

How Much Should I Charge?

by Alexis O'Neill

"How much do you charge?" the school visit coordinator asks.

You freeze. You think, "If I name a fee that's too high, I'll lose the invitation. If my fee is too low, they may think I don't have much to offer."

Nothing causes authors and illustrators more anxiety than putting a price on their school visits. No, wait! What causes even *higher* anxiety is when a school *expects* you to appear for *free*.

If you're suffering fee-freeze with every invitation, it's time to grow up. Begin thinking of yourself as a professional instead of a professional volunteer. Writing is a business. In the world of children's books, your income generally comes from four sources: royalties, freelance work, speaking engagements, and teaching. If you are one of the lucky 10% in the world who can live off royalties alone, you can stop reading this column now. Otherwise, listen up.

WHY CHARGE?

You are professional (probably without health benefits or a 401K). But potential hosts often believe that you:

- 1) are a missionary for reading and writing, in service to a celestial power
- 2) make enough money from the sale of your (expensive) books to buy multiple yachts, and
- 3) write as a hobby.

What hosts don't understand is that you:

- 1) need to earn a living to put bread on the table just like teachers, librarians, administrators and booksellers,
- 2) earn between 1.5% and 10% per book sold, and
- 3) worked a lifetime -- and invested lots of time and money -- to become an expert at your craft.

Bottom line: If you don't have the mindset of a professional, you will never be treated as one.

HOW DO I DETERMINE MY FEES?

Clarify your goal. What's your business plan? How much money do you want to gross in a year? How far are you willing to travel and how many days are you willing to devote to meet your goal? The answer will differ from author to author. For example, if you want to gross \$25,000 from school visits and your fee is \$1,000 a day, then you need to do 25 days within 10 months (the typical school year).

Research local markets. Ask other authors and illustrators in your geographic region what they charge. Ask what their school visit "day" consists of in terms of type (assemblies, class visits, workshops) and number of presentations. (Start online at www.scbwi.org and then check out SCBWI regional websites. Many list speakers' bureaus and individuals' fees.)

Research national markets. Publishers' sites often have an "author visit" sections. Some list speaking fees. For example: <http://teach.simonandschuster.net/Plan-an-Author-Appearance/How-To> or <http://ow.ly/23UjJ> Others link to authors' and illustrators' websites, for example: www.Scholastic.com/authorvisits

Factor-in your experience. How many books do you have published by trade book publishers? Have you received good reviews in *School Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Horn Book*, *Booklist* or other respected outlets? Have your books won any awards? Do you have any teaching background? While teaching experience isn't necessary, it can help establish credibility with hosts. So, factor that in when determining your fee.

Consider the program or service you are offering. Authors charge based on time spent (e.g., per assembly, per day or per half-day) and/or based on services rendered (e.g. student writing workshops, teacher in-service workshops, family

night events, keynotes)

WHAT ABOUT EXPENSES?

Travel, hotel and food are often expensed to the host separately. Handouts are usually reproduced by the school from your templates. However some authors charge a higher fee and cover all expenses themselves.

WHAT ARE THE RANGES IN FEES?

For “practice” presentations, the fee can range from \$0 - \$150. As you gain experience, rates can range from \$500 - \$800 and upwards to \$2500 or more. For example, in an analysis of the 2006 fees for 115 Scholastic authors and illustrators representing 21 states, the median fee was \$1100 for all regions (eastern, central and western states). Half charged this fee or more, half charged this fee or less. Some charged \$100 - \$500 above their base rate for out-of-state visits. In the current economy, many authors have kept their fees at these pre-recession rates.

SHOULD I NEGOTIATE MY FEE WITH HOSTS?

Negotiating can prove worthwhile. Authors commonly offer discounts to schools if two or more schools in the same area book on consecutive days. This also means that schools share in the cost of your transportation. Some authors are willing to visit two schools in one day for their daily rate so that each school pays half.

SHOULD I EVER DO FREEBIES?

Professionals often offer *pro bono* work for their favorite charities. How much you do is dependent on your business plan and income goals. For example, if you have a new book coming out, there is great benefit in participating in events that offer you an opportunity to sell books and make fans. Bookstore appearances, teacher and librarian conferences, author fairs, and large book fairs such as the Los Angeles Times

Festival of Books are examples of no fee/ low fee events that can kick-start book sales and advertise your availability as a speaker.

HOW DO I TURN DOWN A FREEBIE REQUEST?

Say, “I’m so sorry, but I’m not available.” Do not engage in the “whys.” Then recommend them to a local SCBWI.org speakers’ list or to someone who is new and needs experience (with that author’s approval, of course.)

WHAT IF SCHOOLS JUST DON’T HAVE THE MONEY TO HIRE ME?

People usually find ways to afford what they value. If schools are struggling -- and certainly schools without active parent groups are at a disadvantage -- there are still many ways for motivated hosts to find funding for programs that directly support and extend curriculum goals. Give this link to your hosts to get them started:

http://www.leeandlow.com/p/administrators_grants.mhtml

Other sources include local reading councils, service groups and friends of the library organizations.

Remember -- school visits are part of your business. Act professionally and you'll be paid accordingly.

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
