

How to Host a Successful School Author Visit

Picture it. Your students engaged in a gripping conversation with a popular children's author. Questions fill the room: Why did you write a story about a pirate? Where do you get your ideas from? Tell about the next book you are writing! When authors share their ideas about writing, students listen with great attention.

Author visits are exciting! A visit from an author can expose students to the wonders of reading and writing in a unique in a way that they've never considered. When authors come to speak to young people, they often inspire them to want to read great books and to write with more consideration for their audience than ever before.

A successful author visits, though, is no small task. It takes effective planning. Read on for some terrific tips on planning an author visit that will be a great memory for everyone involved.

Contact the Author

It is a good idea to find out *if* an author does school visits at all or if their calendar has openings for the time frame you'd like them to come before you get too carried away! You can contact some authors directly via their websites. If the author has an official website it is likely to be "www.(the author's name).com. If you do a search for the author's name on *google*, websites will come up that you can explore for help. If you can't reach the author that way, you can call or write to the publicity department of his/her publisher.

Honorariums

Honorariums vary from author to author and are subject to increases just like the costs involved in any service. Don't assume an author's honorarium based on what someone else says or based on a quote you were given at some other point in time. If an author's honorarium is beyond your budget, politely explain that this is the case and be prepared to close the conversation. If the author or his/her representative is willing to negotiate the honorarium, let them offer. Most of us don't go to the store and ask for a service to be less than the advertised cost. Treat the author's honorarium similarly.

Funding the Author Visit

There are a variety of ways to fund an author visit. One way is through the local P.T.A. Another method is through grants from state reading associations or local

reading councils or literary organizations. Silent or live auctions held during curriculum night or at some other large parent gathering have frequently garnered funds for such events and become something the school community looks forward to each year. Some items that can be auctioned that don't require a lot of expense and preparation: special parking places at school (with signs), your child can be "Principal for the Day" or "Secretary for the Day," teachers auction a volleyball/kickball game after-school to be played against the winning bidder and his/her team, etc.

Another great place to go for grant information is State Arts Councils! The premiere website that will take you wherever you need for information is www.nasaa-arts.org. On the home page there is a column on the left-hand side with a small U.S. map at the top. When you click on the map icon, a listing of states come up and by selecting your state you will come up with the arts council in your state and all of the contact information! This is a goldmine in terms of linking you to a place that may indeed have some grant funding available for your author visit!

You can also contact the national office via U.S. mail, phone, fax and e-mail.

National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

1029 Vermont Avenue, NW, 2nd Floor

Washington, DC 20005

202/347-6352 Ph

202/737-0526

nasaa@nasaa-arts.org

Paying the Author

Many authors support their families, in large part, based on their income from visiting schools. Be prepared to pay the author on time. Often schools require payment notice a month or more in advance in order to prepare a check. Be on top of this and be sure any expenses that are to be covered are provided for in the check. The author is counting on being paid for his/her service on the day of the visit, and this needs to be honored. Think how you would feel if you were told your paycheck was unavailable when it is due to you because someone forgot to issue it, and you'd need to wait another few weeks!

Travel/Hotel Arrangements

Most authors prefer to make their own travel arrangements with regard to flights because they know more about their availability for flights, airlines, etc. Still, you will need to know this information eventually if flight is involved in the visit.

A visiting author is a guest. Plan to pick up your author at the airport if he/she is flying in. It is much more personal and friendly than asking him/her to rent a car, wait for a commercial shuttle, or take a cab in what might be a strange city. When picking the author up, do not assume that he/she wants a tour of the city, to go sightseeing, or to have dinner with your family. Be sensitive to the fact that authors are frequently surrounded by people when they are traveling, and your visiting author may want some “down time.” He/she may be working on a book and be looking forward to time in the hotel alone to write. You can offer opportunities without making your guest feel obligated.

When booking the hotel room, ask if the author prefers a smoking or non-smoking room. Be sure the hotel room is paid for in advance by the school district and allow the author to have his/her meals put on the hotel bill. This simplifies the process of excess paperwork and the time it takes for reimbursement. Selecting a hotel with a restaurant inside will be greatly appreciated by your author.

Author’s Presentation Needs

All authors vary in their presenting style. Some use a slide projector, a microphone, a laptop and mini-projector, or an overhead projector. Any equipment the school has agreed to provide should be tested and ready in advance of the author’s arrival.

Find out how many sessions an author is willing to speak a day as well as the session length, number of students in the audience, and grade levels the author is willing to manage. All of this information should be agreed to in writing and a schedule should be prepared for the author in advance. It is *not* appropriate to change the agreement with the author. He/she is arriving prepared to do what was agreed to and no changes should be made on short notice without his/her explicit consent.

Prepare Students

Visiting authors agree that the most important way to ensure a successful author visit is to make sure the students have read the author’s books. Be prepared by having the school librarian order multiple copies of the books. Post a list of the author’s titles in the library. Ask teachers to read some of the author’s books aloud and to give book talks based on the author’s titles. Encourage students to visit the author’s website as a class to learn about the author – may be bringing back an interesting fact to share with the class. Caution them, though, not to send messages to the author via the website as any e-mail addresses or contact buttons on websites are typically for business purposes and do not go to the author directly.

Post signs and flyers around the school to spread the word that the author is coming. Ask students to prepare a list of questions to ask the author. Review the questions with your students the day before the visit. When you ask an author what has made their most successful school visits stand out, their responses are always linked to how well the kids know their books.

*Posters, author pictures, flyers, a review copy of some titles, and other promotional materials will often be furnished by the publisher once an event is scheduled. He/She who does not *ask*, does not *receive*!

DON'T assign students write to or e-mail an author! This often leads to disappointment for everyone involved as many authors cannot keep up with their flood of mail. If only those students who decided, all on their own, to write to an author did so, most would probably get answered!

Autographing

Author visits that include book-signing events create much enthusiasm and excitement. This is the student's golden opportunity to exchange a few words with an author one-on-one and to receive a signed book. Order books well in advance. Many publishers offer a significant discount on books purchased in advance of an author visit, but it takes *time* to process the order. Also, several houses will not charge you for the books when they are ordered and allow you to return those you have not sold. Discuss this in detail with the publisher and find out who covers the costs for shipping books back and forth. Remember to order books early!

Many publishing houses or sometimes the authors themselves, have a letter to help organize books sales to parents. This letter should be sent home with the students so that the parents can have time to select titles for purchase. It also helps the school order what is needed so that money can be saved on shipping costs.

Have students pay for the books in advance so that no money will have to be exchanged at the event. Keep in mind, that while paperbacks keep costs down, hardbacks make treasured keepsakes.

Ask the author which title(s) he/she would like you to have available at the event. Also, ask if there are certain titles he/she will be focusing on during the visit and plan your book order accordingly. If you are confused about how many books to order use this formula:

Paperback: Two books for every three children

Hardcover: About 15 percent of your school population that will be attending the event

Publicizing and Generating Excitement

Organize a publicity committee of faculty, staff, PTA members, and students. Ask each member to find creative ways to promote the event. Distribute a flyer or newsletter or make posters and other announcements. Ask the librarian to showcase the author's books in the library or in a display. Have the committee send a press release to your local paper announcing the event and invite them to come. *Remember, always ask permission from the author to schedule a media event.

Have a Fun Fund-raising Event

Work with the PTA to brainstorm creative ways to fund your author event. Host a craft fair, bake sale, or car wash. You are only as limited as your imagination! How about selling donuts before school in the morning? Auctioning off the best parking places at the school for a year during Open House?

Set up a Hospitality Crew

Make an author feel welcome by having a crew of teachers, parents, faculty, and students on hand to give a hearty reception to the author. Create displays, ask the community to get involved, and hold a luncheon for the author with his/her favorite foods! Be sure when planning any type of meal event that you check for dietary restrictions. You can ask your local grocery store or restaurant to donate food in exchange for publicity at the event. Allow those teachers who have worked to promote the author's work with students to a special lunch with the author. Remember, lunch is to be a break for the author – large groups of people at lunchtime may not be restful.

Hot Tips for a Great School Visit: *A Quick Review of Key Items*

- *Before you invite the press, check with the author.
- *Stick to the schedule that was discussed. Switching the audience planned or changing the timing can wreak havoc on a planned presentation.
- *Before you set up a video, please ask permission to do so. Some people are camera shy and are very uncomfortable being videotaped.
- *Don't assume the author want to have dinner with your great Aunt Marge or a tour of the local pottery factory. Offer opportunities in a way that does not make him/her feel obligated.
- *Make sure you stick to your time schedule. Allow enough time between sessions and at the end of the day to get the author to the airport.
- *Check dietary restrictions
- *Have honorarium ready and in the correct amount + expenses
- *Have room and supplies set up in advance
- *Order books and schedule time for autographing
- *Familiarize students with author and his/her books

A Handy Timetable to Help You Get Organized

The Day Before:

Make sure the space where the event will be held is clean and contains enough electrical outlets and extension cords.

Check your equipment for burned-out bulbs, slide carrousels that stick or microphones that are not working. If you are using computer-aided presentations, go through it once to make sure it is going to flow smoothly.

Make sure you have plenty of seating and the teachers know when they are scheduled for their author visit. Kids seated in chair make a *much* more attentive audience. It's true!

Check with all of your committee members to make sure they know their assignments.

The Day Of :

Well, the day is here and everything should be running smoothly. It's up to you and another point person to keep the event running on schedule. Make sure you have the author's payment ready and give it to him/her promptly. *Don't* make your author ask to be paid.

During both the author's presentation and autographing, make sure you have bottle of water handy. If the name of to whom the book is to be signed can be printed neatly on a post-it note, long lines may be defeated!

To keep the lines moving along, have a person assigned to open the book to the correct page for the author to sign.

The Day After:

Have a discussion about the event. Ask for feedback. How could it have been better? What did you learn? Start planning your next author visit!

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