

## "Orientating Visitors Within a Thematic Display"

S. A. Griggs (1983), *International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship*, 2, 119-134.

Summarized by  
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### Introduction

According to Griggs, two factors are responsible for the confusion experienced within a museum: topographical orientation (a museum's physical layout) and conceptual orientation (organization of different subject matters). These problems, as difficult as they sound, can be solved by designing an effective environment and by addressing visitors' expectations. Effective environments provide the visitor with a rich and varied environment, organized in a coherent fashion. Exhibit components should be arranged with a degree of order, not in haphazard fashion. The expectations of visitors are met by establishing conceptual orientation: by providing explicit statements of what the exhibition is about, by guiding the visitors' thoughts, and through the use of advance organizers (signs, maps, etc.) to ensure organizational structure throughout the exhibition.

Griggs studied both topographical orientation and conceptual orientation at the British Museum (Natural History). He used four measures of visitor orientation for three exhibitions (Hall of Human Biology, Origin of Species, and the Insect Gallery):

- **Verbal descriptions:** visitors were asked to describe in detail their passage through the exhibition.
- **Locating exhibits on a map:** visitors were asked to locate objects and particular areas on a ground-plan of the exhibition.
- **Reconstructing the story:** visitors were given summaries of the 10 parts of the exhibition in random order and asked to reconstruct the sequence of the exhibition.
- **Asking for directions:** visitors were asked to take the interviewer to different locations within the exhibition.

### Results

#### Topographical Orientation

The routes visitors followed varied considerably from the intended sequence for each of the exhibitions. The most successful exhibition was the Origin of Species. The exhibit layout is linear and uses the right-turn bias to its advantage, producing a manageable environment for visitors. Visitors had a good representation of the overall layout of the exhibition and were able to give detailed descriptions. On the other hand, the Hall of Human Biology and the Insect Gallery failed to produce a particular pattern of flow due to several possible routes and the use of island displays.

#### Conceptual Orientation

Forty percent of visitors were unaware that the displays were sequential in nature and many visitors were unaware of how the intended sequence was indicated (exhibits were numbered). Most visitors did not make use of the orientation devices provided in the galleries. Their understanding of the physical layout was apparently not impaired by this, but their understanding of the exhibition's conceptual organization may have been improved with use. From visitors' descriptions of the displays, it was evident that most had a very poor conceptual picture of the exhibition, consisting of isolated concepts.

#### Recommendations

From the results, Griggs offers thirteen recommendations for effective orientation.

1. "Orientation should be integrated into the process of developing displays and not tackled as an 'afterthought' once the exhibits have been developed."
2. "Orientation devices should be 'user-defined'." This means that orientation devices should be defined by the visitor not the museum professional.
3. "Design conventions should be explicit." Visitors are informed of the intended sequence in an exhibition.
4. "Detailed conceptual orientation needs to be tackled independently from topographical orientation." Both types of orientation should not use the same devices to convey their messages.
5. "Topographical orientation should achieve two main objectives: to indicate to visitors the overall physical arrangement of the display and to indicate the intended route through the display."
6. "At the entrance to a display topographical orientation can be provided by a ground-plan (map)." The map should be simple enough to obtain the necessary information at a glance.
7. "This information needs to be reinforced throughout the display." Each display section should be clearly marked.
8. "Choice points should be identified during the development of the display and treated appropriately." The environment should suggest the intended sequence in addition to having obtrusive signs.
9. "Any breaks in the sequence of a display should be identified."
10. "The general aim of conceptual orientation is to produce in visitors the expectation of what the display is about and how it is organized conceptually."
11. "There are two main problems to be surmounted before conceptual orientation can be achieved: how to attract and hold visitors' attention to the necessary information and how to communicate the information to them."
12. "Conceptual orientation should begin at the very start of a display."
13. "Conceptual orientation needs to be reinforced throughout the display."