

How To Have Great Author Visits At Your School

By two authors in the trenches,
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Prepare the children.

This is the number one best way to insure a great visit for everyone. Prime the pump. Make sure every child in your school knows the author is coming, has read or heard at *least* one of the author's books, and has had the opportunity to go to the author's web site (if age appropriate).

We cannot stress this enough. In today's school climate with so much testing, and cramped schedules, we know it's not easy, but it is essential. If it's the PTO/PTA that is in charge of the visit, please make sure you are also involved. The PTO/PTA cannot prepare the children; only you as the librarian, along with the teachers, can.

A key to this is starting at *least* six weeks ahead of the author's visit.

Involve the Administration.

Your principal should be just as excited about the day as you are. She or he will communicate that excitement to the teachers and to the children. Give your principal, and other members of the administration, copies of the author's materials. Take time to show them the author's web site. Invite the principal and other powers that be to meet the author and to come to one of the author's presentations. Invite the principal to introduce the author at an assembly program at least once.

Involve the teachers.

Even if you are the one who is going to be preparing the children, make sure the teachers are backing you up in the classroom. Many authors can provide activities that can be done with their books. Ask your author about their suggested activities. Teachers should read at least one book to the younger children, and have books available in the classroom for children to read. In order for this to work, you will need lots of lead-time and extra books. Authors will be happy to make sure that happens. Teachers could also help children to think of questions they'd like to ask the author.

Alert the school office staff of the author's visit.

Have someone available to greet the author and to help with the program set-ups.

Alert parents to the author's visit.

Parents can be a big help in generating excitement for the upcoming event. Invite parents to come to one of the author's presentations.

Talk to the author about what *you* want.

Although we have more or less set presentations, we are willing to adapt them to make the day most meaningful for your students. Feel free to ask us to address certain issues. For example, you might want us to emphasize research with the 4th grade, or talk about revisions to the older children. Just ask—we're happy to discuss it.

Create displays about the author and about the author's books.

Encourage teachers to make displays as well. Welcome banners and displays are heartwarming for the author and help build excitement in the school community.

Sign a Contract with the author.

Usually the author provides a contract, but if you aren't sent one, ask for it. Please sign the contract yourself, and ask the principal to sign, too—even if the visit is arranged by the PTO/PTA. This will protect everyone.

Offer the author's books for sale.

Contrary to popular belief, this is not about the money. Unless hundreds of books are sold at a visit, the author will not see a difference in sales from one visit. But the difference the visit makes to a child if she or he can take a book home is monumental.

Publishers are happy to make the books available, and at a substantial author appearance discount. Some local bookstores will also be agreeable to handling book sales. PTO/PTA volunteers are generally pleased to be asked to help with this, as well.

Consult with the author before you schedule the day.

Please run the schedule by the author a few weeks before the visit so you can iron out any problems. Some authors can come early to have breakfast with teachers; others cannot. Many authors are happy to have lunch with students; some are not. Please talk to the author well ahead of time.

Regarding lunch with students—we suggest that you choose students, or have the teachers choose students, for whom lunch with the author would truly make a difference. Pick the kids who could really use a lift and/or benefit from the experience. Authors like to reach out and help where they can. It's one of the best parts of our job.

Check ahead of time if the author has dietary needs or preferences. Please make sure that there is something healthful and energizing for the author's lunch.

Call local newspapers to come during the visit.

If you don't get a response, have someone at the school take photos, write up the visit and send it in. It's great publicity for your school and for the author.

Check your AV equipment and other technology before author visit day.

It's nerve-wracking to have technical difficulties during author presentations. Also ask the author what other equipment will be needed—tables for display, water, etc.

Seat children with their teachers.

Children will behave better if they are seated near their teachers. Please don't put the author in the position of having to act as disciplinarian.

Encourage teachers to be polite in the assembly.

This request may come as a surprise, but we have been to schools where teachers sit in the assembly and grade papers and (worse yet) talk to their neighbors. Not only is it demoralizing and distracting for the author, but also it is not a good example for the students.

Think of the author if she or he is staying overnight.

Being in a strange town can be lonely. Please put the author up in a nice, safe hotel. Offer to take the author out to dinner. The author might want the time alone to prepare for the visit, but she/he will be happy to be asked.

Ask the author for suggestions for future author visits.

Once the author has spent the day with you, she/he will be able to recommend other authors who would suit the needs and interests of your staff and students. Take advantage of these recommendations.

Follow up after the author leaves.

Give the children opportunities to discuss the author's visit, perhaps asking the students to recall what they learned and what they were surprised to find out. Some students may want to write to the author, some may want to dig right in and work on their own stories, and others may want to try writing sequels or new endings to the author's works. The possibilities for meaningful follow-ups are endless.

For a child, meeting an author can be an experience remembered for a lifetime. It is important that all of us strive to make the author visit as wonderful as it can be.