

The Virtual Author Visit With Bruce Hale



It's an idea whose time has come: conducting author visits on-line. Of course, nothing can replace meeting face-to-face, but if your state has been as hard-hit as mine, school budget dollars are pretty tight right now.

So why not try a Virtual Author Visit? If planned as carefully as an author visit is usually planned, this can be a very effective way to give your students the benefits of a conventional author visit — improved motivation for reading and writing, a personal connection with the author, etc. — at a fraction of the cost.

Thanks to a webcam and some free software, your students will be able to virtually meet and talk with me, ask questions, and learn about my books and the writing life.

Of course, this visit will still require planning and preparation on the part of each class involved. Ideally, all the students should have read at least one of my books, and kids would need to plan the questions they'd want to ask me, to make best use of our time together.

Still with me? Let's start by answering some of the more common questions you might have.

What equipment do I need for the virtual visit?

- Skype software installed on your computer*
- A computer connected with the Internet (preferably via high-speed modem)
- Web camera and microphone

If you've got the technical know-how, it would also be nice to project the computer's video display onto a large screen with a data projector. This will enable more students to participate in the session.

** Note: If you have a Mac computer, we can conduct the visit via iChat, so you won't need Skype.*

Do I use my phone line for this visit?

Not at all. The Virtual Author Visit is conducted entirely on-line, via your computer's Internet connection. Using Skype, we can videoconference without tying up the school's phone line.

What is this Skype you speak of?

Skype is a free, downloadable software you can install on your school computer. With Skype, we can hold a free videoconference over the Web. That's right, free. Unlike a long-distance phone call, Skype-to-Skype calls carry no toll charges.

Where do I get Skype?

Here's the link:

<http://www.skype.com/>

Just click on the DOWNLOAD icon and choose the appropriate version (Mac or PC) for your operating system. Simple as that.

How do I set up Skype?

Install the software on your computer, following the Installer prompts. This will walk you through setting up your account, including your Skype Name. (You'll later need to give me this name, so that I can call you.)

Once the software is installed, make sure to check PREFERENCES (under the Skype pull-down menu) to ensure that your correct video input/output and audio input/output have been selected. If you have an external webcam plugged into your USB port, you should select the "Unknown USB Audio Device" for audio input, and the "USB Video Device" for camera.

What's your Skype contact information?

My Skype Name is:

bruce_hale

(And be sure to type it all lower case, with one underline between words, no spaces.)

To add me to your list of contacts, go to the Contacts menu and choose Add a Contact. When the pop-up menu appears, type my Skype Name into the appropriate space under "Add a Skype Contact," and hit the ENTER key.

How do I use a web camera?

I'm no technical whiz, but I bought a simple Logitech camera with built-in microphone that clips onto my computer screen and plugs into the USB port of my computer. It's as simple as that. You can use any web camera that's compatible with your computer, and some computers come with a webcam already built in.

No extra software is needed. As long as you've selected your audio and video inputs and outputs in Skype Preferences, you're good to go.

How can I be sure this will work?

I will test the transmission with you the school day before the visit, so that we can make sure the set-up works properly. We can talk by phone as we're setting up, to walk you through it and make sure that everything is smooth.

On the day of the visit, I'll call a little bit early, to ensure that the connection works.

What happens if we have trouble connecting?

Sometimes, no matter how well we prepare, technical gremlins rear their ugly little heads. If that happens, I will reschedule my Virtual Author Visit for another time, preferably within a week of the attempted visit.

No matter what, you *will* get the visit you pay for.

BEFORE THE VISIT...

Preparation is the key to a Virtual Author Visit that gets kids fired up about books and reading. Here's what you can do to ensure a successful experience:

1. Read at least one of my books to the kids who will be participating. This is crucial to their having a satisfying experience. If they don't know the books, they won't care about virtually meeting the author.

If they can read or be exposed to more than one of my books, so much the better.

2. Have the students visit my website, www.brucehale.com On the site, they'll find some fun handouts (on the Chet Gecko page), information on my life and books, and directions on how to write a story (under Fun Stuff).

Encourage the kids to try their hand at drawing Chet Gecko (from the how-to handout), or use the activities on the Chet Gecko Teachers Guide, downloadable at:

<http://www.brucehale.com/visitp1.htm>

3. Help the students come up with questions they'd like to ask me. You may need to guide them to devise questions about the writing process, rather than "How much money do you make?" and "How old are you?"

If you can send me some of the questions in advance, that will help me tailor my presentation to the needs of the group.

4. Pre-select the kids who will ask me a question during the visit — at least a dozen students. I'll answer more questions if we have time for it, but a dozen is good to start with.

5. If you have the time and energy, go for the gold! Try one of or more of these student engagement activities:

- **Illustrated metaphors** — ask each student to pick his or her favorite Chet Gecko simile or metaphor ("as full of poison as a cobra's toothbrush," "shorter than an ant's suspenders," etc.) and illustrate it.

- **Joke contest** — The Chet Gecko books are full of old (often bad) jokes. Encourage the kids to write down their own favorite joke on a bookmark. For inspiration, check out Natalie Attired's Bad Joke Page at:

<http://brucehale.com/natjoke.htm>

- **Design a villain** — The Chet Gecko and Underwhere books are packed with colorful villains. Encourage the kids to create a WANTED poster for their own villain, based on the classic FBI wanted posters, with short descriptions and a drawing.

ORDERING BOOKS:

An author visit represents an excellent opportunity to get kids excited about reading. And the best way to take positive advantage of that excitement is to provide autographed books for the students while they're still fired up — on the day of the event.

You can obtain the books from your nearby bookstore, or order directly from the publishers. Ideally, the books should be ordered at least two weeks before the visit to ensure that they'll be on-hand that day.

You'll find a downloadable list of my books on the Virtual Author Visit page of my website after Sept. 15 at:

<http://www.brucehale.com/virtual.htm>

Chet Gecko books and Snoring Beauty:

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 1-800-543-1918 (ask for the author visit discount)

Underwhere graphic novel series:

HarperCollins 1-800-242-7737 (ask for the author visit discount)

Moki the Gecko picture books:

Words + Pictures 1-805-563-7337 (ask for the author visit discount)

If given enough advance notice, I can send sheets of autographed stickers that kids can paste into their books.

Here's the best way to handle book orders:

1. Read the books to the kids;
2. At least 4 weeks before the virtual visit, pass out order forms for students to take home;
3. Collect the order forms and money;
4. At least 2 1/2 weeks before the visit, place the book orders with either your local bookstore or the books' publishers;
5. At the same time, send me a count of total books ordered, so I'll know how many autograph stickers to sign.

I've prepared a sample book order form, which you can download from my website after Sept. 15 at:

<http://www.brucehale.com/virtual.htm>

THE VIRTUAL VISIT

Format:

I'll start by doing a presentation of about 10-15 minutes, talking about my life and how I went from being a reluctant reader to a well-published author. Then we'll take a break for 2-3 questions. After that, I'll do a storytelling from one of my books. The bulk of the questions will come after the storytelling. To wrap up, I'll have some concluding remarks. If time permits, I may even do a cartooning demonstration.

When it's time for the kids to ask their questions, be sure they stand close enough to the mike and camera so that I can see and hear them clearly.

Group size:

The number of students is limited only by their ability to see the screen. In general, I believe that Virtual Author Visits will be more effective for single grade levels or groups of up to 150. But if you've got a bigger group, I'm willing to experiment if you are!

Length and Grade Levels:

50 minutes for Grades 2-6
30 minutes for Grades K-1

Cost:

Normally, it costs \$2,000 when I visit schools outside my home state of California. However, the Virtual Author Visit costs only a fraction of that:

\$250 for one session
\$350 for two sessions (on the same day)

Payments should be made before the visit, via PayPal on my website's ordering page. If you're unable to use PayPal for any reason, please send a check made out to Bruce Hale to:

Bruce Hale
P.O. Box 91835
Santa Barbara, CA 93190

Here's a link to the ordering page. It will be up and running on my website by September 25, 2009.

<http://www.brucehale.com/virtual.htm>

Ready to schedule your Virtual Author Visit? Contact me by phone between 9-5 Pacific Time at: 805-563-7337. Or send an e-mail to:

writerguy@brucehale.com

I look forward to hearing from you soon!