Classy Ways to Use Connections

BY SUSAN SHAPIRO

As the author of many books my family hates and a long-time journalism prof, I love helping aspiring writers get published, paying forward the kindness of my mentors. When people approach me for advice, assistance, and names of my agents and editors, I try to be generous, even when they're basically asking, "How can I have your career?" But there are good ways to connect—and ways not to.

I was miffed when a student who'd taken my class multiple times enrolled in my five-week Zoom course on how to publish an essay, then launched her own five-week publish-an-essay class, without giving me a heads-up, charging one dollar less. Another ex-pupil called every editor I'd paid to visit my course to speak at *her* events, using my name without checking in first. More recently, a West Coast author copied the title, design, and lettering I'd used for the cover of the *New York Times*-bestselling addiction book I'd coauthored in 2012. When confronted, he admitted that since my book had only 148 reviews on Amazon, he didn't think mine had enough "presence to matter," adding, "I'd imagine your book will get a sales bump from my book's marketing push."

Although imitation is supposedly the sincerest form of flattery, I felt fleeced. Over the decades I've been a freelancer and teacher known for sharing contacts, here's the code of ethics I adhere to and some quick remedies if you accidentally blow it.

1. **ATTRIBUTION IS ESSENTIAL:** Attribute any words you publicly appropriate to their source, whether it's in a class you lead, speech you give, social media post, article, or book you publish. Even mentioning in print that I subtitled my teaching technique "the instant gratification takes too long" method, I added "with a nod to the late, great Carrie Fisher," who'd originated the quip. After I created an idiosyncratic expression in 2010, I was surprised to see the phrase I invented in a piece a former student published in 2025, as if it were hers.

   THE FIX: Adding "as my former teacher, Sue Shapiro, coined" after quoting the expression would have turned a theft into a tribute. When sharing someone else's content from Instagram, Facebook, Bluesky, or X, use the official "repeat" button so your followers know where it originated, or add the words "thanks to Joe Smith" or a heads-up in the comments, like "Love this! Reposting."

2. **NAME-DROP DILIGENTLY:** Introducing protégés to higher-ups, I recommend they start their correspondence, "You were great in Sue's class/seminar/panel," or "Susan Shapiro gave me your email." I don't recommend saying, "Susan Shapiro told me to send this to you," or "suggested I submit this." Words count, and this has offended editors in the past. One called me screaming, "Why did you tell this person to send me a 3,000-word op-ed in rhyming iambic pentameter?" when in fact, I hadn't.

   THE FIX: Ask for someone's approval and preference before using their connection, realizing some teachers and mentors may prefer you not name-drop them at all.

3. **TOAST, DON'T BOAST:** When a stranger emailed, "As an honors student at Columbia University who double-majored in English and philosophy and won multiple awards from *The Spectator* …" I didn't finish reading. Showing off is not the way to initiate a relationship with someone not related to you.

   THE FIX: Contacting a mentor/editor/agent/author, begin with *their* accomplishments, as in: "Congratulations on your new book/award/article. I admire your work" or "I loved last week's piece." An undergrad recently asked me, "What if that's phony because I

don't?" I responded, "Then bother someone whose work you do admire."

4. **BE ENLIGHTENED, NOT ENTITLED:** Just because you're sure your 200,000-word magnum opus is worthy of fame and fortune doesn't mean a stranger will read, promote, or blurb the unsolicited file you attached to your email. Studying with someone in the past does not guarantee they'll champion your projects in the present or future.

   THE FIX: Don't treat anyone like a 24-hour free editing service by mailing or attaching anything before inquiring if they have the time to help, and in what format they prefer. (I personally dislike Google Docs or PDFs where I can't mark notes.)

5. **PRE-GOOGLING IS GRACIOUS:** When somebody I don't know emails me, "I want to sell this to a top newspaper or magazine. What do you think?" I may respond, "Great idea," then ask if they've read my writing guides or noticed my upcoming classes and seminars focusing on this exact thing. Often, they haven't. Uninspired to put aside my deadlines to assist a neophyte who couldn't be bothered to do the basics, I often reply, "On deadline, but I can recommend a ghost editor you can hire to help."

   THE FIX: Research the person you're approaching before asking for a favor. If I'm the one who needs help, I often look up the person I'm contacting first, so I know who I'm talking to before proceeding.

6. **CREDIT WHERE CREDIT'S DUE:** After introducing a talented student to my *New York Times* editors, I was proud she became a regular contributor. But I felt hurt I wasn't in her debut book's long list of acknowledgments (though she repeated the name of a fellow student on the staff of *The New Yorker* twice). Whenever someone came through for me, I've tried to express gratitude or invite them to speaking engagements, keynote talks, or paid gigs.

   THE FIX: If someone did you a solid, return the support. Acknowledging someone is free—I've been honored when proteges I've helped land teaching gigs or big bylines had me zoom into their classrooms for Q&As or recommend my writing guide on their syllabus. Expressing thanks doesn't have to be elaborate. Repost your old teacher's publication, noting, "Here's a great piece by my old prof/mentor/editor." Or post your own clips with the shout out "Thanks to my teacher/agent/mentor" who you tag. Added bonus: it undercuts your self-promotion, making you look grateful.

7. **AVOID ANTI-SOCIAL MEDIA:** An aspiring writer I'd never met instant messaged me on Facebook, attaching the draft of a piece they wanted me to help them publish. There are appropriate ways to reach out, like locating the right email on a person's website or professional bio. Slipping into someone's DMs is usually not one.

   THE FIX: If the only way you can find an individual is through their social pages, politely ask for their work email. Then make sure you will be around to receive a reply by including your name, email, home address and/or working cell phone number—especially if it's something timely.

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8. **YOU CAN'T CONTROL KARMA:** I wasn't shocked to learn the company sponsoring my former student's essay class collapsed, and the West Coast addiction author's book didn't follow mine onto the *New York Times* bestseller list (with only 50 Amazon reviews so far). As an editor warned my class, "There are a thousand people in power in publishing who all know each other. If you're a jerk, we'll all know, and it'll probably come back to you."

   THE FIX: Instead of inadvertently slighting someone who came before you, you'll get further by being what my colleague Jennifer Baker calls "a good literary citizen," using the kind of sensitivity, support, and generosity of spirit you'd like to be shown yourself.

Susan Shapiro, an award-winning writing professor, is the bestselling author of books her family hates like *Five Men Who Broke My Heart* and *The Forgiveness Tour*. She uses her guides *The Book Bible* and *Byline Bible* for her popular publishing classes. Follow her on Instagram at @profsue123 or email Profsue123@gmail.com.