

The Anatomy of a Successful Author Visit

Patricia J. Murphy
Children's Book Author

Elizabeth Goldsmith-Conley
Illinois Reading Council

Debra L. Newell
*Thomas Paine Elementary
Urbana, Illinois*

Dear Patricia,

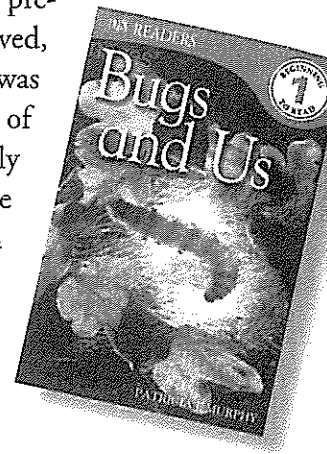
Thank you for taking the time to visit our school and our children. They enjoyed meeting the "real deal," and connecting with you on a personal level. My class is a 3rd grade class, and we chose to create our own bug book using yours as an example.

The children enjoyed finding information, making captions and illustrating. Your book was so full of details that they enjoyed the investigation. They loved the illustrations, which often generated many interesting discussions about a particular insect.

We enjoyed this so much.

*Sincerely,
Mrs. Mary Mann
3rd grade teacher
Thomas Paine Elementary*

Planning an author's visit to your school? To celebrate the first year of *Illinois Reads*, the Illini Reading Council arranged to have author Patricia J. Murphy visit three schools and give an evening presentation at a Barnes and Noble bookstore on November 21, Family Reading Day. *Bugs and Us* (2012), one of her many books, is an *Illinois Reads* 2013 title. While all four presentations were well-received, her visit to one school was the uncontested highlight of the day and will definitely serve as a template for the Illini Reading Council in future years. What made this particular visit so successful? To answer this question, each of us will share an account



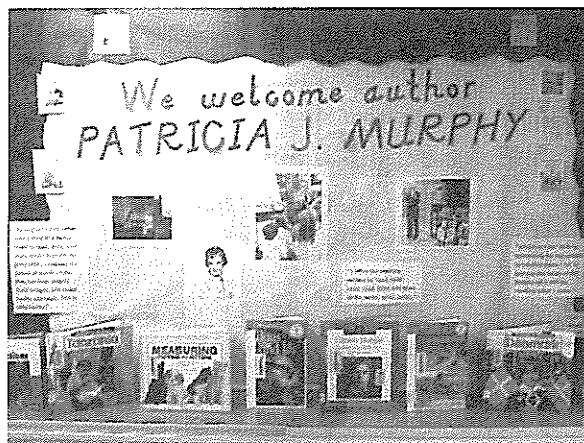
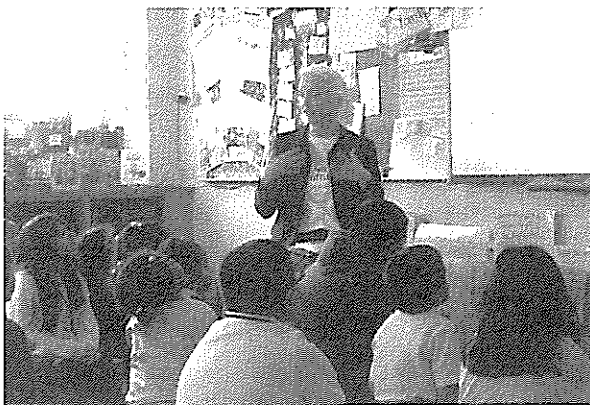
from our own vantage point, first from the perspective of the author, Patricia; then from that of Elizabeth, the Illini Reading Council's organizer of the visit; and, finally, from Debra, the school librarian.

The Author's Perspective (Patricia)

I have had the honor of speaking to thousands of schoolchildren in the last six years since I began developing and offering author visits. While I can control what I bring to the table—a polished presentation that engages, inspires, and motivates readers and writers—other factors are beyond my control. Fortunately, there are often-times many people (e.g., the librarian, media center director, principal, representatives of the parent teacher association) involved in making sure that my author visits run smoothly so that our mutually agreed upon exit outcomes will not only meet, but also exceed, everyone's expectations. I refer to these individuals as my Advance Author Visit Team. My young audiences deserve my best, and our collective best, for as children's poet Walter de la Mare once said, "Only the very rarest kind of best in anything can be

good enough for the young!” Working collaboratively with members of the Advance Author Visit Team certainly helps to ensure a successful experience for all. I meet and/or speak with the members of my Advance Author Visit Team on several occasions. I find out what they liked and did not like about past author visits, and what their hopes are for future ones—namely mine.

Recently, I had one of the “rarest kind of best” author visit experiences at Thomas Paine Elementary School in Urbana, Illinois. From the moment I entered the school building, I could feel a buzz in the air that an author—a real author—was visiting Thomas Paine Elementary that day. “Wait,” I thought, “that’s me—how lucky can I be?” That was only the beginning of my good fortune—and theirs. The buzz continued as classes of Kindergarten through 5th-grade students filed into the school gymnasium. The students came prepared on a variety of levels. They knew how to sit still and listen attentively to my presentation; showed impeccable manners; participated when called upon; and asked some of the most relevant, thoughtful, and interesting questions (e.g., “What do you do when you run out of ideas?” and “How do you feel when you’re writing?”) I have been asked at an author’s visit—EVER! From where I stood, the students seemed truly interested and invested in hearing what I had to say, and they knew about and/or had read some of my books. Their sparkly eyes and bright smiles were telling signs that I was doing my job, they were doing theirs . . . and we had made a REAL author-reader connection.



After my presentation, I had the pleasure of touring the school’s library and the hallways where I saw the behind-the-scenes preparation for my visit: a plethora of reading and writing celebrations of my *Illinois Reads* selected *Bugs and Us* book and the true source of the buzz that I’d felt all day. From students in all grades, Kindergarten through 5th, I saw class books, insect reports, art pieces, pictures, and poetry. Their teachers, their librarian (Debra Newell), and the organizer of the school visit and bookstore event (Elizabeth Goldsmith-Conley) had tirelessly, meticulously, and successfully prepared the Thomas Paine students to ensure all of the above transpired. I felt a world-famous author plus rock star all rolled into one!

Thanks, Debra and Elizabeth!!! And now, I happily pass my Thomas Paine Elementary School “author visit baton” to Newell and Conley for their views to help those charged with setting up author visits to create their “rarest kind of best.” After all, Illinois children deserve nothing less.

The Illini Reading Council’s Author Visit Organizer’s Perspective (Elizabeth)

As organizer of this event, my two major concerns were choosing which book and author our council would want to feature and selecting the schools that would be visited. *Bugs and Us* by Patricia J. Murphy seemed a great choice as it could easily be integrated into any school’s curriculum at a variety of grade levels.

Its subject matter, bugs, deals with a topic covered in the fall by the 2nd grade. The book also makes a perfect mentor text for any grade level that is focused either on informational writing or strategies for reading informational text, a particular focus of the Common Core State Standards. *Bugs and Us* demonstrates several informational text features, including a table of contents, glossary, beautifully photographed examples of bugs, and clear captions. It is a model of well-organized and well-written text, and a fine example of an author's effective use of various literary devices. Its snappy "Buzz. Buzz. Swat, swat! Splat, splat. Scratch, scratch!" opening followed by the question, "Who needs bugs?" grabs the reader's attention right from the first page. The body consists of a catalogue of carefully planned and developed examples, and its ending neatly answers the initial question and returns to its alliterative opening. Moreover, it is available as a low-priced paperback, which enabled our Council to provide each school with multiple copies in advance of Patricia's visit.

Contacting the Author

The book seemed to be a great choice, but what sort of presenter was the author and how open was she to making three school visits plus an evening presentation in one day? A visit to her website, www.patriciajmurphy.com, and a series of e-mails and phone calls answered my questions. Her website indicated that she was an experienced presenter and included a number of glowing testimonials and specific references that could easily be checked. Multiple e-mails and phone calls assured me that Patricia was enthusiastic about such a visit, bubbling with ideas, and meticulous in her preparation. We arranged a contract and agreed that the specific schools would be added at a later date.

Choosing the Schools

It was now time to determine which schools our author would visit. We thought that choosing our two biggest local public school districts would allow us provide enrichment for a greater number of students lacking in such experiences and would introduce more teachers to the work of the Illini Reading Council and to our parent organization, the Illinois Reading Council. Each district, however, contained more schools than our author could visit, so we were faced with the problem of selecting specific schools. We consulted each district's administrative offices. One office referred us to their district literacy coordinator who decided to have our author visit the two schools with the most needy populations. The other school district referred us to Debra Newell, a school librarian, who served as the district's liaison with the other schools' librarians. She contacted the other schools, explaining that we would select the school whose teachers showed the most interest in an author's visit by their willingness to plan projects around one of the author's books. As it turned out, the teachers at Debra's school showed the most enthusiasm and openness to involving their students in relevant activities. This was probably not surprising as Debra had a great deal of experience in setting up author visits and was convinced of their value. Consequently, as her own account will show, she played a key role in helping her teachers and their students prepare for the visit. The classroom set of *Bugs and Us* (30 copies) that we sent to her school six weeks before the event played a key role in their preparations.

The ingredients for a truly successful author's visit were being assembled: a text which easily fit the curriculum; an enthusiastic, meticulous, and experienced author-presenter; a key school staff member who was committed to the project; and a sufficient number of texts sent to the school far enough in advance to allow teachers and students to examine them.

The School Librarian's Perspective (Debra)

Through conversations with Elizabeth, the Illini Reading Council's representative, I learned that Patricia would be coming to Champaign-Urbana to visit local schools. When the Council chose our school to be visited by author Patricia J. Murphy, it was an exciting time for our students and staff. The Illini Reading Council generously provided our district with a class set of her book, *Bugs and Us*, before the visit. I presented it to our faculty, distributed the author's biographical material, showed her other books that were already in our library collection, and asked the teachers' cooperation in providing activities and projects to showcase the book. They did not disappoint! The teachers implemented many creative activities, all of which provided their students with an opportunity to highlight what they had learned from this well-crafted nonfiction book.

I coordinated the distribution of the books to the interested classes and kept to a schedule so the books could be rotated in a systematic manner. The book was a perfect fit for all our classes. It fit directly into the science curriculum of our Kindergarten classes (living things), our 1st-grade classes (insects), and our 2nd-grade classes (animal kingdom groups). The most appealing thing about the book, however, was that every grade level could effectively use the book because it includes wonderful examples of text features that students can use in their practice of gleaning information from nonfiction books. This is an important skill that is included within the CCSS.

The classes produced a variety of artifacts that were then showcased in our school hallways and display cases for all to enjoy. A Kindergarten class focused on the information in the book about bees, and each student chose a fact to write and illustrate. Students in a 2nd-grade class chose an insect and wrote and illustrated cinquain poems using facts from the book. The 3rd-grade classes created Bug Books and used

Patricia's book as a resource for accumulating the facts they included. One 4th-grade class wrote their own stories about some of the bugs in the book, and the students in the other 4th-grade class took photographs of bugs they collected on our school playground and prairie area and then wrote about them. A special education class made paper mache models of the bugs they read about. Since Patricia could only speak to groups of 150 students, these classes were the ones that were invited to her presentation.

To ensure all students would be prepared for Patricia's visit, during my library lessons, I read the humorous book, *Author Day for Room 3T*, by Robin Pulver and engaged the students in a discussion about authors and what we could do to make Patricia's visit to Thomas Paine successful. I presented biographical material about Patricia and posted a copy of that information in a hallway display case along with the header, "Look Who's Coming to Our School!" I also showed the students other books she had written. We discussed what makes a good audience and how crucial it would be for them to use their good listening skills. Most importantly, we discussed the kinds of questions one might ask of an author. I made sure we practiced so the question-and-answer portion of her visit would be most productive, and to encourage students to think about higher-level questions that would allow us to gain insight into Patricia's writing craft.

Pre-planning for an author visit is crucial. Our students knew about Patricia's life and the many books she has written. In their classrooms, they did an in-depth study of her book, *Bugs and Us*, to appreciate her writing, the information she presented, and the effective format of this nonfiction book. They extended their learning by using the book as a resource to create products that showed the knowledge they had gained and, through displays and hall exhibits, shared that knowledge with our whole school population. Because the students were prepared and had practiced, the questions

they asked Patricia were thought-provoking and elicited responses that really helped them understand how a writer works and how they could improve their own writing. By laying the groundwork beforehand, our school visit with Patricia J. Murphy was successful indeed and this experience will have a great impact on our students for years to come.

Conclusion

The common theme that emerges from these three accounts is the importance of commitment, coordination, and preparation. Each of us appreciated the value of having an actual author visit a school and understood what an inspiration and catalyst such an event could be for both students and teachers. Consequently, we were committed to putting in the effort needed to make the visit a success. Choosing a book like *Bugs and Us* that is in such clear alignment with the curriculum gave us a common purpose and common language. Thus, Patricia could plan a presentation, and Debra and the Thomas Paine teachers could design activities that were well-coordinated and mutually supportive. In addition to sharing this commitment and common purpose, we understood the importance of preparation. The key to the success of the visit was all of the work done beforehand by Patricia and what she has called the Advance Author Visit Team. In setting the date and sending a set of books well in advance of the event, Elizabeth gave Debra and the teachers the time they needed to ready their students and create the receptive audience whose “sparkling eyes and bright smiles” Patricia noted.

Advice about planning an author’s visit, as you will see by the list of resources offered in Appendix A, is generally presented from a single viewpoint. We decided, however, that describing the visit from each of our viewpoints would be more comprehensive, informative, and interesting. In addition to the insights we have shared about commitment, coordination, and

preparation, we hope our three accounts have provided you with plenty of ideas for making your own author visit a smashing success!

Children’s Book Cited

Murphy, P. J. (2012). *Bugs and us* [Leveled Readers]. New York: Penguin/DK.

Appendix A. Additional Resources for Tips on Planning an Author’s Visit

Author’s View

CAN! (Children’s Authors Network), *Author Visit Guide*
www.childreauthorsnetwork.com/hostinganauthor.html

Dan Gutman, *The Perfect Author Visit*
www.dangutman.com/pages/planvisits.html

Steve Layne, *How to Host a Successful Author’s Visit*
www.stevelayne.com/webdata/resources/Handouts/How_to_Host_a_Successful_Author_Visit.pdf

Librarian’s View

American Library Association, Association for Library Service to Children, *Tips from the Maureen Hayes Award Selection Committee on Planning an Author or Illustrator Appearance*
www.ala.org/alsclawardsgrants/profawards/hayesaward/tipsforvisitplanning

Cooperative Children’s Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison, *Tips on Hosting an Author/Illustrator Visit*
<http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/authors/tips.asp>

Publisher’s View

Scholastic, *Get Started: Planning, Fundraising, & Tips*
www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/get-started-planning-fundraising-tips-success

Simon & Schuster, *How to Plan an Author’s Visit*
<http://teach.simonandschuster.net/Plan-an-Author-Appearance/How-To>

Finding an Illinois Author

The Society for Children’s Book Authors and Illustrators
Illinois Speakers Directory
www.scbwi-illinois.org/Speakers.html

About the Authors

Patricia J. Murphy is an award-winning children's writer/author and poet as well as the founder/chief creative director of Pattycake Productions. Murphy is the author of over 150 children's books (e.g., board books, early readers, picture books, creative nonfiction, chapter books, and middle grade novels), poems, magazine articles, and a growing list of scripts for children's television. In addition to writing full-time, she happily visits schools, libraries, and museums and offers a variety of writing workshops to inspire and motivate young readers and writers. To learn more about her, visit www.patriciamurphy.com.

Elizabeth Goldsmith-Conley is past president of the Illini Reading Council and chair of the Studies and Research Committee of the Illinois Reading Council. She holds a Ph.D. in Educational Policy Studies from the University of Illinois and has taught at all levels from preK through graduate school. She can be reached at elizgc@aol.com.

Debra L. Newell has served as the librarian at Thomas Paine, a K-5 elementary school in Urbana, for over 20 years. She is also district librarian for Urbana School District #116. She may be reached at dnewell@usd116.org.