

Great Beginnings

by Alexis O'Neill

Bongo drums in hand, [Matthew Gollub](#) walks to the front of the school's multipurpose room and sits in a chair. He puts the drums between his legs and hits them: *Thump*. He raises his hands and gestures to the kids, wordlessly inviting them to repeat his rhythm. They do. He does another pattern. *Thump, thump*. They repeat it. As his patterns become more and more complex, the kids work to keep up. The last pattern is wildly impossible to follow. The kids laugh, and Matthew begins his program on reading, writing and rhythm.

Engaging presenters, like Matthew, know how to grab an audience's attention right from the start. There are many variations of openings that work well, depending on the age of your audience. Try some out -- and then find ones that suit you and your audiences best. Here are some examples:

Activity

Singing or chanting engages kids quickly. Author [Carmen T. Bernier-Grand](#), who grew up in Puerto Rico, sings "*Hola, hola cómo te llamas?*" inviting kids to clap. [April Pulley Sayre](#), author of *Trout, Trout, Trout*, brings the house down with her high speed, rhythmic fish chant. [Erin Dealey](#) begins by teaching kids, "Erin's Reading Song" and has them sing it to wrap up the assembly.

Visuals:

Kids' eyes go to a movie screen like a moth to a porch light, so it's a great way to focus attention. Nonfiction author [Heather L. Montgomery](#) has a "teaser" PowerPoint show running as the kids file into the auditorium, showing bugs in battle and other eye-catching nature photos to spur questions. [Wendie Old](#), author of *To Fly: The Story of the Wright Brothers*, has a video of Orville and Wilbur playing as the kids take their seats.

Others use still images. [Rick Walton](#) leads kids in a lively group reading of one of his books while he shows page images on the screen. [April Halprin Wayland](#) shows photos of a roller coaster, likening the ride to writing. Poet [Betsy Franco](#) gets a big, "Awwww" with her opening photo of her kitty Frida, making a personal connection with kids right away.

Style

Wearing special outfits can offer an immediate, "What's going on?" moment for kids. [Verla Kay](#), author of historical fiction picture books, wears a colonial dress and bonnet to help bring history alive. To complement her railroad book, *Jingle the Brass*, [Patricia Newman](#) dresses like an

engineer and asks, "Has anyone been on a train?" [Gretchen Woelfle](#) dons many old-fashioned hats to "become" the subject of her book, *Jeannette Rankin: Political Pioneer*. [Susan Blackaby's](#) secret to making a personal connection is wearing very sparkly, cool shoes that kids love to talk about.

Talk:

If doing activities, showing visuals or wearing costumes is uncomfortable for you, there are a variety of ways to capture attention through talk alone.

When poet [Janet Wong](#) begins by quickly introducing each of her 20 books, she is actually assessing from the reaction which books her audience knows best and adjusts her presentation accordingly. When leading assemblies for older audiences, [Anastasia Suen](#) asks a compelling question: "Who would like to get a higher grade on their next report?" then shows them how. [Lee Wardlaw](#), author of *101 Ways to Bug Your Teacher* opens with, "How many of you have ever accidentally bugged your teacher?"

Using humor, [Dandi Daley Mackall](#) gathers kids' funny comments about life and shares them. [Kay Winters](#) begins and ends with her original poem about "story magic." With older audiences, [Susanne Gervays](#) opens by telling either a funny or emotional story. Being real is crucial. "You will never really reach them if they feel you're dishonest," she says.

When faced with a disinterested group of high schoolers, nonfiction author [April Pulley Sayre](#) surprised the group when she began listing things she knows about -- rain forests, science, writing. Then she asked, "So, what do you want to know?" After she answered several impertinent questions without flinching, the group decided she was okay. They became totally tuned in.

So, get your audiences to tune in, too! Take time to craft attention-getting openings and all eyes and ears will be with you.

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
