

# The Care And Feeding Of Guests

(by David Gerrold)

This document is intended only as a starting point for discussion. It is not a rigorous manual.

The goal is to create an appropriate treatment for a convention guest. Experience so these notes are intended for general distribution among convention runners.

While most of the specifics in this document were originally intended as recommendations for large and continuing conventions, such as a Worldcon or a major regional event, the same commitment to the well-being of invited guests can be applied to any gathering, even the smallest.

The guidelines that follow should always be adjusted to fit the circumstances. The goal of any event is to have a joyous and successful experience for everyone.

**(SIDEBAR: Those who have specific experience with material discussed in this document are invited to add their own notes, comments, and advice.** For the sake of continuing clarity, please use this sidebar format for additional remarks. Put comments in parentheses, identify them as a **Sidebar** like this one, and definitely sign your name at the end so future readers will know the source of all contributions. Thank you. -dg)

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## **1) Context**

The context of any successful gathering is a celebration of enthusiasm.

In any fandom, the convention invites a guest as an acknowledgment of excellence in the field. Inviting a person as a Guest of Honor is usually the highest honor a convention can offer.

For the World Science Fiction Convention, it is the equivalent of a lifetime achievement award. For most regional conventions, it is a recognition of importance and relevance to the field.

But it is also an acknowledgment of the audience and their affection for the work, it is a recognition of the impact the work has had on them. The work may begin in the creator's mind, but it comes to life in the hearts and souls of the audience. Creation is a partnership.

So as much as the guest is being honored for creating the work, the guest is also honoring those who have created value for themselves in their appreciation of the work. The relationship is one of mutual contribution.

The job of the convention committee is to create and energize that context—not only by honoring the guest, but also by furthering the audience's understanding of the work the guest has created.

## 2) Choosing The Guest

Be wise. Be careful.

A good choice of guest will give the convention credibility. It will create awareness. It will help sell memberships.

An unfortunate choice of guest will hurt attendance.

As much as every committee member will have thoughts on the matter, it's essential that the suitability of any guest be carefully considered.

Be wise. Be careful.

Consider these questions:

- Has this individual produced work or had an impact on the field that justifies this honor?
- Has the person *earned* the honor?
- Does this person *deserve* the honor? (This is a very different question than the previous one.)
- What is this person's relationship with the field?
- Is this person overdue for recognition?
- Is this person popular and respected within the community?
- Is this person's work popular and respected within the community?
- Do we want to give credibility to this person?
- Do we want to call attention to this person and their work?
- Can the convention afford this guest?

Additionally:

- Is this person generally respected?
- Is the person easy to work with?
- Does this person have a good relationship with the fan community?
- Is this person someone that fans will want to see?
- Will there be unforeseen, unintended, unpleasant or negative consequences if we invite this person as a guest?

**(SIDEBAR: Has this individual taken any unpopular positions that could be the source of an uproar?** Events of the past few years have made this an important and necessary consideration. Some individuals have developed reputations so toxic that other guests will publicly withdraw from any convention where they are being honored. Some individuals have expressed political positions that have offended large groups of fans. Many fans will refuse to attend a convention where such an individual is a major guest. A convention is supposed to be a celebration of the genre. Any uproar over the suitability of a guest will significantly damage the credibility of the convention and make it that much harder to create a successful event. The damage could conceivably be permanent, it will certainly resonate for several years. As much as any individual might have earned the honor, might deserve the honor, some individuals have become problematic for conventions. –dg)

Start by making a list of guests you would like to invite. Rank them in order of desirability as well as availability. Discuss the choices with all major committee members. Listen to the input of all major committee members. One certain way to create discord on the convention team is to leave people out of the selection process or omit them from relevant discussions. A convention committee needs to have all of its members aligned and working from the same page.

Carefully vett all your proposed guests.

- *Check with other convention runners about this individual. They will have the best information.*
- Research the experience of other conventions that have invited this person as a guest.
- Look for con reports about this person's behavior as a guest.
- Look for fan reports or blogs about this person's behavior as a guest. (Be aware that some fan sites and blogs may have a specific political agenda and may not be reliable resources.)
- Check with people who know this individual and who will have specific personal experience.

Some of your desired guests may not be available. They might have disabilities that make travel difficult. They might not want to travel very far. They might have other commitments. Be aware that there will always be specific circumstances that affect the choice of a guest.

And finally, there's this:

- Do all your guests get along with each other?
- If they're friends, they can be a lot of fun on the same panel.
- If not, schedule your programming accordingly.

**(SIDEBAR:** I know of one editor who has publicly stated they will not attend any convention where a specific author is a GoH. While both are professionals with exemplary reputations, apparently there are personal issues in play. –dg)

### **3) The Guest Is Part Of The show**

In the initial selection of the guests, especially the Guest of Honor, the committee will have to consider how the guest will serve the convention's purpose as an entertainment.

What experience does the guest offer to the audience?

How will this guest be an asset to the convention?

Most guests with experience in the field will understand their responsibility. They actually look forward to participating.

But some individuals do not have that same perspective and believe that they are being invited to a paid vacation. Some guests have their own political or personal agendas.

The convention committee must be aware of the guest's perception of the event as well as their expected participation. The guests must be in sync with the convention committee.

This will be a consideration not only in the selection process, but in all subsequent communications after the guest is confirmed.

## 4) Inviting A Guest

Before you invite your guests, make sure that all the ranking members of the committee are aligned and unanimous on the selection. Nothing will create discord in the committee faster than being left out of important discussions and decisions.

How you invite the guest will be their first experience of the convention. You want them to feel comfortable that the convention will be a worthwhile experience. Your guest needs to feel that the invitation and the honor it represents are important.

A written letter is elegant, but even an eloquent email is acceptable. However you invite the guest, there are certain points that must be made:

- Do not assume the guest is already familiar with the convention. Introduce yourself and your position on the convention committee.
- Introduce the convention, its history and purpose. Is this a new convention, a well-established convention, or a one-time event?
- Explain the specifics of the event you are inviting the guest to attend.
- Give the specific location and the dates of the event.
- Tell the guest the size of the convention. How many people are expected to attend?
- Where will you be housing the guest? What hotel? (Include the hotel address so the guest can google it.)
- Be specific about the participation you want from the guest—panels, speech, autograph sessions, etc.
- Mention any additional inducements or invitations, such as a tour of the city and available local attractions.
- What expenses will the convention be covering? Hotel, meals, transportation, other?
- What specific services will the convention provide? A dealer's table? An art show display?
- If the guest has special needs, what arrangements will the convention make to address those needs? Special diet? Electric cart?
- If the convention is providing a guest-liaison (guest-wrangler), does the guest have any requests or recommendations?

- *It is generally expected that the convention will cover the expenses for the guest's plus-one. This will not always be a husband or wife.*
- Provide specific and reliable contact information. Appropriate phone numbers and email addresses. Mail addresses may also be necessary.

**(Sidebar:** DO NOT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES PLAN TO HOUSE THE GUEST IN A PRIVATE RESIDENCE. This is not only an uncomfortable imposition on the guest—it says that the convention is too cheap to pay for one or two extra nights in a hotel. –dg)

## 5) After The Guest Accepts And Confirms

Immediately respond with an appropriate thank-you note. Let the guest know that you are excited by their acceptance and that you are looking forward to having them be an important asset to the convention.

It is now appropriate to ask for a recent photograph and biography for the convention's use in publicity.

- If this is a convention bid and not yet a confirmed event, make sure the guest understands that they may not announce their attendance until the bid is won.
- When the bid is won, the convention will make the announcement.
- The guest's cooperation is essential here, because a premature announcement can affect whether or not the convention wins its bid.

This is also a good time to begin planning the guest's participation at the convention. You cannot start this process too soon. The more communication you establish with the guest, the better it will be for everyone.

Make sure you have clear answers to the following questions:

- Do you have any special needs that we need to address?
- Do you have any disabilities that will require a handicapped room?
- Are there any medical concerns we need to be aware of?
- Do you have any food allergies?
- Do you have any food preferences?
- What beverages or snacks would you like in your hotel room?
- Do you need a dealer's table? (If yes, this should be provided at no cost to the guest. Don't be stupid here.)

And these questions as well:

- Do you have any specific requests for the convention program?
- Are there specific events or panels you want to attend or participate in?
- Are there specific events or panels you do not want to attend or participate in?
- How many panels per day do you want to be on? How many events do you want to participate in for the entire convention?
- Would you prefer to give a Guest of Honor speech or a Guest of Honor interview? Or both?
- Are there individuals you want to be on a panel with? Are there individuals you do not want to be on a panel with?
- Can you be available for radio, television, or podcast interviews? Are you willing to be interviewed by these publications?

**(Sidebar:** All interview requests should go through a single committee member who will clear every request with the guest. There's a big difference between being interviewed by the NY Times and by the guy who runs a small local website, hasn't done his due diligence, and who starts off with, "So, what are you known for?")

## 6) Guest Contract / Agreement

While many small conventions have finalized their guest arrangements with a simple exchange of emails, it has become essential for a major convention to create a written agreement with their guests—ie. *a contract*. This will protect both the guest and the convention from any unfortunate misunderstandings.

The contract should include the following items:

- **Special needs.** Does the guest have a disability or a handicap? What adjustments will the convention provide?
- **Transportation arrangements and costs.**
- **Arrival and Departure dates.**
- **Hotel accommodations.**
- **Meal accommodations.**
- **Amenities in the guest's room—preferred beverage and snacks.**
- **Speaker's fee and/or per diem.**
- **Specific guest requirements. (Dealer's table, exhibit space, etc.)**
- **A general schedule of the convention.**

In addition, the contract should include a summary of what the convention expects from the guest:

- **Opening and Closing Ceremonies.**
- **Panels.**
- **Speeches.**
- **Interviews.**
- **Other.**

All of this will require some negotiation as various wants and needs are discussed. Both the convention and the guest will need to be flexible and adaptable.

This negotiation should be complete before the guest's attendance is announced. If negotiations break down, if one side or the other is unable to come to terms, and the invitation has to be withdrawn, this will spare everyone any public embarrassment.

**(Sidebar:** This would be a good place to insert a sample guest contract. If someone has a good example, please let me know. [dgerrold@gmail.com](mailto:dgerrold@gmail.com). –dg)

## 7) Pre-Convention Relations

It is imperative that the convention stay in touch with all guests on a regular basis. Guests need to be informed of all publicity and all scheduled programming, especially any changes, and even more important, who the other participants will be.

Guests may have suggestions or requests. They may also have objections.

The convention committee should clear the proposed schedule with the guests before it is finalized.

**(Sidebar:** Regular communication and reminders are essential. In the days before email, I had a convention invite me almost a whole year before the event was scheduled and announced. When they neglected to stay in communication, I forgot I'd been invited. They were very upset when I didn't show up and whined about it for some time after. –dg)

**(Sidebar:** A more recent convention added an inappropriate individual to a tribute panel. Because a key panelist was informed almost immediately of the addition, it was possible to fix the problem quickly. Yes, it required some behind-the-scenes maneuvering, but it prevented an embarrassing public relations disaster. –dg)

Keeping the guests posted on all plans, especially the program schedule, helps them plan their own participation.

Just as important, it gives the guests the opportunity to spread the word on their own website, blog, and Facebook page. That's not only good publicity for the convention, it often brings in additional attending members.

Keeping the guests well-informed creates a stronger pre-event relationship. Having that relationship in place almost always guarantees that when the guests actually arrive at the event, they will be much more relaxed and comfortable.

***Don't create problems for the guest. The word will get out.***

If your convention gets cancelled, tell the guest before they get on the plane. If your convention changes its plans abruptly, tell the guest before they leave home.

**(Sidebar:** One convention forgot to do tell Larry Niven that the convention had been cancelled. He got off the airplane and there was no one to meet him. —dg)

**(Sidebar:** I was once invited to attend a convention put on by a Midwest university's science fiction club. The week before the convention, the club had an ugly election and the winners abruptly changed the science fiction convention into a gaming convention. The losers quit, not only the convention, but the club as well. No one told me—and I arrived at a con where I had nothing to do, nothing had been scheduled for me, and I was seen as an unwelcome burden on the club's budget. I could not go home until the convention was over because the plane ticket couldn't be changed. It was a very uncomfortable weekend for everyone. —dg)

## 8) Transportation

The guest's transportation is their first tangible experience of the convention. Make it count.

### PLANES

If the guest is flying, there are specific considerations that the convention *must* address.

- Does the guest have a disability? How will this affect their ability to travel?
- What special needs need to be addressed ahead of time?

Be aware of jet lag and time zones.

- Is the guest flying east-to-west or west-to-east? How many time zones? How many hours of jet lag will the guest have to recover from?
- If the jet-lag will be three or more hours, bring the guest in a day or two early so they can acclimatize. This is also an opportunity to provide the guest with a chance to see local attractions.
- If the guest has traveled west-to-east, make sure that programming has not scheduled them for any early morning presentations. It will be like asking them to wake up and perform at 5am.

Booking the flight.

- Where possible, book a non-stop flight on a major airline.
- Where possible, book a first-class or business-class ticket. The longer the flight, the more important this is. Make sure it's a flight that provides respectable meal service.
- Do not depend on hopscotch flights and multiple connections to work. *They don't*. Even a small delay anywhere will result in a missed connection. A missed connection will create a cascade of upsets.

**(Sidebar:** Nine hours in the air, on multiple short flights with no meal service, will result in the arrival of a very hungry, very grumpy guest. If the guest arrives after the local restaurants have already closed, this will be a problem, because you will have treated the guest as a commodity, not as a guest. –dg)

- If it's a short flight, you may be able to fly the guest economy class, but if you do, then you should pay for economy-plus seating, early boarding, all baggage fees, and any other appropriate amenities.
- Do whatever is necessary to *guarantee* the guest an appropriate seat-selection—aisle or window, front of plane, early boarding, whatever.
- Avoid the white-knuckler flights. Some guests would rather have a con committee greeter drive them for an hour or two than fly with the Grace L. Ferguson Airline And Storm-Door Company.

## TRAINS

Some guests will *not* fly. Some guests prefer to drive or take the train. If the guest prefers to take the train, (most of) the airline rules can be an appropriate place to start planning their transportation.

## AUTOMOBILES

If the guest is driving, the convention will have to negotiate a fair recompense for the guest's travel expenses. As a general rule of thumb, the convention should equal the cost of an equivalent plane ticket. However, for longer journeys, that formula doesn't always work. For instance, a round-trip journey from Los Angeles to Dallas would be (approximately) \$750. This includes gas, meals, and one or two nights in a motel, each way.

Make sure that all travel expenses are paid for at least two weeks before the convention. Last minute arrangements almost always guarantee a travel disaster. A travel disaster will almost always upset a lot of other convention plans.

**(Sidebar:** I once had a small Southern convention ask me to pay my own airfare and they would reimburse me on arrival. Uh, no thanks. That trick never works. I didn't attend and they lied to their attendees, telling them that I had taken ill. –dg)

## 9) Guest Arrival

However your guest arrives at the convention, this will be their first impression of the convention and the con committee. Make it count.

### PLANES

*Be aware that your guest will likely arrive tired from the flight. And probably hungry as well.*

- At the airport, have a responsible member (or two) of the committee already there, already waiting, and holding up a large legible sign with the guest's name. Don't count on recognizing your guest. Don't count on your guest recognizing you.
- Send someone who will represent the convention at its best, not its worst.
- If no one is there, your guest will feel abandoned. The guest should not have to wait for someone to show up.

**(Sidebar:** There was once a guest who waited two hours for someone from the committee to show up. No one did, so he got on a return flight and went home. This story might be apocryphal, but it's been shared enough times that the possibility is worth acknowledging. –dg)

It's worth saying again. This will be your guest's first experience of the convention committee. Make it count.

- Whoever picks up the guest should be the guest's liaison—the specific guest-wrangler. They should dress in business casual. Whoever picks up the guest should represent excellence.
- The greeter must be at the airport before the plane lands and must have a large legible sign to hold up with the guest's name on it. Do not depend on recognizing the guest from a photo.
- The greeter should immediately make the guest feel welcome and well-cared for. (The guest will probably not be interested in the greeter's problems or adventures.)

- The greeter should be able to carry the guest's luggage. The guest will be tired.
- The pickup vehicle must be clean. It must have heating and air-conditioning. It must be of recent vintage and in good condition. It must represent excellence.
- The pickup vehicle must be a short walk from the airport terminal. Otherwise, phone the waiting driver and have them bring it around.
- The driver of the pickup vehicle must be a careful driver. The vehicle must be legally registered and licensed. (This should be obvious, but it isn't always.)
- Make sure there is bottled water available in the vehicle, and if the drive will be more than twenty minutes, having a few appropriate snacks is also a good idea, especially if the meal service on the flight was substandard.
- Make sure there are appropriate meal venues available for the guest. Include this in the planning. The guest is likely to be hungry as well as tired. If it is past closing time for local restaurants, have a prepared meal or snacks available in the hotel room. (The specifics of the room amenities should be discussed with the guest ahead of time, usually in the contract negotiations.)
- Once the guest is settled in the vehicle, provide them with a bag or envelope containing a program book, a printout of their schedule, and an envelope containing cash covering all previously agreed-on expenses—the guest's per diem, speaker's fee (if any), and if necessary, any additional travel costs.

**DO NOT DO THIS!**

- Do not send anyone whose social skills are substandard.
- Do not send the annoying inexperienced fanboy with dubious hygiene.
- Do not send anyone who drives unsafely.
- Do not send anyone whose vehicle does not represent excellence. Heating, air-conditioning, and cleanliness are mandatory.
- Make sure the vehicle has enough room for all luggage and all passengers.
- Do not send an excited crowd, even if there is enough room for all luggage and all passengers. It will be overwhelming and annoying.

**(Sidebar:** When I was a GoH at Boskone, I arrived on a wet snowy night. The Guest Liaison was not at the airport. Nobody was. When I finally gave up waiting and phoned, the Guest liaison told me she didn't know she had to arrange a ride for me. She told me to take a taxi to the hotel. She hadn't bothered to check her own arrangements—and that was not a good first impression of the convention. Fortunately, it was Boskone, so I had a great time, but it still stung. –dg)

**(Sidebar:** One small southern convention failed on *all* counts. The appointed driver was slovenly. His car was a broken-down embarrassment. He had to brush week-old French fries off a broken passenger seat before I could sit down. There was no back seat for my son. It was winter and there was also no heater in the car. The fanboy chattered about inanities while driving so recklessly, I began to question my commitment to atheism. This wasn't just embarrassing, it signaled a level of disrespect that promised a very bad start to the weekend. –dg)

## **AUTOMOBILES**

Your guest will probably arrive tired from the drive.

Their first need will probably be a rest room.

Nevertheless, the con committee should have someone available to greet the guest and help unload the car.

If the guest has been promised a dealer's table, the convention should provide a volunteer to help move the guest's sales items to the dealer's table.

## 10) Hotel Room

Be clear with the hotel that the guest room is a priority and that excellence is expected.

- If possible, the guest room should be a suite. If not a suite, it should still be comfortably large.
- It should have appropriate amenities—a refrigerator is essential.
- The guest room should be convenient to the convention.
- The guest room should not be on the convention's party floor.
- If possible, the guest room should not be too far from the Con Suite.

As a convenience for the guest, have the guest room already checked in, so the guest (still tired from travel) doesn't have to stand and wait at the check-in desk. This is not just a convenience, it is a sign of respect for the guest.

Before the guest arrives, **check the room.**

- Make sure that the sleeping arrangements (king bed, two double beds, etc.) are as promised.
- Make sure that the welcome basket has been delivered.
- Make sure that the heating/air conditioning unit works and has been turned on. Set the temperature to a comfortable 72 degrees. (Fahrenheit, that is.)
- Does the room have a refrigerator and is it stocked with a selection of the guest's preferred beverages? Is the ice bucket filled?

You can make your guest very happy simply by saying, "You're already checked in. Here's your key, here's the wi-fi password, and here are two volunteers to carry your bags to your room. It's this way."

This demonstrates a level of generosity and caring that lets the guest relax, knowing that they will be well-cared-for during the entire event.

Be prepared for specific concerns:

- Does the guest have a disability? If so, is the room appropriate to the guest's handicap?
- Does the guest have allergies?
- Does the guest have specific food requirements or food preferences?
- Will the guest need a smoking or non-smoking accommodation?
- The guest liaison, as well as any members of the con committee responsible for the guest's well-being, should be aware of all special needs before the guest arrives. Preparations should already be in place for those special needs. (Again, this is a conversation that should start with the preliminary contract negotiations.)

**The Welcome Basket.** One of the ways a convention can make a guest feel welcome and well-cared-for is to provide a generous welcome basket. The welcome basket is a way of saying we are glad to have you here. Some of the things that a convention can put into a welcome basket include:

- Health-appropriate items, suitable for the guest's specific needs.
- Flowers.
- Candy.
- Cheese and crackers.
- Wine. (If the guest drinks wine.)
- A generous assortment of regional snacks and specialty items.
- Preferred beverages. Beer or sodas. (Should be in the room's refrigerator.)
- A toy or stuffed animal or doodad of some kind that represents the convention or the city.
- A card that thanks the guest for coming to the convention.

The welcome basket need not be excessive, but it does need to be thoughtful. It needs to have things in it that will make the guest smile and feel that the convention cares.

**(Sidebar:** One convention I attended, they would have done better not to have any kind of welcome basket at all. It was a plastic bag with three or four cheap throwaways from the freebie table and a whistle. It looked like someone's discarded Happy Meal. It did not give me a good feeling about the convention or the committee running it. -dg)

## 11) Meals

Meals are a large part of any guest's well-being.

The con committee ignores this at its own peril. A hungry guest is a cranky guest. A hungry guest will leave the convention in search of a good meal. If the local KFC is more appealing than the convention, a hungry guest might not be available for a promised program item.

- Does the guest have any special dietary needs or requirements? Is the guest vegan? Does the guest keep kosher? Is the guest diabetic? Does the guest need to eat at specific times?
- Does the guest have any special preferences for meals?
- Is regional cuisine acceptable to the guest?
- Make sure that all the guest's meals are all covered.
- Make sure the guest receives any promised per diem immediately on arrival.
- Make sure the guest knows where the Con Suite is and what will be available there.
- If the con committee has scheduled a dinner with the guest, make sure the guest is aware of time and place, and has not made alternate arrangements.
- Meals are important to guests. The quality of the cuisine, the quality of the service (or lack thereof), the level of satisfaction that a guest experiences can affect their participation.

## 12) Wrangler / Guest Liaison

If the convention is particularly large, or if the guest is particularly famous—but especially if the guest is a Guest of Honor, it may be necessary to provide one or two volunteers to serve as guest wranglers.

Generally, the wrangler should be someone who has considerable experience with conventions and guests. The guest may also have a preferred individual to serve as wrangler. But whoever serves as a guest wrangler must have a good relationship with the guest.

*Whoever serves as the wrangler must be someone the guest can trust.*

The responsibilities of the wrangler include:

- Functioning as a communication channel. The wrangler must be the singular conduit for all communications between any committee member and the guest. This will prevent various committee members from giving the guest conflicting information and creating confusion. The wrangler must be responsible for getting accurate information to the guest.
- Helping with load in and load out of art show exhibit. Helping work the sales table.
- Managing all interview requests—all requests must go through the guest wrangler.
- Making sure the guest's specific personal needs are met—coffee, a sandwich, a wake-up call, carrying a heavy bag—whatever.
- Making sure the guest arrives on time at all assigned program events.
- Making sure that program events are managed to the guest's needs and expectations.
- Protecting the guest from interruptions, nuisances, and individuals behaving inappropriately.
- Dealing with the guest's unique quirks and idiosyncrasies while still accomplishing the above.
- And all other responsibilities not listed here.

The job of the guest wrangler requires both experience and flexibility because it has to be invented differently for every guest. Do not give this job to an overeager, inexperienced individual. It will not work.

## 13) Special Needs

It is essential to make specific arrangements for any and all special needs the guest might have.

- Does the guest have a handicap or a disability? What adjustments will the convention have to provide? (For example, will the convention need a ramp or a lift to get the guest's wheel chair onto the stage?)
- Does the guest have dietary restrictions? Is the guest vegan? Does the guest keep kosher? Does the guest have allergies? Does the guest need to eat at specific times?
- Does the guest speak English? Will they need an interpreter? If an interpreter is needed, the convention will need to provide at least two qualified interpreters, so they can spell each other.
- Does the guest need exhibit space for artwork?
- Does the guest need a dealer's table to sell books? If so, make sure it's in a featured location. Do not charge the guest for the dealer's table.
- Does the guest need help loading and unloading? Provide helpers. (This should be planned ahead of time, it should not be a last-minute, "Let me go find someone," effort.)
- Does the guest need help setting things up? Provide helpers. (This should be planned ahead of time, it should not be a last-minute, "Let me go find someone," effort.)
- If helpers are needed, the arrangements should be made ahead of time. It should not be a last-minute, "Let me go find someone," effort.

### Medical Issues:

The convention committee should be aware of any medical issues the guest might be dealing with. Contingency plans must be in place. The seriousness of this cannot be stressed enough.

**(Sidebar:** This happened at a convention in Madrid. A convention guest took ill. The guest called the front desk of the hotel, asking if there was a doctor available. In less than five minutes, the hotel doctor was knocking on the door of the guest's room. When the guest expressed surprise at the quick response, the doctor explained, "No one expects the Spanish Inn Physician." –dg)

**(Sidebar:** Just checking to see if you're paying attention. –dg)

## 14) Toastmaster / Hugo Host

If your guest has been agreed to be a toastmaster or a Hugo Ceremony host, they are now an ad hoc member of the convention committee and as such will need to be kept informed of all appropriate responsibilities and schedules, goals and aspirations. They need to be treated as a partner and provided with all the appropriate materials for their job—especially if there are problems or special circumstances.

Remember, the person hosting any event will take the blame if anything goes wrong. The convention must do whatever it can to make the event idiot-proof.

**(Sidebar:** If the guest is the Hugo Ceremony Host, this can be a terrifying and sometimes thankless job. It's time to create a new tradition here. There are usually extra trophies—blanks—left over. Sometimes the designer of the base gets one, sometimes committee chairs take the extras home. Perhaps it would be appropriate to give one of those extra trophies to the Hugo Host. It could be a private moment backstage. The trophy should be labeled "Hugo Host (year)" or even "Best Hugo Host (year)." Even if it is only a trophy and not an actual award, it would still be a gracious acknowledgment, a way for the committee to say "Thank you for your contribution to making the award ceremony a success. Here is a token of our appreciation." –dg)

## 15) Opening Ceremonies

The opening ceremonies have several necessary purposes:

- **Welcome the attendees.**
- **Introduce the convention and its theme.**
- **Introduce the guests.**

Some conventions have turned the opening ceremonies into a pageant. Some fans like this. Some guests like this.

But not all guests do. Some guests find it tiresome and boring. Some fans as well. Many are eager to get to the first real program item.

It is recommended that convention committee check with their guests about their participation in opening ceremonies. Not every guest will be enthusiastic about it. Some guests would prefer to skip it.

Yes, a guest's attendance is desired, but there are times when it should not be required.

## 16) Programming

Once again, does the guest have a disability or special needs?

- Will the guest need a ramp or a lift up to the stage for a wheel chair?
- Will the guest need an interpreter?
- Will there be working microphones?
- Will there be equipment for audio-visual aids? A projector? A computer connection? A disc-player?
- Have these preparations already in place before the guest arrives at the room. Do not make them wait.

It should be part of the negotiated contract for the guest to participate in specific program items. The convention committee should not assume anything. It's appropriate to present the guest with a list of desired events and allow the guest to choose their own levels of participation. Some of the program items that a convention might want to put on might be:

- A Guest of Honor Speech.
- A Guest of Honor Interview.
- A reading of a story or work-in-progress.
- Autograph session(s).
- A specific presentation of a featured work. (Audio or Video adaptation.)
- A coffee klatsch.
- A workshop in writing, costuming, artwork, etc.
- A filk session.
- A screening of a related film or TV episode.
- Judging the art show or masquerade or other event.

Let it be all right for the guest to decline any program item that they do not wish to be a part of. Sometimes a guest will simply not have the interest or the endurance.

In specific, judging any contest can be an imposition. If the guest is not truly interested in the task, it can be a tiresome chore to sit through a long Saturday evening masquerade or spend an evening reading through the entries of a local writing contest. Sometimes a guest would rather spend that time with local friends.

**(Sidebar:** Asking a guest to judge any competitive event can be problematic. Does the guest have enough experience in this venue to have an informed opinion? It has happened more than once that a guest judge has had to deal with a backlash for choosing the “wrong winner.” Asking a guest to be a judge of anything should be a carefully considered decision. –dg)

## 17) The Guest Of Honor Speech

The Guest of Honor speech is usually the most important programming event for a Guest of Honor.

The convention committee must make that the most important program item in that time slot.

To put it bluntly, do not schedule the Guest of Honor speech opposite any event that will draw a majority of attendees away.

Do not schedule the Guest of Honor speech opposite:

- **George R.R. Martin showing the blooper reel from Game of Thrones.**
- **A preview screening of the next Star Trek movie.**
- **The trailer for the next Star Wars or Marvel blockbuster.**
- **Any actor's presentation of anything.**

## 18) Panels

And one more time, does the guest have a disability or special needs?

- Will the guest need a ramp or a lift up to the stage for a wheel chair?
- Will the guest need an interpreter?
- Will there be working microphones?
- Will there be equipment for audio-visual aids? A projector? A computer connection? A disc-player?
- Have these preparations already in place before the guest arrives. Do not make them wait.

In general:

- The moderator must be familiar with the guest's work.
- The moderator should have a list of questions prepared for the panelists.
- Do not put an honored guest on a panel with more than four people. Try for a useful balance of panelists.
- Do not put guest on panels with idiots, wannabes, dilettantes, academics, or first-time panelists.
- Do not put guest on panels with people who have limited experience being on convention panels.

There are some panel ideas that have been worked to death. They might be interesting to some people, but may have outlived their time or usefulness. Depending on circumstances, some of these may include:

- Panels about diversity in the field.
- Panels about women and/or minority writers.
- New writers.
- How to break into the business.

There are times and places where these panel items (and others) can be of interest but they are not necessarily the best use of the guest's time.

The best use of a guest is a panel where they get to speak about their specific area of expertise. For example: world-building, alternate history, costuming, illustration, editing, etc.

**Note:**

The moderator should allow time for questions, but should discourage comments. There's always the one fan who assumes the panel is interactive and that the panelists are entitled to his or her opinion. When this happens, the moderator must be willing to interrupt and say, "We're only taking questions now." The guest will appreciate it.

## 19) Autograph Sessions

Autograph sessions should be well-publicized. The rules for the autograph session should also be well-publicized.

- The autograph session will be limited to one hour.
- Convention members will be allowed to present only three items for an autograph.
- Anyone wanting more than three items autographed, will have to go to the end of the line for each three.

Preparations for the autograph session:

- The autograph table should be clean and neat, with a tablecloth.
- There should be a selection of pens for the guest.
- There should be bottled water or other beverages for the guest.
- The guest wrangler should be prepared for any additional needs—snacks, cough drops, tissues, etc.

The guest wrangler should be prepared to address any problematic situations. Some fans want to tell the guest their whole life story. The wrangler must be prepared to politely interrupt: “Thank you, but we have to give the rest of the line a chance to get their items autographed too.” The guest should not have to be the one to say this.

Some guests put out a tip jar, collecting donations for their personal charities. The convention committee should be prepared to publicize this for the guest.

If the line for autographs grows beyond a reasonable length, the staff should determine a cut-off point and not allow the line to grow longer than that. A staff member should stand at the cut-off point with a large sign that says, “End of the line.”

In such a circumstance, it may be necessary to schedule additional autograph sessions

## 20) Problems

Most conventions have good relationships with their guests. Nevertheless, from time to time, problems do occur.

It is the responsibility of the convention committee to establish specific procedures for dealing with issues that may come up.

Harassment of any kind is unacceptable. The guest is entitled to an expectation of courtesy and respect. The convention committee has a responsibility to remove anyone who causes a disruption or makes the guest feel uncomfortable.

**(Sidebar:** Just as important, the convention committee should not be the source of the problem. One Australian convention where I was a guest, a woman on the committee assumed she had the right to have sex with first one guest, then the other. She tried to break into one guest's room, she stalked the second. The first guest fled the convention immediately. The second rearranged his travel schedule specifically to avoid any further contact. –dg)

### Disinvitations.

It may happen that a convention may have to disinvite a guest. This is a lose/lose situation. It's bad for the convention, it's embarrassing for the guest, and it polarizes the fans.

This is why a convention must vett their guest list carefully before making the invitation.

But sometimes, as careful as a convention committee might have been, sometimes situations do occur. There are no guarantees. Sometimes, something a guest says or does will trigger a fannish firestorm, resulting in a situation that the convention must address.

The first thing a convention committee must do is investigate the situation as fully as possible.

The worst thing a convention committee can do is rush to judgment.

The most important thing the committee must do is respect its own established policies, determine if those policies are appropriate to the situation, and regardless of established policy, find the fairest and most equitable resolution.

The committee must be aligned in its decision. Any internal disagreements or discord must be kept confidential.

**If the decision is made to disinvite a guest....**

There is no right way to do this. There is only the least awful way.

First, the convention committee must communicate their decision to the guest.

The convention cannot control the disinvited guest's response, but they must control their own. They must not get into a public feud.

The safest course of action is to publish as neutral a statement as possible that says they have investigated the situation and made a decision to disinvite the guest. The statement need not say much more than: "Certain circumstances do not represent the convention or what we intend to stand for. We regret having to make this decision. We apologize for the inconvenience and discomfort that we have caused."

**Disinviting a guest is not recommended. It is a last-resort action, and only when all other options have been exhausted.**

## **21) Closing Ceremonies**

The purpose of the Closing Ceremony is to say thank you to the attendees and the guests and even the convention committee.

Depending on the size of the convention (and its budget) it may be appropriate to present the guest with a commemorative plaque or gift, some token of appreciation.

Sometimes it is a tradition, sometimes not. While it is not always a necessary requirement, it is an additional sign of respect, and many guests appreciate the memento.

Whatever kind of thank you is appropriate is a determination that the convention committee will have to make for themselves. Even if no gift or plaque is presented, the guest should still experience an enthusiastic show of gratitude from the convention committee as well as the attendees.

## 22) Departure / Load Out

If the guest has needed help arriving and unloading, they will likely need assistance loading and departing. As before, the convention committee should plan on having helpers available.

If the guest is driving, their departure from the convention will be their departure from the hotel.

If the guest is flying, the same concerns should be in place for their flight home and their ride to the airport.

- The guest wrangler should be able to carry the guest's luggage.
- The vehicle must be clean. It must have heating and air-conditioning. It must be of recent vintage and in good condition. It must represent excellence.
- The driver must be a careful driver. The vehicle must be legally registered and licensed. (This should be obvious, but it isn't always.)
- Make sure there is bottled water available in the vehicle.
- Make sure to get the guest to the airport with enough time for check-in and security—and if necessary, a meal.

## **24) After The Convention**

A thank-you note, or even a thank-you gift, is a good way for the convention committee to acknowledge the guest's contribution to everyone's good time. While an email is always appreciated, a written thank you, sent by old-fashioned snail mail, is a sign of great respect.

This is the opportunity to let the guest know how much their participation in the convention was appreciated by the attendees as well as the committee.

If there have been any specific events, good or bad, that need to be acknowledged, this is the place.

And ... if apologies of any kind are necessary, this is also the place.

Do not leave anything unfinished or incomplete.

The thank-you note is the last bit of closure for the guest. It is the opportunity to complete the experience of the convention, leaving the guest with good memories of the event.

The experience of the guest is one of the ways that a convention can measure its success.