

Display interpretation and writing

This Help Sheet should be read in conjunction with: Display development and design; Historical research; and Interpretation policy: guidelines to writing.

What is interpretation?

For community museums, interpretation is the way in which the significance of items in their collections is shared and used to tell the stories associated with them. It involves the ways in which objects are grouped for display, what historical and other supporting information is provided with them, and how it is presented.

Interpretation policy in practice

An interpretation policy sets the framework within which the museum presents its key objects and tells its key stories. The interpretation policy provides guidance on all aspects of interpretation and reminds museums of decisions that have been made about what is going to be presented and how it is going to be done. This policy should be consulted when developing any display. For help with writing an interpretation policy, see the Help Sheet: *Interpretation policy: guidelines to writing*.

Part 1: Interpreting objects and collections

A. Significance

Just displaying an object does not reveal its significance or meaning. While museum workers might know what an item is and understand why it is important, this is not apparent to museum visitors without interpretation and explanation.

Interpreting objects in the context of a museum involves revealing and sharing their significance in a planned, sensitive and creative manner. The Heritage Collections Council defines significance as:

The historic, aesthetic, scientific, and social values that an object or collection has for past, present and future generations. Significance refers not just to the physical fabric or appearance of an object. Rather it incorporates all the elements that contribute to an object's meaning,

including its context, history, uses and its social and spiritual value...Significance is not fixed – it may increase or diminish over time.¹

This definition of significance provides a guide to the many perspectives from which objects can be interpreted and their stories told.

Historic

The provenance of an object can be described from all sorts of angles. Explore and tell the stories about who made the object and who the first owner was. If the object was passed on, how and why did this occur? What was the object used for? Where was it used and where was it found? Was the object used for particular purposes or in particular events? Do you have any photographs that show it being used? Is there anyone with whom you could record an oral history interview about the object and its history?

Aesthetic

What is the object made of? Is it a common or rare material for this type of object? Why does the object look the way it does? Has its appearance been altered through constant use and inevitable wear and tear?

For example a wooden mallet used continuously may have worn down to more than half its original size; a metal handle may be especially smooth, polished by thousands of hands.

How does the appearance of this item compare to the objects of today that do the same or similar things?

Scientific

This refers mainly to geological, biological and archaeological collections, rather than objects significant to the history of science or technology..A collection of rocks or minerals might have scientific significance because of its rarity or because it reveals aspects of geological or environmental change. A plant specimen collected by an early botanist may have significance because it is the only example of a now extinct species. Artifacts such as spear points unearthed in an early archaeological excavation have significance because of the material from which they were made and the way it was fashioned . They would also have social and historic significance.

Social/spiritual

How was the object used by people? What was its place/role in the family and/or the community? Does it have ongoing spiritual, ritual or religious significance? Was its use related to particular social or life events?

For example a child's christening gown may have religious significance because of its purpose, but it may also be significant as an object passed down through a particular family. It can also be seen as representative of a particular stage of life – the newborn baby. It might have both joyful and sad stories connected with it – the beginning of new life or the loss of a child. These stories will have both familial and social meaning and help to make an emotional connection with visitors.

¹ Heritage Collections Council, Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2001, p. 11.

Contextual and changing significance, past, present and future

How significant was the object at the time it was made? Has the passage of time changed that significance? In what ways? Is the object rare? Is it a particularly good example, in good condition? Will it retain, accrue or lose historical value in the future?

B. Interpreting objects

Items can be interpreted individually or in various groupings.

Individually: Museums can interpret individual objects by providing dates or eras, explaining their usage, placing them in the context of their times (what was happening internationally, nationally and locally when they were being used), telling stories associated with them and linking them with photographs and other information. Try to present more than one side of the story of an item. This can be done by giving insights into the history of the ownership of an object, or describing its changing usage over time. The story of how an object came into the hands of the museum can also be intriguing. Using the key significance indicators listed above can help you to 'see' an object in different ways.

Again using the example of the christening gown, if you have information about its use, you might be able to locate photographs of it being worn or photographs of the wearers as adults could be part of the interpretation. If the gown was donated or you have a clear idea of its provenance you might be able to access accompanying items such as a christening announcement, congratulations cards or you might conduct an oral history interview with its owner.

In groups: Remember that collection items often have more than one historical context or story to tell. Groupings of objects can be changed to highlight divergent themes and tell multiple stories. Different groupings convey different aspects of the significance and meaning of objects.

For example the same christening gown could be displayed

- with other gowns made by the same maker to highlight the work of a particular seamstress
- with earlier and later gowns to reveal changes in manufacture and style over time
- with other objects owned by the wearer(s) of the gown as part of a life story of its first wearer or wearers
- with other items related to the religious ceremony of christening in a particular faith
- with other items which provide insights into naming ceremonies in other cultures
- with other items related to childbirth and care of newborns from different eras
- with other items related to life events such as birth, marriage and death
- with other items related to celebrations in a particular community
- with other significant items resulting from the museum's focus on a specific collecting area as outlined in the museum's Collection policy.

C. Interpreting buildings and places

Buildings or places can be interpreted in similar ways, using the same significance indicators. Interpretation of a site can

- Take a visitor back in time to highlight historical change: 'You are standing on the site of the original station master's cottage...' or 'Look towards the horizon and imagine what the view might have looked like before the arrival of Europeans'.
- Reveal the artistic or structural significance: 'Note the Doric columns on the front verandah. These were added after Mrs Green's visit to Athens in 1908...'
- Give indications of the scientific or research value of the physical remains of a building or highlight the archaeology of a site.
- Reveal the social meaning of a building or a place to a community. 'The meeting hall you are now in was the hub of community life. If these walls could talk you might hear toasts at a wedding, tears at a wake, the tapping of dancing shoes or the raised voices of protest at a community meeting.'
- Make visitors aware of the spiritual meaning of a place: 'For Aboriginal people the creek bed you can see from this window was intimately connected with stories of spirit ancestors such as.....'
- Place the building or the site in different contexts including historical, geographical, architectural or environmental.

D. Themes, stories and messages

In your interpretation policy you will have outlined the main themes, key stories and messages you aim to present through museum displays. Developing a display involves interpreting or re-interpreting collection items and finding new ways of developing themes, presenting history and telling stories related to them.

Ideas about ways to interpret objects or to tell history are gathered through different means including existing museum catalogue records and research materials; further specific research; visitor feedback and/or community involvement; information arriving with newly acquired or donated items and photographs.

When developing interpretation for a display, follow principles of sound historical research and current museological practices (see Help Sheet on *Historical research*).

Keep in mind the following keywords, ideas and questions.

- **Voices:** Does your display allow visitors to 'hear' different voices, views and perspectives? Try to avoid presenting one, authoritative view of history. Reflect on the different ways in which people live and experience historical events. Consider the perspective of women, men, children, the old and the young, Indigenous people, people from different cultural backgrounds, workers and bosses, the affluent and those who struggle to survive, the well remembered, the neglected and the forgotten. Seek balance in the stories you present. For example first settlement in a community meant different things to different people. For the pioneers it was struggle and success, for Indigenous people it meant invasion and dispossession, for the leaders it meant plans and ideas, for ordinary people, hard work. Use oral history and personal memories where you can.

- **Opposing views:** Have you acknowledged where there is conflict and debate? Part of showing different experiences can be revealing and acknowledging opposing views. Don't be afraid to present conflicting ideas – use them as a means to pose questions and involve visitors interactively in your display. Ask them what they think. Be careful to be accurate and to avoid bias towards a particular side of a debate.
- **Questions & Doubt:** Interpretation cannot, and should not try to, provide the definitive and final answer. Interpretation that asks questions, acknowledges doubt and suggests where further research is required is effective. When a display poses a question for visitors or asks them to imagine themselves in a particular situation it immediately engages their interest and makes them think outside of their own experience.
- **Make a personal connection:** As well as challenging visitors to see other perspectives draw them in by making a connection with something they already know, or want to know. For example these days a 'trip into town to buy groceries' means jumping into the car and heading for the nearest supermarket. Ask your visitors to consider how this differs from the experience of a pioneer pastoralist who journeyed by horse and dray for days to reach the nearest settlement where he could stock up on staples which would have to last for months. Encourage them to imagine the experience of a migrant or refugee struggling with a new language, an unknown currency and unfamiliar products.
If you are interpreting a strange object, think about, ask, and answer the logical questions a visitor would ask – What is it? What does it do? How old is it? Why is it important?
- **Involve your audience:** Use interpretation as a means to create empathy. Encourage visitors to step into the shoes of the people of the past. Allow them to see the inherent and continuing meaning of objects and issues. Asking questions and making personal connections involves visitors as does humour, analogies, metaphors and interactivity. For example you might be displaying objects related to washing clothes such as a washboard, a mangle, a copper. You might ask your visitors to imagine sweating over a boiling copper on a 40 degree summer's day trying to dissolve stains out of cloth nappies. Compare this with flicking the switch on a modern washing machine. If you have a secondary example of a washboard, you might set up an interactive area where visitors can have a go at using it themselves. You might pose questions which make your audience think about the changing role of women in the home.
- **Tell a story:** Stories draw visitors in. They personalise a subject. They are immediate, exciting and involving so people keep reading to find out what happened next. 'Nellie and Sam were married in the church opposite this museum. Nellie was standing where you are now standing when the telegram arrived to say Sam was missing in action. Note that Nellie's letter is postmarked the day before. Sam never learned that he was going to be a father.'

- **Photographs:** Photographs, drawings and maps are not just illustrations to break up text on a storyboard or make it look appealing, they are a rich source for interpretation. Ask visitors to study photos rather than just notice them, reading the caption quickly before moving on. Pinpoint particular objects, clothing, groupings, expressions or surroundings in photos. Pose questions about why the photo was taken, what it was trying to convey and what it conveys now. Relate the photograph to items on display or to other stories.
- **Not just the good old days:** See the past in all of its infinite variety and complexity. Avoid generalising about the 'olden days'. See stories in the context of their times and use interpretation to make sure that visitors are exposed to different ways of understanding history.
- **Cause and effect:** Think of ways to show how each event is connected with another and how actions have consequences. Show the lessons of history, the long term impact. Let visitors see connections. For example your display might show how the closure of a railway siding or the diversion of traffic away from a town and onto a major highway completely changed the circumstances of a community — businesses closed, people moved, the local paper folded due to lack of advertising income and community morale hit an all time low.
- **Linking past and present:** Show how problems faced by people in the past are still faced today in different ways. This is part of making a personal connection. Show visitors that while experiences in the past may seem far away, they are really very close. For example, today when factories close and jobs are lost, families are forced to move or rely on welfare. This also occurred in the past, leaving entire communities destitute and with little hope of resurrection. Ask visitors to see the similarities and consider the differences.
- **What's missing?** Find the gaps. When you are doing your research, note the questions that have not yet been answered, the holes in arguments. In your displays, tell the stories that sit quietly in the background behind the well known accounts of great men and major events.
- **Accuracy:** Check facts and stories. Watch out for contradictions and make sure your writing style is clear and not open to being misinterpreted. See the Help Sheet on *Historical research* for tips on how to ensure you are relying on the most accurate sources.
- **Not the whole story:** It is not possible or advisable to try and tell everything about a particular topic in one display. Be selective. Focus on particular themes and parts of a larger story. Thinking in this way can help you avoid the temptation to provide long lists of dates, events and people's names.
- **Context:** By avoiding lists and focusing on themes, you will already be taking steps towards seeing things in context. Interpret events, people and objects in the context of their own time and in contrast to the present. Consider context both broadly and specifically. For example when interpreting local wartime history make sure to place stories in the context of what was happening in the rest of the

country and in the war more generally. Look at the specific context of local events – the appearance of new cars in farming communities after a good season or the closing down of businesses after successive years of drought.

- **Acknowledging sources:** Let your visitors know where you found the information you are sharing. Let people into the inside story of your historical investigation. Answer visitors' questions about where they can find out more.

Part 2: Writing for displays: the nuts and bolts

Writing for displays is an art and a professional writing skill. Visitors to museums are many and varied. They approach and interact with interpretative panels and collection displays in different ways. Writers have described the various types of visitors as 'studiers' (those who read and examine everything in detail), browsers and strollers (who do just that) and skaters (who flit randomly from exhibit to exhibit, reading bits and pieces).² For this reason when planning and writing titles, text and captions you should consider the following.

Audience: You may know something about the expected audience for your displays from a visitor survey or similar research. However, knowing this in detail is not essential. The language and style used in any display should be accessible and understandable for all manner of audiences. Recognise that visitors are not experts in the field, but are there to learn new things and to be entertained and/or moved.

Catch me if you can: Many 'browsers' and 'skaters' visit museums. A catchy title like this will stop visitors in their tracks because it makes them want to read more.

Concise and clear: Once you have stopped your visitors, don't lull them to sleep. Make sure that your text is engaging, clear and easy to read and comprehend. Use short sentences rather than long-winded descriptions. Use familiar words and avoid jargon. When it is necessary to include unfamiliar words, explain what they mean. Humour can sometimes make a definition more interesting.

A galley in this case is not a ship's kitchen, but rather the tray into which the printer placed the type.

KISS – Keep it short and sweet: Limit the amount of text on a panel, don't write a book. Between 50 and 150 words per storyboard or per subject on a larger panel is a good guide. People are unlikely to read more. If there is more text on a large panel, make sure you use subtitles and illustrations to break it up.

Captions and labels: If you link text with illustrations and objects, you will not need to use so many words on labels and captions because connections will be more obvious. However consider the use of catchy and emotive captions and descriptive or story-telling object labels. Remember KISS goes for captions too.

² See Gianna Moscardo, Roy Ballantyne & Karen Hughes, *Designing interpretive signs: principles in practice*, Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, 2007, p 9.

Direct and emotive: Write with the aim to seize the attention of visitors. Get to the point. Make sure the first sentence in a paragraph is important or dramatic. Don't waffle. Rather than saying *I make a recommendation* say *I recommend*.

Use simple sentences without too many qualifying phrases. Read your text aloud. You can create emotive impact through language, tone and sentence structure.

Instead of: *The town, due to the drought, which had continued for many years in this region, slowly reduced in its population.*

Try a shorter, more vivid style: *The drought continued. The population slipped away with each scorching year.*

Balance being creative, with using shorter, more familiar words.

Rather than saying *Nevertheless the magnitude of the undertaking precluded it being completed swiftly'*

Say it more simply: *The size of the project meant it took time to complete.*

Positive rather than negative: Focus on the positive rather than saying *Don't use the negative*. For example: Instead of: *This kind of dust storm was not new to Pinnaroo; say Pinnaroo had survived many storms like this.*

Use active rather than passive voice: Instead of *The town changed as a result of the bushfire* say *The bushfire changed the town*. Active voice is more direct and has more impact.

Control and choice: With a book most people read from beginning to end. With a display visitors choose which part to read first. They control their own experience of a display. However you can influence what and how they read with clever use of titles and by using text to direct readers to move on to the bit you would like them to read next.

Interactivity and posing questions: Visitors will stay to read more if you involve them in thinking about and assessing what you are saying. Ask questions and tell stories that provoke a *how would you feel if this happened to you* response. Provide visitors with a means to record their answers to questions or their reactions to displays. Providing sticky notes, a blackboard or a whiteboard are possibilities.

Respect and sensitivity: Museum text should be friendly and conversational. Try not to talk down to or lecture to your audience. Make sure that you use acceptable, non derogatory language and expressions. Consider double meanings and implications. Make sure you are culturally sensitive. Use capital letters, correct terms and spellings when referring to people or objects from other cultures. For example always refer to *Aboriginal people* not *aboriginals*.

Editing: The secret to writing good interpretative text is edit, edit and edit again. By reading your text over a number of times and having others check it as well, you will gradually shorten and shape it. Reading text out loud is a good way to hear how it sounds. Consider involving a professional editor where you can. The better the text is, the more likely people will stay and read it and comprehend the important points made?.

Quality control: Assess who the good writers in your group are or consider employing a professional historian/writer.

Part 3: Types of interpretation

Use a variety of methods of interpretation in your museum. Think beyond creating storyboards. Brain storm ways that you can

- link display panels with meaningful arrangements of items
- create attractive and interesting information folders or browser books for visitors who want to know more
- develop guided tours or create maps or audio aids for self-guided tours
- incorporate audio-visual or multimedia components in displays
- develop education kits for students and teachers
- design and write publications such as books, brochures, and information sheets on different topics
- produce DVDs and CD Roms for viewing on site or for visitors to purchase
- develop a website.

Look - Imagine - Listen - Think

Museum interpretation should encourage visitors to do all of these things. Involve their senses, engage their minds.