

Tips for Successful Author Visits

(from an author who's visited hundreds of schools)

By Matthew Gollub © 2004-8

A live presentation by an author or illustrator can forever change a young person's relationship to books. Often, students make a bee-line to the library after a successful author visit. Some schools even report improved test scores in the wake of such literary events. Here are some thoughts about coordinating author assemblies, and maximizing the benefits for your students and staff.

Find a skilled presenter: Most authors who visit schools enjoy people—kids in particular. But engaging a live audience requires different skills than producing a quality book or illustration. Try to find authors who give frequent presentations and can provide a list of strong testimonials. Better yet, preview authors at conferences, bookstores, public libraries, or neighboring schools. (By establishing contacts with nearby librarians, you may in the future be able to “share” an author by splitting expenses such as airfare.) When you haven't previewed an author in person, and cannot refer to a colleague who has, don't be afraid to ask the author for references.

Find an author that suits your school: Visiting authors are a varied bunch. Look for those whose books and speaking style will resonate with your students. Over the years your community will be well served if you bring in male and female authors, novelists, picture book creators, illustrators, and storytellers of different race and ethnicity. Once you've decided who to invite, the earlier you inquire about fees and availability, the better. If you must book an author at the last minute, your best bet is one who lives nearby.

Think creatively when it comes to funding: Depending on the author's programs and focus, funding from various sources may be appropriate. If library and parent-teacher organization budgets aren't available, consider other sources such as literacy grants, performing arts, bilingual education or G.A.T.E.

Be absolutely, positively sure to prepare the students: Make sure that the school has enough of the author's books! In general, each student should read or hear at least two of the author's stories beforehand. Ideally, the author's books are not just read in the library but circulated among the teachers and classrooms. Some authors send prep packets with lesson plans, visual displays and ideas for art projects. Display and make copies of these materials as appropriate. To fully appreciate the importance of preparation, envision two real life scenarios:

1) You're an author driving up to a school. You see welcome banners and murals strewn across walls with additional artwork and poems inspired by your books. The students, upon seeing you, already know who you are. Teachers greet you by name and direct you to the office to check in. The audio visual equipment you requested is in place. The first assembly begins, your audience is enthralled. They've been reading your books, anticipating this moment. Even a number of parents have juggled their schedules to attend the event.

2) You're an author driving up to a different school. No welcome signs or artistic displays, no greetings by name. In fact, nothing here suggests that this day is different from all the rest. You find your own way to the office to check in, wondering if, in fact, you came to the right school. When you inform the secretary that you're here to give assemblies, she raises her eyebrows quizzically: “You are?” Students file in for the first presentation. Teachers take the opportunity to

grade papers on their laps. When it becomes clear that you're going to talk about unfamiliar books, the students soon feel overloaded and begin chatting among themselves.

Same great author. Same books. Which school gets more bang for their buck?

Consult with the author about the day's schedule: Find out beforehand how many students the author is comfortable addressing at once. Consider capacity, seating, lighting and acoustics when deciding where the assemblies should take place. (I, for example, like to show slides; I typically speak to audiences of around 250 and prefer that students sit on the floor. So I'm usually in a multipurpose room, not a library.) Some authors offer "half day" visits which typically consist of two 45-minute assemblies. A "full day" may consist of three or four large presentations, drawing or creative writing workshops. Experienced presenters tailor their talks to different grades, so if you must schedule more than a 2 year spread in the same assembly (i.e. 1st graders scattered in among 5th graders), be sure to advise the author first.

Allow time for book signings. Signings are an exciting part of virtually all author visits, meaningful both to authors and students. Consult with the author well in advance about how book orders should be handled. Some authors provide books and order forms themselves. Others may ask you to order the books through a publisher or local bookstore. If your author will not bring books for signing, order the books at least five weeks in advance. If your school will likely buy a lot of books, consider having parents sort forms during the visit and deliver the signed books to students in different rooms.

Delegate tasks to assistants or volunteers: No one person should have to frantically attend to every detail on the day of the event. Custodians can set up the audio-visual equipment; an administrator can transport the author from the hotel; a parent can pick up the author's lunch. Even students can take charge of providing the author with water or snacks. An author visit should be fun, not stressful!

Mic the author! Virtually all authors and storytellers need a microphone when addressing more than fifty kids. Even a small portable microphone will significantly improve the listening experience. The added volume helps retain the audience's attention and allows the speaker to use a compelling vocal range including even a whisper.

Audience behavior: While introducing the author, cheerfully remind students to show their best listening manners. And enlist the help of teachers (and substitutes!) whose students need to be hushed or seated elsewhere.

Of course there are a few other details to work out such as the author's dietary preferences, the length and frequency of the author's bathroom breaks, etc. But by concentrating on the above points, you'll do a fine job. By meeting a working author or illustrator, your students will find renewed purpose in what they learn at school. And since most children's authors are eager to please, you will likely enjoy the event too. You'll also remember why you love books!

*(A note about this author: Matthew Gollub lives in northern California. He has written many award-winning books including *The Jazz Fly and Gobble, Quack, Moon* which feature his musical narrations on audio CD. He enlivens his talks with drumming and storytelling in English, Spanish and Japanese. Each year, he performs at over 50 schools and conferences nationwide and abroad. For more information, please visit www.matthewgollub.com or email him at mg@matthewgollub.com)*

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