

BIBLIOGRAPHY – WORKSHOP #4 WRITING

Workshop Readings in Binder

- Museums & Galleries NSW. “Writing for Success” and “Exhibition Labelling” (no date). Accessed 4 October 2019 <http://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/>
- South Australian Community History. “Display Interpretation and Writing (updated 19 November 2010).” Accessed 24 January 2017.
- South Australian Community History. “Interpretive Signs (updated June 2013).” Accessed 24 January 2017.
- DeRoux, Kenneth. “Exhibit Labels: Some Basic Guidelines for Small Museums,” and “Basic Techniques for Making and Mounting Exhibit Labels.” Alaska State Museum, Bulletin 5 (Summer 1998) and Bulletin 7 (Spring 1999). Accessed 4 October 2019, <http://www.museums.state.ak.us/Bulletin/bulletin.html>
- Borowsky, Larry. “Telling a Story in 100 Words: Effective Label Copy.” American Association of State and Local History Technical Leaflet #240, 2007.
- Wetterlund, Kris. “If You Can’t See It Don’t Say It: A New Approach to Interpretive Writing.” Minneapolis: Museum-Ed, no date. Accessed 4 October 2019. <http://www.museum-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/If-You-Cant-See-It.pdf>

Additional Readings of Interest

- American Alliance of Museums. “Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition.” Annual winners with specific examples from 2009 to 2019. Accessed 4 October 2019. <http://aam-us.org/about-us/grants-awards-and-competitions/excellence-in-label-writing>
- Flagler, Madeline C. “Interpreting Difficult Issues,” in Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler, ed., *Small Museum Toolkit*, Book 5. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012, pp. 26-48.
- Serrell, Beverly. *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.
- Wallace, Margot. *Writing for Museums*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

Writing for success

Writing well is harder than it appears.

For those who are required to repeatedly describe what your organisation does in grant applications and proposals you may find yourself hammering out the same old material time and again.

Here are a few tips to keep your writing fresh, easy-to-read and clear:

USE PLAIN ENGLISH

Plain English has been a requirement of federal legislation since 1983. It highlights a range of methods for achieving clear and accessible communication, some of which are discussed here.

The Plain English Foundation provides training on different types of writing and offer basic online tools to help you.

WRITE FOR THE READER

Put yourself in the shoes the audience. Write for their understanding rather than to impress them.

Avoid jargon and industry-specific terms unless completely necessary. Avoid euphemisms, clichés and trendy terms.

USE ACTIVE SPEECH

Make sure the subject is acting on the object. This means the verb is doing the work in the sentence reducing ambiguity.

Hint: if the action is being done 'by' someone, check you are not using passive voice.

The firemen will investigate the recent arson attack. (Active)

The recent arson attack will be investigated by the firemen. (Passive)

USE SHORT SENTENCES

An average sentence should be 15 to 20 words long. If its more than 30, split it into two sentences. Three to five sentences form a paragraph.

BE CONSISTENT

Use meaningful subheadings to order your information logically. Use the same key terms throughout the document.

REVIEW BASIC GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION

Be clear about how to use apostrophes, commas, colons and semicolons, and in the basic punctuation of lists.

Have a copy of an editorial style guide close by. We use and recommend *Style Manual*, Snooks & Co. A Commonwealth of Australia publication its easy-to-use and reliable.

EDIT YOUR DOCUMENT

Editing your document is essential. There are two types of editing: copy-editing picks up typos, grammatical errors and other inconsistencies, and checks related information; and structural editing which addresses the way the writing is presented—its voice, language and form.

If you don't have an independent editor to review your written material, ask a colleague to read and review it for you. A second set of eyes is always better than one.

Editing is easier to do in hard copy than on screen, so print out a version and review it away from your desk.



You might also like ...

Plain English Foundation

<https://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/>

Plain English Top Tips

https://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/documents/10179/78912/PEF_Top_tips_Key_elements_of_plain_English.pdf

Australian Writers' Centre

<http://www.writerscentre.com.au/>

Exhibition labelling

Not sure what to write on your labels? Here are a few things to consider.

1. Basic information structure

- Artist / maker
- Title
- Date
- Medium/materials
- Dimensions
- Provenance or collection
- Description

2. How much information?

Your label will be read by people without any prior information and by those who are well versed on the subject, so choose language that is clear, concise, integral and avoids jargon.

Select information that provides contextual significance about the object and its place in the exhibition.

Keep the order of information consistent and include key things of interest about the artwork to give important story line information.

Be aware of audience fatigue and use a 70-80 word count on individual artwork labels and 100-200 words for introductory panels.

A standing read time of 10 seconds is also the average time given by audiences to any one label, so once you have written it, test it to know the most important information is included.

3. Label hierarchy

For large scale exhibitions with an overarching narrative a label hierarchy is useful to break up information into digestible sections.

An example might look like this: An introductory panel to the exhibition – themed labels for each room – individual artwork labels.

Visual cues or symbols help connect sub-themes

and provide quick identification of other sources of information such as for audio guides or children's labels.

Consistency of font, text size, spacing and type assists audiences in digesting information. Studies suggest that certain fonts such as Helvetica Regular, Geneva, Verdana and Ariel in a size of least 18 points are the easiest for the eye to comprehend for text based information.

Text sizes should be increased if audiences are standing further than 1 metre from labels.

4. Label types and materials

The most basic form of label is printed information on adhesive paper mounted on card or foam board. This can be done in house and cut to sizes as needed.

Laminated or vinyl printed labels can be sourced through external printing companies. These offer flexibility for specific size requirements, large batch printing, and present better graphic qualities for printed information. These may be single use as vinyl stickers or made more durable for long term use as printed photo paper with laminate mounted on boards such as *Forex*.

Black text on white, cream or clear background is best for legibility however it's good to reassess this if the



You might also like ...

Exhibition and Display Basics

Museums Australia Victoria

http://www.mavic.asn.au/assets/Info_Sheet_11_Display_Basics.pdf

How to write and produce your exhibition labels

Powerhouse Museum

www.powerhousemuseum.com/ecologic/files/2012/08/How-to-write-and-produce-your-exhibition-labels.pdf

wall colour or lighting may be different for a particular exhibition design.

Labels should aim not to dominate over the objects they are placed alongside.

For other signage including the masthead, exhibition title signage, and large introductory panels, capture the audience's attention by using large print vinyls which offer good visual qualities.

5. Audiences

Knowing which audience groups your labels may not communicate effectively with is very important.

The following visitors might benefit from varied labelling, a labelling hierarchy or visual cues and symbols:

Children and families– use labels containing active prompts to encourage looking and responding to the displayed objects or artwork. Place these labels at a lowered height line and include symbols to create a way of leading the audience through the exhibition.

Groups with accessibility issues – provide large print text on portable information sheets for elderly, visually impaired or less mobile audiences. Place these at centralised seating points with increased lighting which reduces the need to stand for long periods of time in front of artworks.

Varied language groups – Dual labels which include basic information in two languages can open access to audiences identified as a strong group for an exhibition. Pay attention to the quality of translation and use professional interpreters where possible. Alternatively, provide foreign language audio guides, interpreted room sheets or tailored tours with an exhibition guide.

In situ technology – video material, audio recordings or interactive devices such as ipads or touch screen monitors makes it easy for audiences to choose how they prefer to engage with exhibition information.

6. Placement and location

The layout and placement of labels in relation to a logical walking path is also very important. The flow of information should build a narrative or develop a learning experience for the audience.

Research suggests that audiences will turn left unless directed to do otherwise. Keep in mind and ensure that labels are placed on the side of the artwork which will be approached first.

Place labels between eye-level at 150cm to a lower height of 1m and within close proximity to the artwork they reference. Adhere small mounted labels with Blue-tac or similar easy to remove product.

Double-sided Velcro tape will support heavier labels however this can mark walls when removed.

Ensure the label level and placement is consistent across the exhibition and that audiences are not required to bend or adjust their posture to read.

Gallery tools such as seating, temporary walls and lighting can also assist in affirming a direction for the audience or breaking up a space if needed.

7. Technology

Technology increasingly provides new ways to communicate exhibition information. Many people have been shown to retain information better when they use a combination of senses and learning approaches.

Think about providing related video material such as interviews or documentaries which screen in situ in the exhibition space. Audio guides or interactive devices such as touch screen monitors or ipads, which allows the audience to select information according to personal preferences, can provide enriching narratives.

When incorporating these forms of technology consider the impact of sound and light bleed. Didactic technology should not dominate over the artworks they reference.

The online presence of information and links to resources is often the first and last point of reference for gallery visitors prior and post visit. Interactive prompts such as QR codes may help in making a connection between the immediate exhibition and online content, however these should not take precedence over other standard forms of label information.

8. Quick Quiz

How good are your object or exhibition labels?

- Is the lighting suitable for text reading?
- What labelling height would be the most comfortable for different labels?
- What information would be engaging for young audiences?
- Would visual symbols or a labelling hierarchy help categorize types of information?

Display interpretation and writing

This Help Sheet relates to standard B2.1, 2.2 & 2.3

This Help Sheet should be read in conjunction with: Display development and design; Historical research; and Interpretation policy: guidelines to writing.

What is interpretation?

For community museums, interpretation is the way in which the significance of items in their collections is shared and used to tell the stories associated with them. It involves the ways in which objects are grouped for display, what historical and other supporting information is provided with them, and how it is presented.

Interpretation policy in practice

An interpretation policy sets the framework within which the museum presents its key objects and tells its key stories. The interpretation policy provides guidance on all aspects of interpretation and reminds museums of decisions that have been made about what is going to be presented and how it is going to be done. This policy should be consulted when developing any display. For help with writing an interpretation policy, see the Help Sheet: *Interpretation policy: guidelines to writing*.

Part 1: Interpreting objects and collections

Refer to Benchmark B2.1.4

A. Significance

Just displaying an object does not reveal its significance or meaning. While museum workers might know what an item is and understand why it is important, this is not apparent to museum visitors without interpretation and explanation.

Interpreting objects in the context of a museum involves revealing and sharing their significance in a planned, sensitive and creative manner. The Heritage Collections Council defines significance as:

The historic, aesthetic, scientific, and social values that an object or collection has for past, present and future generations. Significance refers not just to the physical fabric or appearance of an object. Rather it incorporates all the elements that contribute to an object's meaning,

including its context, history, uses and its social and spiritual value...Significance is not fixed – it may increase or diminish over time.¹

This definition of significance provides a guide to the many perspectives from which objects can be interpreted and their stories told.

Historic

The provenance of an object can be described from all sorts of angles. Explore and tell the stories about who made the object and who the first owner was. If the object was passed on, how and why did this occur? What was the object used for? Where was it used and where was it found? Was the object used for particular purposes or in particular events? Do you have any photographs that show it being used? Is there anyone with whom you could record an oral history interview about the object and its history?

Aesthetic

What is the object made of? Is it a common or rare material for this type of object? Why does the object look the way it does? Has its appearance been altered through constant use and inevitable wear and tear?

For example a wooden mallet used continuously may have worn down to more than half its original size; a metal handle may be especially smooth, polished by thousands of hands.

How does the appearance of this item compare to the objects of today that do the same or similar things?

Scientific

This refers mainly to geological, biological and archaeological collections, rather than objects significant to the history of science or technology..A collection of rocks or minerals might have scientific significance because of its rarity or because it reveals aspects of geological or environmental change. A plant specimen collected by an early botanist may have significance because it is the only example of a now extinct species. Artifacts such as spear points unearthed in an early archaeological excavation have significance because of the material from which they were made and the way it was fashioned . They would also have social and historic significance.

Social/spiritual

How was the object used by people? What was its place/role in the family and/or the community? Does it have ongoing spiritual, ritual or religious significance? Was its use related to particular social or life events?

For example a child's christening gown may have religious significance because of its purpose, but it may also be significant as an object passed down through a particular family. It can also be seen as representative of a particular stage of life . the newborn baby. It might have both joyful and sad stories connected with it . the beginning of new life or the loss of a child. These stories will have both familial and social meaning and help to make an emotional connection with visitors.

¹ Heritage Collections Council, Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2001, p. 11.

Contextual and changing significance, past, present and future

How significant was the object at the time it was made? Has the passage of time changed that significance? In what ways? Is the object rare? Is it a particularly good example, in good condition? Will it retain, accrue or lose historical value in the future?

B. Interpreting objects

Items can be interpreted individually or in various groupings.

Individually: Museums can interpret individual objects by providing dates or eras, explaining their usage, placing them in the context of their times (what was happening internationally, nationally and locally when they were being used), telling stories associated with them and linking them with photographs and other information. Try to present more than one side of the story of an item. This can be done by giving insights into the history of the ownership of an object, or describing its changing usage over time. The story of how an object came into the hands of the museum can also be intriguing. Using the key significance indicators listed above can help you to see an object in different ways.

Again using the example of the christening gown, if you have information about its use, you might be able to locate photographs of it being worn or photographs of the wearers as adults could be part of the interpretation. If the gown was donated or you have a clear idea of its provenance you might be able to access accompanying items such as a christening announcement, congratulations cards or you might conduct an oral history interview with its owner.

In groups: Remember that collection items often have more than one historical context or story to tell. Groupings of objects can be changed to highlight divergent themes and tell multiple stories. Different groupings convey different aspects of the significance and meaning of objects.

For example the same christening gown could be displayed

- with other gowns made by the same maker to highlight the work of a particular seamstress
- with earlier and later gowns to reveal changes in manufacture and style over time
- with other objects owned by the wearer(s) of the gown as part of a life story of its first wearer or wearers
- with other items related to the religious ceremony of christening in a particular faith
- with other items which provide insights into naming ceremonies in other cultures
- with other items related to childbirth and care of newborns from different eras
- with other items related to life events such as birth, marriage and death
- with other items related to celebrations in a particular community
- with other significant items resulting from the museum's focus on a specific collecting area as outlined in the museum's Collection policy.

C. Interpreting buildings and places

Buildings or places can be interpreted in similar ways, using the same significance indicators. Interpretation of a site can

- Take a visitor back in time to highlight historical change: You are standing on the site of the original station master's cottage...or Look towards the horizon and imagine what the view might have looked like before the arrival of Europeans
- Reveal the artistic or structural significance: Note the Doric columns on the front verandah. These were added after Mrs Green's visit to Athens in 1908
- Give indications of the scientific or research value of the physical remains of a building or highlight the archaeology of a site.
- Reveal the social meaning of a building or a place to a community. The meeting hall you are now in was the hub of community life. If these walls could talk you might hear toasts at a wedding, tears at a wake, the tapping of dancing shoes or the raised voices of protest at a community meeting.
- Make visitors aware of the spiritual meaning of a place: For Aboriginal people the creek bed you can see from this window was intimately connected with stories of spirit ancestors such as
- Place the building or the site in different contexts including historical, geographical, architectural or environmental.

D. Themes, stories and messages

In your interpretation policy you will have outlined the main themes, key stories and messages you aim to present through museum displays. Developing a display involves interpreting or re-interpreting collection items and finding new ways of developing themes, presenting history and telling stories related to them.

Ideas about ways to interpret objects or to tell history are gathered through different means including existing museum catalogue records and research materials; further specific research; visitor feedback and/or community involvement; information arriving with newly acquired or donated items and photographs.

When developing interpretation for a display, follow principles of sound historical research and current museological practices (see Help Sheet on *Historical research* and Standard B2.2 respectively)

Keep in mind the following keywords, ideas and questions.

- **Voices:** Does your display allow visitors to hear different voices, views and perspectives? Try to avoid presenting one, authoritative view of history. Reflect on the different ways in which people live and experience historical events. Consider the perspective of women, men, children, the old and the young, Indigenous people, people from different cultural backgrounds, workers and bosses, the affluent and those who struggle to survive, the well remembered, the neglected and the forgotten. Seek balance in the stories you present. For example first settlement in a community meant different things to different people For the pioneers it was struggle and success, for Indigenous people it meant

invasion and dispossession, for the leaders it meant plans and ideas, for ordinary people, hard work. Use oral history and personal memories where you can.

- **Opposing views:** Have you acknowledged where there is conflict and debate? Part of showing different experiences can be revealing and acknowledging opposing views. Don't be afraid to present conflicting ideas. Use them as a means to pose questions and involve visitors interactively in your display. Ask them what they think. Be careful to be accurate and to avoid bias towards a particular side of a debate.
- **Questions & Doubt:** Interpretation cannot, and should not try to, provide the definitive and final answer. Interpretation that asks questions, acknowledges doubt and suggests where further research is required is effective. When a display poses a question for visitors or asks them to imagine themselves in a particular situation it immediately engages their interest and makes them think outside of their own experience.
- **Make a personal connection:** As well as challenging visitors to see other perspectives draw them in by making a connection with something they already know, or want to know. For example these days a trip into town to buy groceries means jumping into the car and heading for the nearest supermarket. Ask your visitors to consider how this differs from the experience of a pioneer pastoralist who journeyed by horse and dray for days to reach the nearest settlement where he could stock up on staples which would have to last for months. Encourage them to imagine the experience of a migrant or refugee struggling with a new language, an unknown currency and unfamiliar products. If you are interpreting a strange object, think about, ask, and answer the logical questions a visitor would ask. What is it? What does it do? How old is it? Why is it important?
- **Involve your audience:** Use interpretation as a means to create empathy. Encourage visitors to step into the shoes of the people of the past. Allow them to see the inherent and continuing meaning of objects and issues. Asking questions and making personal connections involves visitors as does humour, analogies, metaphors and interactivity. For example you might be displaying objects related to washing clothes such as a washboard, a mangle, a copper. You might ask your visitors to imagine sweating over a boiling copper on a 40 degree summer day trying to dissolve stains out of cloth nappies. Compare this with flicking the switch on a modern washing machine. If you have a secondary example of a washboard, you might set up an interactive area where visitors can have a go at using it themselves. You might pose questions which make your audience think about the changing role of women in the home.
- **Tell a story:** Stories draw visitors in. They personalise a subject. They are immediate, exciting and involving so people keep reading to find out what happened next. Nellie and Sam were married in the church opposite this museum. Nellie was standing where you are now standing when the telegram arrived to say Sam was missing in action. Note that Nellie's letter is postmarked the day before. Sam never learned that he was going to be a father.

- **Photographs:** Photographs, drawings and maps are not just illustrations to break up text on a storyboard or make it look appealing, they are a rich source for interpretation. Ask visitors to study photos rather than just notice them, reading the caption quickly before moving on. Pinpoint particular objects, clothing, groupings, expressions or surroundings in photos. Pose questions about why the photo was taken, what it was trying to convey and what it conveys now. Relate the photograph to items on display or to other stories.
- **Not just the good old days:** See the past in all of its infinite variety and complexity. Avoid generalising about the 'golden days'. See stories in the context of their times and use interpretation to make sure that visitors are exposed to different ways of understanding history.
- **Cause and effect:** Think of ways to show how each event is connected with another and how actions have consequences. Show the lessons of history, the long term impact. Let visitors see connections. For example your display might show how the closure of a railway siding or the diversion of traffic away from a town and onto a major highway completely changed the circumstances of a community - businesses closed, people moved, the local paper folded due to lack of advertising income and community morale hit an all time low.
- **Linking past and present:** Show how problems faced by people in the past are still faced today in different ways. This is part of making a personal connection. Show visitors that while experiences in the past may seem far away, they are really very close. For example, today when factories close and jobs are lost, families are forced to move or rely on welfare. This also occurred in the past, leaving entire communities destitute and with little hope of resurrection. Ask visitors to see the similarities and consider the differences.
- **What's missing?** Find the gaps. When you are doing your research, note the questions that have not yet been answered, the holes in arguments. In your displays, tell the stories that sit quietly in the background behind the well known accounts of great men and major events.
- **Accuracy:** Check facts and stories. Watch out for contradictions and make sure your writing style is clear and not open to being misinterpreted. See the Help Sheet on *Historical research* for tips on how to ensure you are relying on the most accurate sources.
- **Not the whole story:** It is not possible or advisable to try and tell everything about a particular topic in one display. Be selective. Focus on particular themes and parts of a larger story. Thinking in this way can help you avoid the temptation to provide long lists of dates, events and people's names.
- **Context:** By avoiding lists and focusing on themes, you will already be taking steps towards seeing things in context. Interpret events, people and objects in the context of their own time and in contrast to the present. Consider context both broadly and specifically. For example when interpreting local wartime history

make sure to place stories in the context of what was happening in the rest of the country and in the war more generally. Look at the specific context of local events . the appearance of new cars in farming communities after a good season or the closing down of businesses after successive years of drought.

- **Acknowledging sources:** Let your visitors know where you found the information you are sharing. Let people into the inside story of your historical investigation. Answer visitors questions about where they can find out more.

Part 2: Writing for displays: the nuts and bolts

Writing for displays is an art and a professional writing skill. Visitors to museums are many and varied. They approach and interact with interpretative panels and collection displays in different ways. Writers have described the various types of visitors as *studiers* (those who read and examine everything in detail), *browsers* and *strollers* (who do just that) and *skaters* (who flit randomly from exhibit to exhibit, reading bits and pieces).² For this reason when planning and writing titles, text and captions you should consider the following.

Audience: You may know something about the expected audience for your displays from a visitor survey or similar research. However, knowing this in detail is not essential. The language and style used in any display should be accessible and understandable for all manner of audiences. Recognise that visitors are not experts in the field, but are there to learn new things and to be entertained and/or moved.

Catch me if you can: Many *browsers* and *skaters* visit museums. A catchy title like this will stop visitors in their tracks because it makes them want to read more.

Concise and clear: Once you have stopped your visitors, don't lull them to sleep. Make sure that your text is engaging, clear and easy to read and comprehend. Use short sentences rather than long-winded descriptions. Use familiar words and avoid jargon. When it is necessary to include unfamiliar words, explain what they mean. Humour can sometimes make a definition more interesting.
A galley in this case is not a ship's kitchen, but rather the tray into which the printer placed the type.

KISS – Keep it short and sweet: Limit the amount of text on a panel, don't write a book. Between 50 and 150 words per storyboard or per subject on a larger panel is a good guide. People are unlikely to read more. If there is more text on a large panel, make sure you use subtitles and illustrations to break it up.

Captions and labels: If you link text with illustrations and objects, you will not need to use so many words on labels and captions because connections will be more obvious. However consider the use of catchy and emotive captions and descriptive or story-telling object labels. Remember KISS goes for captions too.

² See Gianna Moscardo, Roy Ballantyne & Karen Hughes, *Designing interpretive signs: principles in practice*, Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, 2007, p 9.

Direct and emotive: Write with the aim to seize the attention of visitors. Get to the point. Make sure the first sentence in a paragraph is important or dramatic. Don't waffle. Rather than saying *I make a recommendation* say *I recommend*.

Use simple sentences without too many qualifying phrases. Read your text aloud. You can create emotive impact through language, tone and sentence structure.

Instead of: *The town, due to the drought, which had continued for many years in this region, slowly reduced in its population.*
Try a shorter, more vivid style: *The drought continued. The population slipped away with each scorching year.*

Balance being creative, with using shorter, more familiar words.
Rather than saying *Nevertheless the magnitude of the undertaking precluded it being completed swiftly'*
Say it more simply: *The size of the project meant it took time to complete.*

Positive rather than negative: Focus on the positive rather than saying *Don't use the negative*. For example: Instead of: *This kind of dust storm was not new to Pinnaroo; say Pinnaroo had survived many storms like this.*

Use active rather than passive voice: Instead of *The town changed as a result of the bushfire* say *The bushfire changed the town*. Active voice is more direct and has more impact.

Control and choice: With a book most people read from beginning to end. With a display visitors choose which part to read first. They control their own experience of a display. However you can influence what and how they read with clever use of titles and by using text to direct readers to move on to the bit you would like them to read next.

Interactivity and posing questions: Visitors will stay to read more if you involve them in thinking about and assessing what you are saying. Ask questions and tell stories that provoke a *how would you feel if this happened to you* response. Provide visitors with a means to record their answers to questions or their reactions to displays. Providing sticky notes, a blackboard or a whiteboard are possibilities.

Respect and sensitivity: Museum text should be friendly and conversational. Try not to talk down to or lecture to your audience. Make sure that you use acceptable, non derogatory language and expressions. Consider double meanings and implications. Make sure you are culturally sensitive. Use capital letters, correct terms and spellings when referring to people or objects from other cultures. For example always refer to *Aboriginal people* not *aboriginals*.

Editing: The secret to writing good interpretative text is edit, edit and edit again. By reading your text over a number of times and having others check it as well, you will gradually shorten and shape it. Reading text out loud is a good way to hear how it sounds. Consider involving a professional editor where you can. The better the text is, the more likely people will stay and read it and comprehend the important points made?.

Quality control: Assess who the good writers in your group are or consider employing a professional historian/writer.

Part 3: Types of interpretation

See Benchmark B2.1.3

Use a variety of methods of interpretation in your museum. Think beyond creating storyboards. Brain storm ways that you can

- link display panels with meaningful arrangements of items
- create attractive and interesting information folders or browser books for visitors who want to know more
- develop guided tours or create maps or audio aids for self-guided tours
- incorporate audio-visual or multimedia components in displays
- develop education kits for students and teachers
- design and write publications such as books, brochures, and information sheets on different topics
- produce DVDs and CD Roms for viewing on site or for visitors to purchase
- develop a website.

Look - Imagine - Listen - Think

Museum interpretation should encourage visitors to do all of these things. Involve their senses, engage their minds.

Interpretive Signs

This help sheet outlines some basics of preparing content for interpretive signs that highlight a place, person or event of historical interest. For planning museum displays please see the help sheet *Display Development and Design*.

What is interpretive signage?

Interpretive signs provide explanation (historical context) for the events, subjects or sites that they highlight. They differ from place markers by combining a clear theme with good research to tell an interesting and meaningful story.

Effective interpretive signs:

- are well-designed and attractive to look at
- have clear and concise content (words and images)
- have a clearly identifiable key message

Planning Sign Content

Key messages

Key messages state what particular aspect of a topic or theme the interpretive sign will cover. A key message (or 'take home' message) is what you want people to remember from reading the sign. Key messages don't appear on a sign (though they may be reflected in titles), but it is useful to have them written down as a reference point for planning sign content.

For any topic there will usually be much more material available than can realistically be used as sign content. Key messages guide decision making about what to include and what to leave out. For example:

- 1 Topic: The grain trade
Key message: This town was a major port for exporting grain.
- 2 Topic: Institute Building
Key message: People have been learning and socialising here for more than 100 years.
OR Wealth from mining built this place
OR From the time it was planned, this building had a chequered history

A group of signs may share a key message or each sign may have its own key message related to the topic. In example 2 above, the Institute Building could be interpreted with three signs, each with a different key message.

Using Images

Use images to highlight aspects of the text and provide another layer to the interpretation. Selection of images is integral to planning sign content.

Images could be photographs, other graphics such as maps, drawings or cartoons, or images of objects. The source of images should be acknowledged.

Writing Tips

Concise and clear: Use short sentences, familiar words and avoid jargon. When it is necessary to include unfamiliar words, explain what they mean. Aim for text that is engaging, clear and easy to read and comprehend.

Use active rather than passive voice: Active voice is more direct and has more impact. Instead of *The town changed as a result of the bushfire* say *The bushfire changed the town*.

Catchy Titles: Use catchy titles on panel headings to grab attention. Use titles to break-up longer sections of text into manageable chunks for the reader.

Audience: Use language and style that is accessible and understandable for all manner of audiences.

Direct and emotive: Get to the point. Make sure the first sentence in a paragraph is important or dramatic. Use simple sentences without too many qualifying phrases. Read text aloud to see how it 'sounds'. Instead of: *The town, due to the drought, which had continued for many years in this region, slowly reduced in its population*. Try a shorter, more vivid style: *The drought continued. The population slipped away with each scorching year...* Balance being creative, with using shorter, more familiar words. Rather than saying *Nevertheless the magnitude of the undertaking precluded it being completed swiftly...* Say it more simply: *The size of the project meant it took time to complete*.

Interactivity and posing questions: Ask questions and tell stories that provoke a *how would you feel if this happened to you* response.

Positive rather than negative: Focus on the positive rather than saying *Don't use the negative*. For example: Instead of: *This kind of dust storm was not new to the town* say *The town had survived many other storms like this*.

Respect and sensitivity: Text should be friendly and conversational. Use acceptable, non-derogatory language and expressions. Consider double meanings and implications.

Control and choice: Influence what is read with clever use of titles and by using text to direct readers to move on to the bit you would like them to read next.

Captions: Use captions to tell more of the story, not just to state what people can see. Consider what 'main text' could instead be turned into image captions. Restrict captions for images/other graphics to 20 – 30 words.

Editing: Edit, edit and edit again to gradually shorten and shape text. It is very useful to have someone unfamiliar with the content of the sign to be involved in the editing process.

Graphic design

Graphic design is the way in which the content of the sign is arranged including:

- layout of text and illustrations
- choice of fonts for text and titles
- the use of colour and contrast
- design and placement of signs and item labels
- the size of images and other graphics

Design needs to consider where the sign will be placed and how far people will be away from it when viewing it. Reproduction quality, font style and sizes, and use of white space (blank areas around text and images, including a border area) are important to the look and feel of a sign and its effectiveness.

A little advice on fonts

Make sure that the font and text size you choose is easy to read. Text should be readable as people approach the sign.

Body text should be between **24** and **36** points.

Headings between **48** and **72** points.

Titles **72** to **96** points.

Captions for illustrations between **18** and **24** points.

AVOID USING ALL CAPITALS BECAUSE IT IS HARDER TO READ

Use italics sparingly for the same reason

Use *cursive*, *decorative* or *unusual* fonts only occasionally for drawing attention to a title or to create a particular effect.

BULLETIN

Issue 5

AN INFORMATION SOURCE FOR ALASKA'S MUSEUM COMMUNITY

Summer 1998

EXHIBIT LABELS: SOME BASIC GUIDELINES FOR SMALL MUSEUMS

By
Kenneth DeRoux

Label production requires a variety of skills: writing, editing, interpretation, graphic arts and production techniques. For a small museum, this may seem a challenge. However, once the components are understood, it is really not so difficult to produce quality labeling.

Types of labels

- **Title or headline labels.** These are large-letter (4" or more) signs that simply give the title of an exhibit. They are used at the entrance to an exhibit or a gallery, often high up on a wall.
- **Primary or introductory labels.** These provide an overview or introduction to the exhibit. They are the largest in size and in typeface. There may be one label introducing an exhibit, or there may be several such labels for a large exhibit.

- **Secondary or text labels** provide an intermediate level of information between an introductory label and the more specific object labels. These can provide historical background, for example, or text related to groups of objects. They often serve to organize the exhibit.

- **Object labels** provide information on a particular object, such as description or title, date or age, artist or user, material composition, and sometimes a brief text. Also included here is the

museum's catalog number or loan source, which provides a quick link to additional information if anyone should inquire. Different levels of information are usually placed on separate lines.

For example:

Man's winter hat

Moose hide and rabbit fur

Used in the Klondike in 1898 by Dan McGrew.

ASM III-O-659

For design purposes object labels are sometimes combined with text labels.

- **Key labels** are another form of object label. Instead of a separate label adjacent to each object, a key label combines a group of object labels onto one label, identifying them, usually by number, with a corresponding number placed next to the object. Another type uses a drawing of the exhibit object as a key. These labels are used when individual labels would be too intrusive, as with a group of small objects in a case or when the objects are at a distance from the viewer. Key labels should be used only when necessary.

Every object in an exhibit should have some identification, otherwise the object becomes no different than a prop. If it is important enough to show the public, it's important enough to have a label. If you don't know anything about the object, you should at least be able to name it and provide the catalog number.

Label content

You probably know from your own experience that you don't read all the labels in an exhibit, or always finish reading the labels you start. Nonetheless, labels do get read by someone. In fact, many visitors will actually spend more time reading well-written labels than looking at objects, which may only require a few seconds. Visitors do not always proceed through an exhibit in the order intended. Thus, labels should be able to stand alone as much as possible. They should be

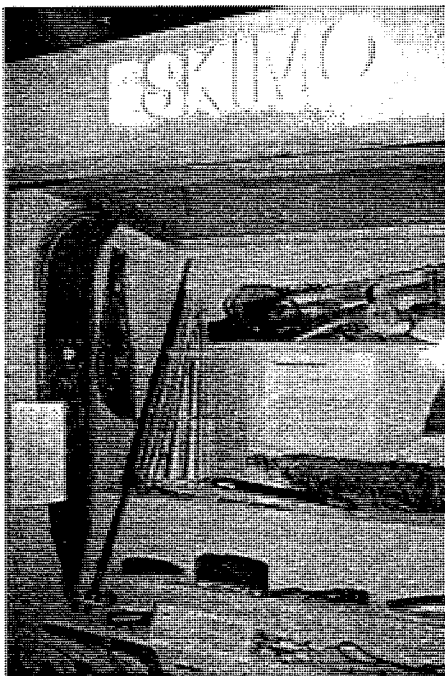


Exhibit showing title (top), secondary label (center), object label with text (bottom) and key label (left).

Continued—page 2

CONTINUE

EXHIBIT LABELS

written to give the most important information first, with subsequent information presented in descending order of importance, much the way newspapers do. Some introductory and text labels put the first paragraph in a larger type face. Sub-headings over paragraphs are also useful to lead viewers quickly to the information they want.

Labels need to be understandable to a wide range of ages and educational backgrounds. Various formulas have been developed to relate sentence length and number of syllables to an average target age or educational level. Using these formulas can be helpful but may also prove time consuming for a small museum. One should, however, strive to keep sentences simple and direct. Avoid too many multi-syllable words and use direct action verbs. Avoid trying to squeeze in extra information. Label writing should also be a group effort. Labels need to be proof read, often a number of times and by more than one person.

Label and type size

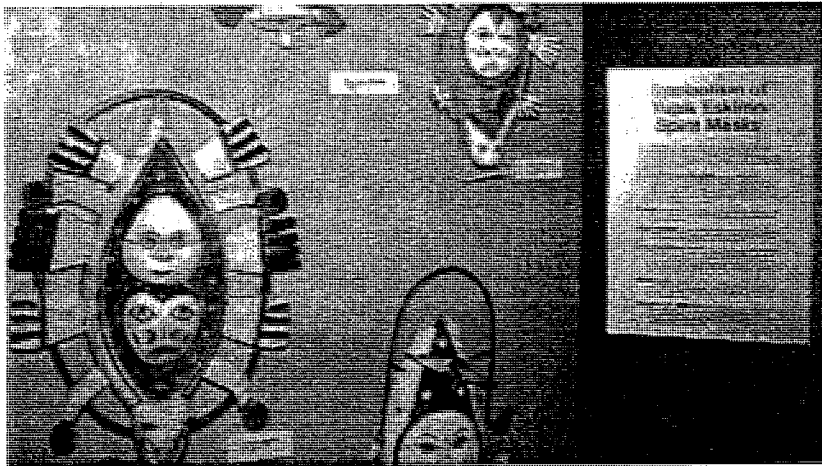


Exhibit showing object labels and secondary text label.

The size of labels depends on three things: the size of the type, the number of words, and design considerations. Type size should be large enough so that even people with poor vision can read a label. This means at least an 18 point typeface for object labels. Secondary text or introductory labels should be at least 24 points for body text, with titles or headlines even larger, at 48 to 72 points. (Points is a term for measuring the height of letters). This means that a typewriter is not a good tool for making labels. A common word processor and a laser printer can generally produce completely satisfactory

labels. Combined with a good photocopy machine, labels up to 11 by 17 inches can be made.

The number of words may become a balance between the size of the type and the overall dimensions of the label. Thus, labels need to be succinct and straightforward. The recommended word count for secondary labels is usually no more than 150 words. Some sources recommend no more than 75 words, but you will be surprised at how difficult this limit can sometimes be.

Typefaces

Different typefaces will use space differently, even if they are the same point size. Choose typefaces that are easy to read. Common styles such as Times, Times New Roman, Garamond or Helvetica are frequently used for labels. Be consistent. Use the same typeface(s) throughout an exhibit. Don't use all uppercase letters except for occasional headings. They take a lot more space and are hard to read. Museums often will have a style template for labels, so that they have consistent typefaces, italics, boldface, punctuation and organization. When labels are added to an exhibit area piecemeal over time, the result can be a variety of different typestyles that create a sense of ambiguity or uncertainty about the content.

Label placement

Labels should be arranged at a height close to, or a little lower than, eye level. Average eye height is about 58 to 60 inches. If possible, avoid placing labels above eye level. Arrange labels uniformly so that text labels appear at appropriate points in the exhibit and object labels maintain a consistent relationship with objects. For instance, in a grouping of pictures on a wall you may want to have all the labels to the right of the artwork, below center and at a consistent height above the ground, so that all the labels are the same height even when the paintings are different sizes. Labels for a children's exhibit, and even in other exhibits, should be low enough for children to read. Likewise, keep in mind the needs of visitors in wheelchairs. If labels can't be low enough

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CONTINUE—

EXHIBIT LABELS

to be read by someone in a wheelchair, you may want to make a booklet or handout with label copy that can be picked up and read.

One purpose of labels is to integrate the exhibit. Avoid label clutter. This can happen when objects and labels are added to an exhibit over time and without an overall plan. Labels should not detract from the

visual appearance of the exhibit. One way to coordinate them is to use colored or transparent backgrounds for labels, being sure to provide plenty of contrast between the background and the type.

Next issue: techniques for making and mounting labels.

GRANTS/OPPORTUNITIES

Winedale Museum Seminar on Administration and Interpretation
Nov. 8-19, 1998, at Winedale Historical Center, University of Texas.

\$500 covers room/board/ materials. Annual 10-day residential training program. Participants selected through application process. Deadline Sept. 22. Contact Kit Neumann, Seminar Coordinator, Texas Historical Commission, P.O. Box 12276, Austin, TX 78711; 512/422-4612.

Introduction to the Management of Museum Collections
Sept. 14-18, 1998

Application deadline: June 15.

Five-day workshop at Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Emphasis is on collection staff or volunteers from small, rural or culturally specific museums. \$325 tuition fee covers materials and group lunch. Contact Bettie Lee, Center for Museum Studies, MRC 427, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560. FAX: 202/357-3346. E-mail: leeb@cms.si.edu.

American Indian Museum Studies presents two up-coming workshops: Starting a Tribal Museum, in August, dates and site to be determined; and Conservation of American Indian Cultural Objects, Oct. 27-30, 1998, in Marksville, Louisiana. Participants are selected from applicants and stipends are provided. Contact American Indian Museum Studies, Center for Museum Studies, MRC 427, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560. Phone 202/633-8991. E-mail: kcooper@cms.si.edu.

The National Heritage Preservation Program

The National Heritage Preservation Program of the National Endowment for the Humanities responds to the problems facing institutions holding significant collections of archaeological and ethnographic objects, decorative art, textiles, and historical artifacts. Grants are made to stabilize material culture collections through the purchase of storage furniture and rehousing of objects, the improvement of environmental conditions (including climate control), and the installation of security, lighting, and fire-prevention systems.

Renovation costs and expenditures that are incurred for the temporary storage of collections during the implementation of these activities are also eligible for support.

Funding may also be requested to catalog and provide enhanced descriptions of material culture collections held by museums, historical organizations, and other institutions.

NEH's share of the total cost of the project will not exceed 50 percent.

Deadline for applying for NHP grants is July 1. E-mail: preservation@neh.gov or see address below.

NEH Public Programs grants may fund museum exhibits. The deadline for planning grants is Nov. 2, 1998, and for implementation grants, Feb. 1, 1999. For information contact:

National Endowment for the Humanities
Public Information Office, Room 402
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20506
or e-mail your request to: info@neh.gov

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BULLETIN

Double Issue 7 & 8

AN INFORMATION SOURCE FOR ALASKA'S MUSEUM COMMUNITY

Winter & Spring 1999

BASIC TECHNIQUES FOR MAKING AND MOUNTING

EXHIBIT LABELS

By Kenneth DeRoux

In a previous Bulletin (issue #5), I discussed some guidelines for the design of exhibit labels, including types of labels, size and placement. In this article I will describe some basic label-making techniques useful to small museums. While there are some common practices for making labels, the methods available are many, restricted only by cost, effectiveness, creativity and concern for the artifact. Like the field of graphic design, museum label-making techniques change and evolve with the times, and with new technology.

Printing or transferring label copy

First, if you are working with a series of small labels on one page, remember to leave plenty of space between the labels when you format the copy to allow for trimming. Once you have written the label, there are a number of ways to print it. Labels typed on a typewriter, even a label typewriter, have become obsolete, even though they are still found in many museums. The most common printing method now is the laser printer, which gives anyone with a desktop computer access to many of the typographic options that only ten years ago were the domain of the commercial typesetter.

Label copy can be printed on a variety of papers, including regular bond paper. Higher quality premium or heavier weight papers will usually give better results. Depending upon your exhibit design, you may find a colored or textured paper that matches or coordinates with the exhibit wall color. Remember, however, that sufficient contrast between the print on a label and the background is a prime factor in legibility.

If your laser printer won't accept heavier weight paper, you may be able to copy your labels onto heavier paper with a good copy machine. Label copy may also be enlarged on a copy machine.

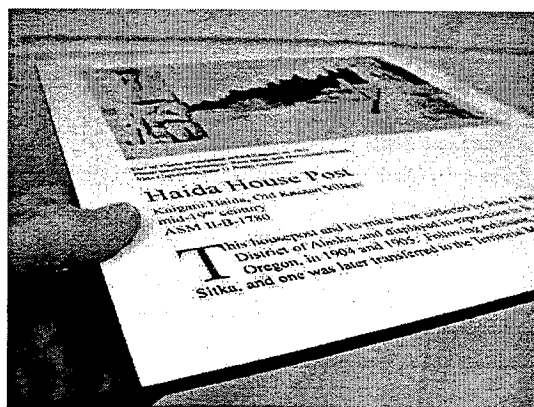
Another option is to copy your labels onto self-adhesive sheets with peel-off backings. The label can

then be adhered to your chosen support material. There are also transparent self-adhesive sheets, such as Stikybak™ laser applique film. These can be adhered directly to a wall or exhibit surface. This can also be a handy way to match labels to your exhibit wall color, by painting a sheet of matboard (both sides, to avoid warping) with the same color you are using in your exhibit, and then transferring the self-adhesive transparent label copy to the colored support. Most of these papers can be found at office supply stores.

Museums are increasingly making use of color laser printers and graphics software to produce labels that may include a colored background, different colors or styles of type, and photographs or graphics, all combined and printed onto one sheet of paper. Some printers will also handle oversized paper. Most colored inks for these printers are still subject to damage from water or liquids. While this may not present a problem during temporary exhibits, labels for long-term use or subject to wear and tear from the public should have a laminating sheet applied to them. This can be done at many copy or photo

stores. It can also be done by hand, with self-adhesive sheets, although these may not look as good as those professionally done. If possible, use a matte surface laminate.

Title or headline labels, which are often in type sizes 3" - 4" high or more, can be made with vinyl letters that are transferred directly onto the gallery wall. Many commercial printers or sign companies offer this service. Vinyl letters come in a variety of colors and styles and are produced as a continuous line of type



Computer processed, color laser printed label spray mounted on 1/8" black Gatorfoam.

which is peeled from a backing sheet, so there is no problem keeping the letters aligned or spaced. It takes some care to transfer the letters without wrinkling them, but it is not difficult and instructions are provided by the sign company. If left on a wall for a long time, vinyl letters may require a razor scraper to remove.

Transfer type, the wax-based letters and numbers that you can rub off a sheet, once a mainstay of graphic artists, can also be used for special situations. They can be transferred directly onto a gallery wall. This is useful for situations such as putting a number next to an artwork or for putting numbers next to objects in a group that might be identified on a key label. One way to do this is to paint the heads of large thumbtacks, transfer the numbers onto the tack heads, and put the tacks next to the objects. A spray coat of clear lacquer or varnish will keep the numbers from peeling off.

Another method for producing labels, used more by larger museums because of cost and labor, is silk screen. Text is photographically transferred to a screen and then stenciled with ink directly onto a wall or label panel. The process is time-consuming and, in many cases, is now being supplanted by digital printing.

Photo-mechanical transfer labels (PMTs) are also going out of style due to digital printing. PMTs are electronically typeset labels printed out on photographic paper. These allow for fairly large text labels, depending on the printer's capabilities, but must be done commercially and only come in black and white. PMTs need to be thoroughly washed to avoid discoloring with time.

Supports

Once printed onto paper, most labels need to be mounted onto a more rigid surface, although labels on heavyweight paper may be adequate for temporary exhibit situations. A mounted label also tends to look better than an unmounted one. The most common materials for mounting labels are matboard, foamboards and Masonite®.

Matboard, also called museum board, is probably the most versatile and easiest to use. It is more suitable to smaller labels because larger sizes will flex. Be sure to use board with a smooth surface, preferably white with a white or black core. Non acid-free boards often have a grayish core which gives the edges of labels a lackluster appearance. For permanent labels in closed cases it is advisable to use acid-free matboard.

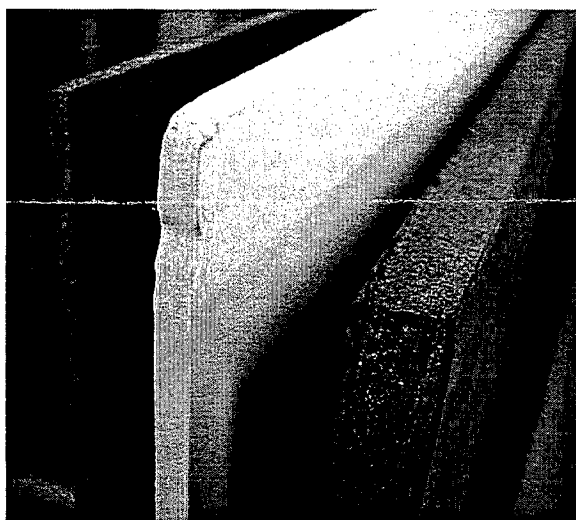
There is a wide variety of foamboards or similar substrates on the market, some of the most common being FomeCor®, Gatorfoam® and Sintra®. They have different characteristics and some will be better than others for various situations. FomeCor, for instance, is a plastic foam sheet with a smooth, clay-coated paper surface on both sides. It comes in both regular and acid free and is available in most art supply stores. Like matboard, it can be cut with a knife. Foamboards are manufactured in a variety of thicknesses and sheet sizes and produce more rigid labels than matboard, so may be more suitable for larger text labels. One drawback is the white foam

edge that may distract from the label. However, this can be painted over carefully or inked over with a black marker. Better yet, buy foamboard with a black core if it is available. Another technique is to bevel the edge of the label toward the back when trimming, so the edge is better hidden.

Masonite®, the common term for hardboard made from compressed wood fibers, is a frequently used material for labels that need to be on a sturdy backing. Its drawback is that it needs to be cut on a saw and its weight can present problems for attaching to a wall. It is not acid free, so it should be sealed or painted before being used in permanent exhibits.

Adhesives

A common way to mount label copy and photographs onto a board is with a spray adhesive. 3M Sprament™ and 3M Super 77™ are two commonly used adhesives. Follow the directions on the can and use a good dust mask or respirator. If you are doing a lot of mounting, you may want to cover your hair and arms to keep them from getting gummy. Use old newspapers or sheets of newsprint to lay your materials on to catch the overspray. Each time you lay down a new label, put it on a fresh piece of paper so that you don't risk putting a label face down on a tacky surface. After spraying the back of your label copy, carefully lay it onto the clean backing board, taking care not to get wrinkles or bubbles in it. The glue remains



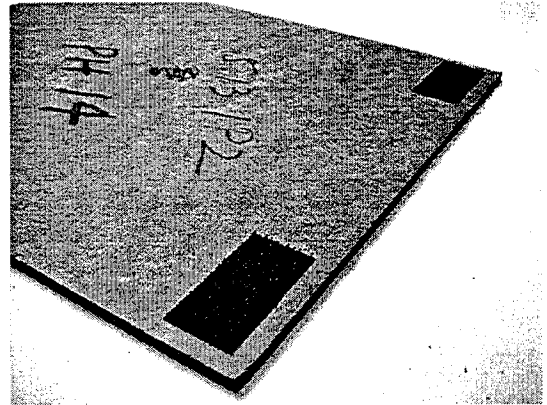
Some plastic core substrates: 1/8" black Gatorfoam, 3/16" white Fome-Cor, 1/2" black Gatoroam.

workable for a short time, so if you need to peel the label back up and reposition it, you usually can. Lay a clean sheet of paper over the label and rub over it with the side of your hand or roll over it with a brayer to secure the bond. It's an easy, straightforward method if one is careful and works in an organized fashion.

For larger labels on matboard it is a good idea to mount a piece of paper to cover the backside of the board to prevent it from curling or bending.

Dry mounting labels and photographs is another common method, but since this requires the use of a dry mount press, an expensive piece of equipment, I won't cover it here.

Wet mounting is a method often used to mount photographs or PMTs. It is not desirable for use with regular paper since it requires wetting the material. To mount a photograph on masonite, for example, the photograph would be wetted in a tray of water for several minutes. A layer of white glue or acrylic gel medium is then spread out evenly over the masonite. The drained or squeegeed photo is placed on the glue and the surface is then carefully squeegeed again from the center to the edges to adhere the photo. Excess glue squeezed out from the edges is carefully wiped up. The photograph can be printed a little larger than the masonite and the edge of the photo wrapped around the edge of the masonite, for a wrap-around effect. Doing this, however, takes some practice. To prevent warping, since the photo will shrink as it dries, another piece of photo paper or kraft paper should be wet mounted to the back of the masonite.



Label with Velcro® attachments.

Trimming

Once labels are mounted, they usually need to be trimmed to size. For labels on matboard, FomeCor, or similarly thin materials, a mat knife or utility knife and straightedge are the tools needed. Use a sharp blade and change it frequently. Blades are cheaper than matboard. You may want to use a transparent drafting square to pencil in cutting guidelines to keep your label edges square to the text. Make sure to leave adequate space around all sides of the label, as a label that is trimmed too tight looks constricted and is harder to read.

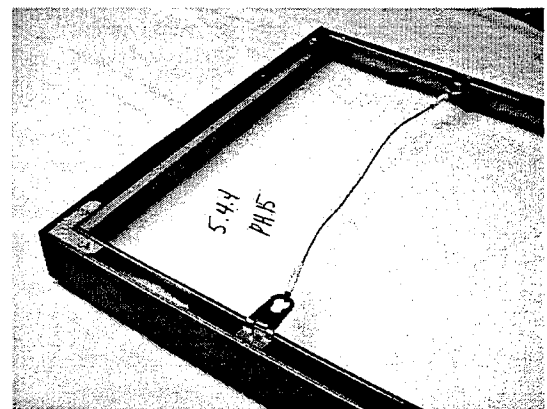
Thicker foam boards and masonite will need to be cut on a table or band saw. While it is possible to glue a previously trimmed label onto a pre-cut piece of masonite, the label will likely need to be re-trimmed. It is helpful to start out by trimming one edge of the label, usually the left side, before gluing so that it can be glued straight along one edge of the masonite panel. The other edges can then be trimmed square to the first side. After trimming, the edges of the masonite will need to be sanded with a very fine grade sandpaper.

Wall mounting

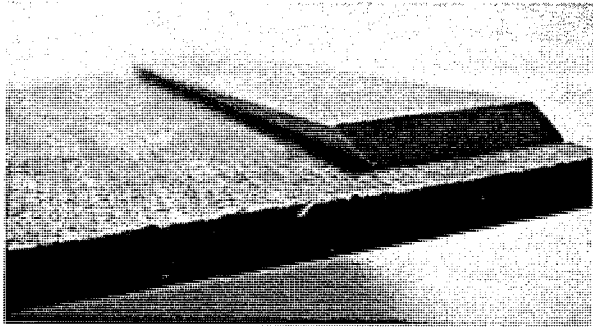
The method for attaching a label to a wall varies depending on the size and material of the label, the type of wall and the length of time the label will be up. Small, lightweight temporary exhibit labels are often attached with either tape or adhesive putty. Double-sided foam tape is commonly used, but it should be used carefully because it can be difficult to remove and shouldn't be used on wall paper or finishes that might peel up when removing the tape. Use the smallest size pieces you can. For small object labels this means just snippets of double sided tape. Larger labels will require larger pieces of tape. If you are unsure how much tape to use, test a disposable label by putting it up and removing it. When removing the label, use a twisting motion to lift it off, being careful the tape doesn't pull part of the wall covering away. Alternatively, a putty knife can be slid behind the label to pop it off the wall. The residue can often be rubbed off the wall with your thumb (make sure your hands are clean), a gum eraser, or solvent.

A handier way to temporarily attach small labels is with an ATM tape gun, a type used by commercial picture framers. The gun dispenses a strip of adhesive from a tape backing that is easier to remove. The gun and tape need to be purchased from a frame supply company.

Another commonly used product is adhesive putty, often sold in art or office supply stores. One trade



Label in picture frame with hanging wire.



name is *Blue-Tack*. To use it, roll a small ball of putty between your thumb and finger and push it onto the back corners of the label, then press the label onto the wall. The label can be easily removed and the putty rolled off and re-used. Putty is not recommended for permanent labels.

Labels can also be tacked up with small brass brads or tacks. Get ones with attractive heads, since the heads will be visible. Make sure the brads are uniformly arranged.

Adhesive backed Velcro® tape can be cut into patches and used to attach labels. This allows you to remove the label and reposition it if necessary. Velcro can be bought with or without adhesive backing.

Larger, heavier labels require more substantial fasteners. Permanent exhibit labels can be attached to walls or supports using hot glue. Hot glue is dispensed from a hot glue gun, available at hardware stores. Hot glue can also be used to attach wood strips to the back of masonite supported labels. This will enable the label to be hung using conventional picture hanging hardware and techniques.

Of course, labels can also be hung on a wall by putting them in picture frames and hanging them with picture wire, or by hanging the upper edge of the frame over the heads of nails. This option opens up a variety of design possibilities for integrating labels with an exhibit, because of the variety of framing styles available. Labels can also be set off with mat board within a frame, just as if you were framing a picture.

A convenient method for hanging larger labels and photographs is with an angle or wedge bracket. To make one, take a length of wood, such as a 1x3, and cut a bevel along the length of one edge. Cut off a section of this board, long enough to go across the top back of the label, and cut a corresponding length to go on the wall. One piece is glued to the upper back side of the label, bevel down, facing in toward the back of the label. The other piece is attached to the wall, bevel up, facing into the wall. Make sure both strips are exactly horizontal. The strip on the back of the label can now be set down to mesh against the strip on the wall, holding the label firmly in place. This type of mount allows the label to be easily removed or adjusted side-to-side. Other materials, including masonite or metal strips, can also be used to make wedge strips.



Wedge bracket glued to the back of a masonite® mounted label.

Wedge on reverse of label locks into wedge attached to wall.

Sources for supplies: Many of these materials are available at art supply or hardware stores. If your local retailer doesn't carry them, you can try: Blaine's Art & Graphic Supply, 2803 Spenard Road, Anchorage, AK 99503. Phone (907) 561-5344.

For bulk orders or information on Gatorfoam® and Fome-Cor®, contact: International Paper, Taylorsville Rd. Statesville, NC 28677 Phone 1-(800) 362-6267.

Next issue: Guidelines for writing labels.

TRIBAL MUSEUM DIRECTORY

The Center for Museum Studies has announced the release of the Tribal Museum Directory, a listing of over 150 tribal museums in North America providing general information and descriptions.

Also included is a general bibliography and a list of related organizations. The book is 48 pages, spiral bound and available from the Center or \$15. Write: Center for Museum Studies, 900 Jefferson Drive SW Suite 2235, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560. Or call (202) 633-8981.

Note: The American Indian Museum Studies program at the Center also has available several pamphlets of interest to tribal museums: *Traveling Exhibits for Tribal Museums*, *The Value of Regional and State Museum Organizations to Tribal Museums and Cultural Centers*, and *Tribal Collections Management at the Makah Cultural and Research Center*. They may be obtained by writing to the above address.

Telling a Story in 100 Words: Effective Label Copy

By Larry Borowsky

Consider two blocks of interpretive text for a panel in an exhibit about the Great Depression. Here's the first one:

The Dust Bowl of the 1930s was one of the worst ecological disasters in U.S. history. It was caused by severe drought and erosion, and resulted in the loss of millions of acres of topsoil throughout the Great Plains. Baca County lay at the heart of the disaster. For several years, the region got less than half the annual average of 15 inches, the longest and deepest drought ever recorded here. The land was already in poor shape due to decades of overuse, and the drought left it unable to sustain crops. Baca County farmland lost more than 80 percent of its value during the 1930s. By the end of the decade more than half of its farms were in foreclosure.

And here's the second:

First the rains stopped; then the land dried up and billowed. In those two cruel strokes, the Dust Bowl swept much of Baca County away. Swirling earth blackened the skies, jammed machinery, choked livestock, and stripped farmhouses free of paint. Since the first fields were plowed here in the 1880s, farmers had always lived with drought—but not on this scale. Half the county's residents drifted off between 1931 and 1936, often reaping no return on acreage their families had worked for 50 years. Those who remained were certain recovery lay just one thundershower away. But no one breathed easy until 1940, when Baca County soil finally brought forth a wheat crop—the first since 1932.

The first is not a bad label. It's informative and factual, and it introduces a number of important themes in a very short space. But it's also as dry as Dust Bowl dirt—a loose assemblage of facts that

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division,
FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF34-018268-C DLC]



A Dust Bowl farmer and young son on a tractor near Cland, NM.

are liable to drift out of the reader's mind at the first gust of wind. The material is not binding. It's not the kind of soil in which the roots of knowledge can take firm hold.

The second one has fewer facts but, I would argue, more truth. There's a unity to it. The images are coherent, and the sentences build upon one another. This label is much stickier, much more apt to get caked under a reader's fingernails—and more likely to nourish the seeds of lasting knowledge in his or her mind.

"History, a fable agreed on, is not a science but a branch of literature," wrote Wallace Stegner in the Fall 1965 issue of the journal *The American West*. It is "an artifact made by artificers and sometimes by artists. Like fiction, it has only persons, places, and events to work with, and like fiction it may present them either in summary or in dramatic scene.... The dramatizing of legitimately dramatic true events does not necessarily falsify them, nor need it leave their meaning ambiguous. Dramatic narrative is simply one means by which a historian can make a point vividly."¹

Dramatic narrative is dangerous territory for a nonfiction discipline such as history, and especially so when you've only got 100 words or so in which to write. What kind of story can you expect to tell in so short a space? Let's turn that question around and ask how many facts can you really convey in a 100-word label? And how many of those facts do readers carry with them when they leave the exhibit? I bet it's not a high percentage.

A reader is more likely to remember a dynamic narrative than a compendium of static facts. A narrative-driven label, if executed properly, can provoke a more powerful response from the audience than a traditional expository label, and generate a stronger sense of identification with the exhibit. To give the story room to develop, you might have to withhold a fact or two from your label, but, again, what's the value of one additional fact? Weigh that value against the value

of inspiration—of having your readers get so excited about your subject matter that they seek further information about it after they've left the museum. *That* is the primary dividend of narrative-driven labels. They can stir the imagination and get visitors excited about your subject matter. They can create a springboard effect, giving visitors a reason and a desire to learn more about the exhibit's topic after they've left your museum, to seek out books and articles and films that are much longer and more information-packed than an exhibit label (even an entire exhibit) could possibly be.

Having said that, narrative labels still must contain information. They need to contain enough information so that readers who aren't inspired to pursue further reading on your subject still come away from the exhibit with a solid, basic knowledge of the subject matter. By packaging that information in a narrative form, you can both inform and inspire. Doing so requires tradeoffs and conscious choices about which facts to present, which ones to withhold, and what order they're presented in.

Here's how to go about it.

Is it a Story or Not?

Before outlining the key ingredients of a 100-word story, it seems appropriate to firm up the definition of "story" beyond the single example I cited in the introduction. As a general rule, consider a label to be a story if it produces some of the same responses in a reader that a much longer work of fiction can. Specifically, focus on the following:

1. Does it create an air of suspense and/or tension (hook the reader)?

This is a reader's most primal response to any story, the desire to know what happens next. Creating this mood can be tricky with respect to historical material, because the sequence of events and eventual outcome is often common knowledge to some or all of your readers. This is likely the case with the Dust Bowl. But even so, a well-crafted 100-word story can simulate the feeling of suspense by leaving readers vaguely unsure of where the label is headed.

Compare the two Dust Bowl labels. The first one gets directly to the resolution, using the basic form of an expository paragraph, a topic sentence up front, followed by details and evidence that support the topic sentence. It is clear and informative, but not a story. Since the outcome is stated as a *fait accompli*, the reader has no sense of working toward an unknown destination. On the contrary, you start at a known destination (the worst ecological disaster in U.S. history) and work backwards. Once you've read the first sentence, no surprises await the reader.

In contrast, the second label begins with a vague, open-ended image. No specific time or place is cited,

nor even any particular historical fact. The ecological disaster is not stated so much as described, and the description unfolds incrementally and seems to deepen with each sentence, much as the Dust Bowl unfolded and deepened year by year. Most readers probably have a general sense of where the narrative is headed. They are viewing an exhibition about the Great Depression, after all, and most American adults probably have a general awareness of the Dust Bowl. Just the same, readers naturally look for resolution, and this label does not resolve itself until the final sentence. Until they reach the end, readers are going to be hungry for that resolution. They're going to want to know what happens next, even if they already know.

2. Does it trace a journey through time and/or distance (frame the story)?

This is also integral to any story, and closely related to the element of suspense. More important, however, the passage of time is also integral to the telling of history. Events of great significance usually don't happen in an instant, but they often come across that way in a 100-word label. That is unfortunate, and it is misleading.

Again, compare the two Dust Bowl labels. The first one cannot be described as a "journey" because (as described above) it begins and ends at the same known, fixed destination. The ecological disaster is presented as something that occurred in a single stroke, rather than as a dynamic process that occurred over a long period of years. Likewise, the decade of the 1930s is presented as a single, indivisible unit of time. There is little sense of a cause-and-effect relationship between events.

In the second label, effect follows cause. First the land suffers, then farm property suffers, and ultimately people suffer. It's all presented in sequence, creating the illusion of movement through time. Reinforcing that sensation, the years 1931, 1936, and 1940 are called out by name explicitly depicting the passage of years, and framing the era with start and endpoints. As a result, the Dust Bowl comes across not as a static event, but as a progression of events, a discrete period of time with a beginning, middle, and end.

3. Does it encourage readers to suspend disbelief?

This is certainly essential for readers of fiction, but how does it apply to readers of history? Insofar as the events of a historical narrative are all true, the suspension of disbelief would seem to be unnecessary. What is really referred to here is the reader's willingness to place him or herself in an alternate world—to become drawn into a reality that exists only in the text and accept that reality on its own terms. In historical writing, this is often helpful, because it encourages readers to identify with the bygone world they're reading about—to feel, if only fleetingly, as if they're living in the past.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection (LC-USF34-018262-C DLG)



A Dust Bowl farm in the Coldwater District near Dalhart, TX.

Such an effect clearly is not produced by the first Dust Bowl label, with its authoritative textbook-ish prose. But the second label achieves the effect. It encourages readers to feel, hear, and sense the events of the past as if they are really happening. *And they really did happen.* That is the whole point. Labels that nudge readers to suspend disbelief can thus produce a depth of identification that's impossible to achieve with a more expository, objective approach.

Elements of a 100-Word Story

Keep in mind that writing story labels is a matter of tradeoffs and choices. This form of storytelling is as elastic as every other form, which means that a writer often gets the best results by breaking the rules.

Don't consider the following to be rules. Think of them as guidelines—instruments that can be useful, but are not essential, when constructing a 100-word narrative. It's a short list with only three elements. They are:

- A narrative arc,
- Thematic unity, and
- A provocative first sentence.

But remember it's all about tradeoffs. It may be that one particular label works more effectively if you sacrifice a measure of thematic unity in order to sharpen the narrative arc. For a different label, you might have such a great first sentence that you just can't alter it, even though it dilutes the narrative arc somewhat. So this recipe for 100-word stories is exceedingly malleable. You can alter the ratio of the ingredients and/or substitute liberally as need, taste, and/or circumstances dictate.

Narrative Arc

That's fancy talk for saying the label needs a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning introduces a problem and a crisis, or an unresolved question. The middle describes the grappling with that unresolved problem, the attempts to rectify the imbalance.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Gettscho-Schlesinger Collection (LC-G622-T01-81482-DLC)



A stagecoach at Riverside, NY.

The finale reaches a point of equilibrium—not necessarily resolution, but at least a point of stability or of change. Something has changed; the universe of the story has been altered.

Sticking with the Dust Bowl label of the introduction, what's the narrative arc? Here's the text again:

First the rains stopped; then the land dried up and billowed. In those two cruel strokes, the Dust Bowl swept much of Baca County away. Swirling earth blackened the skies, jammed machinery, choked livestock, and stripped farmhouses free of paint. Since the first fields were plowed here in the 1880s, farmers had always lived with drought—but not on this scale. Half the county's residents drifted off between 1931 and 1936, often reaping no return on acreage their families had worked for 50 years. Those who remained were certain recovery lay just one thunder-shower away. But no one breathed easy until 1940, when Baca County soil finally brought forth a wheat crop—the first since 1932.

In the simplest terms, this narrative says:

Beginning: There was a famine.

Middle: The famine tested people's faith in the land and Providence.

End: The famine finally ended—having left a deep scar.

There is nothing too fancy about it. You can't (and shouldn't try to) get too fancy in 100 words. But thinking in terms of beginning/middle/end helps you make choices about what information to include in a label, and what information to leave off. It provides a through-line, a backbone, which every piece of information has to support. If it doesn't, the label sags.

Take a quick look at the first and last sentences of the Dust Bowl label, and note how the last sentence reflects back directly upon the first. Indeed, one could almost fuse the two sentences together to form a mini-narrative, viz.:

First the rains stopped; then the land dried up and billowed....no one breathed easy until 1940, when Baca County finally brought forth a wheat crop.

Use this fusion as a shorthand way of evaluating a

draft of a label. Ask yourself if the last sentence reflects back to the first one. If you only read those two sentences and nothing else, can you discern the outlines of a story? Consider these pairings:

Stricken with tuberculosis at 21, Doc Holliday came west in 1873 with the standard "lunger" prescription: get rest and fresh air.... By 1887 his ravaged lungs were beyond saving, and he expired within two months.

In the late 19th century, towns came and went in the San Juan Mountains as abruptly as gusts of wind.... But their remnants, still visible throughout the San Juans, bear powerful witness to the enterprising spirit of the frontier.

Castlewood Dam backed up enough water to irrigate 30,000 acres—or would have, if it didn't leak so badly.... the flood devastated farms in this area and tore out six bridges in Denver, thirty miles downstream.

In every case, the last sentence is a natural extension of the first. So no matter what information you pack in between, the whole thing is going to hang together.

Thematic Unity

More fancy language, which means, in this case, that a 100-word label can only be, ultimately, about one thing. In the Dust Bowl example above, the one thing is *the land blew away*. Look at how the word choices reinforce that unifying theme:

*First the rains stopped; then the **land** dried up and billowed. In those two cruel strokes, the Dust Bowl swept much of Baca County away. Swirling **earth** blackened the skies, jammed machinery, choked livestock, and stripped farmhouses free of paint. Since the first **fields** were **plowed** here in the 1880s, farmers had always lived with drought—but not on this scale. Half the county's residents drifted off between 1931 and 1936, often reaping no return on **acreage** their families had worked for 50 years. Those who remained were certain recovery lay just one thundershower away. But no one breathed easy until 1940, when Baca County **soil** finally brought forth a wheat crop—the first since 1932.*

The words in **bold** all refer to the land; the words in roman text, to wind. So the language itself is structured to reinforce the storyline of the Dust Bowl. Look at another example:

*Admirers said William "Billy" Adams **shot down** more bad laws than any legislator in Colorado history. During forty years as a state representative and senator (1886-1926), the Alamosa rancher won **countless battles** for his working-class constituents. He **muscled** wage supports, agricultural*

loans, child-labor laws, and mine-safety statutes through the legislature, as well as the bill authorizing Alamosa State College (now Adams State). Most important, he **led a heroic stand** against the Ku Klux Klan, whose allies controlled the legislature during the 1920s. Adams used parliamentary tactics to **beat back** the KKK faction and then, in 1927, defeated its candidate in the gubernatorial race. He served three terms in that office and retired in 1933, having never lost an election.

What do these words in **bold** tell you about Billy Adams? He was a strong man, a fighter. We could come right out and say that in a single expository sentence—“Billy Adams was a fighter”—but the statement has no resonance. Embedded within a narrative, in a suite of coordinated images, the assertion carries far more power and makes a much greater impact on the reader.

A Provocative First Sentence

A good first sentence has three main purposes. It should:

- A. Convey information,
- B. Raise an unanswered question (hook the reader), and
- C. Frame the theme of the story.

You can't always achieve all three of these objectives in a first sentence—indeed, sometimes you don't even want to achieve all three. But when I'm writing my first sentence, I always evaluate it in terms of these three criteria. Let's take them in order.

A. Convey information

In a 100-word label, there's no room to waste; every sentence has to convey information. But that doesn't mean every sentence has to be an expository statement of fact. On the contrary, you can pack plenty of information in a sentence that seems less a statement of fact than a flippant opinion, like this one:

Stagecoach passengers on the Butterfield Overland Despatch stood a better-than-even chance of surviving the journey to Denver.

There doesn't seem to be as much information in that sentence as there would be in a sentence such as “The Butterfield Overland Despatch operated from 1865 through 1870, carrying passengers from Joplin, Missouri to Denver.” Or this one: “From 1865 through 1869, the Butterfield Overland Despatch was the only regularly scheduled transportation service to the Rocky Mountain region.” But the sentence does convey a lot of facts; it just doesn't state any of them directly. It tells readers that:

- The Butterfield Overland Despatch was a stage-

coach line.

- It carried passengers to Denver.
- It crossed terrain that must have been dangerous.
- It operated in the nineteenth century.

The last bullet point, the time frame, is not stated directly, yet many readers will be able to infer it—they've watched enough Westerns to have formed a rough association between stagecoach travel and the nineteenth century, and/or they know enough about early Denver settlement to make the connection. (The panel appears at a roadside history exhibit near Denver.) Just to make sure no reader misses the point, the implied time frame will be made explicit in a later sentence:

Stagecoach passengers on the Butterfield Overland Despatch stood a better-than-even chance of surviving the journey to Denver. That was the good news. The bad news? They had to endure hour after punishing hour on the coach's wooden bench, bouncing over prairie trails in hot, dusty, stifling misery. Although Butterfield used that era's most comfortable coaches (Concords), travelers suffered from the very first mile. Even the price (\$75 one way from Kansas City) hurt. But travelers had no better option during the Butterfield's years of operation (1865-1870)—the railroads wouldn't be complete until 1870. And if they happened to pass the corpse-littered scene of an Indian attack, those road-weary passengers swallowed their complaints. Things could always get worse.

So while this first sentence does convey information, it defers certain pieces of “introductory” information (i.e., the time frame) in order to meet the other two objectives (i.e., raise an unanswered question and set up the rest of the story). This is a tradeoff that should be made consciously. You need to balance the three objectives.

Let's quickly look at another example:

Juan de Oñate may have built a fort beneath the Spanish Peaks in 1598—but maybe not.

Without having been told directly, the reader knows the following facts:

- Juan de Oñate lived in the late 1500s.
- Judging by his name, he was Spanish or Mexican.
- He must have been a soldier or explorer, because he built forts.
- He might have traveled in the vicinity of the Spanish Peaks.

We could state all those things directly: “In 1598, the Spanish conquistador Juan de Oñate led a group of 25 men from Santa Fe into this region.” But that wouldn't achieve Objective 1 (hook the reader) or Objective 2 (frame the story). To show you what I

mean, let's stick with this example.

B. Raise an unanswered question (hook the reader)

While the first sentence has to provide information—to fill gaps in the reader's knowledge—it's just as important for the sentence to create gaps in the reader's knowledge by asking an unanswered question. In this example, the unanswered question is explicit, "Did Juan de Oñate build the fort or not?" The reader's curiosity is naturally aroused, and he or she has a strong incentive to keep on reading—to get the answer to the unanswered question. That is the air of suspense mentioned in the previous subsection.

In this example, it so happens that we're unable to provide the answer to the unanswered question of the first sentence:

Juan de Oñate may have built a fort beneath the Spanish Peaks in 1598—but maybe not. Another Spanish explorer who ventured into this region, Antonio de Valverde, supposedly erected a post nearby in 1719. Who can say for sure? So many legends surround these mountains that it's impossible to tell fact from fiction. The Utes called them Huajatolla—"breasts of the earth"—and believed vengeful spirits haunted the slopes. Spanish prospectors coveted the peaks' treasures but dreaded their power; one explorer swore he saw fire shoot forth from the crest. Visible from 100 miles off, these landmarks guided 19th-century travelers, but most kept a respectful distance away just in case.

This is a question we can't answer. But that's kind of the point. In this case, the Spanish Peaks possessed a mystique, and even today there are legends and rumors about them that historians can neither confirm nor refute. (Note that most of the implied information in the first sentence is made explicit in the next sentence—Oñate was, indeed, a Spanish explorer.)

Take a look at this one:

Castlewood Dam backed up enough water to irrigate 30,000 acres—or would have, if it didn't leak so badly.

There is some good information here. Castlewood Dam was built to irrigate local farms, and it apparently had some structural problems. But what's going to keep people reading? Are the unanswered questions implied by the reference to the leak? Did the dam eventually burst? And, assuming that it did, what happened afterwards?

Castlewood Dam backed up enough water to irrigate 30,000 acres—or would have, if it didn't leak so badly. The seepage began the year the dam was completed (1890); within seven years, a 100-foot section of the earthen barrier had crumbled.

Engineers made repairs and vouched for the structure's soundness, and local farmers—who needed the water—trusted them, even though the leaking continued on and off for decades. On August 3, 1933, the inevitable happened. Castlewood collapsed, releasing a two-billion-gallon tidal wave down Cherry Creek. Only two people drowned, thanks to a switchboard operator's life-saving calls, but the flood devastated farms in this area and tore out six bridges in Denver, thirty miles downstream.

So the rest of the label provides the answers to the questions raised in the first sentence.

Note how many expository elements are slipped in throughout the narrative.

- Year of completion? **1890**
- Composition of the dam? **Earth**
- Stream dammed? **Cherry Creek**
- Location? **Thirty miles from Denver**

We might have dispensed with all this information in a single expository sentence: "Built in 1890 on Cherry Creek, 30 miles upstream of Denver, Castlewood Dam backed up enough water to irrigate 30,000 acres." Sure it's informative, but it's boring. It doesn't pique our interest or make us want to learn more about the subject.

C. Frame the story

Continue with the first sentence about Castlewood Dam. The choice of detail, and the presentation thereof, sets up this label as a story about misplaced faith in technology, about humankind's inability to ever truly tame nature, and about hubris and humility. If one wanted to frame the story differently—say, as a story about heroism in the face of calamity—one would make different choices in the composition of the first sentence.

So before you write that sentence, you have to know what kind of story you want to tell. The rest of the story should hang off that first sentence the way a coat hangs off a hook on the coat rack.

Beyond the 100th Word—the Untold Story

Consider the following 100-word story:

Stricken with tuberculosis at 21, Doc Holliday came west in 1873 with the standard "lunger" prescription: get rest and fresh air. Instead he drifted like a contagion, drinking and gambling his way from Dallas to Dodge City to Tombstone. Hot-tempered and reckless, he killed a poker rival in 1880, his first—and maybe last—murder; most of Holliday's attempts failed because his wheezing and boozing made him an unsteady shot. Still, he was dangerous—striking suddenly and at random,

making brave men uneasy, just like his disease. By 1887, when Holliday moved into the Hotel Glenwood, his ravaged lungs were beyond saving. He expired within two months.

A reader is going to form a certain impression of Doc Holliday from this label, but he or she also might come away with it with a few questions about the subject. For example:

- Where did Doc Holliday come from?
- Why did he ignore his doctor's orders?
- Why did he kill that rival poker player?
- Why didn't he go to jail for it?
- What's a lunger?

These are all good questions, and it is not bad that they're left unanswered. On the contrary, it's consistent with the storyline to leave them unanswered, insofar as the narrative equates Doc Holliday with an impersonal force of nature—a contagion, an epidemic. Who knows where a virus comes from? Who knows why it acts as it does? Doc Holliday always has been a mythic figure, and this label acknowledges and respects that status. He remains a sketchy, somewhat outsized figure in this telling. But the label still dispels the myth of the Wild West gunslinger as somebody endowed with superhuman powers. On the contrary, in this story the gunman is only too human—he is what he is because of his own mortality and his frailties. We don't encourage the reader to reflect on these things unless we leave a few blanks for him or her to fill in. So I would argue that the existence of these unanswered questions actually strengthens the label.

Unanswered questions also provoke curiosity and can motivate the reader to seek answers on his or her own, after leaving our exhibit—and that is surely one of our goals. However, if a given curator was uncomfortable with this level of ambiguity, unanswered questions can always be addressed without damaging the overall narrative:

Stricken with tuberculosis at 21, Doc Holliday came west from Philadelphia in 1873 with the standard prescription: rest and fresh air. Instead, seemingly gripped by a death wish, he drank and gambled his way from Dallas to Dodge City to Tombstone. Hot-tempered and reckless, he shot a man in 1880 during a cardroom dispute—Holliday's first, and maybe last, murder (he was acquitted on a self-defense plea). Most of his shootings failed because his wheezing and boozing unsteadied his aim. Still, he was dangerous—striking suddenly and at random, making brave men uneasy, just like his disease. By 1887, when Holliday moved into the Hotel Glenwood, his ravaged lungs were beyond saving. He expired within two months.

This version is only ten words longer than the original, but it addresses all of the questions on the bullet-pointed list above (answers in **bold**):

- Where did Doc Holliday come from? **Philadelphia**
- Why did he ignore his doctor's orders? **Seemed to have a death wish**
- Why did he kill that rival poker player? **Cardroom dispute**
- Why didn't he go to jail for it? **Pled self-defense**
- What's a lunger? **N/A**

The tradeoff here is that, in order to include the “death wish” text, we lose the “drifted like a contagion” metaphor. I think it's a losing exchange. To answer that question adequately, it would take a whole chapter (or more) of a book. It's a complex question without a pat answer. We only have enough space here to provide a hasty answer to the question, one that will still leave many readers unsatisfied. The contagion metaphor gets closer to the truth. He ignored the prescription for health because he was flat-out unhealthy. One might as well ask why a germ kills its own host, and thereby destroys itself. It's simply in the germ's nature to do so. Live for the moment and damn the consequences—that's as good an answer to the question as any.

Let's take another example:

In its own way, Brown's Hole circa 1890 was the very picture of frontier law and order. People generally got along with their neighbors and minded their own business, and no wonder—their business sometimes included cattle rustling, bank robbery, tax evasion, or worse. Safe from the authorities' prying eyes, wanted men such as Butch Cassidy, Black Jack Ketchum, and Isom Dart lived peacefully in this inaccessible valley. Almost everyone was welcome—except men with badges. One lawman who'd chased a fugitive across most of Wyoming stopped his pursuit when it reached Brown's Hole and handed the case off to a man named Philbrick—who was himself wanted in three states.

But hold on a second—

- Where was Brown's Hole?
- Who were Black Jack Ketchum and Isom Dart?
- Why didn't authorities just raid the place?
- Why did the law-abiding residents tolerate these criminals?

I cite this example to suggest other, non-textual ways of answering the questions. The first one is simple enough, include a map on or near the label that shows the location of Brown's Hole (it's in extreme northwestern Colorado). The second question can be answered in captions accompanying photographs of Ketchum and Dart (the former was a train robber, the latter, a cattle rustler). The third

All photos from Nevada State Museum, Carson City, NV



A narrative-driven label, if executed properly, can provoke a more powerful response in the audience than a traditional expository label and generate a stronger sense of identification with the exhibit.



In a 100-word label, there's no room to waste; every sentence has to convey information.



Labels that nudge readers to suspend disbelief can produce a depth of identification that's impossible to achieve with a more expository, objective approach.

question also takes a graphic answer. Topography made a raid out of the question, so a topographical map or illustration is in order. A caption might cite a description of the citadel's impregnability contained in a U.S. marshal's report.

As to the last question—I think this one is best left to the reader's imagination and curiosity. Much like the question of why Doc Holliday didn't obey his doctor's orders, this one admits no easy answers. There's a complex dynamic at work, one that would require many pages to illustrate adequately. It is best merely to drop a hint and try to prod readers to investigate on their own.

Conclusion

The point I would like to conclude with—one I've returned to throughout this essay—is tradeoffs. There's no right or wrong way to write an exhibit label, nor is there a hard delineation between an "expository" label and a "narrative" one. Most labels contain both elements out of necessity. The question the writer must answer is this: what is the proper balance to strike among these elements? What effect do I want to achieve? What do I want my audience to walk away with?

When we write, we compose a mosaic. We pick and choose the "tiles" (the words, facts, and images) we want to include, and which ones we want to withhold. We pick and choose the shape and arrangement of the tiles. In a 100-word label, the number of available tiles is far greater than the available space, so the use of one tile necessarily excludes the use of many others. That makes each choice an extremely important one. The key to writing good text is to make those choices deliberately—to weigh what is gained and what is lost if I swap out tile B for tile A; if I tilt a given tile at an angle instead of lodging it square; if I pack my tiles densely or disperse them unevenly.

If I follow this process, I end up with labels that make the most of that 100-word space—labels that not only convey facts but also hint at truths; labels that not only inform but also entertain, maybe even enchant.

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¹ Wallace Stegner, "On the Writing of History," *The American West* (Fall 1965): 7-8.

If You Can't See It Don't Say It

A NEW APPROACH TO INTERPRETIVE WRITING

KRIS WETTERLUND

Museum-Ed • Minneapolis

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Introduction

I have two books about writing. One, *If You Want to Write* by Brenda Ueland, who wrote that art and writing is a generosity: "... you tell somebody something not to show off, but because you want to share it with them."¹ The other, *Beyond the Writer's Workshop: New Ways to Write Creative Nonfiction* by Carol Bly, who gave this advice (so relevant for art museums) on proofing your final draft: "... it is a good idea to check for fancy tone possibly emanating from unpleasant psychological smoke."² Both of these are Minnesota women, and that's what I am. Midwestern, practical, plain spoken; and that's what you'll find in this guide. Interpretation is not information, as Freeman Tilden the great National Park Service interpreter tells us, it is revelation based on information; it is provocation rather than instruction.³ This guide is about interpretive writing, about practical ways to provoke our visitors to revelation about the works of art in our galleries. What you won't find here are guidelines about font, type size, etc. or strategies for producing layers of interpretation for entire exhibitions. Those guidelines are given elsewhere, and you can see those resources in the attached bibliography.

I came to this guide after putting on a two-day online conference about writing for museum educators. I created the conference because I was interested in writing, and the audience of 250 people convinced me that others were interested too. Next I taught several online interpretive writing workshops with Philip Yenawine, whose guide to writing for adult museum visitors was a great inspiration.⁴ The workshops were free, but participants had to apply and we received many more applications than we could accept. Later I started conducting interpretive writing workshops for art museum educators in real time, and I thought I might turn those workshops into a guide so that more people could participate.

What I've learned along the way is set down here. You'll read about ways to write about a work of art so that you can effectively share your ideas. Of course we seldom write about just one work of art, but writing about one work of art is a place to start, and you might later apply these ideas to a whole gallery, or an entire teacher packet. You may not be the one responsible for writing about art for your museum visitors, but that's no reason not to write anyway. Garrison Keillor, another Minnesotan, said that you never really know what you think until you put it into words. So even if you're not currently writing for visitors, write so that you know what you think about the art in your museum. Let's get started.

¹ Brenda Ueland, *If You Want to Write* (St. Paul: The Schubert Club, 1983), 163.

² Carol Bly, *Beyond the Writers' Workshop* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 126.

³ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977) 9.

⁴ Philip Yenawine, *Writing for Adult Museum Visitors; Thoughts on Writing in Museums*. Brooklyn: Visual Thinking Strategies, 1999.

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And finally an enormous thank you to Holly Witchey, my brave and generous friend who agreed to be an outside reader on the project and shared her wise and gentle feedback about drafts sent to her.

If You Can't See It Don't Say It

The first rule of writing about art, whether you're writing a gallery label, an audio script or copy for a Web site is: If you can't see it, don't say it. Never write about what the reader cannot see. At first this might seem too restrictive, but give it some thought. You'd be surprised what can be seen after all. Take a look at this former didactic label from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts:



Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin

French, 1699-1779

The Attributes of the Arts and the Rewards Which Are Accorded Them, 1766

Oil on canvas

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund 52.15

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

J. B. S. Chardin, born in Paris, had his first art instruction from his father, a master cabinetmaker. In 1713, he began his academic training, and achieved his first recognition in 1726. He was elected a member of the Académie Royale in 1728 and thereafter exhibited at the Paris Salons. He specialized in still life and genre and was championed by the encyclopedist Diderot. There are several extant versions of this subject, which features a plaster model of Pigalle's famous work. The Hermitage painting is closely related to Minneapolis's and has a provenance reaching back to Catherine II. It may well be the original Salon of 1769 work, though both pictures are signed and dated 1766. Neither should be confused with the Moscow canvas entitled *Attributs des arts avec une tête de Mercure en plâtre*, which shows a bust of Mercury, since this is not Pigalle's Mercury but, instead, a cast of a famous antique portrayal of the messenger of the gods. Recent studies suggest that Minneapolis's painting may in fact be a replica Chardin executed as a gift for Pigalle himself.⁵

⁵ *Interpretation at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts* (Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1993), 39.

See what happens here? There's hardly any point in looking at the picture at all. Here's another label for this painting after the Minneapolis Institute of Arts applied the "If you can't see it don't say it" rule.



Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin

French, 1699-1779

The Attributes of the Arts and the Rewards Which Are Accorded Them, 1766

Oil on canvas

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund 52.15

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

This picture may appear to reproduce the casual clutter of an 18th-century tabletop. Not so: Chardin carefully selected objects to convey specific meanings. A palette with brushes, placed atop a paint box, symbolizes the art of painting. Building plans, spread beneath drafting and surveying tools, represent architecture. An ornate bronze pitcher alludes to goldsmithing, and the red portfolio symbolizes drawing. The plaster model of J. B. Pigalle's Mercury, an actual work by a friend of Chardin's, stands for sculpture. The cross on a ribbon is the Order of St. Michael, the highest honor an artist could then receive. Pigalle was the first sculptor to win it. So this painting sends multiple messages: it presents emblems of the arts and of artists' glory and honors a specific artist, Pigalle.⁶

⁶ *Interpretation*, 38.

Here's another example that works, about a sculptural object from a different culture:



Chinese

Bowl, 18th century Nephrite

The John R. Van Derlip Fund and gift of the Thomas Barlow Walker Foundation
92.103.12

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

The form of this little bowl is based on a bronze food vessel used in ceremonies in ancient China. It was especially appealing for 18th-century Chinese scholars interested in studying antiques and collecting old objects, just as many of us are today. The owner of this bowl probably used it as a water container on a writing table in his study, displaying his appreciation of China's past. The subtle color, called "mutton fat" in Chinese, was preferred by 18th century collectors to the brilliant green and white colors of jade.

(Fictitious label, based on *Interpretation at The Minneapolis Institute of Art*)⁷

Notice that the label tells us Chinese scholars loved this kind of bowl because it represented their interest in ancient China. That's an example of using the label to say something about who might have owned a work of art, while sticking with what visitors can see: "It (this bowl) was especially appealing for 18th-century Chinese scholars..." The last sentence gets readers looking again at the bowl to examine its color.

There is plenty of evidence out there that visitors don't spend a lot of time reading labels in our galleries. But all the research that's been done on this topic seldom answers this question: are the labels interesting? One of the biggest reasons I think visitors don't read our labels is because there's nothing written on them about what the visitor is trying to understand – the work of art that goes with the label.

⁷ *Interpretation*, 40.

Simple, Core and Compact

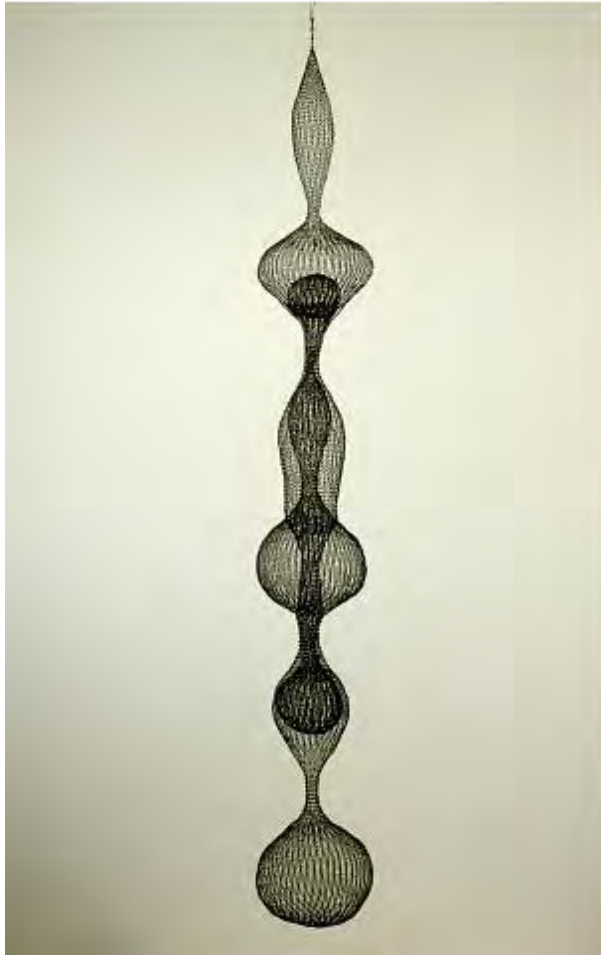
The next rule of writing for visitors is that the message must be simple, core and compact. Good examples of elegant simplicity are proverbs: a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. A proverb isn't a sound bite, it's an encapsulation of an abstract idea in a easily remembered, simple sentence. Visitors don't want our ideas simplified into sound bites, they need real information and insight. Our readers' problem isn't lack of intelligence, it is inexperience dealing with our subject matter. Simple means compact and elegant, not dumbed down information.

In their book *Made to Stick*, the Heath brothers wrote about a college journalism instructor who gave his students information about teachers at a local high school traveling out of town the following week to a national teaching convention. The instructor included the theme of the convention, and presentations that local teachers would make. Margaret Mead was a keynote speaker at the convention. The journalism students were to write leads for a news story in the community paper about the event, and when they turned in what they had written the instructor quickly reviewed them and set them aside. "The lead," he said, "is that there will be no school on Thursday."⁸

The core message is not necessarily subject of the text or a work of art. The core message is what the work of art or text means; in this case, there will be no school on Thursday. It isn't always easy to figure out, but it's worth working on to make your message both core and compact.

At the Oakland Museum of California, poet Jaime Cortez was hired to write "personal perspective" labels for pieces in the collection. Consider the way this label never veers away from the sculpture, and describes what it is, what it does, and what it means (the core message), "a winding map of transformation."

⁸ Chip and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick* (New York: Random House, 2007), 51.



Ruth Asawa
Untitled, 1959
H. 93 in.

Collection of Oakland Museum of California, gift of the
Women's Board of the Oakland Museum Association
A59.74

This is a hard working sculpture. It is defining an inside space without enclosing that space. It is turning its own shadow into art. It is showing you many faces as you circle it. It is taking the delicate art of crocheting and making it lift weights. Most of all, it is using one plain piece of wire to map a winding path of transformation.⁹

Put yourself in the visitor's shoes, and ask yourself: What is the essential question about this work of art? Or, ask yourself: What is the most interesting thing about this work of art? This is a good time to workshop your ideas, talk to your colleagues or visitors about your notion of the most interesting thing. Do they agree?

Visitors are depending on you to determine what is core about your message, and they will swallow it hungrily if you deliver it in a simple, elegant and compact package.

⁹ Gail Gregg, "Your Labels Make Me Feel Stupid," *Art News*, Summer 2010, <http://www.artnews.com/2010/07/01/your-labels-make-me-feel-stupid/>.

Schemas

Because most art museum visitors lack experience dealing with our subject matter, they can most easily stretch and build their understanding when the information starts with something they already know. As we experience the world, we all build schemas to organize and interpret information as it comes in. Tapping into these schemas helps build bridges for readers from what they already know to new concepts. For example, consider the following definition of pomelos:

Also called Shaddock, the largest fruit from the citrus family with a thick soft rind that is easy to peel away. The resulting fruit has a yellow to coral pink flesh and can vary from juicy to slightly dry, and from sweet to tangy and tart.

Do you have a picture in your head of a pomelo? What if I told you a pomelo is like a supersized grapefruit with a thick soft skin?



Analogies, comparing two different things in order to highlight some similarity, are very useful, because they can tap into our visitors' schemas – what our visitors already know. Describing the functions of the human brain by comparing them to functions of a computer is a popular analogy.

“Analogies prove nothing that is true,” wrote Sigmund Freud, “but they can make one feel more at home.”

One of my favorite didactic labels of all time taps into people's schemas, and is core and compact. This label isn't for one work of art, but rather for an exhibition at the Phillips collection. Notice how it sticks to what visitors to the exhibition will see.

El Greco to Picasso from the Phillips Collection

The contents of a stranger's shopping cart, the books in an acquaintance's living room—every collection of objects says something about its owner. This one is no exception.

Duncan Phillips put together his art collection like a host making a guest list—always searching for the right mixture, harmonious yet diverse. Looking through these rooms, you may notice his preferences. He had a weakness for color. He avoided art that he considered overly intellectual. He was drawn to emotion, wherever he found it: human gestures, haunting color, expressive brushstrokes.

What is it that makes you like the art you like? How much do your tastes match those of Duncan Phillips?

This label is so admirable because it starts with something most people know a little about – shopping and bookshelves. It's quite simple, only 110 words. It also begins in concrete rather than abstract terms, something we'll cover in the next section. When the label does venture into the abstract it gives an example. Art expresses emotion, but what does that really mean? In this label the abstract idea of emotion as expressed by art is laid out quite clearly and in more concrete terms: for Duncan Phillips, it meant human gestures, haunting color and expressive brushstrokes.

Concrete Versus Abstract

People are able to connect more easily to things that are concrete, especially unfamiliar things. If you want to explain something to a large group of people, the easiest language for them to understand is concrete language. That's one of the reasons Aesop's Fables are so enduring (the other reason is that they are stories, but we'll get to that later). Aesop's Fables take an abstract concept like "slow and steady wins the race" and put it into concrete terms. An oil painting is concrete, expressionist mood is not.

Related to the idea of instructional scaffolding in education, concreteness helps people build on their existing knowledge (schemas) to advance into abstract ideas. Abstraction is the luxury and the curse of experts. How many of us would care to read a peer-reviewed journal article about differentiating synchronic and diachronic analysis in semiotics? A professional chef wants to discuss the philosophy of haute cuisine, not swap recipes. The notion that abstraction is the luxury of experts might help to explain what happens when museum curators are in charge of writing for the general public.



Paul Cezanne
Still Life with Bottle and Apple Basket, 1890-94
Oil on Canvas
Private Collection

Ask yourself *why* to avoid the curse of the expert:

Expert: Paul Cezanne was influential in the development of the Cubist movement.

Why?

Expert: Objects in his paintings shift in and out of perspective.

Why?

Use this: He wasn't interested in how things looked, instead he tried to record the act of looking.

Concrete details help make lasting memories. Memory is like Velcro. Lots of little loops on the brain side of the tab connect with hooks created by experiences on the other side. Concrete experiences create lots of hooks to connect with the loops, and as a result stick one tab more firmly to the other. Try this exercise from *Made to Stick*.¹⁰ Answer the questions below by taking some time to think about each one.

¹⁰ Heath, *Made to Stick*, 110.

- What is the capital of Kansas?
- What is the first line of “Hey Jude”?
- What does the Mona Lisa look like?
- Remember the house where you spend most of your childhood.
- What is the definition of truth?
- What does a watermelon taste like?

As you moved through the questions, you probably noticed that it feels different to remember different kinds of things, depending on how concrete the answer is, whether you ever knew the answer in the first place, and how many hooks you already have in place to help you remember. We all use different parts of our brains to remember different things.

Remembering the house where you spent most of your childhood was probably pretty easy. All the different experiences you had in the house created lots of sticky Velcro hooks. The definition of truth was probably a lot harder – it’s an abstract concept. The Heath Brothers who wrote *Made to Stick* recommend that if you don’t know the Hey Jude song you trade their book for a Beatles album. They think you’ll be happier.

Helpful Topics

According to surveys conducted by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts,¹¹ visitors are most interested in reading and/or hearing about, in this order:

- Subject (a location, an environment, a person, a concept)
- Content (beauty, personality, repression)
- Function (a memorial, a portrait, worship, education)
- Cultural and historical context (the Italian Renaissance, the Mende people of west Africa, ancient Greece)
- Why the work is considered art and why it's in the museum
- The artist (statements that pertain to the work, intention and/or style, other related work by the same artist)
- Technique (materials, innovations, specialized methods)
- Economics (commissioned by ..., created for sale, created for trade)

Not helpful are

- Unsubstantiated assertions of aesthetic quality or judgments (masterpiece, most profound, naïve, primitive)
- Stylistic development (genre, "influenced by the Mannerists," Japonisme, in the Gothic style)
- Discussions of art theory ("...critical to the development of Analytic Cubism." "New class identities." "Included in the salon of 1866.")
- Lengthy artists' biographies
- Provenance ("the painting remained in the Valpinçon family until it was sold to ...")

Consider this sentence, written for the public about the Charleston period room at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts: "The outstanding quality of the rococo carving over the fireplace and the precise classical proportions of the woodwork were probably executed by the English trained craftsman Ezra Waite, who was responsible for numerous other prerevolutionary Charleston interiors." It covers every point on the unhelpful list, leaving the reader to wonder: so what?

A word about using artists' quotes. Visitors love to hear from artists, or at least that's what they will tell you. Often I think visitors ask for this information because they know to ask for it. They logically assume that since an artist made it, the artist must be able to explain what it means. People know to ask for what they know about, they can't ask for what they don't know about. Confirming my suspicion, Reach Advisors report that in a survey of 40,000 visitors, what museum visitors say they want is different from what they actually found meaning in.¹²

¹¹ *Interpretation*, 34.

¹² Reach Advisors, "The Lens of Meaningful Experience," accessed September 1, 2013. http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum_audience_insight/2012/10/the-lens-of-meaningful-experiences.html.

“Silhouettes are reductions, and racial stereotypes are also reductions of actual human beings.”

– Kara Walker



If you think about it, giving people what they ask for misses the opportunity to use our specialized expertise to amaze and astound them with fascinating new information. Of course if you have an artist's quote that actually sheds light on a work of art, by all means use it. But not all artists are great at talking or writing about their work. If they were, they might be writers or performers instead of visual artists.

Regarding unsubstantiated assertions of aesthetic quality or judgments, visitors do not like to be told what to think or how to feel. Put the emphasis on unsubstantiated here. If you'd like to tell people that something is a masterpiece, or that a work of art is designed to create discomfort, tell them why and/or how. Taking the time to explain these things moves your writing from unsubstantiated assertions of aesthetic quality or judgments (the not helpful list) into explaining why something is considered art and why the museum decided to display or own it (the helpful list).

Kara Walker
The Rich Soil Down There, detail 2002
Image courtesy of Lori L. Stalteri, Flickr

Journalism Is Not a Model

According to Beverly Serrell in *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, journalism is not a good model for interpretive writing. “It is a bad model because newspaper articles are written with the assumption that most readers will not read the whole thing. After the headline or subhead that communicates a short teaser or summary, the body of the article that follows has the most important information up front, then goes into detail, often repeating information.”¹³

Interpretive writing should start with the details and then move out to more general information. For a perfect example of this, we can take a page from *National Geographic Magazine*. The folks at National Geographic know that their readers flip through the magazine looking at pictures and reading the captions, and then decide if they want to read the whole article. As a result, they have become masters at caption writing; they start with the details and add more information about the subject of the picture at the end. Let’s deconstruct this example:

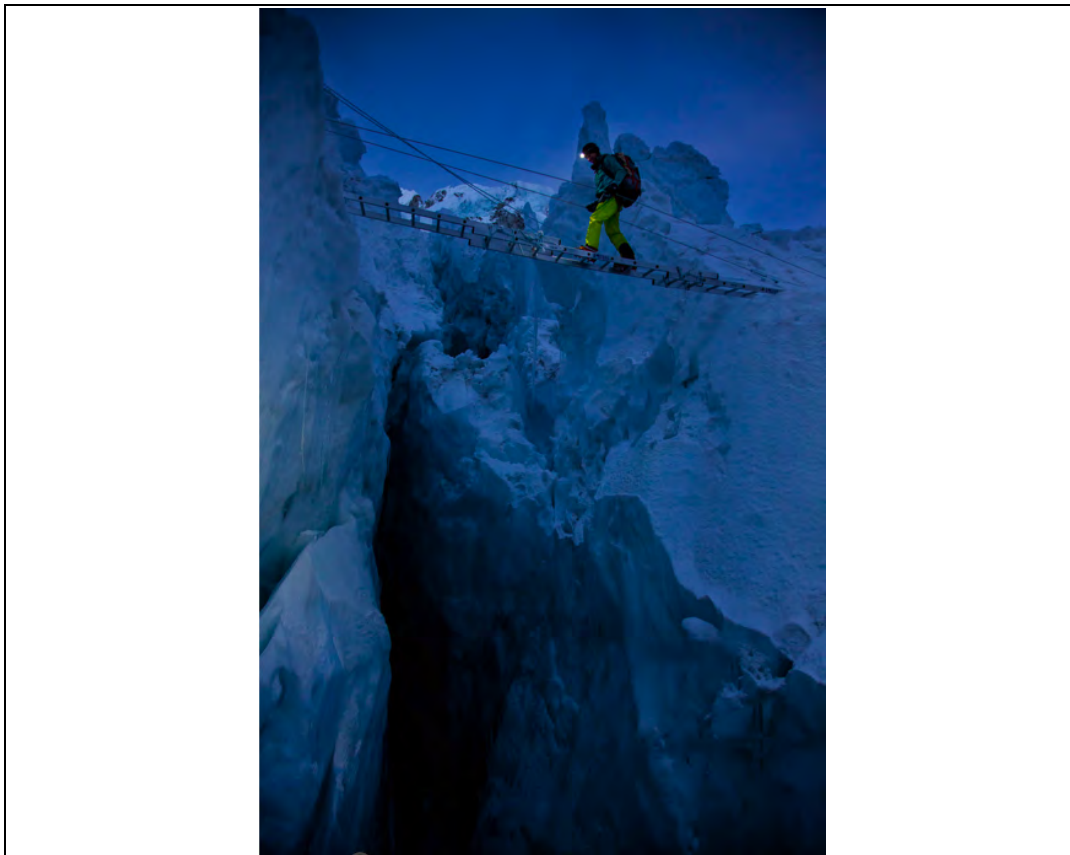


Photo: Andy Bardon / National Geographic Creative

Team member Hilaree O’Neill steps across a bridge of aluminum ladders lashed together above a crevasse in the Khumbu Icefall. Considered one of the most unpredictable hazards on Everest, the icefall is an ever shifting labyrinth of loose, jagged blocks.¹⁴

¹³ Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Walnut Creek CA: AltaMira Press, 1996), 90.

¹⁴ Caption from "Maxed Out on Everest," *National Geographic* (June 2013)

The first sentence of this caption, part of a story about climbing Mount Everest, tells you in very compact terms not only what you are looking at, but exactly who it is. That helps you connect with the human part of the story. But where is the Khumbu Icefall and what is an icefall? That's answered in the next sentence, but notice that the second sentence doesn't start out answering the where and what question. It grabs your attention by putting this information first: Considered one of the most unpredictable hazards on Everest.

Here's another one:



Photo: Rob Leeson, Newspix/Rex USA

Australia—Anzac the kangaroo and Peggy the wombat—each about five months old—snuggle at the Wildabout Wildlife Rescue Centre in Kilmore, Victoria. Both animals' mothers were killed by cars. Officials hope to return them to the wild eventually.¹⁵

This is not just any kangaroo and wombat. This is Anzac and Peggy. The first sentence of the caption helps us make that human connection by disclosing the human names bestowed on these two animals. We don't need to wonder where the Wildabout Wildlife Rescue Center is, because the "dateline" beginning, Australia – answers that question. But why are Anzac and Peggy in a rescue center? The second sentence holds the answer: their mothers were killed by cars. Notice that these animals weren't "orphaned." Their mothers were killed by cars. Being very specific in this case helps send an emotional message to readers, quite possibly encouraging them to be more careful with their cars. What will happen to Anzac and Peggy? The third sentence answers that question.

Go to the library or head to the bookstore and pick up a copy of National Geographic. Study the way the photo captions anchor the reader with specific visual information first, go from the specific to the more general, anticipate the readers' questions about the image and answer those questions in compact and concrete ways.

¹⁵ Anzac and Peggy Caption from "Visions of the Earth," *National Geographic* (June 2013).

The Power of the Unexpected

Surprise at the beginning gets our attention. Interest keeps our attention. Surprise at the end is like a little gift for reading the whole thing. Or in this example, watching the whole thing.



<http://youtu.be/7HMHJ4UTLXM>

My favorite label from the Schemas chapter uses the power of the unexpected right up front. You wouldn't expect a label that introduces an exhibition to begin: "The contents of a stranger's shopping cart, the books in an acquaintance's living room..." Readers are compelled to keep reading to find out what this surprising beginning has to do with the exhibition. To avoid being gimmicky and make sure that the surprise produces insight, it's targeted at the core message of the exhibition: it's a collection.

According to the Heath brothers in *Made to Stick*, the most basic way to get someone's attention is this: Break a pattern. Humans adapt incredibly quickly to consistent patterns, like the art historical drone of didactic labels in an art museum, for example. The only time we become consciously aware is when the pattern changes.¹⁶

Related to this idea are mysteries. Have you ever sat through a stupid movie or TV show that you couldn't quit watching just because you had to know what happened? Gaps in understanding cause discomfort. We need to close them. To hold a reader's interest, create a gap and then close it. Mysteries are perfect for this; they're so powerful because they create a need for closure. The Aha! experience is much more satisfying when it's preceded by a Huh? experience. Art museums are filled with mysteries. Interpretation is fluid and subjective. It changes over time and offers great opportunity for mysteries. Conservation is more commonly thought of as the core message

¹⁶ Heath, *Made to Stick*, 127.

of zoos and, to a lesser extent, science museums, but the art conservation lab is like the CSI of art museums. Share these activities with your readers, and help them solve the mysteries of the art museum. For example:

The day this Chinese bronze vessel arrived in the Walters Art Museum conservation lab, it came with a mysterious message. The museum's director, who delivered the vessel, said he had some questions about it and ask if conservators could investigate its origins.

So begins the text in the Walters Art Museum's [Integrating the Arts](#) online unit for students.¹⁷ The online program proceeds to walk students through all the steps that conservators took to answer the question: real or fake? The program is written for middle school students and their teachers, but could also easily be a mini-exhibit in the museum.



¹⁷ The Walters Art Museum, "Integrating the Arts: China" accessed September 1, 2013 <http://thewalters.org/integrating-the-arts/china/>

Help Readers Care

Caring is part of interest. People get interested and keep reading because they care. You can help people care about what they read by making it personal and emotional. Remember the picture of Anzac and Peggy? Part of what helped us care about what would happen to them is that the caption called them by name – human names. Reading about Anzac and Peggy is so much more personal than reading about a kangaroo and a wombat. Even though analysis is a lot of what we do in art museums, reading about it turns people off, it's too impersonal. Consider this example:

There were 16.7 million cars registered in Australia in 2012, up 13.3% since 2007. As a result, cars killed millions of animals last year.

Anzac and Peggy need your help. Their mothers were killed by cars.

Which makes you care more? Making Anzac and Peggy's story personal also makes it emotional. One of the ways this works is by addressing the reader directly. Use the word YOU whenever you can, as in "Anzac and Peggy need your help."

For art museums, this means adopting an active voice. Don't write "It interesting to note..." instead write "You might find it interesting..." You can create triggers to action by directly telling people where to look or what to do. "Look at the fleur-de-lis on the mast of the ship. They're a symbol of France." Don't write "We've created an audio tour..." Instead write "You'll enjoy listening to our audio tour."

According to [Grammar Girl](#)¹⁸ an active voice means that the subject of the sentence is doing the action: Kris loves museums. In the passive voice, the receiver of the action, museums receiving love, gets promoted to the subject position: Museums are loved by Kris.

TIP!

To write in a more active voice, go through your text and remove the words "that" and "then" where ever you can. You'll find ~~that~~ you don't need to replace them, and removing them will ~~then~~ make your message more compact and your voice more active.

The passive voice is usually harder to understand for the general population. But Grammar Girl notes: "An exception is that scientists are often encouraged to write in passive voice to lend their writing a sense of objectivity—to take themselves and their actions and opinions out of the experimental results." Does this sound familiar? It should, because a lot of art historians write in the passive voice too.

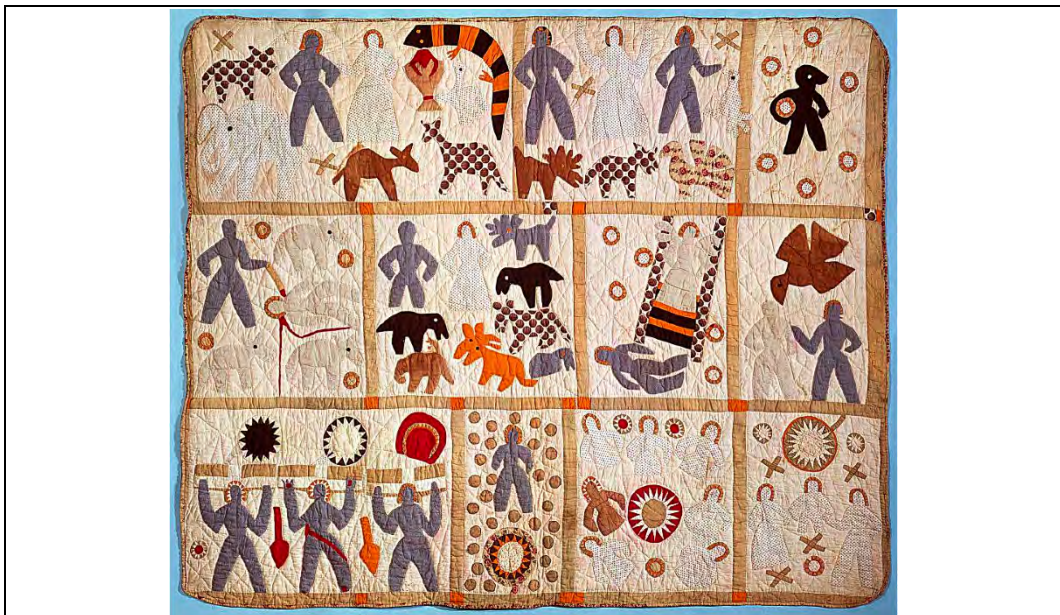
The musical iconography of Cubism has often been the subject of general discussion. Only recently, however, has a picture of the artists' musical inclination during the early Synthetic Cubism years begun to emerge. This expanded vision is based largely on the lettered names of composers and song title, and on the inclusion of collaged portions of sheet music found in many of these compositions.¹⁹

¹⁸ Grammar Girl, accessed September 1, 2013 <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/active-voice-versus-passive-voice>.

¹⁹ *Art History*, Vol. 19 No. 1, March 1996. 102.

This kind of writing might be fine for art historians, but given to our visitors is it any wonder that many are surprised to hear about all the people who work in art museums? People want to hear from other people. We can make our museums and our writing more interesting by making it personal, from one person to another. This often requires that we adopt a point of view. Take a stand, reject objectivity, let readers know there's a real person behind the writing. The current fashion in some museums is for the authors of didactic labels to sign their work to achieve this understanding. But take a closer look at the content of the label. If authors continue to produce incomprehensible art history gobble-dee-gook, and then sign the label to add a personal touch, we still haven't achieved our aims.

Appealing to reader's emotions helps them care more about what they're reading and by extension, looking at. Research also suggests that emotional ideas are more memorable, and that readers rate emotional parts of text as more important. One of the ways to tap into the strength of emotions and to create empathy is by asking your reader to imagine. The following example represents an obvious and compassionate point of view, and asks readers to imagine:



Harriet Powers, Athens, Georgia
Bible Quilt, 1886-1886
Cotton
National Museum of American History

In 1890 Harriet Powers fell on hard times. A white art teacher named Jennie B. Smith admired Harriet's bible quilt at a local fair and Harriet accepted five dollars for it. Jennie entered the quilt in the Cotton States Exposition, where a group of women from Atlanta University saw it and commissioned Harriet to make another. Eventually this quilt made its way to the Smithsonian, and the other was given to Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. That is all we know about the needlework of Harriet Powers. We can only imagine what other quilts she might have made.²⁰

(Fictitious label, adapted from The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art, Penguin Books, 1998)

²⁰ The Guerrilla Girls', *Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1998) 54-55.

Another way to create an emotional connection is to appeal to your reader's identity. John Falk has done a lot of research regarding museum visitors and identity, theorizing that museums have something to contribute to visitors' idea of who they are – their identity as art lovers.²¹

In *Made to Stick*, the Heath brothers share a story about a math teacher trying to come up with an answer that would satisfy his students' questions: Why should we study algebra? When will we ever use it? In 1993 a group of math teachers pondered the question and came up with this: "Algebra provides procedures for manipulating symbols to allow for understanding of the world around us." Not very satisfying for high school algebra students. Another reason commonly cited for studying algebra: "Every future math and science class you take will require a knowledge of algebra." Also not exactly satisfying, especially if you're more interested in literature, art or the social sciences. It wasn't until the math teacher came up with this that students were finally motivated to study algebra: "Math is mental weight training."²² This winning reason taps into kids' schemas about weight lifting. Learning algebra, it suggests, makes you realize more of your potential, a powerful goal for most people, including kids. If we can help art museum visitors realize more of their potential as art lovers, they'll likely form a stronger connection to what we have to say.

²¹ John Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009).

²² Heath, *Made to Stick*, 125.

Authenticity

Lack of authenticity implies a lack of respect for your audience. If you don't believe what you're writing, your readers won't believe it either. Consider the math example we just read about: "Algebra provides procedures for manipulating symbols to allow for understanding of the world around us." Really? Do you know anyone who manipulates algebraic symbols in order to understand the world around them? There's a reason that we (and also the kids it's supposed to address), see right through this. It's not authentic.

Writing authentically helps fix the potential problem of talking down to your readers too. If you don't respect your readers they won't respect what you have to say. Remember the TV show "Frasier?" The show was under some pressure to halt the highbrow language and tone of Frasier Krane and his brother Niles, for fear the TV audience wouldn't get it. But Kelsey Grammer, who played Frasier Krane, refused. "I am solidly convinced, and I always will be, that the audience is hungry for us to play up to it," said Kelsey Grammer. "They are engaged by language that is not commonplace. I think they find intelligence fascinating. Most people do. The most interesting thing people do, after all, is think."²³ And he was right. "Frasier" was on for 11 years and won numerous Emmy, Golden Globe and other awards.

The best advice I've seen on writing authentically is to write the way you talk. Your interpretive writing should be a conversation with the reader. As museum educators, we all try to be friendly experts when it comes to our visitors, and we care intensely about meeting the visitors where they are. Write as if you are talking to a visitor, sharing your enthusiasm about art, and your writing will be authentic.

Questions on labels or in text produced for students, teachers or in a gallery guide are fine, but only if they're authentic. Too often questions appear written on labels or gallery guides that ask in various ways: What do you think? It's a rhetorical question, there's really no one there to hear your

answer and so it becomes an empty exercise. Worse, it implies that you haven't been thinking up to that point and now you should think, which is downright insulting. Questions are good if they are authentic. Go back to my favorite label as an example. Remember that the label tells you a bit about Duncan Phillip's tastes in collecting art and then it ends with an invitation in the form of a question: compare your tastes with Duncan Phillip's. It's an enticing idea – pretend you're filthy rich and reviewing a friend's collection – would you have collected the same?

The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers.

– *James Baldwin*

²³ Bruce Newman, "All in Their Family," LA Times, March 1, 1998 accessed September 1, 2013. <http://articles.latimes.com/1998/mar/01/entertainment/>.

Storytelling

We think in stories. Call them schemas, scripts, cognitive maps, mental models, metaphors, or narratives, they are how we explain the world to ourselves and share our worldview with others. We tell ourselves stories about our selves (identity), stories about the world (perceptions), stories about others (relationships), and stories about our experiences (interpretation). This hard wired impulse, to document and share our

experiences, is at the root of all of the arts. At the same time we are attracted to seeing the world through another person's eyes. Listening to someone else's stories is like being in a flight simulator trying out a flight path. Stories are simulations we run on the mental machinery of our own imaginations. Because of the human attraction to stories, storytelling is a powerful way to connect with visitors.

When we tell the story of a work of art, it creates personal, emotional and memorable pathways to meaning. Consider the story of Harriet Powers and her quilts. Because that interpretation was written as a story, with a particular point of view, it is so much more powerful than an analysis of the iconography found on the quilt. In fact, connecting with Harriet Powers might make you curious to know more about the iconography on the quilt!

TIP!

Do you admire someone else's writing? Would you like your writing to reflect the same tone? Copy it. I mean literally, type out the text you admire. Copy a paragraph or two and when you work on your own writing the tone will carry over. I don't know why this works, it just does.



Photography of Lascaux Cave Painting, Professor saxx.

Have you ever noticed that when we talk about the power and science of stories, the cave paintings at Lascaux (France) are often present? Pictures of the cave paintings appear as illustrations to articles and on the cover of books about storytelling. The cave paintings are presented as evidence of our history of storytelling, evidence that from the beginning we've told stories. But the cave paintings are not stories. They are paintings. They've become evidence of our storytelling as a species because of the stories we tell about them. Let that sink in. If anything should convince you of the power of the connection of art and stories, that should be it.

Checklist

Here's a list of everything covered in this guide. Use it as a checklist to score your writing about a work of art. Not all of the items on the list are required, but the more the better.

- Simple
- Core
- Compact
- Schemas
- Concrete
- Unexpected
- From Details to General
- Personal
- Emotional
- Active
- Appeals to Readers Identity
- Authentic
- Tells a Story

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Resources

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For back issues of the *Exhibitionist* cited in this article contact Whitney Watson at wmw@mkohistory.org. Back issues are \$10 each.

For back issues of *Museum News* cited in this article contact the AAM Bookstore, 202-289-9127 or aam-us.org.

For back issues of the *Journal of Museum Education* contact http://www.spry.org/publications/Background_Book.pdf.

For Monterey Bay Aquarium resources contact Elizabeth Labor, Monterey Bay Aquarium, 886 Cannery Row, Monterey, CA 93940, Tel: 831-648-4843, Fax: 831-644-7583 or elabor@mbayaq.org.

ONLINE TOOLS

Grammar Girl, Active Voice Versus Passive Voice.

<http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/active-voice-versus-passive-voice>.

Fry's Readability Graph. <http://www.millerandlevine.com/stpaul/readabilityscores.pdf>.

Online readability calculator. <http://www.editcentral.com/gwt1/EditCentral.html>.

FOR FUN

Arty Bollocks Generator. <http://www.artybollocks.com>

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About the Author

Kris Wetterlund is a founder and current Editor of Museum-Ed, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing museum educators opportunities to ask questions, to exchange ideas, to explore current issues, to share resources, to reflect on experiences, and to inspire new directions in museum education.

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