



10 Top Tips for Museum Interpretation

For everyone working on displays,
learning resources or other
interpretive materials.

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Tip 1: Aims and Objectives

Start your project by asking what your visitor wants, rather than what you or the museum needs!

Most interpretation projects are team efforts. You might work with a group from your own team, or there could be external partners involved. At the beginning, everyone will have their own ideas about what they want from this project. But who will champion what is best for your visitors?

If you are not careful, it is possible that individual, personal, or organisational objectives will overshadow what you do. That is why it is so important to start a project by setting aims and objectives based on what your visitors will get out of it, rather than concentrate solely on what your museum would like to achieve. Once these are agreed among your team, they are the common ground shared by everyone. Not only will you be able to produce a better interpretation project with a clear vision – it will also help you work out any individual differences among your team.

In practice...

To help museums think about the objectives of our interpretation projects, MLA has come up with a framework called "Generic Learning Outcomes", or GLOs. These are meant as helpful pointers reminding us about what kind of benefits our projects can deliver for our visitors. Not every project will deliver all of these outcomes – but it is a good starting point to asking the right questions:

Knowledge & Understanding What kind of information (facts, messages, ideas) will visitors get and take away? How does the information help visitors make sense of complex situations?	Skills Following a visit, what kind of skills might people have developed as part of their visit? Are visitors encouraged to try and do new things?
Attitudes & Values What kind of attitudes, perceptions and opinions do we want visitors to develop about the subject or our organisation? How will people feel during their visit?	Enjoyment, Inspiration, Creativity What do we do to help our visitors think creatively and express their creativity? How much fun is this project? Do we surprise and challenge our visitors?
Activity, Behaviour & Progression How do we want people to behave during their visit? What would we like our visitors to do (differently) as a result of their visit?	

Tip 2: Your Audience

Really good interpretation is accessible to all – but tailored to the needs of specific groups of people!

We try to make interpretation suitable for everyone from toddlers to the elderly, from enthusiasts to the disaffected. Of course, we want access for all – not just because we are legally obliged, but also because we want everyone to enjoy their visit.

Unfortunately, there is no “one size fits all” when it comes to museum displays - no matter how big or how small the project may be. Unless you identify your target audience and tailor your work to what they find exciting, you will face the danger that the end result is “ok” for all, but no one really likes it.

In practice...

When you have decided on your target audience(s), you can create a simple table to help you think about their specific needs. Here is an example of what such a table might look like:

Audience Group	Physical	Sensory	Intellectual	Other
Young families	Safe for children Low level displays Comfortable	Emphasis on interactivity Bright, colourful designs	Opportunities for joint family learning and play Avoid written text	Time-pressures, might prefer short bursts of visits
Local retired couples	Overall good physical access More seating	Replicate all key info to be sound and text	Might value more detailed info Avoid high-tech	Potential repeat visitors Potential volunteers
Individual tourists visiting the area	Good orientation (signage, plans)	Attractive marketing to entice visits	Need good introduction Make links to national events	Souvenirs Might appreciate info about other local destinations

The information on what your target audience really needs may come from your experience of observing them, or research from other sites that you can use. If you think that you need to do your own research – the best way is to ask a Focus Group.

Focus Groups do not have to be expensive or time consuming. They can be informal discussions with a group of people who know about the needs of your target audience. You probably already have volunteers who can help make contacts among their friends and families. If that does not work, the best tip is to approach existing groups for help. Often the promise of refreshments and the opportunity to have special access to your museum is enough to convince people to help you.

Tip 3: Key Message

Decide on one overall message that you would like to get across before you start planning the details of your interpretation.

You have probably been to exhibitions in the past where you saw a lot of interesting information. Yet, a few days later you could not remember any of it.

Research into the way we learn suggests that we don't recall facts and figures easily. Instead we store a maximum of four messages – themes that we take away as learnt. For example, visitors may recall that they would not have like to eat the food served in a Victorian workhouse. However, it might be more difficult to remember what exactly was served. Good interpretation uses our understanding of the way we learn to create displays that communicate particular messages to the visitor. Thus, we can influence what people learn more effectively.

The best interpretive messages are relevant, revealing and exciting.

In practice...

Just imagine - your museum has acquired a new collection of 19th century flat irons from a local collector. To celebrate his donation, you agreed to put on a small display in your museum. Here is just one example of how small changes in the interpretive message can make a big difference to your display:

Option A:

House work in Victorian England required a lot more effort than we use today.

The display could explore how well the flat irons would do the job, what the risks of their use were, how heavy they are, or how long it would take to prepare them. All that would need to be compared to today's methods to make the point.

Option B:

Some Victorians called these "sad" irons – wouldn't you?
The display could use historic accounts to show the use of the name and explain where it came from. Maybe there are other tools that have unusual names. Draw on the modern interpretation and how it reflects on their use in comparison to modern appliances.

Checklist:

When you create your display ask yourself what would be the one thing you wish visitors to remember about seeing the display after their visit

Is your message relevant to your visitors? Be realistic and ask yourself: so what?

Does your message reveal something interesting about the subject that people would not normally know?

Check with fellow volunteers: can they tell from your display what your message is?



Tip 4: Story Telling

To make your interpretation more engaging, you can learn from the art of story telling.

There are two constant truths about interpretation. Firstly, visitors enjoy hearing about people more than objects or abstract ideas. And secondly, memorable interpretation engages a visitor both

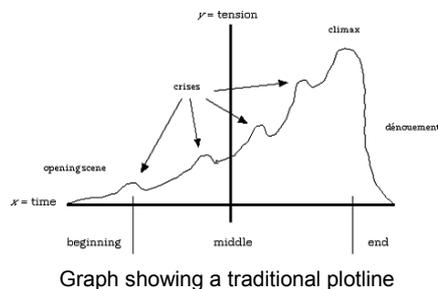
Key components for story telling in museums...

Persons, around which the story revolves, especially focusing on their individuality or characteristics

A plot or storyline that has a linear flow – from the start or introduction, to the central part in which actions take place, and finally the end that is either a revelation or a resolution

The method of delivery – for example, this could be a first person account, or told with an all-knowing narrator.

Just like a narrator, your displays can use dramatic techniques to draw your audience into the story. You can use lighting, dramatic pauses, images etc. Consider Who will your visitor empathise with – and therefore, who will they care about the most?



Checklist:

What kind of emotions will your characters evoke in your visitors? How does that support your interpretive objectives and messages?

What does the development of the main characters tell your visitor about your chosen subject?

Historic or thematic research is likely to give you a good start (setting the scene) and a proper end (the final outcome). Given the characters involved, plot your story along the main events or milestones to develop your storyline.

What is the most dramatic moment in the development of your story? How do you communicate your story's climax?

Does your story offer an opportunity to surprise your visitors?

How much do you help your visitors create the world of your story in their minds? (Images, using evocative language, etc.)

"The Art of Storytelling" at Delaware Art Museum

In 2007, the museum delivered a new kind of interpretation project. Instead of providing visitors with information, the team encouraged local groups to compose their own stories inspired by the exhibits. The groups started to think about the objects more critically. They asked questions and explored aspects, which the museum team had not thought of before. Then, they wove the information into a narrative. In the second part of the project, other visitors read these stories as part of the interpretation. Instead of a single, factual account, visitors were given many different view points and stories.



The project was hailed as a great success. Most importantly, it encouraged people who would not normally visit the gallery to get involved. But critics say that it does not encourage people to learn about the objects anymore, because the role of experts is diminished. Some think it is the future of interpretation. Others think, it is the end of it.

What do you think?

Tip 5: People Interpretation

All interpretation is communication; and well-trained people are the best communicators.

How much text did you read the last time you visited a museum? While we may cherish traditional interpretive media such as panels or guide-books, the reality is that our visitors are more likely to remember and enjoy the information we give them, if it is communicated by another person. Our lifeless interpretive media is just a substitute.

To some extent, new technology can help museums. You might choose to offer interactive videos or high-tech simulations. But technology, while being expensive, cannot replace real interaction with another human being. A knowledgeable and friendly volunteer, curator or interpreter will be able to tailor the information and respond directly to people's interests.

Live Interpretation in practice...

Step 1: Gather inspiration

If you are not sure about how live interpretation works, the best way to get ideas is to see it in action. Take your project team to see a live interpreter and discuss what you like or dislike about the performance.

Step 2: Decide on how you would like to deliver live interpretation

Scripts – a piece is researched, scripted and learned line for line. With background information, the interpreter can answer questions after the presentation.

Researched free flow – the interpreter researches the subject well, and then, in character, imparts that knowledge to the audience through a presentation or talk.

Improvisation - the interpreter is armed with information and improvises a piece based on what they feel the audiences needs are

Living history - the interpreter sets about day to day tasks from a relevant period of history. They can either ignore the public, or interact with them in character

Tours in character – a tour of the museum is given with the tour guide in costume and as a character that is relevant, giving valuable insights into the building and its use

Step 3: Decide what level of authenticity

Once you have made a decision, stick to it. Don't mix and match objects or clothing to make life easier as it will only confuse your visitors.



Good and bad examples of costumed interpretation...

Tip 6: Script Writing

Most interpretive script should resemble the way we speak rather than the way we write.

Museums have a reputation for providing well-researched, balanced and authoritative information about a given subject. After all, our visitors rightly expect high quality research. This is becoming even more important as the internet offers easy-access to a wealth of information, some of which is not as rigorously checked as the information we use for interpretation. However, this does not mean that our interpretation should resemble an academic paper on the subject.

The style of language you use must reflect your chosen medium, and how your visitors will access the information. Visitors require well structured and easy-to-digest language that reflects the way in which they use the space. An average visitor might spend as little as 3 seconds looking at a graphic panel before browsing to the next area. If we can't grab their attention immediately, we are likely to cater only to the most dedicated of our audiences – and lose everyone else.

Writing text panels in practice...

Streakers, Strollers & Studiers!

Research into visitor behaviour has distinguished these three types of visitors based on how long they spend reading text in museum displays.

To cater for all three types of users give your text panels a clear hierarchy of text:

1. Single line, attention grabbing title (streaker)
2. No more than 50 words summary (stroller)
3. No more than 250 words script (studier)

Keep It Short, Make Everything Tell!

Before you start scripting your panel set yourself an ambitious word limit: the shorter, the better.

No single interpretive panel should carry more than 300 words including titles and summaries! If it needs to be longer, then a graphic panel is not the right medium to use. Remember, keep it clear and to the point. And use simple and short sentence structures.

Always active – never passive!

Our historic sources often speak in a passive voice. In order to create interesting and people focused interpretation, it is vital to change that into an active mode for our displays.

For example, you might change:

Hilltops were often chosen as settlement locations.

Into:

Iron Age settlers chose to live on hilltops.

Grab that headline!

Every panel should have a clearly identifiable title. This is the first thing a visitor will see and it must achieve two objectives:

- Grab people's attention
- Give a flavour of what the panel is about

Think "newspaper headline" rather than "essay title".

Tip 7: Accessibility

Making your interpretation accessible helps everyone – not just those visitors with special needs.

First of all: making sure no one is unreasonably excluded from your museum is a legal responsibility according to the Disability Discrimination Act. But making your interpretation more accessible will help everyone: the family with a toddler in a buggy, the visitor in a rush who takes in only the most obvious information, the group of friends who look for things to do together, etc. etc. The best way to ensure your displays are accessible is to work with people who have experience of special access needs. No one can think of everything there is to consider – even though there is plenty of excellent guidance available. But remember, access is very personal and individual. What suits one person, might not suit the next.

The key to an accessible museum is the attitude of your staff and volunteers – from the front of house teams to the backroom support; from the gardeners and cleaners to the managers and Trustees.

In practice...

To help you with your interpretation, here are some practical tips to making it more accessible:

Graphic style:

- Avoid any **COMPLICATED** fonts
- If possible, use “sans serif” fonts such as Verdana, Arial, Berlin, Candara, or Tahoma
- Make the size of the text as big as possible
- Do not CAPITALISE your titles
- Avoid *italics* or underlining of text. If you wish to emphasise something use larger font or **bold**
- Align your text to the left
- Allow for visual breaks in the text such as paragraphs and line-spacing
- Make sure the text has a good contrasting colour to the background, and the background is not too complicated

Physical layout:

- All routes through your display should be at least 1200mm wide
- A suitable gradient for a ramp is 1:15 – that means a 1m ramp would negotiate about 67mm in height
- Try to keep all interpretation at a viewing height of between 800mm and 1800mm
- The reach of a seated person is roughly between 600mm and 1200mm

Lighting

- Try to avoid any glare or shadows. It’s the contrast that most people find difficult to adjust to rather than light levels by themselves

... and finally,

The more varied your interpretation is—even if it means saying the same thing twice—the better!

Tip 8: Design Approach

When it comes to dressing your display cases: continue following-through with your interpretive ideas.

We have plenty of good reasons why we want to cram as much as possible into our display cases. Unfortunately, over-crowded cases are rarely atmospheric and fun – but more often a sign that we have chosen to compromise on the interpretation for the benefit of creating storage.



Example of a traditional case layout at the National Museum of Australia

In practice...

Consider your objectives and your target audience. Then, decide on two or three guiding principles that you would like your visual display to follow.

For example, if you are telling the story of a famous scientist to a younger audience, you might want chose a visual approach of “bright, clear, fun”. In contrast, Victorian family life might be displayed using design principles of “showman-ship, comfort, and privacy”.

Deciding on the design approach will give your case a unity that will make it more attractive, as well as help you decide on what is the right amount of objects suitable for the display. Check when it is done whether you have achieved your goals by asking a colleague. If he or she can't guess your basic principles, it might be worth reconsidering.

Every object that is selected for display must work for its keep – so ask yourself, what does this object really contribute?

Every square inch must count, so every time you put something into a case, ask yourself what that object adds to the overall interpretation. Keeping to this simple trick means that you will soon realise where objects double up, and also whether there are any imbalances between what you want to communicate and what you are actually displaying.

Lighting can make all the difference. Choose your star objects within your case and check that they are well lit.

The most careful display layout can lose its impact if the lighting is not right. You don't necessarily need expensive equipment to achieve a good result – just add light sources as you can, and make sure the positioning of objects relates to the light that is available.

Use object stands and wires to display objects to their best advantage.

You might already have a selection of specialist acrylic stands available, which can add greatly to your ability to display objects. If not, there are plenty of alternative ways to create stands. Just make sure that they fit into your original visual principles for the case.

Tip 9: Education

If you want your interpretation to be used by school groups, communicate clearly what children can learn from your displays that they can't get in the classroom.

As a rule, school teachers are time-poor, pressure-rich. To organise a trip to your museum means finding money to pay for a coach, dedicate time to organise the trip, and worrying about anything going wrong. And even those teachers that find the energy to organise a trip, they might have a wealth of choice: not only fellow museums but science and wildlife centres, farm attractions, activity providers and many, many more compete for the education market.

To grab teachers' attention and outclass the competition, you have to be able to offer schools something unique. Something that the children cannot experience in the classroom. If you can communicate to teachers what special benefits children will have from your display using the right language, you will stand a much better chance of attracting school visits.

Speaking the language of teachers, museums can...

build knowledge and understanding through interaction, role play, participation, experience and investigation of primary resources

develop positive attitudes and values through increased self-confidence and motivation as well as greater empathy and understanding towards other people and communities

improve thinking, communication and social skills through debates, decision-making and activities which focus on different interpretations of history to help children make deductions based on primary sources.

encourage children's imagination and creativity through stories of new and unfamiliar times and places and opportunities to express their ideas artistically.

develop life skills essential to children's successful development by showing how maths and literacy, good communication, social and personal skills are vital for success – whether to shape history, or just to get by the everyday chores



Where to find out more...

The National Curriculum

The latest information about the National Curriculum is published online. It is worth checking the website at least once a year to keep up with changes and to familiarise yourself with the language.



In 2010, the web-address for the National Curriculum is:

<http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk>

The Quality Badge

This scheme was set up to help attractions improve the quality of education services.

Even if you decide against applying, the website offers useful guidance:

<http://www.lotc.org.uk>

Tip 10: Evaluation

Good evaluation will not take long and save you time in the future!

How often have you completed a project without gathering a single piece of evidence to suggest that it did what you wanted it to do? There is no hiding from the fact that evaluation is often promised or planned for, and rarely delivered. One of the reasons for a lack of evaluation is that we think the best time to evaluate our success is at the end of the project. But realistically, the last thing we want to do when completing the project is to go over everything again. After all, it is too late to do much about it. Instead, we are already planning the next idea.

The easiest way to avoid this trap is to continue simple and effective evaluation throughout rather than leaving it to the end. Doing a little but often also allow you to address any lessons learnt before it is too late.



3 Steps of Evaluation

Step 1: Front-end

If you have followed the tips recommended in this guide, you have already completed Step 1. By identifying your target audience, and by considering what they will need, you have established the evaluation framework. The solutions and approaches you are developing are the results of your appreciation of your target audiences' needs. This is the benchmark against which the success of the project can be judged.

Step 2: Formative

As soon as your plans have moved on into creating practical ideas, you should start the process of formative evaluation. This should be the very heart of your evaluation, because you can still make changes before you have committed all your resources. All you need

to do is step back and allow your critical friends and colleagues to test your plans. This can take as little as 30mins as you talk someone through your plans and show them a sketch of your display. What matters most is that you invite a fresh pair of eyes to help you confirm that your delivery matches your ambitions.

Step 3: Completion

The final stage is simple. Just check the initial plans and find out whether it actually worked. For many teams, this can be daunting as they concentrate on what went wrong. Why did we not get more visitors? Why did we not meet our objectives? Why did we overspend? Of course, lessons must be learnt to ensure how best to avoid any problems in the future. However, what most final evaluation tasks miss is to highlight what went well. Whatever form of evaluation you choose, you should check that you spend as much time evaluating the good things, as you do dissecting the bad!



Renaissance Yorkshire

Authors

"10 Top Tips for Museum Interpretation" has been prepared by Jaane Rowehl and Kate Vigurs on behalf of the Renaissance Yorkshire Museum Development Team in 2011.

Further Reading

If you would like to read more about the art of interpretation, here are a few recommendations:

- Sam Ham (2011). *Interpretation: A guide to making a difference on purpose*. Fulcrum Group.
- Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2007) *Museums and Education: Purpose, pedagogy, performance*. Routledge
- Scottish Museums Council (2001). *A Closer Look: Increasing access through interpretation*. Available online at: <http://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/publications/publication/38/a-closer-look>. (website address as per Feb 2011)
- John A Veverka (1994). *Interpretive Master Planning*. Verulam Publishing.

There is also a dedicated Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI). Find out more on their website: <http://www.ahi.org.uk>

