

# Increasing Invitations for Middle Grade and YA Writers

by Alexis O'Neill

Middle grade and YA writers sometimes complain that they don't get the volume of invitations to schools as their picture book writing colleagues.

Are you doing what's known as "glamour" or "my journey" assemblies, talking about how you became an author? This may work if you're a Newbery medalist or have an incredibly compelling and adventurous life story. But with today's busy school schedules, glamour visits aren't enough anymore.

If you want to be hired to do more presentations at middle schools and high schools, you'll need to deliver practical substance with specific connections to curriculum to make your program compelling.

## PROBLEM

Middle schools (grades 6-8) and high schools (grades 9-12) really have to *want* or *need* a novelist or nonfiction writer before they consider hiring him or her. Elementary schools want to know that a writer for older children can also address the younger grades, too. And schools have to deal with complex scheduling issues, funding challenges, and standards-aligned teaching requirements. So, how do you make your presentation a *must have* rather than just a *nice to have* program?

## SOLUTIONS

**Make curriculum connections.** George Pilling, District Library Media Supervisor in the Visalia Unified School District, California, coordinates author visits. He says, "The standards are very specific and teachers are not allowed to deviate from them. So, if an author can help work on a standard by the visit, it may be a way in."

- Many teachers welcome help in teaching

writing skills and motivating students to read, write and study.

- Research related educational standards for the grade levels you wish to reach. See <http://www.academicbenchmarks.com/search/> or check state education department and district web sites.
- Offer a program to help students overcome a particular writing problem
- If you write nonfiction, provide content and skills (i.e. how to research a topic) that reinforce the curriculum.
- In your promotional materials, specifically state the standards that your program addresses.

**Be seen.** Demonstrate your program at conferences and workshops attended by teachers and librarians. Pilling says, "Authors should present to the teachers as if they were students so that the conference-goers can really see what they do in a school. Often authors tell what they do, but showing is much more powerful."

**Offer activities.** Gear your program to active student participation rather than passive listening. For example:

- Offer a trivia sheet and activities for students to do prior to your visit
- Create writing activities to do with students during your visit.
- Engage students in Readers' Theater from one of your chapters. Provide the script in advance.

- Prepare age-appropriate visuals. Author [Joanne Rocklin](#) says, “I use a funny puppet, and all grades like it. If you say you have a shorter, younger version of what you do for the older grades in your repertoire, this vastly increases your marketability.”

**Offer residencies.** Some authors offer residencies in which students create a work over a period of time. You might visit a class or classes for a week, once a week for a month or over the course of a year. You’ll be providing content and feedback to students that complement the teachers’ goals.

**Offer virtual visits.** If a face-to-face visit is difficult, offer a virtual visit via a teleconference, speakerphone, computer chat, or a written Q &A with questions sent ahead of time.

**Offer book order help:** It takes kids time to read your novel in preparation for your visit. Consider offering the school 50 copies of your paperback when they schedule your visits and pay a deposit. You can purchase them from your publisher at cost. Many schools have little idea how to order books!

**Create a support group.** Form a “school visit” group with other middle grade and YA writers. Share presentation techniques, tips and contacts.

**Getting in.** “I get a lot of brochures that I barely glance at unless I have already heard of the author,” says George Pilling. “I hire people from recommendations and/or having seen them at a conference.” He adds, “The success of the visit depends on the librarian and the principal, and perhaps the department head, supporting it and

working to make it worthwhile.”

**Why you?** School districts may have trainers providing inservice writing workshops to teachers. But as an author, you offer something unique -- practical experience in the real world. You know about rejection -- and perseverance. You understand how to write for a specific audience. You know the importance of revising and meeting deadlines. Because of your writing skill, you have succeeded in a very competitive market.

So -- get out there, get known -- and get into the lives of your audience!

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**Alexis O’Neill, Ph.D.,** is the author of *THE RECESS QUEEN* and other award-winning books for children. She has been an elementary school teacher, a teacher of teachers, and a museum educator. She is a popular school visit presenter and helps other authors create and deliver quality programs. Visit her at [www.schoolvisitexperts.com](http://www.schoolvisitexperts.com)

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