



Secrets to a Successful Skype Visit

by Lee Wardlaw

Pros and Cons to Hosting a Skype Author/Illustrator Visit

Pros:

1. Less expensive! All you pay is the author's honorarium (which is usually substantially lower than an on-site visit). No need to pay for the Three M's (Motel, Meals, & Mileage). Some authors actually offer free 10-20 minute programs if you've read at least two of their books with students.
2. Less hassle! No worries about who will pick up the author at the airport/hotel, or who will help her lug in and set up the program.
3. More comfy! The author can wear her bunny slippers during the visit, and no one will know. ☺

Cons:

1. Passive experience for the audience. Students already spend way too much time staring into screens (TV, iPhones, computers, etc.). This is just one more time when they're sitting watching a talking head.
2. Passive experience for the author. She can't move around or be as spontaneous as she might like; she also can't make eye contact with every student, so it's difficult for her to judge the audience's needs. Highly interactive programs, such as reader's theatres or writing workshops, are trickier to implement.

Tips for Planning the Skype Visit

Choosing the Author or Illustrator:

- Decide what kind of Skype visit you want: Q & A? Writing workshop? Power Point Presentation? Your answer will determine whom you'll invite.
- Talk to librarians, teachers, schools, and other authors/illustrators for suggestions. Or, check out the Skype an Author Network <http://skypeanauthor.wikifoundry.com/> or Skype's classroom speaker programs: <https://education.skype.com/literacy/>

- You'll need someone who is dynamic, animated, interesting, personable, and comfortable in this kind of setting.
- You don't necessarily need someone with Skype experience; but you *do* want someone who is experienced talking with your age group of students.
- Authors who are new to Skype will sometimes charge less money in order to gain Skype experience.
- Ask the author if she prefers a check or money order, and when/where the honorarium should be sent.

Choosing the Skype Site

- Keep the audience as small and intimate as possible – unless you have good acoustics and a large screen. (And I don't mean a large computer screen!)
- A library is a good choice, with a maximum of two classes.
- Decide if you want students sitting in chairs or on the floor.

Tips for Preparing Students for the Skype Visit

- Read at least two of the author's books to the students.
- Encourage students to check out the author's books from the library.
- Share info from the author's website with students. Better yet, invite students themselves to do research on the author via her site, blog, Facebook, *Something About the Author*, etc.
- Download available teacher's guides for the author's books and take part in the suggested activities and writing projects.
- Ask for student volunteers to email or snail mail the author, welcoming her to the upcoming Skype visit. Students might also want to share info about themselves, their school, and class.
- Encourage students to get involved in prep and publicity for the Visit. Examples: make a welcome sign (hung in the library behind where the children will sit so that it's visible to the author); create a fun bulletin board or book display; write about the author in the school newspaper.
- Make the Visit a celebration! Ask students to cook or bake snacks that align with the book's theme.

- Ask for volunteers to write the author's introduction and read it to the class before the author appears on screen.
- Have students think about and write out questions for the author prior to the Visit. Discuss these questions so there are no duplications. Pick the 'best' questions to ask by taking a class vote.

During Skype Visit

- If you have a small enough group and plenty of time, invite each student to stand and read his/her question aloud.
- Use a hand microphone that can be passed around.
- Ask students to introduce themselves before asking their questions. Remind them to speak loudly, clearly, and *slowly* (to adjust for time lags).
- Keep an eye out for disruptive students. This is important for on-site visits as well, but especially crucial during virtual presentations because the author can't always see what's happening - and can't act to resolve problems.
- Also keep an eye on the clock so that the Visit doesn't go into overtime.

After the Skype Visit

- Host a book sale!
- Ask if the author can send autographed bookplates for purchased books.
- Photocopy autographed bookmarks for each child so everyone goes home with a souvenir.
- Ask volunteers to write thank-you notes or emails to the author.
- If you enjoyed the author's Skype Visit, remember to recommend her to other schools and libraries!

Technical Tips

- Decide ahead of time who will initiate the call.
- Arrange for a morning visit, if possible, when everyone is fresh. (But be aware of time differences!)

- Do a sound, video and lighting check *at least* twenty minutes before the Visit. (The day before is even better!)
- Ask the author to provide her landline or cell phone number – and give her yours, as well – in case of technical difficulties.
- Whenever possible, make sure that both your computer and the author's are connected to routers. (Wireless Skype Visits are often plagued by lost feeds and voice/videos that are off-sync.)
- Warn the students about possible technical difficulties, and have a back-up plan in place.



Thank You - - and have fun!