

Interpretive Writing

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Introduction

Good interpretive writing helps visitors think about places, objects or events in new ways. It adds to their experience without dominating it.

Good interpretive writing must be easy to understand. That doesn't mean it has to present a simplistic view of its subject: it just needs to make the subject interesting for people who may know little about it.

Good interpretive writing must be easy to read, and must get its points across quickly and clearly. Its readers will usually be standing up, and often distracted by their companions: not the ideal situation for following complex arguments or for in-depth study.

Really good interpretive writing can use nuances of meaning and rhythms of pace and tone to add personality and feeling to its subject.

This guidance note aims to help you write good interpretation. The really good stuff comes with the right project, some sparks of inspiration, and plenty of practice!

To begin at the beginning...

Ask yourself these questions, which will guide what you choose to write about as well as how you write. They could all just as easily be part of a guide to planning interpretation, but they're worth repeating here. You could try writing your answers as you think about them, and see where that leads you.

Why are you writing?

Every interpretation project needs a clear sense of purpose. Most importantly, it needs a clear idea of how it's going to offer its audience something they want, something they'll find interesting, or something they'll find useful.

Who's going to read it?

Build a picture in your mind of the people who will read your words. Who are they with, and how do they interact? What interests them? In exhibitions, visitors often read snatches of text out loud to their companions: your writing becomes part of the conversations they have, both during their visit and afterwards. How can you offer them seeds from which interesting chats might grow?

Think about the sort of language you can use. If most of your audience come from a defined area, with its own local words, using those words might make your interpretation more lively and relevant. If your audience includes a lot of international visitors, you'll need to keep to a more standard set of vocabulary and language patterns. Unless, of course, local words can become part of the story.

What are you going to write about?

Define the idea you'd like people to think about as a result of your writing and the effect you'd like it to have. Then choose the stories you'll tell them and the facts you'll use to achieve that.

In interpretation planning, the idea you'd like people to engage with is called a theme. Working with a clear theme, rather than scattering random facts or trying to give a short summary of a subject, is essential when you have to write a panel of 200 words about, say, an Iron Age hillfort. Try to summarise the facts you know about Iron Age hillforts in 200 words and you'll end up frustrated – and your readers will end up bored. Pick an interesting idea about hillforts, like this one:

“This hill top gave the people who lived here a commanding view for miles around. But we don't really know whether they built enclosed settlements like this for defence, or as status symbols.”

and you can write 200 words about it that will satisfy you and add something to visitors' experience of the place.

How are you going to write?

Start collecting samples of interpretive writing you think is effective, and think about how your samples work. You'll probably find that the authors follow many of these guidelines:

Hook them with something interesting at the start.

Forget what you might have learned about writing essays, where you lay a careful groundwork of evidence and references before dazzling your reader with a brilliant conclusion. Visitors don't use interpretation like that: they need to find something interesting in the first sentence or two.

Be concise.

Look for ways to get your meaning across using fewer words. This will often give your writing more impact too. For example, instead of “A castle has been standing here for more than three centuries” you could say “A castle has stood here for over three hundred years”.

Use everyday words and expressions.

Check the example above again: most people would say “a hundred years” rather than “a century” when they're talking to someone. The vocabulary we use in conversation is more immediate, and therefore clearer, than words and phrases that might seem to give an air of refinement, literacy or academic credibility. Instead they just get in the way.

Grammar nerds note

English is full of traps like this, and they often hide a fascinating glimpse into the origins of the British class system. Compare “This nature reserve was purchased by the Council in 1995” with “The Council bought this nature reserve in 1995”. “Purchase” is the sort of language you see in official documents, usually ones assuming an air of formality and authority. It comes from Latin, via Old French, and it’s an echo of the power of the Norman overlords who took over the government after 1066. “Buy” comes from Old English, the language of the street. It’s still the word most of us would use in conversation.

Use short sentences.

Or at least short-ish. And break your text into short paragraphs. If possible keep paragraphs to fewer than 50 words. But do vary the length of your sentences. You’re probably a bit fed up with this paragraph by now. It’s used a string of short, staccato sentences, which means there’s no variation in the rhythm you hear subconsciously in your head as you read. Weren’t the commas in the last sentence a welcome relief? An average of between ten and twenty words per sentence is a good target.

Grammar nerds note

You may have heard of “reading age” or “readability” as a guide to the level of difficulty involved in reading a piece of text. Text with shorter words and shorter sentences has a lower reading age, and should be easier to read. You can get various readability scores from the Spelling and Grammar tools in Microsoft Word. The most useful statistic is probably the “Flesch Reading Ease” figure: if the score is below 60, you should try some re-writing.

But readability is a complex subject. Reading age tests make no allowances for creative or dramatic use of language, and making all your work conform to a given reading age can be very restrictive. A reading age score might be useful as a finger-in-the-wind guide to how complex your writing is, but it’s too blunt an instrument to use as an absolute standard.

Divide your material into short, discrete “chunks”.

They should make sense independently, but be related to your overall theme. It’s better to offer visitors eight separate pieces of text, each of about 50 words, than a single block of 400 words. Or even two blocks of 200 words. Visitors who are really interested in the subject will read more chunks.

Link your text to things people can look at, touch, smell or listen to.

Remember that you’re offering something to complement visitors’ experience. Your “chunks” might be captions for images, labels for objects or text to accompany an interactive, as well as display text. Encourage your readers to notice details that will help them understand your theme.

Work with your designer.

The way your words look is often as important as what they say. Good design attracts readers’ attention, guides it to where they’ll find something interesting, and can encourage

them to read more. Ideally you'll work together with a designer on ideas for how to structure the text. Be prepared to adjust both words and layout as you see them take shape.

Use the active rather than the passive voice of verbs where possible.

For example, try: "We can use evidence from below ground to re-construct the past" rather than "Evidence from below ground can be used to re-construct the past". Too much use of the passive sounds guarded and dull. The times when the passive voice is appropriate are:

- If you are more concerned with the object (the person or thing affected by something happening) than the agent (the person or thing making it happen). Newspaper reporters would write "Buckingham Palace was destroyed by fire this morning" rather than "Fire destroyed Buckingham Palace this morning".
- If the agent is obvious or unimportant: "The noise could be heard all over town" rather than "Everybody could hear the noise all over town".

Read it aloud.

Once you've got a draft ready, read it aloud. Better still, get a sympathetic friend to read it to you. Hearing the words helps you get a feel for the rhythm of what you've written, and will show up places where the meaning isn't clear.

Defend your work.

It might take you several drafts and rounds of amendments to produce some lively, accessible text that you think will get your readers interested and give them something they'll enjoy. But the end result can look alarmingly simple. Be prepared to justify the way you've written to bosses or colleagues who don't know about interpretation, and who may want to make the text longer or more complex.

Try it out.

Wherever possible, test a draft of your text with a sample of your audience. If possible, present it as a mocked-up layout, rather than simply words on a page, and get them to read it in similar circumstances to the real thing: standing up in a gallery, or outside on a nature reserve.

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AHI Best Practice Guidelines 7.

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