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## **Guidance**

### **Communicating with your visitors**

#### **How to write effective interpretive text**

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SCOTTISH  
MUSEUMS  
COUNCIL



## **Introduction**

These notes will guide you through the process of writing interpretive text and will help you to communicate more effectively with your visitors.

Written text is just one method of interpretation. You may be using it on its own, for example in a single display panel, or with a range of other media, for example if you have planned for a full redevelopment or a new display. In this situation written interpretation could include titles, sub headings, blocks of text, object labels, leaflets, instructions for interactives, a publication and more.

Whatever the context, to make the most from your writing, it helps to take a planned and considered approach. There are things you need to think about before you even put pen to paper. These notes will encourage you to

- set objectives for your writing
- write for your audience
- think in themes
- make your writing accessible
- evaluate – before and after.

### **Set objectives for your writing**

Start by thinking why you are producing a new piece of interpretive writing. What is it for? What reaction do you want to draw from your visitors in terms of what they learn, how they feel or how they will act subsequently?

For example, an objective might be

- to increase understanding of a little known local hero
- to increase knowledge and recognition of common fossils
- to generate concern for the preservation of local heritage, or
- to encourage people to volunteer to help at an archaeological dig.

Setting objectives will help you to focus your writing, as well as providing points against which you can evaluate the impact of your writing later on.

### **Write for your audience**

Before you begin to write, it is important to decide who your audience is going to be. This decision should influence both the content and style of your text. For example, the interests of primary school groups will differ from those of families, and from those of special interest groups. Children might enjoy minimal text written in an informal and chatty style, whilst a visitor with a specialist interest might want evidence of serious research.

If you are expecting a range of different visitors, you may need to consider providing text to suit several different levels of interest. For example, within the same exhibition you could produce text panels aimed at the general visitor, labels written by children for children, and factsheets or a publication with additional detail for those with special interest.

*Think . . .*

What will your visitors want? Give them what they want, not what you want.  
If in doubt, ask them.

### **Think in themes – what do you want your visitors to know?**

If you haven't already done so, decide what is special about your place or collection that you want your visitors to know about.

*Think . . .*

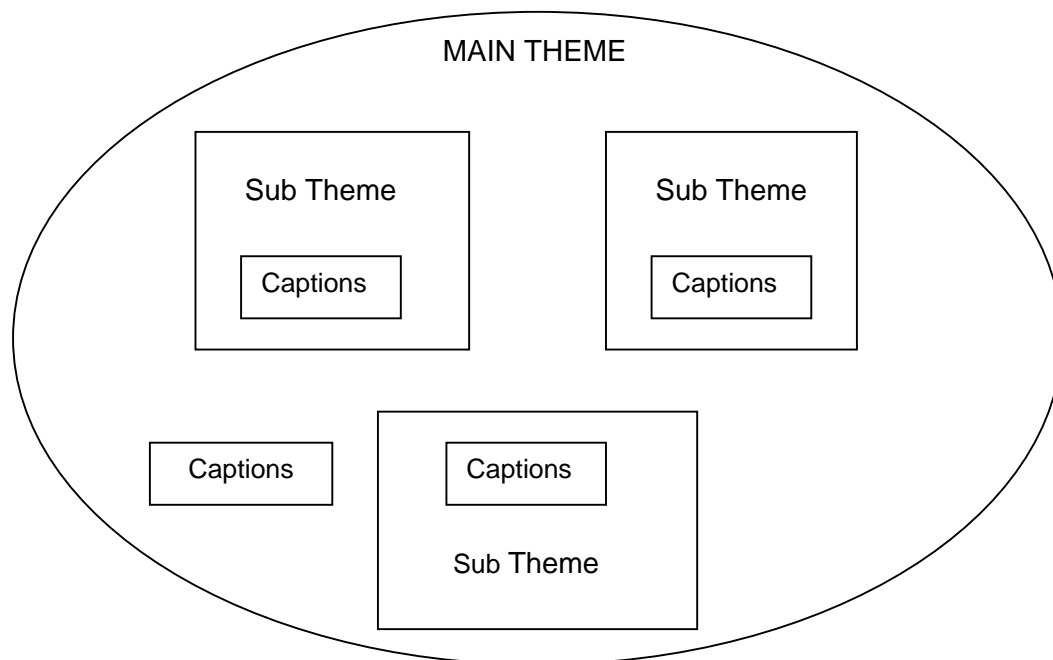
What is the one thing you would like your visitors to remember at the end of their visit?

This will give you your main **theme**. All your writing, in the context of your new panel, display or other interpretive project, should relate back to this main theme in some way, giving structure and coherence to your writing.

While you are deciding upon your main theme, you will probably also generate other related ideas, other associated information that your visitors might want to know about. It is these ideas that will form your **sub themes**. Sub themes can be used to break your text into manageable chunks, and could naturally form separate paragraphs, panels or other pieces of writing, depending on the scale of your project.

Within the context of a museum display you will probably be using objects, images and text side by side. Your objects and images should either illustrate the themes expressed in your text, or be the basis for discussion themselves. Either way, objects, images and text should all exist within the framework of main theme and sub themes. Object captions should therefore relate to objects, but also support the theme or sub theme within which they occur. The same is true for image captions.

The relationship between themes, sub themes and captions could be expressed as follows



## Make it accessible

Once you have decided on your objectives, audience and themes you are ready to put pen to paper. Writing effectively can be difficult, but the way that you express and display your ideas is so important it is worth taking the time to get it right. Getting it right means you will encourage all your visitors to take the time to read your interpretive text, to understand your key messages, and to enjoy their museum experience.

- To make your text **intellectually** accessible you will need to think about

Content	<p>Answer your visitors' natural questions, or tell short stories. Your visitors are more likely to remember these than dry or formulaic facts, or abstract ideas.</p> <p>Encourage visitors to interact with your collections by using prompts and questions that allow them to see and discover for themselves.</p>
Language	<p>Interpretive text doesn't have to be serious – think imaginative, stimulating, challenging, creative, original.</p> <p>Use active rather than passive verbs, to make your text more lively.</p> <p>Keep language simple and familiar, and avoid using too much jargon or technical terms. If you must use a technical term, explain it.</p> <p>Ask questions to help visitors engage with what you are saying, or encourage physical or mental interaction.</p> <p>Try addressing the reader as 'you', to give a more personal feel and help them feel involved.</p> <p>Use analogies or metaphors, to help relate new concepts to things visitors can more readily understand.</p>

	<p>Use language that is appropriate to your chosen audience.</p> <p>Keeping it simple is not about 'dumbing down', it is about giving all your visitors the best possible chance of understanding what you are trying to say.</p>
Length	<p>Your visitors will probably be reading text whilst standing up, so keep it brief and focussed. A few key points are more likely to be read and remembered.</p> <p>Limit the length of a panel to 150 words, and the length of an object or image caption to 40 words.</p> <p>Keep your sentences short (less than 20 words), but vary the length a little to provide a good reading rhythm.</p>
Layers of information	<p>Put your main point across at the start.</p> <p>Break panels of text in to chunks or short paragraphs. Each chunk or paragraph should contain a single idea, relating to a sub theme or theme.</p> <p>Try dividing your text by complexity of idea or level of information, for example key message, extended detail, discussion points etc. But, keep your language and tone the same throughout.</p> <p>Or try dividing your text into 'chunks', to be read in any order or any quantity as decided by the visitor. All chunks should contain a similar level of detail.</p> <p>Or try dividing your text by purpose, for example introductory text, themes, object labels, first-hand reports etc. Make the organisation logical and apparent to your visitors.</p> <p>Use consistent visual design features to help visitors recognise the way you have layered your text and help them navigate.</p>

Design	A good design can enhance the written content of your text and help establish mood. But beware of over designing. Your text should still be in focus, be legible and easy to follow.
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- To make your text **physically** accessible, you will need to think about the following recommendations made by RNIB and INTACT

Type size	For printed text, <b>14 point</b> (minimum).  For display text, <b>16 point</b> (minimum).
Type face	Avoid fancy type faces, including <i>italics</i> .  Choose something plain like Tahoma or Arial.
Colour and contrast	Dark coloured type on a pale background works best.  Try to avoid using pale colours on a coloured ground, and strong background images.
Justification of text	Justify text on the left margin only, to allow an even spacing of words  Right justification should not be used.
Use of upper and lower case	Avoid using all UPPER CASE. Normal sentence case is easier for the reader to follow.
Length	Keep sentences simple and concise.  Try to avoid using complicated sentence structures, including too many sub clauses.

Display height and angle	<p>Text panels are most easily viewed when centred 140cm from the floor.</p> <p>Labels should be displayed at between 90 – 120cm from the floor, whether cased or wall mounted.</p> <p>Ensure case labels are angled for ease of reading, are not laid flat on a case shelf, and are not displayed too far to the back of a case.</p> <p>Make sure your labels are well lit, but that light is not reflecting back off them or the case glass.</p>
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### **Evaluate - how do you know it's working?**

Once you have written your interpretive text and are happy with it yourself, you might want to try it out on others to see if it fulfils your initial objectives.

For example, you might want to know if visitors

- can identify your key theme
- can understand your use of language
- find the subject matter interesting
- can remember two key facts from the text
- feel and empathy / emotion when reading your text . . . . . and more.

You can find all this out, by using simple print-outs of your interpretive text, taking them into your galleries, asking visitors what they think and recording the response. Or you could set up a focus group to be on hand to give you regular feedback. Just make sure the group you test with reflects the make up of your target audience.

When you are satisfied your objectives are being met, then you are ready to produce the final version of your interpretive text. You can display it in the confidence that it is meeting your objectives, communicating with your visitors and fulfilling their needs.

If you want to discuss the process of writing interpretive text, you are welcome to contact SMC Museums Officer Emma Morehouse.  
Tel 0131 476 8594. E-mail [emmam@scottishmuseums.org.uk](mailto:emmam@scottishmuseums.org.uk)

### Further reading

For more information about writing interpretive text try the following

	Key subjects
Hillier, D A Closer Look - increasing access through interpretation Scottish Museums Council, 2001	Planning for writing; Putting it into practise; Evaluation.
Masters, D Introducing Interpretation: Writing Interpretation Scottish Natural Heritage <a href="http://www.snh.org.uk">www.snh.org.uk</a>	Reading age; Word length; Writing style.
Serrell, B Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach Altamira Press, 1996	Fully comprehensive guide (themes, audience, learning styles, evaluation etc)
Rayner, A Access in Mind: towards the inclusive museum The Intellectual Access Trust, 1998	Design of labels and panels; Amount of information; Content of labels and panels.
Veverka, J A Interpretive Master Planning Falcon Press, 1994 ISBN 1560442743	Generating themes; Setting interpretive objectives; Defining audiences.



Design a Label - guidelines on labelling for museums Museums Association, 1999	Writing techniques; Access requirements.
Museum Practice No 5 Interpretation Museums Association, London, 1997	Meeting visitors needs; Medium and message.

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