

How to Prepare for an Author Visit

The most successful school visits I have done have been at schools where the teachers and students had done some advance work to get ready for the day. The school marquee had a welcome on it letting students know that an author was visiting that day, the halls were decorated with student drawings illustrating my poems, and the students were giddy with anticipation. While not every school can go to this amount of effort to prepare for an author visit, the more familiar the students and teachers are with my work on the day of my visit, the more likely it is that the visit will be a successful one.

To help ensure that the students and teachers know who I am and why I am there, it is a good idea to do one or more of the following:

- Appoint one or more teachers (possibly the media specialist, the reading specialist, and/or the classroom teacher who is most enthusiastic and knowledgeable about my upcoming visit) to visit each classroom before “author day” to talk about the author.
- Read from my books or my web site (www.poetry4kids.com), and let the students and teachers know if my books can be found in the library.
- Post copies of the enclosed flyer where the students will see it.

The more the students know about an author, the more they’ll appreciate and benefit from the author visit. For example, they may have favorite poems they can request; they can prepare questions to ask after the presentation; and they will most likely have a better appreciation for the presentation, with greater opportunity for insights and a deeper understanding.

What to Expect the Day of the Visit

The most commonly asked questions by schools arranging an author visit are about what to expect the day of the visit. Will the author do an assembly before the entire school or visit individual classrooms? How many presentations can the author give? Where is the best place in the school for the presentations? How long is each presentation?

For me, a school day usually consists of several assembly presentations, arranged by grade level, and an autographing session for students who purchased books or just want an autograph. A typical school day looks something like this:

9:00-9:45 – K-2 Assembly

10:00-10:55 – 3-4 Assembly

11:00-11:55 – 5-6 Assembly

12:00-1:00 – Lunch

1:00-2:00 – Autographing Session

The above is just an example and should be modified to suit your school’s needs. Assemblies can be given in the school auditorium, gym, cafeteria, multi-purpose room, library, or even outdoors, weather permitting.

Letting Students and Parents Know About the Author Visit

Letting your students and parents know about the upcoming author visit can build student and teacher enthusiasm as well as letting the author know that everyone is excited about the visit. Here are a few ways to let students and parents know about the author visit:

- Hang a welcome sign or banner in the school lobby, where students, teachers, parents, and the author will enter the school.
- Have the students illustrate their favorite story or poem by the author. Hang the illustrations on the classroom or hall walls.
- Decorate classroom or hall walls with reviews of the author's work written by the students.
- Put an announcement on the school website, along with a link to the author's website so students and parents can find out more about the author.

This kind of welcome not only puts a big smile on the face of the author and gives a very positive image of the school, but it also lets the students know that it is a special and exciting day.

Handling the Logistics of the Author Visit

Giving assemblies and classroom visits is part education and part performance. The fewer details I need to worry about during the day of the visit, the more I can focus on giving the best possible performance. Here are a few things to plan for in order to make the day go as smoothly as possible.

- I generally require very little preparation time or extra materials. I will need a table to set some books on (a 6 or 8-foot table is ideal). I also require something to write on. My first choice is a dry erase whiteboard with markers, though a flipchart or overhead projector will do in a pinch. I bring my own portable PA system, so you do not need to provide a microphone.
- Speaking all day tends to dry out my throat. Please make sure there is water available (room temperature is best).
- Please plan enough time between presentations for a restroom break. Because I often shake hands with many students, I like to wash my hands between each presentation.
- Remind your students, in advance, of what kind of behavior you expect from them in the assembly. It is okay for them to laugh, applaud, and even ask questions when appropriate, but please remind them not to talk to one another during the program, and to raise their hands when they have questions or comments.
- Although I can control a rowdy audience, it is helpful to have teachers monitor their students so they can make sure the students' behavior doesn't get out of hand.
- If you have a "quiet" hand signal, gesture or "call" that the students recognize, please share it with me so I can call for quiet if it's needed.
- During my presentations, I am "always on", which can be physically and mentally draining. Please plan to provide a light lunch (salads are great!), preferably away from the students, either in the teachers' lounge or in a nearby local restaurant. I am not a vegetarian.
- Prepare a schedule for the day, and let me know as early as possible, two weeks in advance or so, (email is best for this) what time your school day starts, when I should arrive, and any special details such as where to park, which door to come in, and so on.

- In addition to planning time for the presentations, be sure to arrange a time during the day when students can get their books signed. Whenever possible I like to sign each book personally to any student who buys one. As a rule of thumb, plan about one minute per book for autographing. For example, if students have purchased a total of 90 books, try to allot 90 minutes for autographing. Also try to let the teachers and students know when they can expect to get their books signed.
- It is customary to provide a check for the author's fee by the end of the day of the visit. If your school requires a contract or other paperwork to be filled out in advance in order to provide a check, please be sure to send me this paperwork as early as possible.

Selling Books

Meeting an author can have a positive effect on children by showing them that books are written by real people, and that they too can write their own poems, stories, and even books. In addition to meeting an author who writes or illustrates books, it is equally important for a student to own a book created by an author whom they've met. I find that most students who have seen my presentation and are familiar with my poetry want to have at least one of my books as a souvenir of my visit. A personally autographed book is an excellent keepsake.

I do not "plug" my books during my assembly and workshop presentations. The purpose of my visit is to promote reading and writing among the students by showing them firsthand that writing can be fun and exciting. I do not treat it as an opportunity to advertise to your students.

However, making my books available to them is another way to create and maintain their interest in reading and writing. Plus, students often get such a thrill showing their parents and friends the book that was signed to them personally by the author.

Lastly, of course, as a full-time author, selling books is important to my livelihood. I do not have a "day job," so book sales and speaking fees are my only sources of income. By offering books to your students, you help make it possible for me to continue writing full-time.

There are a number of ways to handle book sales:

- The school can purchase books directly from me.
- You can have sales handled by the PTO/PTA.
- You can have sales handled by a local bookstore or dealer.

However you handle the book sales, it is always best if I do not have to collect money from the students individually. It is customary to handle this in advance of my visit and provide a single check for the books sold by the end of the day. If students will be bringing money on the day of my visit, please plan to have a teacher collect money from the students and give them their books so I can focus on autographing.

I prefer to ship books to the school in advance whenever possible. In most cases, I cannot carry books with me when I travel, so I need to send them ahead of time. It is a good idea to provide an estimate of how many books you expect to need, as early as possible. Try to allow at least three weeks for shipping. Any books that you don't sell can be shipped back to me after my visit.

Please plan to send home a book sale notice and order form a few weeks in advance, to allow plenty of time. The easiest way to do this is to photocopy the order form enclosed in this preparation kit.

There are two book order forms enclosed in this preparation kit. One is a student order form you can photocopy and send home with the students. The other is for the school to aggregate your students' orders to send to me. When you order books directly from me, the shipping cost is included in the price.

You may feel free to estimate the number of books you will need and return any unsold books after my visit.

Payment for books is normally not due until after my visit is done and any unsold books have been returned.

After the Visit

The benefits of an author visit should continue long after the assembly or classroom visit is over. There is a lot of potential for learning in the days and weeks after the visit. Immediately after the assembly or classroom visit ends, begin to harness the student's creative energy and enthusiasm by:

- Writing poems like the ones I've shown the students, and discussing with the students other types of poetry they might explore.
- Making books or posters celebrating your favorite poems.
- Writing thank-you notes expressing why each student valued the visit. Although I can't reply personally to every letter I receive from a student, if a group of students writes to me, I always try to send a note of appreciation to the school.
- Rereading and referring to my books of poetry.
- Discussing my poetry. For example, comparing and contrasting my style vs. that of other popular poets and other writers.
- Emailing me with your comments and suggestions. Please let me know how the day went and if there is anything I could have done to make it even better.

One Last Thing

As a working artist, it is sometimes difficult to make ends meet. I am not yet at the point in my career where I can earn a living entirely from book royalties. School visits help make it possible for me to earn a living as a poet. There are three things you can do to help me to follow my dream of writing books that get kids excited:

1. Let other schools know about my programs. If you have friends or colleagues at other schools, please recommend my author visit programs to them and let them know about my website.
2. Place a link to www.poetry4kids.com on your school website. The more schools that link to my site, the more likely it is that other teachers will discover it.
3. Write a testimonial or a letter of recommendation. If you enjoyed my program as much as I think you will, please take the time to write me a letter or an email that I can share with other schools.

Summary

I will do everything I can to ensure that the visit to your school goes smoothly and that your students get as much as possible from the day. If the students are well-prepared, you should find them overflowing with enthusiasm for reading and writing poetry by the end of the visit.

An author visit to a school can be a very positive experience for the students, increasing their excitement for reading and writing, and enriching their understanding of the writing process. Or it can be a less than rewarding experience. Having given thousands of presentations at schools, libraries, conferences, workshops, bookstores, and other events, I believe that the key factor in the success of an author visit is preparation.

I hope you will follow some of the suggestions provided in this paper and help make my visit to your school a fun and productive one. If you have any questions prior to my visit, please don't hesitate to send me email at kenn@poetry4kids.com or call me at (509) 987-5366.

Timeline for a Successful Visit

Here are some tips that may help to prepare for a successful author visit, arranged chronologically, leading up to the day of the visit.

Three to Six Months Before

After we confirm the date of the school visit, I will send you a “prep kit” that includes a copy of one of my books, book order forms for the school and students, flyers you can photocopy and display, etc. After reviewing the prep kit, please contact me if you have any questions.

Two Months Before

Please email me a schedule for the day. This will let me know when the school day starts, when the first assembly begins, and what assemblies, workshops, or other programs you would like me to present. It will also give me a chance to review the schedule and suggest changes if necessary.

Six to eight weeks prior to the day of the visit is a good time to start preparing the school and students. The more the students and teachers know about me and my books prior to the visit, the more excited they will be the day of the visit, and the more likely it is they will have a terrific time. Here are a few things I recommend you do to begin preparing at this time:

- Start talking to students, teachers, administrators, resource staff, volunteers and parents about the upcoming visit.
- Share the sample copies of my books with the teachers and students. I include free copies of each of my books so that you may pass them around to the classrooms.
- Contact local newspaper about the visit.
- Place a blurb in school newsletter publicizing the event.

Six Weeks Before

I will make travel reservations, including airline tickets, rental car and hotel reservations, as necessary. If there is a hotel nearby that you recommend, please let me know. Also please let me know if you would prefer the hotel direct-bill the school, or if I should invoice the school for reimbursement.

If you would like to make any other arrangements with me outside of the regular school day (e.g., evening parent talk, before-school teacher workshop, dinner, etc.), please let me know before I make my travel arrangements.

During the Month Before

- Each week include an announcement about the visit in the school newsletter.
- Help students create displays to advertise the event.
- Read poems from my books as part of morning announcements.
- Encourage teachers to use my poems in their curriculum; i.e. to create writing and art related to or inspired by poems from my books.
- Send home Student Book Order Form one month prior to the visit.
- Send me the School Book Order Form summarizing your students’ orders.

Two Weeks Before

- Re-contact local newspaper.
- Prepare student introducers, if students will be introducing me.
- Line up custodial needs, including chairs for teachers.

One Week Before

I am often on the road this close to a school visit. The best way to reach me is via email (kenn@poetry4kids.com) or cell phone (509-987-5366).

- Distribute lots of copies of the final schedule. Make sure that I have one as well.
- Brainstorm questions to ask the author with students. Every assembly is followed by 5-10 minutes of Q&A. Students may want to think about their questions ahead of time. For primary grades, it may be helpful to discuss how to ask questions.
- Plan lunch for the day of the visit. Will it be for the entire staff, or perhaps at a local restaurant?
- I travel with a navigating GPS, so I don't usually need directions, unless your school is rural. However, please send me any special instructions such as "park in the lot on the right," etc.
- Check in with me with any last-minute questions.

One Day Before

- Reconfirm with local newspaper.
- Contact me with any last-minute questions. I may be at another school the day before the visit, so please feel free to send email or call me in the evening.

The Day of the Event

- Set up equipment in the assembly space (i.e., whiteboard, table, water, etc.).
- Involve students as much as possible as ambassadors, introducers, etc.
- Expect me to arrive 30-45 minutes prior to the first assembly, to allow time for set-up, tour of the school, etc.

After the Event

- Thank all volunteers and students who helped make the day a success.
- Discuss the author visit with students and encourage them to read and write based on what they learned.
- Share the newspaper article with students.
- Let other schools in your area know about your author visit and how it went.
- Start planning your next author visit!