
Factsheet

Introduction to evaluating museum interpretation

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What is evaluation?

Evaluation is about measuring how well you are doing. It is

‘a systematic examination of activities where objectives are defined and performance in meeting objectives is measured.’

(Centre for Environmental Interpretation)

Evaluation can be used to measure the progress or impact of any museum activity. In particular, evaluation can be used to aid the planning and production of interpretive media in order to create and deliver interpretation that interests and engages with your visitors.

Why you should evaluate your interpretation

Evaluating your interpretation will help you to

- understand why visitors come to your museum, to know what they like or don't like, and to be able to react to their needs
- assess whether your visitors understand the messages or stories you are trying to communicate to them
- make judgements about how well you are doing, and allow you to target funding and plan for change
- advocate what you do with others, by providing a record of your achievements.

Evaluation will also tell you whether you have met your **interpretive objectives**.

To know this, you must have set objectives at the start of your project, for example what you want visitors to learn, feel or do as a result of engaging with your interpretation. It is important to ensure your objectives are measurable in some way, and to think of how they might be evaluated from an early stage. For example, if your objective is to increase understanding of a particular subject, you will need to think how to measure what visitors know both before and after visiting your exhibition to mark any change.

For more information on setting objectives, see SMC Guidance *Communicating with Your Visitors*.

When to evaluate

Evaluation can, and should, take place at several different stages during your interpretive project. At each stage, you will want to gather slightly different information to inform your work.

Planning stage – Front end evaluation	Find out what your visitors already know, like, their preconceptions etc. Use this information to refine your interpretive objectives and to shape your interpretation.
Design stage – Formative evaluation	Test your visitors' response to mock-ups of each piece of interpretation. Test whether each piece reaches its communication goal. Make any necessary changes.
Completion stage – Remedial evaluation	As you install your display, check your finished interpretation is in working order, is accessible, well lit etc. Make any final, small scale adjustments.
Completion stage – Summative evaluation	Once your interpretation is in place, find out how well it works overall. Does it meet your interpretive objectives? Use this information to provide reports for sponsors or funding bodies, and to guide future work.

If you already have interpretation in place, you can still test visitors' responses, and use the results to inform the planning stage of your next project. For example, can visitors physically access all your interpretation? Are they taking away your key messages? Does the subject matter interest them etc? You should try to set objectives for each new project so that in future you have something definite to evaluate against.

What type of data to collect

No matter which stage of a project you are evaluating, there are two basic types of data you can collect.

- **Quantitative** data – numerical data, such as number of visitors, time visitors spend in a single gallery etc. This type of data can be analysed statistically.
- **Qualitative** data – information relating to your visitors opinions, attitudes, perceptions and feelings. This data requires further organisation and interpretation to be meaningful.

A successful approach involves evaluating at different stages of production, gathering different types of data, and using a range of collection techniques. Information on how to gather data can be found in the SMC Guidance note *How to evaluate your interpretation*.

If you want to discuss how to begin evaluating your interpretation, you are welcome to contact SMC Museums Officer Emma Morehouse.
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