

Shaping Your Presentation

by Alexis O'Neill

The first question most new authors ask is “Where can I get gigs?” Frankly, that’s putting the cart before the horse. The first question should be, “What can I do in a presentation that will enrich the lives of my audience?”

You may feel that telling your life’s history and reading your golden words is enough. Not exactly. Although audiences love hearing about your struggles, triumphs and funny anecdotes, a good presentation is not all about *you* -- it’s really about *them*. What can you share with audience members that they can apply to make their own lives better?

Recently, a veteran elementary school teacher said, “I’ve seen a lot of assemblies in my career. Some were entertaining, but I didn’t learn anything from them. Some were educational, but they weren’t entertaining. I think the secret to a good school presentation is to be both educational *and* entertaining.”

Here are five tips to increase your audience appeal:

Think “story arc”: Just as in a good book, a presentation has a beginning, middle and end. Your opening is like the first page – make it attention-grabbing. Give a lively overview of what you’ll be doing. Set the themes (i.e. finding ideas to write about; how a book comes to be; revision; rejection; etc.) Develop characters (i.e. introduce You the Author as well as the characters in your books.) Work toward a climax (i.e. having volunteers engaged in acting a portion of your story out, etc.). Have a definite “last page” that ends the presentation quickly and effectively after the climax.

Think “interactive”: Engage the audience in your presentation. Have the whole audience repeat a phrase from your book, sing, or clap a rhythm. Invite a volunteer or small group to read a scene from a chapter, hold props or demonstrate an action a character does. Vary whole audience participation with individual participation.

Think “pictures”: Add color to your presentation

with pictures and props (and, yes, novelists can do this, too!) If you’re not a wizard at PowerPoint, make overhead transparencies of your book cover, interior illustrations, rotten first drafts, your office, pets, family photos, places related to book research. Remember that in any audience (adults and kids alike), you will have visual *and* auditory learners. By hitting both learning styles, you’ll increase your audience appeal.

Think “props”: We all like to travel light, but objects enliven a presentation. Was there an object that inspired your story? Patricia MacLachlan brings a bag of dirt, Bonny Becker brings art prints. Is there an object that your character identifies with? For *Estela’s Swap*, I bring a music box and *folklórico* skirt. For their nonfiction books, Lee Wardlaw brings a tall ice cream cone lamp, Carolyn Arnold brings mammoth fossils, Carmen Bredeson brings space food that looks like vomit.

Think “writing”: (With apologies to illustrators who will be the focus of another column!) Schools invite you because you are a *writer*. You are the inspiration for or the culmination of a year’s worth of lessons about The Writing Process. Remember that the journey you know best is the one that took you on the road to publication. Share it. Give tools and tips that your audience can apply in their own lives – and they’ll love you for it.

Further reading: *Presenting to Win: The Art of Telling Your Story* by Jerry Weissman. Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2006. ISBN 0-13-187510-8.

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