

# Why Johnny Won't Read Labels

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## Introduction

Despite the interpretive value of artifacts, people, landscapes, and events, the writing, design, and production of labels that accompany them too often result in sloppy writing and sloppy design. The finished products often declare how amateurish or professional organizations are, but organizations may never be aware of the images they project. In the process, interpretive opportunities are often left unused.

## The Planning Process

The likelihood of producing labels with quality content and design can be enhanced by breaking the process down into incremental steps. These include: assess resources—> select theme—> research topic—> revise theme—> set objectives—> consider the audience—> select the medium of communication—> write—> rewrite—> in-house critique—> design—> production—> environmental considerations of installation—> evaluation.

## Kinds of Labels

The planner works with four kinds of labels: gallery labels, which introduce visitors to a major area of exhibition; exhibit labels, which give a brief title to a single exhibit; explanatory texts, which provide a narrative about the subject at hand; and captions, which provide such information as the name of the donor, artifact number, and title of the object if it is a work of art.

## Information Or Interpretation?

Without realizing it, most texts provide information rather than interpretation. This in itself is not bad, but the planner must be aware of the differences and make choices deliberately. Information can be characterized as describing, naming, identifying, listing, observing, and selecting. Information is provided without inference, without insight, is didactic in purpose, and consists solely of facts.

"Nothing in education," declared Henry Brook Adams, "is so astonishing as the amount of ignorance it accumulates in the form of inert

fact." Interpretation is: analyzing, classifying, comparing, contrasting, distinguishing, organizing, grouping, sequencing.

Interpretation is holistic. It cultivates values. It develops relationships. It relates to an individual's experience. It creates understanding. It motivates. It fosters appreciation. It uses "What if?" and "So what?" questions to forecast, predict, evaluate, and speculate.

Interpretation is revelation based upon information. It is a way to draw insight. It is, as Freeman Tilden espoused, revelation based upon information.

"The mind," declared the philosopher (and interpreter) Plutarch, "is a candle to light, not a vessel to fill."

## Seven Ways To Interpret An Artifact

The planner must recognize the seven ways to interpret an artifact. The choice must be deliberately made, for, without reflection, planners usually resort to the mundane options and rarely explore the potential of interpreting values. The following sequence of choices is one of increasing sophistication: How was it made?—> How was it used?—> What was its environment?—> What was its development through time?—> Cross-cultural comparisons—> Noting influences (the social context in which artifacts are used, or events occur—> Values.

## Research

How much research is needed before writing begins? Perhaps enough to produce ten or one hundred times more information than will be used. The potential for fresh insight always exists, which is increased if the researcher keeps digging, remains skeptical of traditional story lines, and looks for other points of view that may dispel popular thinking or folklore. This is when learning is increased.

## Setting Objectives

All too often, our sole objective is to get the job done. This attitude caused social critic Alvin Toffler to observe that, "Much of the difficulty troubling arts institutions today stems directly from a failure to define their own purposes precisely, cleanly, concretely...Until we learn to get specific...we are going to wallow about futilely" (date unknown).

By stating objectives in terms of benefit to the audience, planners will find changes in their ways of thinking. An effective approach is to phrase an objective beginning with, "As a result of reading this label, the visitor will be able to ..." This encourages planners to become more specific in determining their goal—whether that goal is the transmission of fact or values.

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## Consider The Audience

Visitors are not all alike. Their educational levels vary; their interests vary according to the subject and artifact. It varies according to the sequence in which a presentation is made, and the physical effort made immediately before the exhibit is encountered (e.g. the top of a flight of stairs). All these will influence the decisions on writing and design.

## Select The Medium Of Communication

Because reading ranks low in exhibits as a medium of communication, labels must be well-crafted. As pointed out by Washburne and Wagar (1972), the following rank far above texts in their holding power: motion pictures, music, audio sequences, scale objects, relief models, authentic objects, and touch and manipulation exhibits. In addition, there are cultural groups and individuals that rely more on the spoken word. Texts, therefore, are not automatically the preferred way to communicate.

## Writing And Rewriting

The two most common drawbacks of labels are that they are too long and are composed at too high a comprehension level. Labels written at a seventh to ninth grade level are comfortable for most adults. Studies reveal that adults like texts written at the fourth grade level even more. By counting the number of sentences and syllables in 100-word samples it is possible to measure the educational level of a text—and adjust it accordingly. The graph for estimating readability, developed by Edward Fry (1977) of Rutgers University Reading Center, is a highly reliable tool for gauging comprehension level.

Every word, every phrase must be examined and questioned. Every word must be used with intent and be a part of the writer's plan. Are the words necessary? Are they understood? Do the words mean what was intended? Has enough been said?

"Modern writing," declared George Orwell (1946), "at its... worst consists of gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug."

Writers must avoid emotionally charged words that can drive readers to distraction—such as "man," "deficit," "communist," and "pagan"; as well as dying metaphors and pretentious diction—such as "prioritize," "trial balloon," "back burner," and "the bottom line." Also to be avoided are tautologies (the redundancy of joined synonyms)—such as "advance planning," "cancel out," and "old adage," and foreign phrases such as "fin de siecle"—unless they are commonly used.

Writers should always remain aware of the power of quotes. These are effective because of their potentially high holding power. Quote marks are a signal to the reader that the text is a crystallization of an uncommon insight, a universal truth, or a pungent idea. Quotes are a way to present human differences, flaws, or controversial points of view without necessarily advocating them.

Mindful of pitfalls, the writer crafts language pleasant to the ear using the play of vowels, the placement of words, and rhythm. This is the art of the work, of crafting a style.

"Style," penned Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (1916), "is the power to touch with ease, grace, precision, any note in the gamut of thought or emotion...of thinking...with the heart as well as the head" (p. 297).

## Design and Installation

Many elements affect readability. Individually and cumulatively, these can reduce or enhance the communication of ideas. These elements include: typeface, type size, line length, text pattern, hyphenation, margins, surface texture, suitability of type to the content, duration of reading, color and contrast of type and background, position of texts, and lighting.

## Reference

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