



Well-Chosen Words and Carefully Articulated Ideas: Teaching Interpretive Writing

by Dan Bartlett

Dan Bartlett is Curator of Exhibits and Education and Instructor of Museum Studies, Logan Museum of Anthropology at Beloit College. He may be contacted at bartletd@beloit.edu.

If you would like to comment on this article or others in this issue, please go to the NAME page on Facebook or send us a tweet @NAMExhibitions.

By the time students enroll in exhibition design and development courses, academia has done everything it can to ensure they will be lousy interpretive label writers. Firmly conditioned to academic writing, they compose for an audience of one that has a PhD and a firm grasp of their paper's subject. Minimum page lengths for assignments insure bloated sentences filled with qualifying statements and rambling arguments. Breaking these habits is crucial to convert students into effective writers within the exhibition design format.

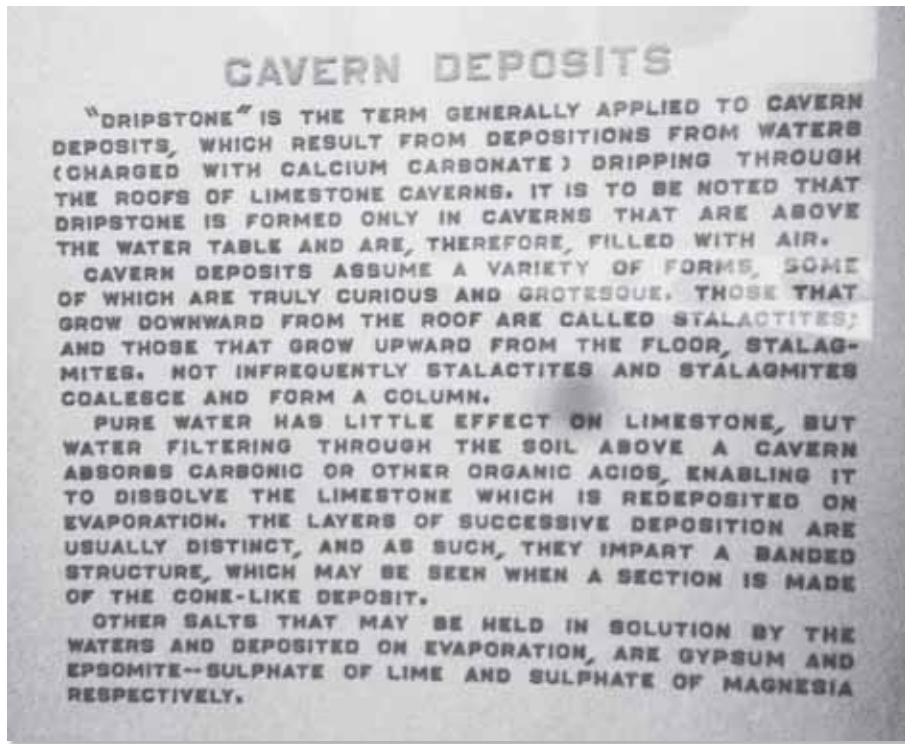
This article discusses teaching interpretive writing for museum exhibitions. What it does not discuss is anything related to the visual design and placement of text within museum exhibitions. It does not discuss character sizes for specific reading distances, leading, or kerning. It says nothing about the advantages and disadvantages of white text on dark backgrounds or dark text on light backgrounds or the readability of serif versus sans serif fonts. Instead, this article is about the information and words within a museum text, and how we might teach that critical textual aspect of exhibition design. In spite of wonderful advances in interactive design and the incorporation of multi-sensory interpretive modes within exhibitions, text remains the predominant means of communication, from framing an entire exhibition's thesis to explaining a single exhibit's interactive gizmos. Therefore, well-chosen words and carefully articulated ideas are as important to an exhibition's success as object placement and gallery arrangement.

Words Matter

The words we put on exhibition labels

matter. Decades of research indicate that both label length and writing style affect how much of a text—if any—a visitor will read. Here's some of what we know about visitors and exhibition text:

- All visitors read at least something; only a few visitors read everything (Falk & Dierking, 2013, Moscardo; Ballantyne, & Hughes, 2007).
- More people read shorter labels (Serrell, 1996).
- Visitors are more likely to read long text passages if the text is broken up into smaller segments of no more than 75 words. Stephen Bitgood (2014) summarizes a number of studies that support this claim.
- If the time and perceived effort needed to read a text are low, people are more inclined to read it (Bitgood, 2013).
- Text that is direct, conversational, and written in active voice; text that uses simple sentence structure and first and third-person pronouns; and text that is personally relevant to the reader is more likely to be read. Moscardo, Ballantyne, & Hughes (2007) summarize five studies that support these assertions.
- If an interpretive piece is easy to process and personally relevant to them, people are more motivated to think deeply about its content (Ham, 2013).
- Variety holds readers' attention longer. Variety includes headline,



Long, ponderously written text passages predominated in exhibitions 50 years ago. This example still hangs on the wall in a Midwestern museum. Courtesy of Dan Bartlett.

Decades of research indicate that both label length and writing style affect how much of a text—if any—a visitor will read.

sentence, and paragraph length; the amount of text; the use of humor, questions, and ambiguity in headlines; and the use of examples in text (Moscardo, Ballantyne, & Hughes, 2007; Serrell, 1996).

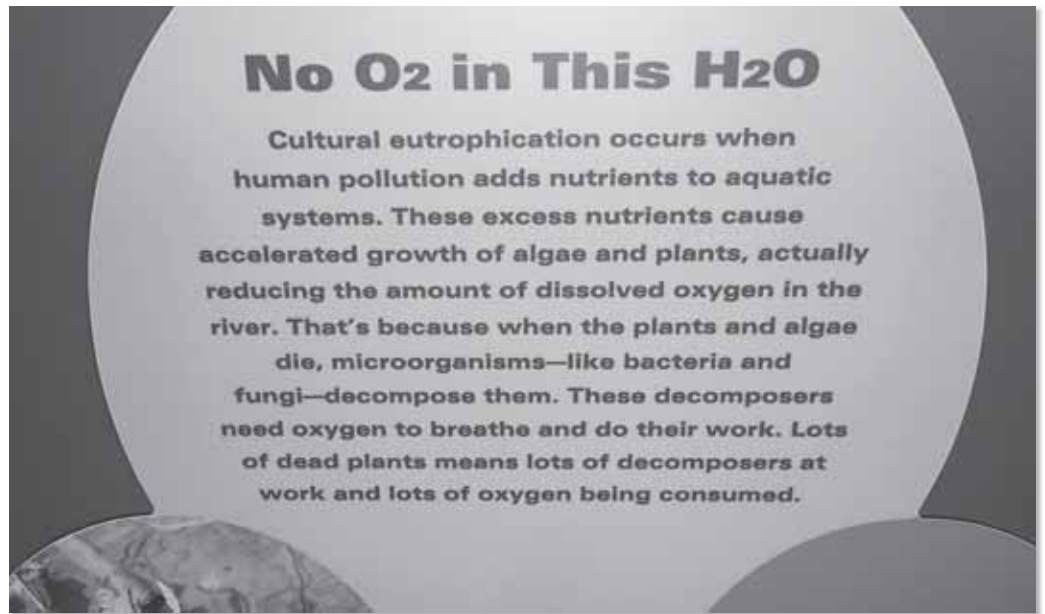
- A visitor’s ability to remember information in a text is related to how much of the passage he or she reads. Longer labels that provide more information do not increase the amount of information visitors recall (Bitgood, 2013).
- If a label’s “area of reference” changes, people stop reading. For example, a text that begins by discussing the impact of a new technology but switches to a description of its workings is a label that changes its area of reference (McManus, 1989).

As a style, interpretive writing blends techniques of expository and creative writing. Interpretive writing is goal-oriented (it has a point to make) and should be relevant to the audience and easy and enjoyable to read (Leftridge, 2006; Ham, 2013). Students should begin

writing interpretive texts during their first week in class. Five characteristics—focus, clarity, readability, brevity, and relevance—are the keys to writing museum texts that take into account the research findings summarized above, and these characteristics are central to teaching interpretive writing.

Parameters

The process of writing interpretive exhibition text requires a writer to hold the exhibition’s theme and objectives, as well as the intent of the individual passage, in his or her mind—all at the same time. Before students can do this, they need to understand what themes and objectives are and how information within an exhibition can be organized. The difference between a topic and a theme¹ and a look at different kinds of exhibit objectives should be part of the first week of the syllabus. In my course students explore thematic structure and interpretive principle within the first two weeks. This may seem like diving into the deep end of the pool before knowing how to tread water, but these subjects provide the parameters within which good label writing must occur. They should be



This contemporary exhibit label's 72 words are a reasonable length, but its author seems to have forgotten his or her audience is mostly families with younger children. Courtesy of Dan Bartlett.

(continued from page 35)

revisited many times through the semester as students are exposed to the other facets of exhibition design and development.

Writing Assignments

Eight weekly writing assignments prepare students for drafting text for a class exhibition opening at the end of the semester.² The assignments ask students to write a 50-75 word interpretive label at a Flesch-Kincaid reading level of 9.0-10.0 grade.³ The label might relate to some aspect of an assigned reading for the week. Explaining an aspect of their readings is good practice for identifying and articulating key exhibition concepts in a concise manner (not to mention insuring better digestion of assigned readings). Occasionally assignments require inclusion of a specific technique such as a metaphor or question. Students must always provide a word count and reading level summary.

In grading, I look to see if the information in the label accurately reflects the assigned reading or follows the assigned prompt. After that, I use a heavy hand, crossing out unnecessary words, splitting compound sentences, correcting passive voice, re-ordering sentences, challenging word choices, and suggesting words with fewer syllables (“came on time” versus “arrived punctually”). I try to

show students how changes alter word counts and reading levels. To identify an assignment that is exemplary, I compare it to students’ earlier assignments to emphasize improvement, and select one or two of the best pieces to read and discuss in class as examples when returning assignments. And if it’s obvious that the piece was written in three minutes, I call them out on it.

Readability models are problematic (Moscardo, Ballantyne, & Hughes, 2007; Serrell, 1996). Use them not because they necessarily indicate just what a ninth grader is capable of reading, but because they provide a general sense of a passage’s difficulty in comparison to others. And they give immediate feedback during writing. The ramifications of plugging one of two synonyms into a sentence, or splitting a compound sentence into two, are revealed with the push of a button. Readability statistics also help students write consistently across multiple labels.

Students should learn how the interpretive writing style blends elements of creative and expository writing in different measures at different times. Not every label needs a clever word picture or relevance-making analogy. Labels that spend so many words setting a scene

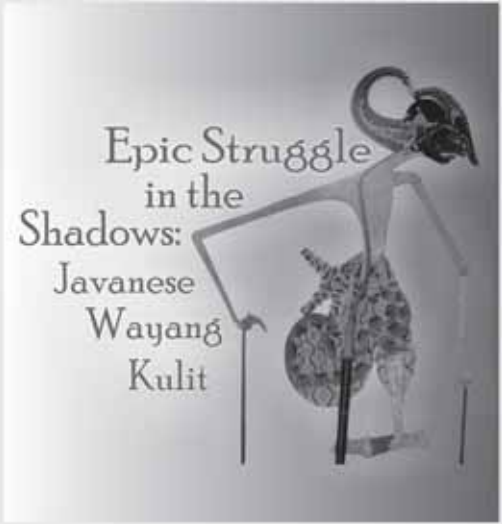
that not enough remain to get the point across are no more interpretive than dry textbook passages. On the other hand, strictly expository labels always benefit from active voice, varied sentence lengths, and the removal of weasel words. All of these are effective interpretive writing techniques. At some point in the semester, it may be necessary to ban a specific technique due to overuse. For example, once some students figure out what self-referencing is, every label suddenly begins with, “Have you ever...?” or “Imagine that you are...” Teaching an appropriate balance is part of the series of weekly short writing assignments.

Text Critique

The other half of teaching interpretive writing is analyzing texts found in local museums. This assignment has two parts. In the first, students identify the exhibition’s thematic structure and assess if and how individual labels support it. The second has students analyze the language used.

The physical design and placement of labels are crucial in the gallery setting, helping or hindering visitors’ understanding. In the first part of the assignment, I ask students to look past those design decisions and think about the relationships of each discreet label to the others in the exhibition. Do the labels tell a coherent story? Is there consistency of voice and style among them? Is there an information layering scheme? Is each label effective within the thematic structure?

The second task is to analyze the language used. Who do students think is the audience? Is the vocabulary accessible to that audience (no jargon, colloquialisms,



Epic Struggle in the Shadows: Javanese Wayang Kulit

The room darkens. A screen lights up, revealing the villain and his henchmen. They discuss the battle they just fought with their mortal enemies. News that his beloved brother died in the fighting stuns the villain. At that moment, the tragic hero enters and the two start plotting the defeat of their enemies on the next day.

Heroes and villains, magic and monsters—is the latest Hollywood blockbuster? A blockbuster yes, but this one is centuries old. This is a shadow play. Characters are projected onto a simple white sheet using flat leather puppets. They are recognized by their distinctive shapes and voices and are as popular as Superman and Batman are in this country today.

Shadow plays are a part of many cultures, but nowhere are they more firmly rooted in local cultural identity than on the island of Java. Wayang kulit, which means “shadow made by leather,” is an old, highly respected art form on Java. Its characters, themes, and performance all have great significance to Javanese people.

Epic Struggle in the Shadows: Javanese Wayang Kulit explores the history, stories, characters, and performance of wayang kulit and its place in the culture of Java.

Interpretive writing today is audience-focused, connecting visitors with the exhibition’s themes through language that is conveys information, yet is enjoyable and easy to read. Courtesy Logan Museum of Anthropology, Beloit College.

slang, idioms, or clichés)?⁴ Is the text relevant to the audience? Is the complete text broadly “interpretive?” Students select one or two examples of primary or group texts from the exhibition. How long are the examples? Is the language active? Is the text interpretive? Is it clearly focused? Does it make sense in isolation from other exhibition texts? How could the text be improved if the student deems it lacking?

The process of writing interpretive exhibition text requires a writer to hold the exhibition's theme and objectives, as well as the intent of the individual passage, in his or her mind—all at the same time.

Interpretive writing assignment number 2: Based on our reading last week from Falk and Dierking, write a 50-75 word interpretive label (9.0 to 10.0 reading level) explaining how the personal, socio-cultural, or physical context affects a museum visitor's experience (CHOOSE ONE to write about).

When reading a story, we ^{usually} start at the beginning and read to the end.

Because ^{This sentence is redundant to this sentence} what came first ^{experiences} changes what happens later, The characters early

experiences in the book ^{Passive} are informed by their later actions and ideas. The same

^{applies} holds true for museum visitors. When coming to a museum, people bring an entire

^{more this phrase to beginning of sentence} lifetime of experiences and interests with them, ^{affect} and these change how they

interact with the exhibits, ^{ions} what they are interested in, and what they will

^{Their interests and their memories} remember.

80 @ 10.0 reading Level

my changes = 62 words / 7.7 F-K reading level

This short writing assignment, the second of eight, is typical of those described in the article. By the eighth piece, the students' writing is tighter and requires much less correction. Courtesy of Dan Bartlett.

(continued from page 37)

Synthesis

The text students write for their class exhibition is intended to meld what they learn from their weekly practice with their more in-depth analytical critique. While students work in curatorial teams for the exhibition, each individual writes and submits the text for his respective group's part of the whole. I grade these and return them before the teams combine them into a finished product. Each group then shares drafts with the others for feedback.

I occasionally use other assignments designed to foster thinking about the individual texts that make up a whole exhibition script. These have included:

- Explaining the vapor compression refrigeration cycle in seven 50-word labels.

- Explaining human blood pressure in 75 words.⁵
- Writing 150-word texts about specific innovative Victorian home technologies (speaking tubes, central heat, indoor plumbing, etc.) for a local historic house museum.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Sportswriter Red Smith wrote, "Writing is easy. You just sit down at a typewriter, open up a vein, and bleed it out drop by drop" (Keyes, 2006, p. 257). He could easily have been referring to the effort it takes to write interpretive text. Practice makes it easier. The writing assignments described here help students internalize the principles of interpretive writing and understand the importance of well-chosen words and carefully articulated ideas to the effectiveness of an exhibition design. ✨

End Notes:

¹Or thesis, or “big idea,” or communication goal, or central idea, or concept, or core idea. Choose whatever term you prefer.

² I use eight assignments because by the eighth week, students have begun to draft text for their own exhibition and it seems like a logical point for transition. I am considering increasing the number to 10 or 12 short assignments because some students have not fully internalized the rules and process for drafting exhibition text by the eighth week and I think additional structured assignments would keep them from falling back into old academic habits in the crush of semester-end exhibition opening details.

³Current best practice holds that texts not exceed 150-200 words (varying based on the type of text) and that text blocks not exceed 50-75 words (Dean, 1994; Serrell, 1996; Spencer, 2002; Caputo, Lewis & Brochu, 2008).

⁴Idioms and colloquialisms are common in conversation, the popular press, and the internet but are problematic in exhibition texts. “Like shooting fish in a barrel” is my favorite example of an idiom. While it is wonderfully descriptive, imagine how bizarre that simple phrase might sound to people just learning English and how much effort they might expend trying to place that phrase within the context of an exhibition’s story. Colloquialisms are little better. Here in Wisconsin we don’t have “drinking fountains;” we have “bubblers.” The Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design (1996) offers good advice for writing accessible text, including reminders to avoid use of colloquial English and other potentially problematic English language forms.

⁵ I provide a two-page reading that explains blood pressure and ask students to summarize it.

References:

- Bitgood, S. (2013). *Attention and value*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Bitgood, S. (2014). *Engaging the visitor: Designing exhibits that work*. Cambridge, MA: MuseumsEtc.
- Caputo, P., Lewis, S., & Brochu, L. (2008). *Interpretation by design: graphic design basics for heritage interpreters*. Fort Collins, CO: InterpPress.
- Dean, D. (1994). *Museum exhibition: theory and practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Falk, J. H., & Dierking, L. D. (2013). *The museum experience revisited*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Ham, S. H. (2013). *Interpretation: Making a difference on purpose*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing.
- Keyes, R. (2006). *The quote verifier: Who said what, where, and when*. New York: St Martin’s Press.
- Leftridge, A. (2006), *Interpretive writing*. Fort Collins, CO: National Association for Interpretation.
- McManus, P. M. (1989). Oh yes they do: How museum visitors read labels and interact with exhibit texts. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 32(3), 174-189.
- Moscardo, G., Ballantyne, R., & Hughes, K. (2007). *Designing interpretive signs: Principles in practice*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing.
- Serrell, B. (1996). *Exhibit labels: An interpretive approach*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Smithsonian Accessibility Program (1996). *Smithsonian guidelines for accessible exhibition design*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- Spencer, H. (2002). Exhibition text guidelines. In B. Lord, & G. D. Lord, *The manual of museum exhibitions* (pp. 398-400). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Use [readability models] not because they necessarily indicate just what a ninth grader is capable of reading, but because they provide a general sense of a passage’s difficulty in comparison to others.