

Watch the Clock

by Alexis O'Neill

For over fifty years, a local county office of education in California has hosted an author breakfast attended by librarians, teachers, and, of course, authors. Lots of authors. The organizers give the authors three minutes to speak on a specific topic. Because many authors have consistently blown past that timeline, this year, the organizers created a visual warning system: a yellow card for, "1-minute left," a red card for, "You're done." Yet some authors yakked on beyond the red.

Is this inconsiderate? Yes. Selfish? Yes. Time is a precious commodity. Schools and other venues have schedules they must attend to. As a presenter, the more you are sensitive to the time limits and constraints of your hosts when you speak at schools, bookstores, libraries and social groups, the more warmly they will think of you when it comes time for recommendations.

Calculate presentation time. I had a friend attend some of my assemblies. She marked down the time it took for each part of my program (basically, introduction, body and wrap-up). Later, we discussed which parts could be tightened, which could use more time. She watched faces of kids and teachers to see if there were moments where they weren't engaged in the program. If so, those were spots I tossed. If you're doing a showcase (a talk of 3 to 15 minutes), practice with a tape recorder. When you do your presentation, wear a watch – and use it!

Build a cushion. If your core assembly takes 30 minutes, tell your host that the duration is 45 minutes. Only once have I had an assembly start on the dot (the principal was a former Marine.) Most classes just begin to file into the auditorium at the "start" time, delaying the actual program from 5-to-10-minutes.

Confirm schedule with host. Confirm your schedule with your host in advance of your visit.

Find out if there is any "wiggle room" to make up lost time in case the kids arrive late. Often recess and lunch bells are non-negotiable, so be prepared to end when the schedule says to.

Plan transitional time. Moving hundreds of kids into a multipurpose room or a library (and then out) takes time. Build these transitions into your schedule. I usually plan for 10 minutes between assemblies.

Assign a timekeeper. Have the timekeeper (your host, librarian or teachers) give you an agreed-upon warning signal at 10-minutes and 5-minutes before the end of your presentation. Give them permission to stop you when your time is up.

Never lay a guilt trip. It's tempting to tell an audience who arrives late that they won't get your full program as a result. It's tempting to say, "If I had more time, I would've _____" Never reference time or what's missing to your audience. They will feel rushed or cheated. Understand that life is not a precision Swiss watch. Expect delays and plan for them. Decide in advance what you will eliminate if things get behind. If you need to cut something out, just do it without referring to it.

Remember, when you get on a presentation roll, it's easy to lose track of time. Be aware of when you start and when you are supposed to end. It's better to leave your audience wanting more than to have them wishing for a hook to pull you off the stage!

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
