

Get It In Writing

by Alexis O'Neill

I'm not a lawyer. But I have to think like one when I agree to the details of a school visit. And the most important advice I can give is, "Get it in writing." So, what's the "it" that you need in writing? What form does it take? And why do you need to do this?

The "It" That You Need:

You need a written agreement for paid as well as volunteer services. This agreement clearly specifies to your host in advance: 1) the service you will provide on the day of your visit, 2) the expected compensation and terms of payment, and 3) what the host must provide to make your visit successful.

Service: In my letter of agreement, I state that I must *approve* the schedule in advance of my visit before it is published for the school staff. To me, this is *the* most important item on my list. I know from experience what works best – session length, time needed between sessions, number of kids, number of sessions, and the order in which my sessions must happen. I send a sample schedule for the school to work with. In some instances, I've had them go back to the drawing board several times before I approve the schedule. If they balk, I say, "*For maximum educational benefit to your students, I've found that this works best.*"

Compensation: You and your host will agree on your honorarium and the expenses the host will cover such as travel, food and lodging. Some hosts require that you submit receipts after the event, while others allow you to build expenses into your original invoice. Authors usually ask to be paid on the day of service. If a parent group is footing the

bill, this is likely to happen. However, if the district or county office is paying, your check can be delayed. In the latter case, ask your host for the Purchase Order (P.O.) number assigned to you as a "vendor." This number will be helpful if you have to inquire about the status of a late check. Payments can take from 15 to 60 days after the event to arrive.

Set-Up: For me, the right set-up is extremely important in order to generate the right climate. For assemblies and workshops, I not only specify what equipment I need, but how the children should be seated.

Books & Book Sales: You can request that the students be familiar with your books, but what are you going to do when you get there and they're not prepared? Walk out? It's not the kids' fault. Some authors also require that the school sell their books. This is up to you. As for me, it's not a deal breaker. No matter how you play it, if you insist on this, you will come out looking mercenary, even though most hosts haven't a clue that our per-book profit is pretty pitiful.

Cancellation Policy: Authors who have been burned by last-minute cancellations build a cancellation policy into their agreements. I've only had one cancellation, due to weather, and the host agreed to pay expenses that I had already incurred.

Forms That the "It" Takes:

Email: Most schools now contact authors through email. Email gives you a record of discussions if there's a

disagreement later.

Letter of Agreement: This is the form I use. A letter is a contract in “normal-speak” rather than “legalese.” I enclose my invoice with this letter as well as an “Author Visit Checklist” detailing specifics (including lunch and a marked parking spot!)

Formal Contract: For a good example of a formal contract, go to scbwi.org. Click on “For Our Members” and “SCBWI Publications.” Then click on “Sample Lecture Contract” under the heading “Publicizing Your Published Work.”

Why You Need This:

The more you iron out in advance, the fewer surprises will greet you – such as your host adding a session with preschoolers when you’re a novelist, not leaving time for resetting between assemblies, or having employees plop kids down and then leaving (this is illegal, by the way!) You’re the “outsider.”

You will be the fall guy for a rough day, even if it’s the host’s fault. Thus, your efforts made ahead of time to insure a smooth day increases the likelihood that your host will recommend you to other schools.

So remember -- get it in writing. But also be aware that you are on stage at all times, and your hosts will judge you by your reactions. Roll with the punches when you can – and have a great school visit!

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Click here for a sample of my [Letter of Agreement](#) and [Author Visit Checklist](#), or send an email request to info2@schoolvisitexperts.com.

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