
Guidance

Planning for Effective Museum Interpretation

How to write an interpretive plan

SCOTTISH
MUSEUMS
COUNCIL



Introduction

Good interpretation does not just happen automatically. To get it right, to communicate effectively with your visitors, and to give them a meaningful experience, takes time, practice and planning.

These notes are intended as a practical guide for anyone who is new to interpretive planning, or for those who want to update their planning skills. They will explore

- who should be involved in the interpretive planning process?
- what an interpretive plan should include – key questions to consider
- writing your plan
- what next?

We recommend that you use them to help identify key questions, to guide your decision making process, and to inform the writing of a plan that is right for you. If you have not already done so, you should read these notes in conjunction with the SMC factsheet *Introduction to Interpretive Planning* and the SMC Guidance *Planning for Effective Museum Interpretation: How to write an interpretive strategy*.

Who should be involved in the interpretive planning process?

If possible, you should try to involve a group of people in creating your interpretive plan, rather than working on your own. It is easier to generate ideas in a group and you can benefit from individuals' different areas of expertise. If you are producing a plan that includes the shared objectives of several different organisations, for example a regional forum, it is important that they are all represented.

What an interpretive plan should include

Writing an interpretive plan may seem like an involved process, but good planning increases your chances of producing interpretation that is targeted and effective.

In drawing up an interpretive plan, there are many things to consider. The following questions will help direct your thinking and can be used to structure your final document. Not all questions will require the same degree of research or detail, but they should all be considered.

Why do you want to produce new interpretation?

Set some aims and objectives and decide what you want your interpretation to achieve. For example

- increase visitors' understanding of your collections
- increase the number of visitors coming to your museum
- encourage visits from a new or specific audience
- increase the length of time visitors spend in your museum
- encourage activity, interaction and enjoyment.

What is it that you want to interpret?

Think about what is special or unique about your collection or site that is worth interpreting. What meanings can you reveal through different combinations of objects? What stories can you tell? More importantly, what do you have that will interest your visitors? What else is being interpreted nearby and how do your plans relate to this?

At this stage you could hold a brainstorming session to discover which ideas, or themes, are most significant, popular or worth telling. Brainstorming with a group of people should reveal themes that either recur, or appear as one-off suggestions. This will help you to identify the main theme or sub themes that should flow through your interpretation, whilst eliminating others that are simply personal favourites.

(For information on themes, see the SMC factsheet *Introduction to Interpretation*)

Who are you interpreting for?

It is so important to take your visitors into account. Whether you are aiming at a known and existing audience, or trying to attract a new audience, your interpretation should aim to reflect who they are and what it is they want. In drawing up a profile of your visitors you should consider

- who visits your museum and where do they come from?
- how often do they visit?
- why do they visit?
- what are their motivations, expectations, preconceptions, and interests?
- how long do visitors stay and what holds their interest the longest?
- what level of knowledge do they bring with them?
- what are their physical and learning needs?
- who isn't visiting, and why?

How will you interpret your collection / subject / site?

At this point you can start to think creatively about how to meet your established aims. You should

- Develop in detail your interpretive themes and sub themes. Think about the messages you want your visitors to take away.
- Establish interpretive objectives, for example what do you want your visitors to learn or feel, or how do you want them to act as a result?
- Explore options for the use of different media, anything from labels and panels to computer interactives and audiovisual displays. Choose the most appropriate media to deliver your message and meet your interpretive objectives. It doesn't have to be hi-tech or expensive to be effective.
- Decide upon methods of display for your objects, for example in cases, in a room set, available for handling etc.

Define the tone and/or mood of your interpretation, according to your target audience and key objectives.

Where will you locate your new interpretation?

Think about physical access to your interpretation. Will it be equally accessible to everyone? For example, what height is it displayed at, how well is it lit, and can visitors get close enough to read your choice of font size?

(For information on access see the SMC Guidance *Communicating with Your Visitors: How to write effective interpretive text*)

Decide upon the format for your display, including layout, definition of space, location of signage and interpretive media.

When will your interpretation be available?

Do you want your display to coincide with a particular event or anniversary to attract a particular group of visitors? Will your museum be open for access all the time? If not, do you open at times when most people want to visit? If you are running guided tours are they at times suited to your visitors, and do they take in to account staffing levels and staff rotas?

Implementation – putting your ideas into practise

- Practical and financial issues may already have influenced your decisions regarding what you want to do, for whom and how, but now is the time to work out the detail. In writing your plan, try to be realistic about what you can achieve even if it means cutting back on some previous ideas.
Consider how you will implement your ideas in relation to
 - Budget – how much will your project cost, can you attract any external funds, what skills or materials and advice can you get for free?
 - People – who will manage your project, how much time will people need to input at different stages? Do you have enough people to deliver or supervise the type of interpretation you want?
 - Skills – do you have the necessary expertise to produce all interpretation in-house, and if not, what skills might you need to buy-in? Will any staff require training? If you decide to employ designers, the detail in your interpretive plan can help form their brief.
 - Space – have you got the space to do what you want i.e. run handling sessions for school groups, show videos, give gallery talks? Be realistic, and if you haven't got enough space don't do it, or find an alternative.
 - Equipment – do you have any necessary equipment? If you have to purchase new hardware can it be reused in other projects, will it date?
 - Objects – how will museum objects be displayed and protected? Is any conservation work required? If you intend to loan objects from another museum, have you left sufficient time to make arrangements?
 - Timescale - how will your project be phased, are deadlines realistic? Produce a timetable of work, allocate against responsibilities, regularly review progress, and stick to your plans.
 - Maintenance – will any of your interpretation require regular maintenance or updating? Discover what this will cost and build it in to your budget from the start. You should also plan maintenance into your museum's forward plan.
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Evaluation - How will you know if your interpretation is working?

At the beginning of this plan you set objectives for your interpretation, so it should also be important to you to know whether those objectives have been met. There are many methods of evaluation to choose from depending on the type of feedback you want. These range from pre-testing your ideas in pilot studies, to visitor figure counts - from observation of visitor behaviour to formal visitor surveys.

You will need to choose a method that best measures the success of your interpretation according to your initial objectives. For example, if you want visitors to spend longer in the galleries, observe how long they spend before and after installing your new interpretation and keep a record of what attracts them for longest. It is only by evaluating your interpretation that you will refine your knowledge of what visitors want, how they learn and what they enjoy. This is valuable material to feed into your next interpretive project and your next interpretive plan.

Writing your interpretive plan

Once you have the answers to the previous questions, you will have all the detail and structure you need to write your plan. It does not have to be a long document, depending on what you want to do, but it should be an active document. Use it to guide your interpretive work and stay close to your aims.

Try to draw up a separate interpretive plan for each new interpretive project. Although you will still need to consider the same range of questions, the more accustomed you are to the planning process the quicker it will become. You will also find that a lot of information can be reused, based on your initial research. For example, you could keep a permanent and regularly updated record of your visitor profile and staff skills base, or a scale drawing of your gallery space. More importantly, feedback from previous evaluation can help inform future projects.

Once you are confident with the interpretive planning process you could also consider writing an interpretive strategy, to set out and guide your approach to the development of interpretation in the longer term.

(See also the SMC Guidance *Planning for Effective Museum Interpretation – writing an interpretive strategy*)

What next?

We hope this guidance will encourage you to have a go, and develop an interpretive plan for yourself. If you do want further advice about the process of writing an interpretive plan, or would like someone to comment on content you are welcome to contact SMC Museums Officer Emma Morehouse.
Tel 0131 476 8594. E-mail emmam@scottishmuseums.org.uk

Further reading

For more information about interpretive planning, try the following

	Key Subjects
Carter, J. A Sense of Place; an interpretive planning handbook Tourism & Environment Initiative, Inverness, 1997	Introduction to interpretation; Interpretive planning – why, what sort of plan, putting it into practise.
Hillier, D. A Closer Look – increasing access through interpretation Scottish Museums Council, 2001	Approaches to interpretation; Key planning questions; Making it happen.

<p>Masters, D. Introducing Interpretation: Interpretive Planning Scottish Natural Heritage www.snh.org.uk</p>	<p>Scales of planning; Key planning issues.</p>
<p>Veverka, J. A. Interpretive Master Planning Falcon press, 1994 ISBN 1560442743</p>	<p>Learning concepts; Introduction to interpretation; The planning process; Planning for tours and exhibits.</p>
<p>Developing Star Attractions: a resource for successful management - Interpretation Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions, 1995</p>	<p>Introduction to interpretation; Planning – starting, building, completing & reviewing a plan.</p>
<p>Museum Practice, No 5 Interpretation Museums Association, London, 1997</p>	<p>The benefits of interpretation; Introduction to interpretation; Developing exhibitions.</p>

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