

“Today children, we have a very special visitor...”

A guide to organising an author / illustrator visit

A visit from an author or illustrator to a school or library can be a rewarding experience for all involved, but it does need careful thought and planning. The following guidelines and suggestions are given in the hope they will be of benefit to all those involved in the organising of a successful author / poet / illustrator visit.

Why have an author / poet / illustrator visit?

From this fundamental question, the whole visit will take shape. Answers may include:

- To enthuse students about reading, writing and illustration.
- To allow students to meet a favourite author / illustrator / poet in person and ask them questions about their work.
- To fit into a scheme of work.
- To be able to tick the relevant National Curriculum box.
- To gain positive publicity for the school.
- To be part of a programme of events (e.g. Book Week, PTA event).
- To gain from the experience, professionally and personally.

What sort of author do you want? (poet / illustrator / writer of prose)

Once you have decided what the focus of the visit is, you should begin to research which author might be appropriate for you. There is a different set of skills employed in writing / illustrating a book and talking about it. Not all children’s authors / illustrators are confident in undertaking school / library visits. On the other hand, there are authors / illustrators who can be truly inspirational. It is up to you to find out which ones are going to be the best for your needs. Points to consider:

- Does an author / illustrator / poet come recommended by colleagues / local library services / local book groups?
- Writers often specialise in writing books for a particular age-group so make sure the visitor will be suitable for your intended age range.
- Some writers offer a range of events including readings, workshops and drama sessions while others make a more traditional presentation (ie. readings / question and answer sessions). What do you wish your author / illustrator to offer?
- How many people do you wish the author / illustrator to see during the day? Do they offer small workshops or large-scale presentations?
- Is the author / illustrator affordable? Fees can vary.
- Is the author / illustrator available? Big name authors / illustrators are usually booked up years in advance and some do not undertake school visits. Even lesser known authors / illustrators can be booked up 6 – 9 months in advance, especially around times of National Book Week, World Book day etc. It's no good trying to book someone at the last minute.

Information on Writers, Poets and Illustrators

Contact details and information on the types of visits available can be found on the following websites:

- www.literacytrust.org.uk
- www.scottishbooktrust.com
- www.contactanauthor.co.uk
- www.booktrusted.co.uk

There are agencies that specialise in the organisation of author visits. These include:

- Authors Aloud
- Authors Abroad

- Speaking of Books

See also:

- Author's / illustrator's Website/ Facebook/Twitter/Instagram
- Publisher's publicity departments. (Be warned that they are usually very busy)

Preparation

Once you have decided on who you would like to invite, make contact with the author/illustrator / agency (if possible, speak to the author / illustrator – direct contact can help to avoid the Chinese whisper syndrome that can lead to authors / illustrators not turning up / turning up on the wrong day / the school not expecting the visit. It happens!).

A letter or e-mail is a good starting point – include a contact number / address or ask the author if you may phone them.

To discuss:

- The date of the visit.
- The age-group to whom the visitor will be talking.
- Group size.
- The number and timing of the session(s).
- The length of the session(s).
- The type of venue. (Decide whether your venue is suitable for the visit – mostly it will be, but sometimes clubbing together in a larger venue may be more appropriate).
- Technical equipment (projector, flipchart, etc.) required.
- Arrangements for refreshments, lunch (check for any special dietary requirements).
- Accommodation arrangements, if needed.

- The fee agreed per session, plus expenses (travel & subsistence) and VAT if appropriate.
- The books the writer will be discussing.
- Book sales and signing.
- Legal requirements of school (DBS / insurance / photo ID etc.)
- Details for payment.
- Arrangements for getting the visitor to the venue.
- Showcards / publicity material from the publisher.

Once this has been agreed upon, write a letter to confirm details. Include:

- School contact name (have a back-up person as well in case of illness).
- School's address / phone number / e-mail.
- Map or clear directions.
- Confirmation of collection times if arriving by train/bus.
- Mobile phone number of person picking up the writer.
- If applicable, details (map, directions) of accommodation and confirmation of how it is to be paid.

Before the visit

The longer run in time you have, the more excitement can be generated!

- Make sure you have a venue available (double-booking of school halls is not unknown!).
- Make sure colleagues know of the visit.
- Make sure the children know of the visit.
- Involve the PTA and wider community (feeder / link schools / local library).
- Contact the writer's publisher(s) and ask if there is any display or promotional material available.
- Prepare the children by introducing the visitor's work.
 - Make display of books / pictures / posters etc.
 - Read sections of author's work.
 - Show the illustrator's work.
 - Visit author's / illustrator's website (if they have one).
 - Discuss the questions the children might ask.
- Write a letter to parents/carers telling them of the visit – include details of the price of the books available to buy.
- Organise the availability of books through your local bookseller or equivalent (some authors may bring their own books to sell) – these can be sold in advance to the children, or/and on the day of the visit.
- Charge batteries for digital cameras if they are to be used (ask visitor's permission about taking pictures / filming event).
- Press and publicity – contact local paper with details. Check the position regarding parental consent and the publication of pictures.

The visit

Each visit will obviously be different.

The following are guidelines to ensure a successful day:

- Remind staff of the day's activities.
- Be in good time to pick up the author if arriving by train / bus.
- Be ready to meet and greet the author (Make sure that the school receptionist or equivalent is aware of the writer's arrival - a welcoming cup of coffee generally goes down well!).
- Have refreshments available throughout the day.
- Make sure that the venue is clean and equipped with suitable seating / technical requirements.
- Make sure children and staff are in place on time for the session(s).
- Introduce the author to the audience.
- Make sure that staff / children do not wander through the venue when the talk is taking place.
- Escort the author to the correct venue.
- Don't leave the author to fend for themselves in staffrooms at break times or lunch.
- Make sure that books are available for sale and book selling is organised in an orderly manner.
- Make sure that payment is given or invoice requested.
- Thank the author appropriately.
- Make sure arrangements for leaving are in place (lift to station etc.).

Some common pitfalls to be aware of:

- Do not leave the visitor alone with the pupils at any time. They are not to be regarded as substitute teachers and left with a class or classes. (There are public liability insurance and DBS implications).
- The members of staff who would normally teach the children in the audience should be present, (and other teachers / teaching assistants, if

available) and should be fully engaged with the presentation, not filling in forms or marking books.

- It is a good idea to let the visitor know of any children with special needs or behavioural problems.
- Make sure that there are no problems with noise in other classrooms (or from author's / illustrator's sessions). Exams and author visits tend not to mix!
- If having a local press photographer, make sure that they do not arrive mid-session. Photos should be taken before or after sessions in order not to interrupt the event.

After the visit

- Encourage the children to write and thank the visitor.
- Talk to the children about the event.
- Undertake follow-up work with the children.
- Make sure all payments are made in good time.

And finally,

- Begin to arrange the next author / illustrator visit!