
Factsheet

Introduction to Interpretation

SCOTTISH
MUSEUMS
COUNCIL



What is interpretation?

Interpretation is the process by which museums communicate with their visitors.

It has been defined as

'Revealing meanings and relationships, through the use of original objects, by first hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information' (Freeman Tilden)

'Helping people appreciate something that you feel is special' (James Carter)

'About intangibles: ideas, beliefs, understanding, opinions and emotions'
(Dan Hillier)

'Telling a story' (Scottish Natural Heritage)

Interpretation can help promote understanding and learning, as well as encouraging interaction and adding enjoyment. It can contribute significantly to your visitors' experience.

What should interpretation do? (adapted from Freeman Tilden)

Interpretation is different to information. Information presents facts.

Interpretation

- **Provokes** curiosity and interest

Introduce new ideas or understanding, and engage with your visitors through choice of subject matter, through language and questioning.

- **Relates** to everyday experiences of your visitors

Use analogies and metaphors to relate new concepts to what your visitors already know and understand. For example, *when full a soldier's pack weighs the equivalent of 40 bags of sugar.*

- **Reveals** a memorable message

What is the key thing you want your visitors to remember after reading your interpretation? What new insight or understanding do you want them to take away?

- **Addresses the whole** story using a unifying theme

Identifying a theme encourages you to sort and organise information, and helps you identify and deliver your key message. A theme is different to a topic. For example a topic might be *pottery*, but a theme might be *regional potteries developed their own distinctive styles to suit local demand*. A theme will help keep your key message in focus, no matter how many tangents, or sub themes you choose to explore along the way. It will give your visitors a clear thread to follow, and aid their understanding.

Types of interpretation

Interpretation can take many different forms and can use different types of media, for example

- panel of text
 - object or image or related caption
 - audio guide
 - video
 - eye-witness account
 - guided tour
 - mechanical or interactive device
 - publication
 - sounds or immersive experiences
 - live demonstration or actor
- . . . and more

Provide visitors with a variety of interpretation and media. By appealing to different senses, and encouraging mental and physical interaction, you can make your interpretation accessible to as many visitors as possible. Always define the message or purpose behind each piece of interpretation, no matter which method of delivery you choose.

To find out more about how to put the principles of interpretation into practice,
see

SMC factsheet – *Introduction to Interpretive Planning*

SMC guidance – *Planning for Effective Interpretation – how to write an
interpretive plan*

SMC guidance – *Planning for Effective Interpretation – how to write an
interpretive strategy*

SMC guidance – *Communicating with your Visitors – how to write effective
interpretive text*

If you want to discuss any aspect of interpretation, you are welcome to contact
SMC Museums Officer Emma Morehouse.

Tel 0131 476 8594. E-mail emmam@scottishmuseums.org.uk

© Scottish Museums Council

August 2003

County House 20/22 Torphichen Street Edinburgh EH3 8JB

Tel 0131 229 7465 Fax 0131 229 2728

E-mail inform@scottishmuseums.org.uk

Web <http://www.scottishmuseums.org.uk>

A company limited by guarantee No. 74264, recognised as a charity No. SCO 15593