

## The writer speaks—making the most of an author visit



*Scot Gardner's energy and passion for his writing comes from his zeal for observing of ordinary events from an extraordinary perspective. This gift enables him to zone in on the real and the everyday, bringing a freshness and honesty to his storytelling.*

**W**hy would you have an author visit your school? Why would you go through all the pain and anguish and expense of hiring someone who spends the best part of their

working life locked in a small room with their imaginary friends?

It's a big risk. A big investment of your time and effort. But, there are ways to hedge your bets and suck the most out of the day.

If you've had a successful author visit, you'll be able to give me a hundred grinning reasons why it's worthwhile, maybe more. When it works, it goes through the kids like a bag of blue M&Ms—suddenly the sharky little nose-pickers (you know the ones I mean) want something from the library other than Internet access. Suddenly the library is alive to them and the books aren't just things to line the shelves with, but vessels to carry trusted yarns and giggles and reasons to live.

Sometimes just making the connection between those paged thingies and a real person is a powerful tool in de-mystification. Eggs don't come from boxes or supermarkets, nor do books just magically appear in libraries. It's not a huge leap in understanding but it's easy enough to overlook, even if you're an avid reader.

Sometimes it's that simple.

While some authors for young people have come to writing through education, many of us haven't seen a classroom since we were kids. That can be both an advantage and a disadvantage in a presentation. We come in and the students don't have their guard up the way they may in a formal classroom. They listen with a different set of ears to the ones they use in English or PDHPE.

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There's a heightened sense of newness about the situation and if I'm conscious of one thing in the first minute of any presentation, it's this—hang on to that newness. Keep it sparkly and unusual. Impress upon the students that while their education is important, I am not a teacher.

The downside, though, of not being a teacher revolves around juggling age-appropriate content and delivery and the management of classroom behaviour (Is it okay for those guys to punch each other? It's not bothering me, but there's a lot of blood!).

It takes time to get that stuff right.

Teachers have had lots of experience delivering to classes before they're asked to run one—we're in

the deep end.

A conservative Year 10 might struggle with material that makes a feral group of Year 7s cry with laughter.

There are three degrees of separation between anything on the face of the planet and a bum/poo joke. As teachers you probably don't want to go down that road too often but an author is there for a good (and hopefully provocative and informative) time, not a long time. We're not there to do what you and your colleagues do; otherwise you'd be doing it.

### **A checklist—**

Some of these things are small and commonsensical; some are large and crucial but often overlooked:

**DO** go the extra level in hospitality. We love it when you feed us ... anything ... but a selection of pickings show that you care. Prepare a cup for us to use in advance. It's easy – wash it and write **VISITING AUTHOR** on it in permanent marker (or whiteboard marker if you want to use it for visiting musicians at a later date). It sounds petty, I know, but when left to their devices, authors gravitate towards cups owned by the possessive and angry members of staff. I have scars to prove it.

**DO** take the time to print and colour a timetable of the day's activities, including the start and finish times for each session.

**DO** bring on the water. One glass or one bottle or one jug.

**DO** brief staff and encourage them to leave their correction folders and the newspaper back in their office. Having them tapping away at the computer while you're fighting to keep the attention of their class gives the wrong message and the kids certainly pick up on that. Feign interest if you need to. Kids do it all the time!

**DO** make a brief, concise and informed introduction. Above all else, get the guest's name right. Ask if you need to, but not mid-introduction.

**DO** be pro-active, discreet and solid about audience management. Perhaps discuss your involvement with the speaker beforehand. Take disruptive kids outside then **TAKE THEM OUTSIDE!**

**DO** make a display—a few photos, copies of covers, books on stands all help to fire the students up and provide a focus for them, long after the visit. If you don't have a swag of the author's work, you might need to get some to cover the expected jump in demand.

### **A final observation**

We're always busy. You're always busy. It can be a challenge to get an author visit off the ground but the benefits are wide and varied.

Reluctant readers may find a book that hooks them in.

Meeting the real deal might just be the thing that shapes the career of a budding writer.

Whatever the outcome, an author visit for an hour or a week will shake your library's snow dome.