

# GUIDE TO VIRTUAL AUTHOR VISITS



From time to time authors may be asked to conduct a school visit or other 'appearance' remotely, usually via Skype, Zoom, FaceTime or Google Hangouts. Before you agree to a some 'author time', it's worth bearing the following in mind.

## WHAT KIND OF VISIT?

Virtual visits (VV) can be used as an alternative offer for schools which are remote, overseas or have time or funding issues. Whilst they are convenient and enable environmentally conscious authors to engage with overseas readers, they are not comparable to an actual physical appearance, and will not offer pupils the same inspiration and engagement. Bookings tend to be one-offs and to a single school, but it is possible to arrange a linked broadcast with other schools, so you could expect audiences from 10 to 300.

Most authors offer short 15-30-minute interactive sessions for small group work of 10-30 pupils or up to an hour for larger audiences. This approach engages pupils, whereas lengthy readings or talks can lead to fidgeting. Most authors agree that the most satisfactory visits are those where pupils have read their title(s) in advance and have prepared questions. Author complaints around visits tend to be around unnecessary complicated preparations, so be clear as to what you need and make preparations as easy as possible.

When setting up the visit you may like to consider the following:

### Preparatory arrangements

- Consider setting up a page on your website with details of what you offer schools on a virtual visit. This is particularly important for schools that may be new to virtual visits. You may like to post your diary online with links to buy a virtual visit slot via PayPal. You may want to only offer visits on a particular day once a month; and if you do free visits, only one per school. If you are not comfortable making your diary available ask for two dates and time slots along with full contact details of the teacher who will be coordinating the visit and will be present during the session.
- Set out your payment terms, cancellation policy and what platform you are comfortable with (Skype, Zoom etc). Consider posting a request/booking form with 'required fields' as this will save you a lot of time chasing up details by email. You can see a good example on Jonathan Emmet's [virtual visits page](#).
- Take into account the time difference with international bookings - 3am might sound workable far in advance, but can be gruelling on the day.
- Specify which key stages and ages you are comfortable addressing and what titles the children have read. Insist (particularly if you offer a free or subsidised visit) that the children have read the books and your books are available to borrow and read after the session.
- Specify or agree a format (a good example can be found on [Chris Bradford's website](#)) Ask what topics the teachers are currently working on and whether there are any themes you should be aware of. If the school has read the book this frees you up for a Q&A rather than a lecture. Be aware that this platform does not work well with call-

and-response type of assemblies. Visuals might be too low resolution or fractured to select volunteers or to deal with multiple responses.

- Identify the full nature and size of the audience. What sort of venue will the children be in (hall or classroom) and will the video be projected, or are pupils going to crowd around a laptop? As with in-school visits, it is worth knowing if any pupil has any special needs that you should be aware of.
- Make sure that the school understands that you need to see and hear the pupils. Ideally, ambient noise should be kept to a minimum (no shouting out questions en masse) and a microphone used.
- Clarify whether books are to be sold around the visit. Send posters, book lists and order forms in advance. You may wish to offer a discount for bulk-buys.
- Collect your caller's details and add them to your contacts list.
- Send additional materials (worksheets, quizzes etc) so they arrive in time for your appearance.

### On the day

- Check the camera and sound at your end before the start and what can be seen in the background. Tidy and remove any personal items. Most authors put a bookshelf behind them and arrange their books or merchandising (plush characters, etc) so that they are front-facing.
- Check the connection in the room well in advance so there is time to resolve any glitches. Insist that this is done when children are not present, so they do not lose the novelty of the visit. If you Skype/Facetime regularly and are confident that your own set-up works correctly, you may not wish to make test calls as they can be very time consuming. With inexperienced schools, ask them to test out the set-up they will be using (including any external microphones and speakers) with another third-party user ahead of the session.
- Remind the teacher of the format and your requirements.
- Agree who's going to ask the question (pupil(s) or teacher?) and ascertain how near or far they have to be to the microphone to be heard.
- Have some props on hand – if you have been enlarged across the classroom wall and are talking to primary children it can be fun to make things 'appear' on the screen.

**“Tip: If children have bought books, authors can post signed stickers – this will encourage children and the school to buy books even if it’s a virtual visit.”**

*Chitra Soundar*

## FEE

The majority of UK schools will contact authors expecting a free talk, but payment is common overseas, particularly in America where VVs are more established. Authors should not be shy of charging – these talks make the same use of your professional time and reputation, and include the same high expectation of performance. Assuming the session is conducted from your home, you are saved the time spent travelling and the host *is* saved accommodation and travel expenses; but you will still have to prepare for the visit and spend more time in administration – arranging the booking and testing connections in advance.

In a 2019 survey of Society of Author's Children's Writers and Illustrator Group (CWIG) members quoted charging 50-100% of the rate for a single physical appearance in a school, commonly quoted as being £150. See also our 2013 [Authors Fees Advice for School and Library Visits](#).

- 10-15 minutes – 'Free' charitable sessions consisting of a short reading and Q&A. Some authors charged an administration fee of £20-25.
- 20 minutes – £50
- 30 minutes – £50-90
- 60 minutes – £75-90-150-180

Authors who had previously given free visits said that they had begun to charge, as schools tended to be more committed and respectful of arrangements if a fee was in place.

## RIGHTS

Most visits are live-streamed and not recorded, but it is sensible to clarify what use the host (or you) can make of the material. For example:

- Stipulate that the event may not be recorded other than by mutual agreement. If the event is recorded for future use the audience should be notified and their/or their parents' consent gained in advance (there may be privacy and safe-guarding issues).
- Where the event is recorded, clarify terms based on the following – amend as appropriate:
  - (i) all rights in his/her contribution remain with the author, which will not be edited
  - (ii) the author's moral rights will be asserted
  - (iii) a digital copy will be provided to the author
  - (iv) the recording is for [school] use only, and may not be publicly broadcast, put up on YouTube or otherwise disseminated without consent

**“For free visits, it usually takes around five minutes at the beginning to sort everyone’s viewing positions out and make sure the sound is okay, then I’ll read for about 10 minutes and there are 5 minutes of questions at the end.”**

*Lou Treleaven*

the host may make [in-house use for non-commercial educational purposes] for a fixed period of [to be agreed].

or

the host can buy an annual licence for continued use of the recording [for non-commercial in-house educational use] only.

## DIRECTORIES AND RESOURCES

[www.virtualauthors.co.uk](http://www.virtualauthors.co.uk)

A UK site hosted by author Jonathan Emmett which carries a free database of authors. '10 Top Tips for Great Virtual Author Visits' may be particularly useful to authors new to virtual visits: <https://virtualauthors.co.uk/tips.html>

[www.skypeanauthor.wikifoundry.com](http://www.skypeanauthor.wikifoundry.com)

A US site for US teachers and librarians of K-12 students with a free listing service for authors.

<http://www.katemessner.com/authors-who-skype-with-classes-book-clubs-for-free/>

A US site featuring a free listing service for authors (picture-book to YA) who offer the occasional short free visit.

<https://education.microsoft.com/skype-in-the-classroom/overview>

Inspiration for Skype talks.

[www.candygourlay.com/2015/09/a-comic-on-how-to-skype-author.html](http://www.candygourlay.com/2015/09/a-comic-on-how-to-skype-author.html)

Useful comic for schools on Do's and Don'ts.

[www.candygourlay.com/2014/12/how-to-do-virtual-author-visit-using.html](http://www.candygourlay.com/2014/12/how-to-do-virtual-author-visit-using.html)

Blog by Candy Gourlay on using Google Hangout.

<http://www.chrisbradford.co.uk/virtualvisits>

Clear and informative framework on how Chris Bradford sells and handles his virtual offer.

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