

*[This essay was submitted to the Chronicle of Higher Education (as an anonymous piece), but they rejected it three times. Meanwhile, I continue to be asked for it, so I am posting it. (The title phrase is a common Google search, as I know from the search strings that lead to [academia.edu](http://academia.edu).) This version was originally on [my website](#). Please send all comments, emendations, etc., to the [author](#). This version is c. 2006. (Revised April, 2021).]*

## How to Invite a Speaker

by Anonymous

From a college's point of view, inviting a speaker is a complicated business. It involves everything from choosing the speaker to ferrying the paperwork through Accounting. It may seem things are simpler from the speaker's point of view: just accept the invitation, show up, and give a good lecture. Unfortunately it's not always that simple. A speaker who travels regularly may be inundated with emails, calls, and faxes, asking all sorts of things, and preparations can quickly become unmanageable. It can seem as if every institution is a different country, with its own business customs, calendar, and paperwork. Because there is no Handbook for Inviting Speakers, I thought it might be helpful to write out some pointers. These are common problems and solutions, as seen from a speaker's point of view. Hopefully they will be of some help when it comes time for that next lecture or colloquium.

1. When you have decided on a speaker to invite, the most important thing is to gather all the relevant questions and data together and put them in the initial invitation. That avoids the necessity, which in my experience is very common, of sending a string of letters, each asking for a new piece of information. Where it is feasible, that first letter should begin with a full description of the event and its context, including the length of the lecture, its intended public, the number of people that might reasonably be anticipated, and how widely it will be advertised. It is also useful to estimate the composition of the audience: how many graduate students, how many people from other departments,

how many people from outside the academic community. Those pieces of information help the speaker prepare the tone of the talk, and pitch it correctly for the audience. In addition the invitation letter should include a proposal for the speaker's fee, whether or not that fee includes travel, and whether it includes all meals or only some. If a publication is planned or hoped for, the initial letter should include that information, because it means that the speaker's time will also be needed later for editing and revising.

2. When the speaker accepts, it is helpful to write a second letter that gathers together all the questions having to do with preparation, promotion, and payment. Usually you will need to know the speaker's institutional and home addresses and Social Security Number (for tax purposes); their special dietary preferences; their preferences for podiums, pointers, and audiovisual aids; and their desire or aversion for having breakfast, lunch, or dinner with faculty or students. Overseas invitations may also involve bank information, such as IBAN numbers, or routing numbers. Sometimes you will also want to request a promotional photo, a brief biography, a copy of the speaker's vita, a title for the talk, and an abstract of the talk. At one question per letter, that would be over a dozen letters. It is not uncommon for a speaker to get ten or fifteen letters from a college in preparation for the visit, and for a speaker who travels often, that can be hundreds of letters per semester. The second email should also include full contact details: your phone, cell, fax, address, and email, and the hotel's phone and address -- I will explain why under point number 6.

3. Always designate one person to communicate with the speaker.

A few years ago I received an invitation that involved four contact people, and it slowly bloomed into an astonishing confusion, where everything was open to debate: the days of my visit, whether or not I was making my own travel plans, my fee, and even the number of lectures I was to give. Funnel all correspondence through just one intermediary. If a travel agent is involved, all emails should be copied to the speaker and the person in charge.

4. When you write to the speaker, always identify yourself, your institution, and the dates of the visit. From the speaker's point of view it sometimes takes a moment to remember, and after a few emails it can easily happen that you omit your institutional

affiliation and last name altogether, leaving the speaker to rummage through her files to find a person with your first name.

5. State the proposed speaker's fee up front. In the humanities, speaker's fees vary from none (for conference participants) to over \$8,000. Well-known speakers can sometimes be paid less at major institutions than they would be at smaller colleges and universities, presumably because the venue itself is attractive. I myself am usually paid in the range of \$500 to \$1000 at major universities in North America and at most universities in Europe, but I ask between \$2,000 and \$3,000 at mid-size American institutions. In smaller universities in Europe and elsewhere, honoraria are literally that; they are often around \$500, or up to \$1,000 in exceptional cases. In the humanities fees for two-day visits (lecture and seminar) rarely go above \$3,000 except for world-famous speakers. (This means speakers in the humanities can make money in North America, but not in Europe and elsewhere: a key economic fact in the humanities that is seldom noted.) Plenary speakers at conferences do not need to be offered more than \$2,000. A keynote speaker should be available for \$1,500 plus expenses: I would suggest that any demands over that be regarded with some suspicion. (You might consider calling places the speaker has recently visited: after all, you wouldn't buy a used car without comparing prices.) In business and technology, fees are higher, and \$5,000 is a common fee for a speech at a business-oriented event.

6. When the speaker arrives, or beforehand if possible, give her a map of the area and a full itinerary. Even if the speaker is only going to give a single public lecture, it is helpful to have a sheet with the name, phone, email, address, and fax of the department; the name, address, and phone of the hotel; and the contact information for people the speaker will meet (the host, the person who does the introductions, people who are going to the dinner afterward). If the invitation includes a seminar or other activities, include the names and emails of the graduate students and others teachers who will be attending. That information is especially helpful because it means the speaker won't have to ask for people's contact information—it will all be on the sheet. I often arrive home with a little envelope of business cards and napkins with people's names written on them, and as often as not I find I'm missing contact information for people I'd like to reach. (And the

reason for sending contact information in the second email, which I listed above under point number 2, is that it can happen that the speaker arrives at the airport and no one is there to pick her up. When that happens — for any number of reasons — the speaker needs to know who to call, or where to go. I have several times been stranded in airports for an hour or more, looking through my email correspondence in hopes of finding a phone number or hotel name.)

7. Attend to smaller things: from a speaker's point of view it makes a big difference to be given something like fruit or water to take to the hotel after a long day's work. If the speaker wants to see a local attraction or visit a friend, and it won't interfere with the schedule, then the speaker is apt to appreciate help with the arrangements. If your college puts its guests in a college-owned condominium, be sure to check the apartment first: they vary from palatial to desert-like. Recently I was lodged in an apartment with no sample-size soap or shampoo, so that I had to wash my hair in the morning using hand soap from the kitchen. The lower-end hotels and motels should also be avoided. If it is necessary to put your speaker in a discount hotel, check the rooms first. Is there a bath, or only a stand-up shower? Are smoking rooms really segregated from non-smoking? Where I work, we rarely visit the hotels that are just down the street — the ones we put our guests in. Travel websites that include customer reviews are helpful in this regard: they can alert you that the "luxury" hotel you have always used is something less than luxurious!

8. Do not give your speaker too much free time. Some hosts want to ensure the speaker is relaxed and energetic, and so they schedule three- or four-hour intervals between events. Occasionally that is just the ticket, but it can also be a burden. I never want to finish a morning seminar and hear the words, "Well, see you at dinner!" When the speaker wants to see something or someone in the area, then free time is wonderful; but if the speaker has not asked, it is safe to assume she would be just as content to be occupied. Remember that you are paying! Speakers should earn their pay, and there is no reason to feel guilty for imposing a full day's work. The same goes for any work that is needed after the event, such as editing and submitting the paper for publication. It is only good busi-

ness to insist that people make deadlines, and you can insist because you are the employer.

9. The introduction is always a matter of great interest for the speaker. Everyone has an ego, and even though your speaker may look uninterested, he or she is listening! I don't know anyone who genuinely dislikes effusive introductions, but I do know people who resent introductions of this sort: "Professor X is so well-known that I doubt any introduction is necessary. So, since I'm sure you're all eager to hear what she has to say, here she is." Even if your speaker doesn't really mind what kind of introduction she gets, it is prudent to be sure of the details of what you mention. My own resumé has been mangled in all sorts of ways, and each time I can conclude with great precision what the person introducing me—and by extension, his or her students—knows about my work. That in turn tells me a great deal about what kinds of conversations I can expect later, after the talk or at dinner. This is a matter for each introducer to decide, but my own sense of it is that the ideal introduction focuses on just one or two issues raised by the speaker's work: it is, in short, an invitation to conversation after the lecture.

These are my suggestions for peace and harmony between institutions and speakers. In the best of all cases, they can result in good publicity, because speakers in any given field will compare notes, and pass on their sense of your institution to their students.