

Introduction

Many common mistakes made in the writing and design of exhibit labels are avoidable, and there are many findings from visitor studies to guide the way.

The list of common sins committed by label writers and label designers is, unfortunately, not getting shorter.¹ Writers are doing a better job of being more visitor friendly and writing shorter and more active labels, but the typical errors that result from poor graphic design choices—reflections, shadows, type too small, type colors with not enough contrast to background, lack of paragraphs, unintelligible icons or color coding—are still too prevalent.

I've heard from dozens of label writers over the years about how this book has helped them write better labels. I have not heard from many designers. Here's hoping that the word will get out with this edition, which has been written with them in mind. The photographs were selected for being effective graphic examples, thanks to good writing and good design.

Suggestions for ways to avoid the sins are given throughout this book, but a brief summary of "commandments" will remind you up front of what to avoid. The first six will increase the benefits that visitors can get from paying attention to labels; the next four relate to decreasing the amount of effort that visitors have to make to read them.²



FIGURE I.1

9. Labels for interactives should have instructions or interpretations integrated in logical, intuitive ways.
10. The typography (typefaces, sizes, design, colors, lighting, materials, and placement) should make them legible and easy on the eyes, not busy or distracting.

Research and evaluation of labels in exhibitions tell us that these things will increase visitors' use of labels, encourage reading, and foster engagement, comprehension, and meaning making.

We label writers are really lucky people because we get to craft less text with more focus on real things in real spaces for visitors in meaningful places with shared boundaries, unlike the virtual, unbounded, unlimited Internet.

NOTES

1. Stephen Bitgood, "Deadly Sins Revisited: A Review of the Exhibit Label Literature," *Visitor Behavior* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1989).
2. Stephen Bitgood, *Attention and Value: Keys to Understanding Museum Visitors* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013).

TEN COMMANDMENTS

1. Labels should begin with concrete, visual references to the objects they interpret to bring them to life.
2. Labels should relate to the big idea of the exhibit, not ramble without focus or objectives or contain sub-sub-subtopics.
3. Labels should emphasize interpretation (offering provocation) over instruction (presenting information).
4. Labels should know their audience and address visitors' prior knowledge, interests, and/or misconceptions.
5. Labels that ask questions should be visitors' questions.
6. Label design should reflect the label's content or context and have a recognizable system of organization of label types.
7. Labels should be written with a vocabulary that is within reach of the majority of visitors.
8. Labels should be short and concise, more like a tweet than a tome.

I

OVERVIEW

Behind It All

The Big Idea

A powerful exhibition idea will clarify, limit, and focus the nature and scope of an exhibition and provide a well-defined goal against which to rate its success.

When I put this chapter first in the 1996 edition, I wasn't sure it would be as important as it has turned out to be. Many cases since then have proved a big idea to be a useful tool for creating necessary guidelines for label writers. Writers can do their jobs better and the exhibition team can put together a more coherent exhibition when there is a big idea that sets the conceptual boundaries. It's about clarification and focus. Simplicity is not the goal.

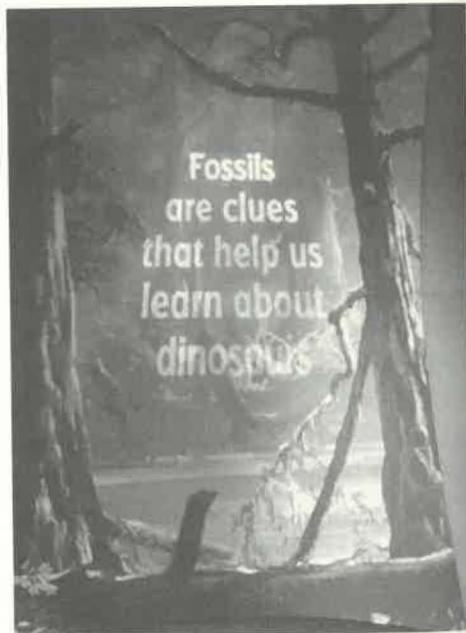
WHAT IS A BIG IDEA?

A big idea is a sentence—a statement—of what the exhibition is about. It is one complete, noncompound, active sentence that identifies a subject, an action (the verb), and a consequence (“so what?”). **It is one big idea, not four.** It is the first thing the team, together, should write for an exhibition. A big idea is big because it has fundamental meaningfulness that is important to human nature. It is not trivial.

The definition of a big idea, written as a big idea statement, could read like this: *The big idea provides an unambiguous focus for the exhibit team throughout the exhibit development process by clearly stating in one noncompound sen-*



FIGURE 1.1
The entryway of the dinosaur exhibition at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis states the big idea clearly: It's all about the clues.



tence *the scope and purpose of an exhibition*. This one contains thirty words, but there's no word limit on a big idea. It should be as long as it needs to be.

WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE?

Examples of big ideas that contain a clear subject, an active verb, and a “so what?” follow. As you read each one, what picture do you get in your mind of what you will see, do, and find out about in an exhibition with this big idea?

- Most of what we know about the universe comes from messages we read in light.
- A healthy swamp—an example of a threatened ecosystem—provides many surprising benefits to humans.
- Forensic scientists look for evidence of crimes against wildlife in order to enforce wildlife laws.
- The conditions for life on Earth in extreme environments help define the ways we search for life on other planets.
- Art depicting the California gold rush promoted a skewed romanticized vision of one of the nineteenth century’s most important events.

As you can see in the examples above, the subject can be stated in one word (*swamp, scientists*) with adjectives (*healthy, forensic*), or more than one word (*most of what we know about the universe, the conditions for life on Earth, art depicting the California gold rush*).

The next three examples do not conform to the Serrell rigors of a big idea statement (subject-verb-so what?), but they do function just like a big idea in that they define or describe the content of the exhibition. By reading the title or the statement, you know what the exhibition will be about.

- *Manufacturing a Miracle: Brooklyn and the Story of Penicillin*
- Sharks are not what you think.
- What is it about dogs that strongly connects them to humans?

All of the examples above show the difference between a topic and a big idea. Topics—such as sharks, penicillin, forensic scientists, or Western art—are incomplete thoughts, whereas a big idea tells you *what about* sharks, *what about* forensic scientists, or *what kinds of* art.

FIGURE 1.2
The final big idea of the *Evolution & Health* traveling exhibition from the New York Hall of Science stated a complex idea succinctly: “Every adaptation has consequences for our health.” Photos and captions reinforce the exhibit’s four themes.



Some people confuse topics, outputs, or objectives with big ideas. Topics and objectives will not help keep the exhibition focused.

These examples are *not* big ideas:

- This exhibit is about the settlement of the western United States.
- This exhibit will present the complex historical and scientific information surrounding the questionable authenticity of sculpture.
- Visitors will learn about molecular structure, chemical reactions, and the scientific process of analyzing unknown substances.
- Visitors will develop a sense of wonder about nature by exploring the *secret* world of animals.

The above are not big ideas because they don’t say what the subject of the exhibition is or tell you what is going on. If “visitors” or “the exhibit” is the subject, you haven’t got a big idea yet. If the visitors are doing something, it’s probably an objective. If the exhibit is doing something, it’s probably an output.

HOW DO YOU COME UP WITH A BIG IDEA?

It takes time. Hours, days, even months. It’s not a matter of just wordsmithing. It takes a lot of thinking and rethinking. It is messy. There’s lots of editing and reediting. Starting over. Sleeping on it. Often it means tabling it

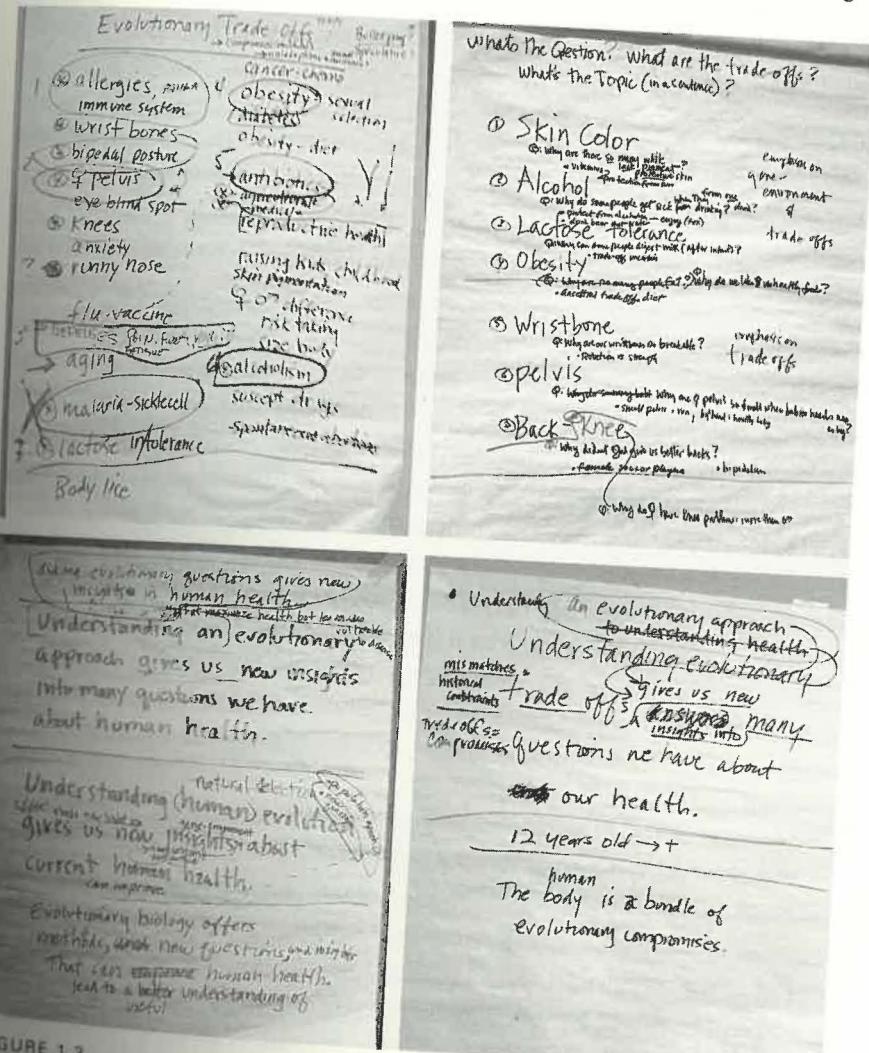


FIGURE 1.3
It takes a lot of time, and it can be a messy-looking process, to develop a big idea. In the case of *Evolution & Health*, it took more than 50 hours of discussion and dozens of iterations.

until later. Sometimes you go through the whole development process without one. Sometimes you find it after opening.

Reaching the big idea by consensus is important because it needs to be “owned” by everyone on the team. If you decide on one by voting democratically, the losers will be resentful and “I told you so” will haunt the process. Consensus means that everyone shares the successes as well as the missed opportunities at the end.

HOW IS A BIG IDEA USED?

Having a big idea does not mean that the exhibition has to insist on communicating it overtly, but it provides a thread of meaning, coherence, and weight. Exhibit developers use the big idea to delineate what will and will not be included in the exhibit. It is primarily a tool for the team, not an actual label for visitors, so although it must be clear, it can use a complex vocabulary.

The big idea guides the development of exhibit elements and their labels (e.g., for cases, captions, interactives). This means that each element must have a clearly defined objective that supports, exemplifies, or illustrates aspects of the big idea. For each exhibit component, the question, “What’s this got to do with the big idea?” should have a clear and positive answer.

Some exhibit developers do not exercise self-control when selecting content for an exhibition. They have no limits and do not resist the temptation to try to tell every story. As one developer admitted proudly, “I’m the one who was responsible for the 450 panels on the wall. I wouldn’t give up.” But what is most interesting to that expert will not interest, engage, or positively impress most visitors. Faced with those 450, a visitor reported, “My heart sank when I saw all those labels.”¹

Interpretive labels will be easier to write and will make more sense overall to visitors if the exhibition has a single focus that unifies all its parts. Good labels are guided by a strong, cohesive exhibit plan—a theme, story, or communication goal—that sets the tone and limits the content. Not just the labels, but all of the interpretive techniques and the elements designed for the exhibition will be driven by this plan.

Exhibitions with a big idea can be big or small (e.g., 8,000 or 500 square feet). Size is not the determining factor. A small exhibit with a big idea can be very powerful. A big exhibit with a big idea can be very comprehensive and contain many elements that reinforce each other.

ARE THERE ANY EXHIBITIONS THAT DON’T NEED A BIG IDEA?

Some very large, encyclopedic, nondidactic permanent collections may not lend themselves to having a big idea. But even for these, institutions may want to think about renovations and reinstallations that would break up their large mishmash galleries into smaller, more intellectually accessible units.

Not every exhibition at a children’s museum needs to have a big idea, but the teams should be clear about the ones that do or don’t. These decisions will be made by looking carefully at the age of the audience, the topic, and whether the exhibit experiences lend themselves to new learning—beyond active, engaging play.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THERE’S NOT A BIG IDEA?

Exhibitions that lack a big idea are very common. And they show it because they are overwhelming, confusing, intimidating, and too complex. There are too many labels, and the texts do not relate to the objects. The labels contain too many different ideas that do not clearly relate to each other. They are hard to grasp. They are typically underutilized—the majority of visitors move through them quickly, stopping at fewer than one-third of the elements.

Too often, museum practitioners, especially those working in children’s museums and science museums, do not ask themselves what the big idea is. Instead, they develop the exhibition as a bunch of “neat, affordable devices that visitors will love and not be able to destroy.” These neat exhibit elements are often developed with cleverness and creativity, but they lack a cohesive or logical relationship to each other and do not always support any exhibit objectives. They also lack soul—the fundamental meaningfulness that answers the question, “So what?”

Neat exhibit ideas without precision, focus, and soul are not enough. There should be more to exhibit elements than having visitors like them and enjoy themselves. Enjoyment is not the only criterion for success. Especially in exhibitions that claim to be educational, visitors should be able to understand what an element is about, grasp its context in the whole exhibition (i.e., within the big idea), and find it personally meaningful and useful.

Without a big idea, the job of the label writer is much more difficult: interpretive text contains fragmented, unrelated facts with emphasis on providing information for the sake of information, not on providing meaningful, useful experiences for the visitor’s sake.

CASE STUDY**MY DOG**

by Beverly Serrell

A natural history museum developed a six-thousand-square-foot exhibition about dogs. Early in the planning process exhibit developers came up with a big idea, stated as a question: "What is it about dogs that strongly connects them with humans?" The exhibits would answer the question in a variety of ways, such as dogs' physical and mental abilities, their social structure, and evolution and selective breeding.

Later in the process, experts in canine science from local universities were called in to advise on content for the dogs exhibition. They made many recommendations for different topics that the exhibits could cover—some that were related to the big idea, such as artificial and natural selection, canine communication, and a dog's sense of hearing, sight, and smell. But the experts also suggested other topics that were clearly not closely related to the big idea, such as research and conservation, the Genome Project, neoteny and juvenilization, endurance, canine familial disorders, the story of urban coyotes, and the story of Yellowstone wolves. The result was a very large exhibition.

Summative evaluation showed evidence that the primarily dog-loving audience was highly attracted to and engaged with half of the eighty-plus exhibit elements. But despite a preponderance of label text, a third of the visitors indicated a desire for more information. The evaluators concluded that the range of topics could have provided "additional layered information" to satisfy the needs of that audience. Really? Maybe not.

Maybe it's not just a matter of providing more information. Perhaps when visitors say they want more information (when in fact, a lot of information was provided at the eighty-plus exhibits), what they really mean is that they wanted more of the *right kind of information*: they hoped for more information about their own particular favorite species—my dog.

What if the exhibition had stuck to the original big idea in the first place and only included those topics that clearly answered the question about the unique aspects of our long-term relationship with dogs? What if the exhibit developers had been less comprehensive (for example, leaving out the parts about wolves and coyotes) and were more focused, saying more about the attractive qualities of dog behavior, their mental capacity, physical traits, and the history of our connection? Instead of being encyclopedic, the exhibits would allow visitors to compare their own dog's attributes with the ones presented, such as expressive ears and tails, emotional vocalizations, social structures, useful services, and sloppy wet kisses.

And people who did not own a dog could still become engaged with the traits they know and see in other people's pets.

Next time you see the plans for making the largest and most comprehensive traveling exhibition ever created to explore the history, biology, and evolution of dogs or horses or frogs or sharks or whatever, think: *What about my dog?*

That's the "so what?" of all big ideas—answering the question, "*How is this going to relate to me?*"

OTHER ADVANTAGES TO HAVING A BIG IDEA

Having a big idea does not make visitors' experiences in the exhibition more controlled or constricted, or less open-ended than an exhibition without one, but it does increase the likelihood that visitors will be able to decipher the exhibition's communication goals. A big idea keeps the exhibit team accountable to its educational objectives while allowing visitors to construct their own experiences freely.

The "voice" of an exhibition is linked to the big idea, but it is also different from it. The big idea determines what the voice or voices within the exhibit will be like—casual, formal, knowledgeable expert, firsthand experience, or different voices with different points of view.



FIGURE 1.4
How do you make plants dynamic—more than decoration or background? The Huntington Conservatory did it with a provocative big idea: “Plants are up to something.”

If the big idea is a controversial one, a balanced viewpoint may or may not be desirable—again, it depends on exactly what the big idea is. The 1995 controversy at the Smithsonian Institution over plans for the *Enola Gay* exhibition was the result of a bad match between the subject (the atomic bombing of Japan in World War II) and the timing (the fifty-year celebration of the end of the war, honoring those who fought).² Was it supposed to be an academic history of a war exhibit or was it a tribute to the United States of America’s armed forces? A balance between those two might not have been possible, but a clarification of whose point of view was being communicated and for what purpose would have clearly been a good idea.

Exhibit developers who work in teams will appreciate the power of a big idea. It can unify the efforts of the team members by helping to eliminate arguments over ego and turf. When all members of the team focus on the same objectives, each person’s ideas can be considered more fairly. If an idea works,

the team embraces it; if it does not fit, the team can reject it without bias by one member. A clear big idea also protects the team from criticism by sources whose support is needed, such as the director or the board. In an exhibition driven by the team’s desire to communicate a big idea, there will be less need for the single job of “educator” because the whole team will share that role.

A big idea works best when the team writes it down—but does not set it in stone—at the beginning of the exhibition development process, and changes it when necessary. The operative words are “written down.” If the big idea is not written down, different people on the exhibit team will have their own interpretations for it, and conflicts will develop over what is necessary and appropriate in the exhibition. Even when the big idea is written, it is amazing how differently people will interpret it. Members of the exhibit team should all memorize or post the big idea label over their desks so that they can refer to it easily. “The big idea serves as the place to start, a place to come back to, and a place to end as the planning progresses or when the team gets off track. Repeatedly asking the questions what, how and why helps to define and refine what we want to say,” said a museum studies student.



FIGURE 1.5
Consensus on a big idea is important; in the end, the whole team will share in credit for success as well as responsibility for the missed opportunities.

A BIG IDEA AND EVALUATION GO HAND IN HAND

A big idea can be tried out with visitors early in the planning stages, and visitor response can help developers shape or modify it, or tighten up the exhibit plan. After the exhibition is completed, evaluation can tell you whether or not visitors' experiences successfully reflect or incorporate the big idea.

As visitors exit an exhibition, if they can easily, unhesitatingly, and thoroughly answer the question, "What was that exhibition about?" and their answer resonates positively with the big idea, there is strong evidence for immediate impacts of comprehension and personal significance. If the majority of them seem hesitant ("Uh, ummm . . ."), uncertain ("I think, maybe, well . . ."), brief and incomplete ("It was about sharks"), or apologetic ("I really wasn't paying attention," "I just breezed through"), there is evidence that the big idea was not clear.

Summative evaluation can answer the question, "To what degree and in what ways did visitors understand what the exhibition was about?" Visitors certainly can create their own meanings in ways unintended by the exhibit developers, but this is not a problem as long as the majority of them create something that is not contradictory to the exhibit's purpose or does not perpetuate misunderstandings that the exhibit was supposed to correct.

I have again given a lot of space to the idea of having a clear big idea in the first place because so many other things depend on it—content research, label writing, image selection, design, layout, graphic look and feel, size, evaluation metrics. With a concise thesis statement as the basis for all interpretation, the use of words in the exhibition will have clear direction and defined limits.

In the next chapter, you will see that just as a big idea provides useful limits to the nature and scope of an exhibition, an interpretive approach to label writing gives the exhibition a less dogmatic, or knowledge-based voice. A big idea defines what the story will be, and an interpretive approach encourages visitors to become part of the story themselves.

NOTES

1. These comments were from "Critiquing Museum Exhibitions: The Sequel" (panel presentation, American Association of Museums annual meeting, 1995).

2. Mike Wallace, "The Battle of the Enola Gay," *Museum News* 74, no. 4 (July/August 1995).

What Are Interpretive Labels?

Interpretive labels tell stories; they are narratives, not lists of facts. Any label that serves to explain, guide, question, inform, or provoke—in a way that invites participation by the reader—is interpretive.

The purpose of interpretive labels is to contribute to the overall visitor experience in a positive, enlightening, provocative, and meaningful way. Interpretive labels address visitors' unspoken concerns: What's in it for me? Why should I care? How will knowing this improve my life? If labels only identify objects, animals, or artwork, they are not interpretive. As one visitor commented about the lack of interpretive labels in a natural history museum's bird halls, "Maybe one out of five birds had a little baseball card thing on them besides the name. 'Hits right, throws left, batted .328.' I guess I was looking for more."¹

Interpretive labels are part of interpretive exhibitions, which are displays that intend to tell stories, contrast points of view, present challenging issues, or strive to change people's attitudes. Interpretive exhibitions are found in all types of museums where the design of the show is intended to give visitors the opportunity to become engaged in the exhibit environment, be aware of the communication objectives intended by the exhibit developers, and find personally meaningful connections with the exhibits.

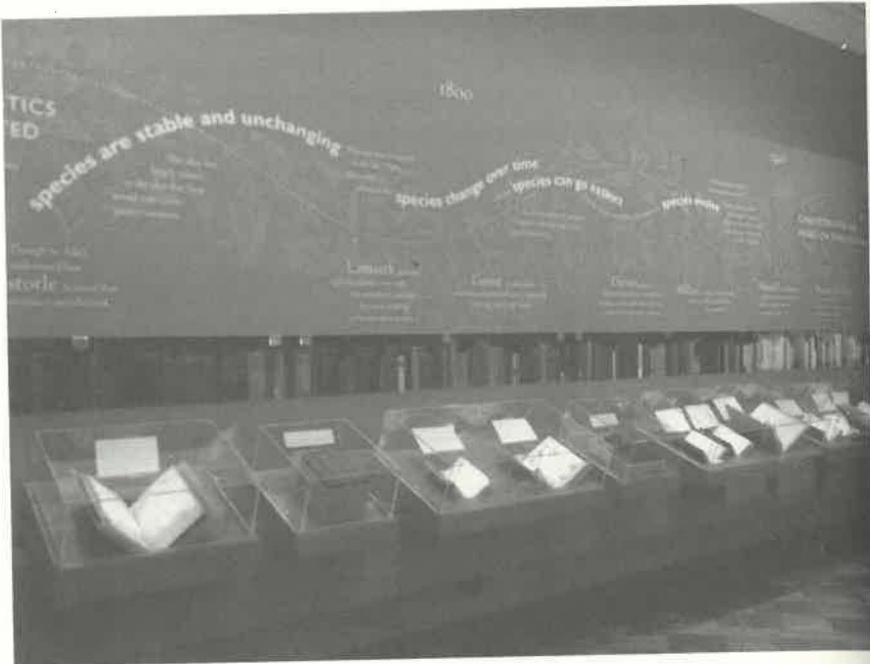


FIGURE 2.1

Many books' worth of ideas were distilled on this wall to summarize the long, complex story of the development of Darwin's theory of natural selection at the Huntington Library. Just below are 250 editions of *On the Origin of Species* in different languages.

SOME BACKGROUND ON THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

But what is "interpretation" itself? It is more than presenting information and more than encouraging participation. It comes to museums (in the United States) from the more oral tradition of educational programming in the National Park Service, and it is far more interactive than traditional, formal educational models of teachers as deliverers and mediators of information.

In the classic *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Freeman Tilden explained his six principles for interpretation, developed from his extensive experience in National Park ranger programs and in writing labels and designing exhibitions at park visitor centers.² Although his 1950s language is noninclusive (e.g., visitors and interpreters are referred to as "he" and "him") and the photographs appear dated, his principles still ring strong and true and are presented in a straightforward, down-to-earth style. Tilden's six principles:

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but **provocation**.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.

Tilden proposed his principles in 1957, long before museum educators and other practitioners began using words like *the visitor experience*, *meaning making*, and *empowerment*. His fifth principle is the most relevant to chapter 1 in this book: to have a big idea behind it all; to keep everything else focused toward one, overall whole message; and to think about visitors as whole people with many shared needs. I like his ideas about revelation and provocation being the goal instead of instruction.

There are other books that discuss the importance of and describe the history of interpretive exhibits. Two standard references within the environmental interpretation field are Sam H. Ham's recently revised and retitled *Interpretation: Making a Difference on Purpose*, and *Interpretive Master Planning* by John Veverka. In a newer book, *Interpretive Planning for Museums: Integrating Visitor Perspectives in Decision Making*, Wells, Butler, and Koke situate the role of interpretive labels into a broader consideration of interpretive planning for exhibitions or for an interpretive master plan at the institution level. Their whole book places emphasis on how museum practitioners can integrate visitor perspectives into their plans for developing and evaluating interpretive efforts.³

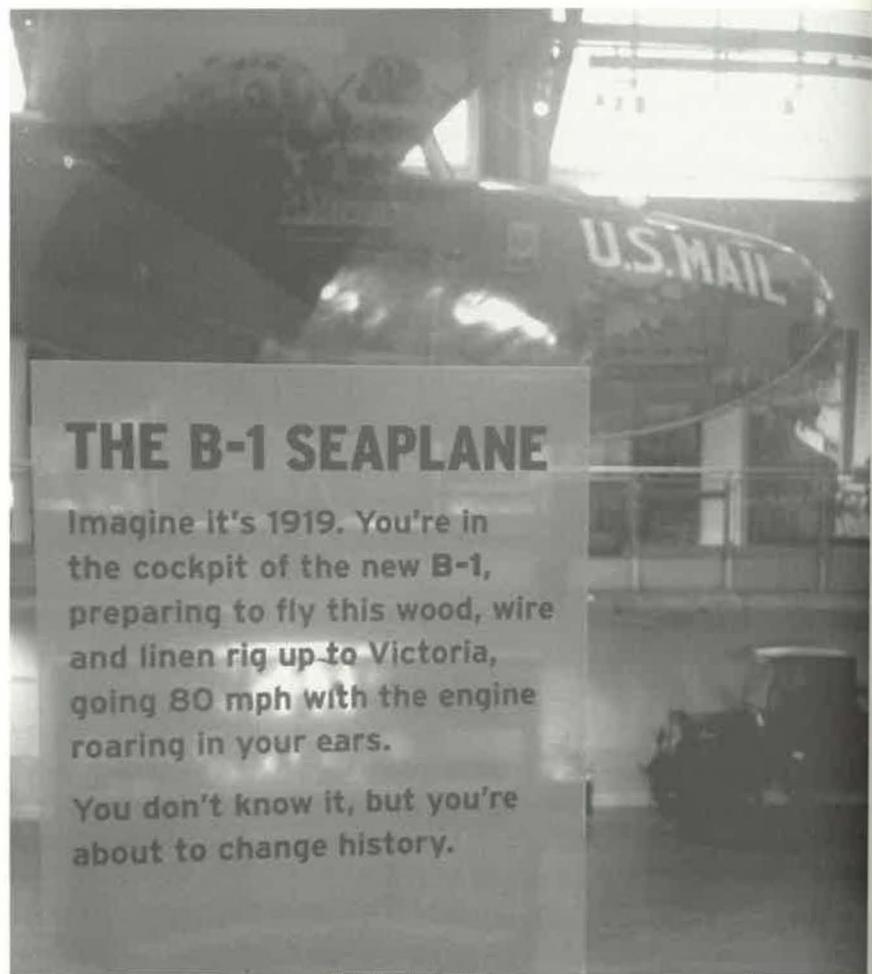


FIGURE 2.2

At the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle, a label invites you to use your imagination and be part of the story.

LABELS AS STORYTELLING

The above general notions about interpretation have concrete implications that are important for museum labels. For one, there are some interesting similarities among interpretation, narratives, storytelling, and exhibit texts. Printed words exist as visual and verbal elements to the reader's eye and mind, and as oral components to the reader's ear (reading silently or hearing

someone read aloud). Good interpretation, like good storytelling, carries the listener along with the sound of the words and the images they create, and lets the listener participate by anticipating where the story is going. Good stories don't keep the reader in the dark. Our brains are wired for emotional storytelling strategies, says Lisa Cron. "All story is emotion based—if we're not feeling, we're not reading."⁴

Museum exhibit labels tell very short stories. In figure 2.3, a label for a Greek vase not only describes what the man is doing but also how he ended up like this.



Wine Jug with a Drunk Man Singing

Greek, made in Athens, about 470 B.C.

Terracotta

Red-figure *chous* attributed to the Oionokles Painter

With his mouth open in song and his arms outstretched, the man depicted on this pitcher shows the effects of a night of drinking. His young servant is ready to minister to his needs, holding the man's belongings as well as the jug into which he urinates.

FIGURE 2.3
The Getty label tells a story with a punchy ending. Visitors look back and forth between the label and the image repeatedly, which is evidence of active engagement.

Below are three more examples of interpretive labels that strike a good balance between what the reader might anticipate is coming next and what does:

When the tide ebbs, sandpipers fan out across mudflats and beaches to feed. As the tide rises, they retreat, to preen themselves and wait for the next low tide.

—from an aquarium, at a seabird exhibit

These screens were made at the Savonnerie manufactory, which was owned by the French Crown and provided carpets and screens for the royal chateaux. Such screens were known as *paravents* (“against the wind”) and were usually kept folded in the corners of rooms. When the rooms were being used, the screens would be arranged by servants for protection against drafts.

—from a decorative arts exhibit, as a caption for a pair of textile screens

The logger needed clothes that were functional and provided freedom of movement. Pants were cut off just below the boot tops to keep the rain out and to prevent snagging. Men working in the woods often had to take off at top speed, and if a pant leg caught it could mean the difference between life and death.

—from a history museum,
as a photo caption in an exhibition about logging

These kinds of labels help readers look back and forth between the label and the object, following the details of the narrative. Or readers can imagine action in their minds and memories, aided by the label’s concrete references. You may not see the tide rising, or feel the cold breeze in the chateaux, or witness the logger running for his life, but these quick stories give visitors a “minds-on” moment.

LABELS WITH MEANINGFUL STORIES

Visitors refer to labels in various ways: as blurbs, captions, wall texts, descriptions, titles, legends, cards, and explanations.⁵ What changes would it take to get them to call labels *stories* or *conversations*? One way might be to follow the advice of Joseph M. Williams, in his very handy book called *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*.⁶ He gives us some excellent guidelines for how to

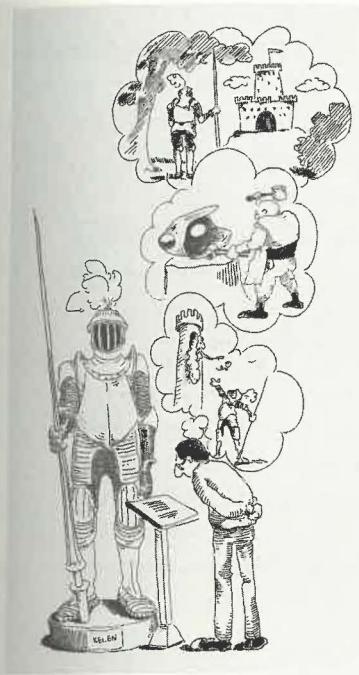


FIGURE 2.4
A good label fires the imagination.

make prose more clear, less passive, and more engaging. His “First Principle of Clear Writing” states, “When we link the simple point that sentences are stories about characters who act to the way we use the grammar of a sentence to describe those characters and their actions, we get a principle of style more powerful than any other.” His principle has two parts:

1. In the subjects of your sentences, name your cast of characters.
2. In the verbs of your sentences, name the crucial actions in which you involve those characters.

Similarly, labels that lack subjects and have unclear action cannot tell clear stories that flow easily.

Because many of the stories in museums are about people, labels can be edited to include them as the subjects. In the two examples below, notice how changing the subject of the label from objects to people creates a more engaging story.

A DESERT GRAVE WAYSIDE

by Beverly Serrell

While driving through the vast and scenic Big Bend National Park in Texas, along the lonely two-lane road, I encountered occasional pull-off areas with wayside exhibits—a single panel with graphics and some interpretation of the spot or view.

"A Desert Grave" was located at the end of a short trail from the parking area. It was a quiet, sunny day, with only a slight breeze. I read the story about the pioneers and how the wife had died and was buried here. I looked around and pondered the stark beauty of the desert and what it might have been like to live out here, and I thought about the struggles the family went through.

Years later, on another visit to Big Bend, I drove past the same place, and I stopped again to visit the desert gravesite. I walked down the path and came up to the wayside panel. I was stunned by how few words there were in the text—not more than one hundred. I thought there had been many more than that! My imagination must have filled in details about the weather, the scenery, the daily life, the sadness, and a wordless number of feelings that the text in "A Desert Grave" inspired in my mind after I'd first read it.

How often do just a few words create a lasting memory that felt like a fully lived experience? Let your labels be jumping-off places for people's imaginations. Let them fill in many more words and feelings.

Pictograph

Carvings and paintings on rock are scattered throughout California. They seem to have had magical or religious significance related to the hunting of large game. Other rock paintings were made during girls' coming-of-age ceremonies and boys' initiation rites.

Rock Carvings and Paintings—Pictographs

Early people carved and painted on rocks throughout California. The pictograms they created, such as the one on your left, may signify magical or religious aspects of the large game they hunted. Other rock paintings showed girls' coming-of-age ceremonies and boys' initiation rites.

In the first, the subject "they" refers to the pictographs, not the early people, and pictographs are never defined. The pictographs do not have beliefs, people do, and the second example more actively acknowledges that.

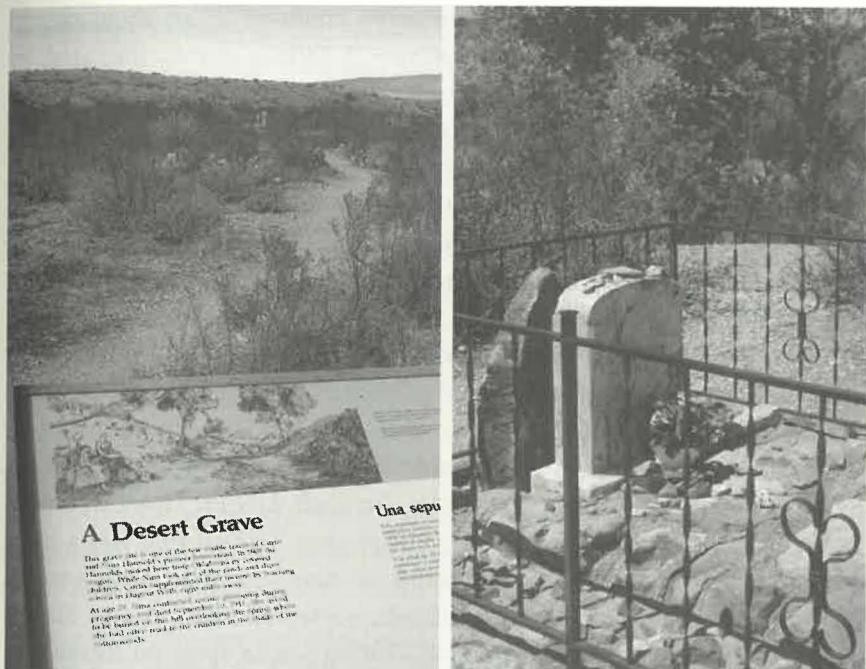


FIGURE 2.5

At a wayside exhibit in Big Bend National Park, a well-crafted story told in fewer than 100 words provokes a multitude of thoughts.

The nature of storytelling in museum exhibitions and the techniques for doing it well are part of a larger context of issues that surround education, communication, and being human. We need stories that tell of origins, envision the future, and give a sense of continuity and purpose. This is especially challenging when we think about the diversity of typical urban communities that museums serve. Because exhibitions can provide multiple types of experiences for visitors, museums are in a unique position to take on difficult topics.⁷

DIFFICULT STORIES WELL TOLD

The traveling exhibition *Race: Are We So Different?* asked “What is race?” and opened a public discourse on this difficult topic. One of the primary messages was that the concept of race is a human invention and that we are all more alike than different. Individual exhibits encouraged interaction and conversation, and “provided visitors with the information, evidence, and thinking tools necessary to make the leap from vague, confused beliefs about race to more sophisticated understandings of race.”⁸ Talking circles, mediated by trained docents, gave visitors the opportunity to discuss issues of race raised by the exhibition and their own personal experiences.

An exhibition about the Japanese internment camp at Heart Mountain in Wyoming walked a fine line between revealing what actually happened there and being sensitive to the people who were involved. The exhibition took a clear position: that the internment was illegal and wrong. The labels were written in the first person, and sometimes in the voice of a real person who had lived there. Oral histories and interviews with detainees prompted visitors to put themselves in the shoes of internees or provoked thoughts about modern civil rights issues.

Darkened Waters: Profile of an Oil Spill was about the grounding of the *Exxon Valdez* off the Alaska coast and its aftermath. Like the Heart Mountain exhibition, *Darkened Waters* had a point of view: The oil spill was a huge disaster. But it included different points of view—commercial fishermen, oil industry workers, government officials, conservationists, Alaska Native people, and others caught up in the spill—letting people speak for themselves wherever possible. It did not, however, try to be equal or balanced. Instead, the “potential cacophony of voices [were] made coherent under that broad umbrella of the museum’s clearly stated position.”⁹ Exhibit elements about

the transport and use of petroleum, marine life, and long-term energy needs encouraged visitors to think about the future and to take action.

The answer to the question, “What should label writers write about?” is a complicated one. The general answer is, write about something that will be meaningful and useful to visitors, and write interpretively. Other than that, it depends on the individual museum and its visitors, and the individual exhibition and its big idea.

The question should be reframed as, “How do you decide what to write about?” The discussions in this chapter, the previous chapter about the big idea, and the upcoming chapter about audiences guide you toward an answer for what the “what” is. The remaining chapters will help you decide the “how.”

NOTES

1. From focus group comment in unpublished study by Serrell & Associates, “From Stuffed Birds on Sticks to Vivid Feathers, Gleaming Talons and Sparkling Beaks: A Summative Evaluation of the Bird Halls at Field Museum of Natural History” (unpublished report, Serrell & Associates, November 1992).
2. Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1977).
3. Sam H. Ham, *Interpretation: Making a Difference on Purpose* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2013); John Veverka, *Interpretive Master Planning* (Cambridge, MA: MuseumsEtc., 2011); Marcella Wells, Barbara H. Butler, and Judith Koke, *Interpretive Planning for Museums: Integrating Visitor Perspectives in Decision Making* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013).
4. Lisa Cron, *Wired for Story: The Writer’s Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2012).
5. Lisa Hubbell Mackinney, “What Visitors Want to Know: The Use of Front-End and Formative Evaluation in Determining Label Content in an Art Museum” (master’s thesis, John F. Kennedy University, 1993).
6. Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1989).
7. Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Borzoi Books, 1995).

8. Randi Korn & Associates, Inc., "Summative Evaluation: *Race: Are We So Different?*" (unpublished report, Randi Korn & Associates, Inc., November 2007), xiii.
9. Kathleen McLean and Catherine McEver, ed., *Are We There Yet? Conversations about Best Practices in Science Exhibition Development* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2004), 63.

3

Types of Labels in Exhibitions

Every label in an exhibition has a specific purpose that needs to make sense within the organization of the whole, but given the way visitors encounter them out of order, they also need to function independently.

There is no universal terminology in museums to identify types of labels. Some institutions use function (e.g., orientation, introductory, caption); others use placement (e.g., wall text, case label, free-standing); some have in-house colloquial expressions (chat panels, tombstone labels); and others haven't thought about labels enough to develop an in-house style vocabulary or standards. Regardless of the names they are given, labels should be developed as an integrated system, from the single title, to the broadest categories, to the one-of-a-kinds. They should all work together.

The most important types of interpretive labels in any exhibition are the title, introduction, section labels, group labels, and captions. These labels help to organize the information and present the exhibition's rationale for looking like it does. Although these labels are developed as linear and hierarchical information, they may not be used in the "right" order by visitors. Nevertheless, the labels still should have internal integrity, organization, and a clear logic to the design.

Noninterpretive labels include identification labels (ID labels), donor plaques, wayfinding and regulatory signs, and credit panels. They will be discussed briefly at the end of this chapter. Labels for interactive exhibits, which