, as ever, send me an email. You know I love getting

those!

Keep creating, no matter what.

This entry is part of the series

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