

The Hemingway Effect

Sarah Bartlett

A very brief and very evocative label at the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail Visitor Center (National Park Service).



COURTESY OF DESIGN MINDS AND KIMBERLY NELSON OF THE PRD GROUP

It seems like we are obsessed with paring things down to their essence: build a tiny house, clear your clutter, drop some pounds, tweet 140 characters, LOL, SMH, WTF?! So what can our exhibition labels learn from the new minimalism?

Introduction. For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn.

It's a famous example of a six-word story, apocryphally attributed to novelist Ernest Hemingway. And it's now become a favorite exercise for many writers. Six words to tell a story, some funny, some poignant, some scary.¹

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In this article, I'll look at how several museums have experimented with paring down their labels. I'll also look outside the museum world to see what other fields and types of writing can teach us about crafting better exhibition text.

Chapter 1. We shed our words and flew.

Brevity in label writing is nothing new.

As Smithsonian Institution editor George Weiner suggested in his 1963 article, "Why Johnny Can't Read Labels," we should think of exhibition text like packing for a trip:

We are advised to stack our belongings in three separate piles—(1) the things we would like to take; (2) the things we think we need; and (3) the things we absolutely cannot get along without—and then take only the third group.²

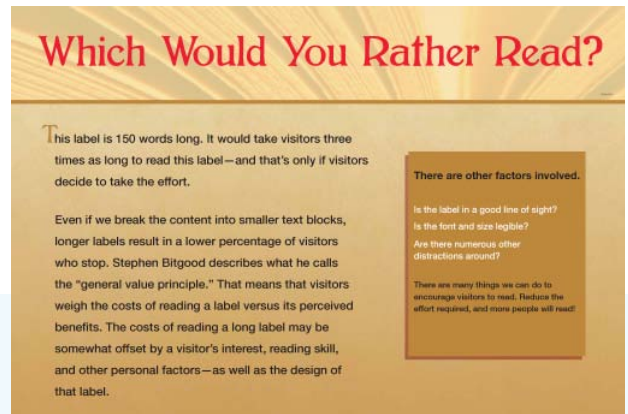
In stripping exhibition text down to its absolute necessities, we increase the likelihood that visitors will read and understand the content. Visitor researcher Stephen Bitgood cites numerous studies that show that decreasing the number of words on a text panel, simplifying the language, and increasing visuals all

¹ For some examples, visit "Very Short Stories," last modified November 2006, <http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/sixwords.html>; <http://www.sixwordstories.net/> and "Six Word Memoirs," last modified July 17, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2008/02/07/18768430/six-word-memoirs-life-stories-distilled>.

² George Weiner, "Why Johnny Can't Read Labels," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 6, no. 2 (1963): 143-156.

figs. 1 & 2.

Comparison of a 50-word panel and a 150-word panel.



COURTESY OF STEFFANY SCHMIT, SPLIT ROCK STUDIOS

increase visitor reading (figs. 1 & 2).³ Bitgood concludes that the “safe” number of words per label is somewhere between 30 and 75.”⁴

Chapter 2. Families learn, not always by reading.

In 2004, the USS Constitution Museum in Boston initiated the Family Learning Project, funded by an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant. In developing a new exhibition, *A Sailor's Life for Me?* (ASLFM), museum staff committed to creating labels that were no more than 50 words each.

Fifty words is brutally short, but it forced us to focus. For each panel we asked ourselves: what is the main point we want to convey? This meant that we distilled a 50-page draft document with research notes and quotes down to a fifteen page document with text for the interpretive panels, object labels and question panels.⁵

The museum tracked and timed visitors through ASLFM—2,000 square feet and 1,500 words of text—and compared it with tracking for an older, more traditional exhibition that was 3,000 square feet and with text totaling nearly 4,500 words. Family visitors spent nearly 22 minutes in the smaller ASLFM, compared to seven on average in the larger, more traditional exhibition.⁶

As one of part of their evaluation of the approach, they asked visitors which interpretive labels they

preferred. Some 43 percent expressed a clear preference for the 50-word labels from *A Sailor's Life for Me?* (fig. 3); only 18 percent preferred the longer labels of the older exhibition. Visitors shared that they found the 50-word labels easier to follow, more interesting, and more informative.⁷

Chapter 3. What can we take from technology?

Has technology changed the way people read and process text writing? When smart phones allow us to access the world at a touch or a swipe, are paper labels obsolete? Have we really turned into a society of short attention spans, listicles, and abbreviations?

Well...maybe. And maybe that's not so bad.

Since 1994, web usability expert Jakob Nielsen of the Nielsen Norman Group, a user experience consulting firm, has looked at how people use online content. He has discovered that most people do not read websites. A 1997 study—and subsequent follow-up studies—found that fewer than 20 percent of people proceeded word by word; the majority scanned and picked out the highlights.⁸

Even online, unbounded by page limits, word counts are crucial. Nielsen has demonstrated that reducing the word count of a web page in half results in better recall of its contents—and a higher overall satisfaction. Website visitors prefer simple, informal language. In fact, many respondents felt that briefer, better written content conveyed more than the unrestrained text.⁹

3 Stephen Bitgood, “Deadly Sins Revisited: A Review of the Exhibit Label Literature,” *Visitor Behavior* 4/3 (1993): 4-11, and Stephen Bitgood, Stephany Dukes, and Layla Abbey, “Interest and Effort as Predictors of Reading: A Test of the General Value Principle,” *Current Trends in Audience Research* 19 (2006), accessed December 2015, http://www.jsu.edu/psychology/docs/ao5-Interest_Effort.pdf.

4 Bitgood, “Deadly Sins.”

5 USS Constitution Museum team, “Writing for a Family Audience,” accessed December 2015, <http://www.familylearningforum.org/engaging-text/writing-for-families/writing-for-families.htm>.

6 USS Constitution Museum team, “Writing for a Family Audience.”

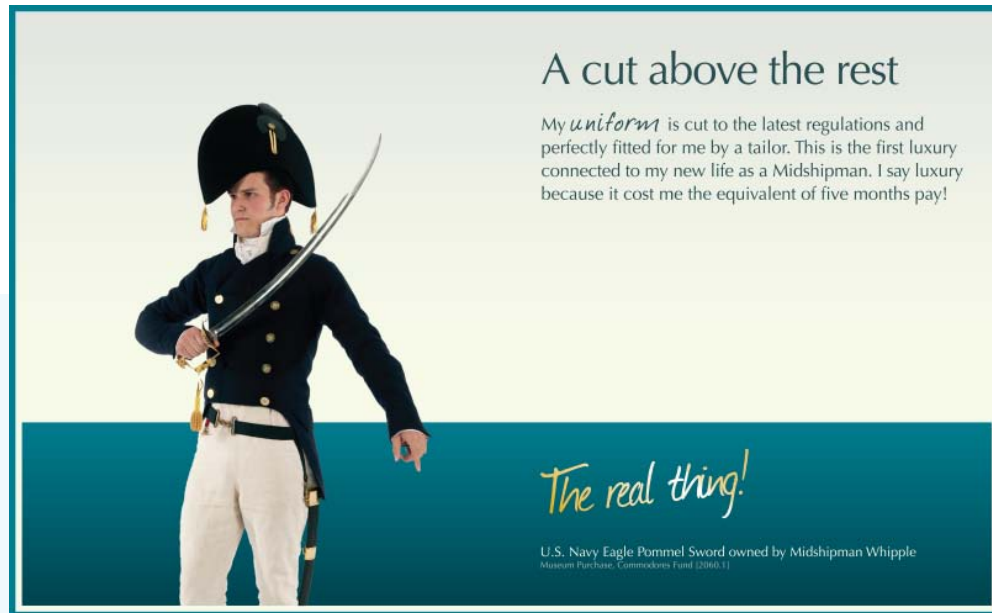
7 Label written by Sarah Watkins. USS Constitution Museum Team, “Audience Research Results: Labels with Historical Characters,” accessed December 2015, <http://www.familylearningforum.org/engaging-text/questions-and-quotes/research-results-labels.htm>.

8 Jakob Nielsen, “How Users Read on the Web,” last modified October 1, 1997, <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-users-read-on-the-web/>. John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen, “Concise, SCANNABLE, and Objective: How to Write for the Web,” last modified January 1, 1997, <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/concise-scannable-and-objective-how-to-write-for-the-web/>. Jakob Nielsen, “How Little Do Users Read?” last modified May 6, 2008, <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-little-do-users-read/>.

9 Nielsen, “How Users Read.”

fig. 3.

A family-friendly label in *A Sailor's Life for Me?* at the USS Constitution Museum.



COURTESY OF SARAH WATKINS AND THE USS CONSTITUTION MUSEUM

Nielsen came up with a number of guidelines for writing for websites, many of which are applicable to interpretive writing as well. He suggested that online writing should use:

- highlighted **keywords**;
- meaningful **subheadings**;
- bulleted **lists**;
- **one idea** per paragraph (Nielsen found that users will skip over any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph);
- the inverted pyramid style, **starting with the conclusion**;
- and **half the word count** (or less) than conventional writing.

When Twitter—with its 140-character limit—first came out, many people questioned how we could communicate meaningfully with so few words. But as we've adapted, most of us have discovered that these limits actually push us to come to the point more quickly.

Chapter 4. I've seen a future without labels.

If you walk into the Worcester Art Museum's paintings reinstallation exhibition, cleverly titled [*remastered*], you'll find 16th- to 18th-century paintings clustered together in interesting arrangements.

What you won't find are labels.

The museum, led by director Matthias Waschek, opted to make the art the main focus of visitors' attention.

In studying their visitors, the museum was dismayed to find that visitors raced through the galleries. People barely looked at the artwork, or they looked “just at the labels, not the paintings.”¹⁰ So in [*remastered*], Waschek made the decision to remove all labels from the wall and instead give visitors “something to look at, not read.” The galleries are not totally without interpretation: visitors can use laminated guides, books, and interactive iPads to learn more about the artwork. People can even add their own labels and see what others have written.¹¹

Waschek concedes that some visitors have complained about the lack of labels. The museum continues to tweak and adapt their approach to written interpretation.

Chapter 5. It sparked no joy. It went.

Japanese cleaning guru Marie Kondo has made converts with her approach to minimizing clutter. In her book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, Kondo recommends going through your belongings and keeping only those things that “spark joy.” Her aim isn't to reduce to a specific number, but to pare down to what is necessary for each person.

In Kondo's method, some things spark joy because of their beauty; others because of their utility. So why can't interpretive writers try the same exercise? Go through every word and sentence in a label and see if they spark joy. It's not so different than focusing on a big idea or a

10 Jared Bowen, “Open Studio: Reimagining Art in Worcester,” accessed December 2015, <http://www.wgbh.org/programs/Open-Studio-With-Jared-Bowen-2162?episode=48322>.

11 Worcester Art Museum, “[*remastered*],” accessed December 2015, <http://www.worcesterart.org/exhibitions/remastered/>.

theme when you write, but focusing on joy may make the task less onerous.

Chapter 6. A full story in few words.

One of the most engaging museum labels I've ever read is just 17 words long:

BACKCOUNTRY WOMEN

MOUTHS TO FEED.
MEN OFF TO FIGHT.
INDIANS ARE NEAR.
COLD IS SETTING IN.
BABY IS SICK.

The label ([intro image](#)), from the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail Visitor Center in Abingdon, Virginia, interprets the experience of women in the Overmountain settlements during the Revolutionary War. In 2012, the text received an Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition award.¹²

Short labels were necessary in the tiny visitor center, which measures just 720 square feet. The text needed to express multiple perspectives: that of Overmountain men, backcountry women, African Americans, Native Americans, and British loyalists. Each panel conveys—in 20 words or fewer—the character of each group and the struggle that they faced. The intensity and emotion of the text pulls people in. Visitors who want to learn more can read a longer panel on the reverse side of each figure; but those who don't still come away with an understanding of the story.

Conclusion. Where do we go from here?

Why, more than 50 years after George Weiner's article and after numerous decades of visitor studies, are we still struggling with text length? To extend Weiner's packing metaphor, it's a lot faster to throw everything into a big bag—to know that you have everything you might need—than to select only those things that are most important. Writing a long label is just...easier. Editing and paring—that's the hard part.

Technology offers some means to help. The Hemingway app (www.hemingwayapp.com) is a reasonably priced online and downloadable tool that assesses word counts, reading levels, and general complexity of any text. Aim for sharp, declarative sentences like Papa Hemingway himself.

Alternatively, try speaking, not writing, your first draft. Explain your label to a smart friend—ideally, someone from your target audience group. Record yourself doing this, and take note of the questions that your listener has. Try building your text around those questions.

The next time you create an interpretive label, try giving yourself a tough word limit. For your particular audience and story, that may be 6 words, 50 words, or 100 words. Think about whom you are writing for: is it for other experts—or for nonspecialist visitors? What is the experience that you want them to have? You may discover that what you once thought of as a limit now sets you free. ■

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¹² Label written by Kimberly Nelson (now with the PRD Group), edited by Michael Lesperance and designed by Samantha Scott of Design Minds. The American Alliance of Museum's Curators Committee (CurCom)—in cooperation with the Education Committee (EdCom) and the National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME)—sponsor the competition that makes the annual award.