

Notes about an author visit by Ed Wicke...

Before the visit

It's really helpful if we can talk through your plans in some detail. That way, we'll probably come up with some useful ideas together. Email me (edddwicke@hotmail.com), or arrange a phone discussion (07748 781931).

I'll drop by some books well before the visit, or arrange for a box to be sent to you. It is SO important that teachers use these in class; it really builds expectation and excitement.

Background

I think the main contribution of an author visit is to engender enthusiasm and self-confidence, as part of the school's overall literacy strategy. I'm not a teacher; I couldn't do all the things teachers do! So although I try to be "educational" as well as "inspirational", I do this in an understated manner.

The main session

The main element for any visit is a presentation of about 75 minutes, which is organised around 3 lively short stories, imagination exercises and a lot of encouragement for reading broadly and writing creatively. It's held together by a theme which is often something general like "Writing a good short story", but which can be something more pertinent to the current teaching plans, eg "Myths and Legends" or "Using your imagination".

80 minutes may seem a long time – but it always flies past and the children always want more! I build in some standing up & questions/answers a couple of times in the session.

I'm accustomed to group sizes of 60 to 250. My preferred approach for larger schools is to have all Years 3 & 4 together for one session, and all Years 5 & 6 for another. For smaller schools with a large enough hall, I'm happiest with all KS2 together.

I'm very happy to do a separate 30-40 minute session for KS1.

Other sessions

I only offer workshops after the main session, unless the school is paying a full fee (in that case, you can have whatever you like!).

Because of time constraints, there is often a choice to be made between:

- Short, sharp, focussed sessions based on creating stories together. The half hour will be very participatory & at the end the children will feel they've been part of a funny and creative exercise, but they won't have written anything down. They'll be full of ideas, though!
- Longer sessions where we can either build individual stories or else build a group story. They would need pencil and paper. At the end, they will have the skeleton of a story plan. The down side is that this is a more serious session that progresses more slowly.

The important thing is for the school to decide what they most want to achieve. I offer a wide variety of sessions and am happy to invent new ones.

In the writing workshops, we normally make things up together and write down outlines of them as we go along. We usually end up with every child having his or her own version of a story (normally quite an amusing one!). This works pretty well in various sizes of groups (I've done 16 to 100). If you want to target smaller numbers of children, that works fine. If you want to spread it thinly, I suggest Year groups all together: also fine, but with less of a personal touch.

I've also done many Advanced Writers/G&T sessions, lasting about half an hour. In these we discuss common problems with writing stories and do some practical story invention on the fly. These sessions are always helpful and very amusing! They seem to work best with between 10 and 16 students.

Some schools have instead asked me to run creative writing sessions with groups of children who are struggling to write stories: and this too has worked very well, for groups of up to 20 students.

I also have a few powerpoint-based presentations which trace the development of the cover & illustrations for one or more of my books, from the first email exchanges with the illustrator and initial sketches, through to the final versions. This takes between 30 and 60 mins (up to you) and can be for large groups in a hall or smaller ones in classrooms.

Teacher support

Underpinning all this is the support of teachers. I expect the school to take this involvement seriously, because it has such a big impact on the educational success of the visit.

My recommendation is that each teacher chooses one story they like from a Wicked Tales book. They don't need to read the whole story to the children, but they could spend a minute or two each day for a few days in the week before my visit reading part of the story out loud. I'm aware that not all Primary teachers read regularly to their class; my experience is that it makes a big difference to the children's attitude to the visit – it's like getting a pre-approved credit rating!

Book signings

I always sell signed copies of my books at schools for £5 each (in shops & online they are £5.99 / £6.99). *The Unicorn, the Princess and the Boy* is shorter and targets Years 3 & 4 - so I sell that one for £3.

I try to organise signings so that there's no disruption to the school's day, and so that it doesn't take up the time of school staff. What I've found works is the following...

- At the end of each day I'm visiting, I set up a table somewhere appropriate (eg hall, library) and sign books. Not many children bring money the first day, but after that there are usually more than the school expects!
- I also arrange to pop back at the end of school on the day after my final visit (or later that week) & sign any remaining books.
- If I'm visiting for two days, and if it's okay with the school, I sign some books at lunchtime. This cuts down on queues at the end of the day.

(Note that it really doesn't work having a signing session only on the day of the visit. The children won't remember to bring their money in!)

The number of books I sell at schools (when the arrangements are appropriate) ranges from 40 books per 100 Key Stage Two pupils to over 100 books per 100, dependent largely on the economic profile of the school's intake. These sales enable me to charge little or nothing to schools.

Fees

I try to keep fees to a minimum, because I prefer for schools to spend their literacy budgets on books, not authors. In any case, an author worth inviting should be able to sell enough books to cover the standard fees recommended by literary organisations.

I don't normally charge a fee within an hour's travel, unless the school is rather small. Where I do charge fees, I try to keep them reasonable, and always agree them in advance.

Because I fund my visits from book sales, I will usually have to charge fees where there are restrictions on book sales – eg, where we can't make appropriate arrangements for me to sell at the end of each day plus a day later; or where the school has other Key Stage Two authors visiting within a couple of weeks before or a day after my visit. I am however totally relaxed about schools having sales going on via a "travelling bookshop" arrangement; I don't find there's much overlap between those sales and my own.

I do usually require schools to purchase a small number of my books (at £5) for their libraries: this ensures that the children from poorest homes will have access to my books too. Schools tell me that the "Wicked Tales" books are almost constantly checked out!