

Tips for Nonfiction Book Presenters

by Alexis O'Neill

[Sneed Collard III](#) once pointed out that schools often view nonfiction “as an aberration or specialty, to be featured as something different from their usual fiction fare.”

[Marsha Skrypuch](#) of Authors Booking Service in Ontario, Canada concurs.

<http://www.authorsbooking.com>

“We find that fiction writers are far more likely to be asked to do school and library visits [than nonfiction writers]. Even award-winning and high-profile non-fiction writers have a tough go of it.”

At every grade level in school, kids are required to write reports, letters, book reviews, opinion essays – all works of nonfiction. Like students, nonfiction writers research facts, check them, and synthesize them. They also have to find the “hook” and “story” among those facts to have readers identify with their content. They must be masterful storytellers of the truth.

Even so, it's challenging to turn public perception around. The last nonfiction book to win the Newbery Medal was in 1988 (Russell Freedman's *Lincoln: A Photobiography*) -- yet one of the “hot topics” cited in the International Reading Association's newsletter, *Reading Today*, in 2009 was “informational /nonfiction texts.” Hopefully [April Pulley Sayre](#) is right when she says, “Administrators are also starting to recognize that nonfiction writing is the key to student achievement.”

So how can nonfiction writers tap into this need and garner more school visits? Here are some insights from teachers & librarians, parents, kids and authors.

PROGRAM:

[Chris Crowe](#) reports that 95% of the time,

schools are more interested in the content of his books than they are in the writing process.

[Brandon Marie Miller](#) says that her history talks are chosen 70% of the time.

While content can attract schools to a specific author, authors like [Joanne Mattern](#) make a point of comparing what they do as writers to the reports kids have to do in school.

Most authors spend 30 – 50 % of their program time sharing their writing process.

WHAT TEACHERS & LIBRARIANS WANT

With the Internet-era of cut-and-paste, teachers struggle to get kids to understand what plagiarism is and why it's important not to plagiarize.

Teachers also want students to know how to:

- avoid plagiarism
- do research
- take notes
- construct a bibliography
- paraphrase
- distinguish a reliable source of information from an unreliable one

Teachers would love for visiting authors to reinforce these and other standards-based skills that are being taught in the classroom.

WHAT PARENTS WANT

Parents wish nonfiction authors would check with grade level teachers ahead of time to find out what class projects the kids might be working on, and then demonstrate research and writing strategies. A big frustration for parents is helping kids to organize or outline their material.

Perhaps authors could show their process for doing this.

WHAT KIDS WANT

Kids love to be actively involved in presentations. [Melissa Stewart](#) has primary grades act out a butterfly life-cycle and older grades do Readers' Theater based on her books.

[Amy Hansen](#) has kids do the "Dinosaur Stomp" shaking stones in jars with lettuce to show the digestive process.

[Jan Thornhill](#) brings a "museum-in-a-bag."

Kids love content with the "that's so cool factor," says [Katy Duffield](#).

[Marsha Skrypuch](#) states that any nonfiction writer whom she books through her agency must "do something memorable . . . that engages and involves kids. Kids need to touch stuff."

WHAT AUTHORS WANT

Biographer [Jeri Chase Ferris](#) wants kids to "be much more sensitive to injustice and unfairness [and] see that they too can succeed despite hardships."

[Caroline Arnold](#) loves it when kids "rush back to the classroom and start working on their own stories and reports."

[Tanya Lee Stone](#) is invigorated when she sees kids getting that "A-ha!" moment during her presentations.

[Wendie Old](#) wants kids to learn "there are REAL people behind those subject books called nonfiction."

In general, nonfiction authors want to get kids excited about finding out about the world around them.

While it's terrific to have these overarching goals, don't forget to leverage the knowledge and power that you have as a nonfiction writer. Create interactive, kid-friendly presentations. Offer not only subject content, but also practical writing advice that students and teachers can apply immediately in the classroom.

Entertain, involve, inform. Do this, and you'll become the darling of the school visit circuit.

[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
