



# History of the SDSU Writers' Conference

**San Diego State University's Writers' Conference** is one of the most successful of its kind in the U.S. While SDSU has been around since 1897, its Writers' Conference began in 1984 (no relationship with the book *1984!*), and has adapted (see infographic) to make the annual gathering a lesson in flexibility.

In 1983, two individuals, Irving Cooper and Diane Dunaway Kramer, met to discuss gathering writers together at SDSU. In the meeting, an idea emerged: Cooper, who was a screenwriting instructor at the time, would ask his film and screen writer pals in Hollywood to take the short two-hour trek to San Diego to lecture. The SDSU Writers' Conference was born. The first "mini" conference was a one-day event held at SDSU's Business Administration Building with about 25 attendees.

After a few years, the event flourished under the leadership of Jan Wahl and Diane Dunaway Kramer. Diane began inviting agents and editors from Los Angeles and New York to broaden the event's reach. The event eventually outgrew its original location and moved to the Aztec Center, where keynote speakers and writer luncheons were introduced. Two of the first keynote speakers were Jonathan Kellerman and his wife Faye Kellerman, authors of numerous bestselling suspense novels.

After a few years, SDSU's coordinator

extraordinaire Erin Grady Alcaraz began scheduling the one-on-one session between writer and editor or agent. The opportunity for writers to sit down and have personal access to editors and agents is copied by many other national writers' conferences today, and is one of the most popular and talked about aspects of the conference. (Side note: Our once coordinator Erin, today has five published books to her credit – talk about a conference success.)

The Writers' Conference staff began to embrace the motto "adapt to the situation" as they realized the conference venue and marketing strategy would change given national events. The events of 9/11 brought a change in marketing strategy – because of the uncertainty of national sentiment, whether to hold the event was questioned. Instead of spending a lot of money on marketing, SDSU mailed potential attendees a postcard that directed them to a web page to check on dates and details. The postcard-website combination is still used today—where money is spent on the event and not marketing the event. Even more amazing is that the SDSU Writers' Conference was one of the first to have its own webpage in 2001.

In 2003, after experimenting with several off campus venues, the conference moved to the Doubletree hotel, where it is currently held. One location – serving as event and hotel host – made it convenient for out-of-towners and allowed attendees the oppor-

tunity to network outside of the conference walls.

Through the years the conference continues to adapt to changing events, and grow with new ideas and stewardship. Diane continues to be the creative co-director. Each year she develops relevant topics and special events and invites A-list speakers from the publishing world. Erin Grady Alcaraz still orchestrates the conference editor-and-agent appointments and in recent years has been a conference speaker.

Today, the conference continues to be a success with attendees coming from as far away as Switzerland. The administrative co-director Becky Ryan runs a fine-tuned operation and has welcomed new genres like chick lit and hen lit, as well as encouraging new media like tweeting and blogging about the event. She has noticed a positive trend in the last few years as the new, young adult generation of writers begins to attend with fresh new ideas of how to blend the new technologies with the old.

What started out as a lecture-based conference with a few attendees and faculty, participants has grown to over 60 publishing professionals, agents and editors from New York and Los Angeles with over 400 attendees. This once small regional event has become one of the most respected writers' conferences in the country, but it continues to provide individualized attention to each participant.



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