

Museums of Cheshire

Volunteer Training Toolkit

Interpretation & Editing



CO-ORDINATED BY:



Museums
of Cheshire

TRAINING BY:

Tom
Hughes

FUNDED BY:



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Introduction

Much of our work in museums involves telling the stories of our collections, sites and local heritage. Taking time to think about how we do this helps us to engage with our visitors more effectively. These are some starter points for consideration based upon the workshops in our Volunteer Development Programme supported by Museum Development North West. The toolkit is mainly focussed on interpretation in exhibitions.

Who is the audience?

This could be based upon a profile of your visitors, or new groups you want to attract. Try not to just say the audience is everyone. If you can identify your target audience, you can choose an appropriate method of interpretation, for example the reading age, or if there are special interest groups who would want detailed information.

If there are two or more audiences, with different needs, you could perhaps consider having an introductory level in the exhibition, with more details on a blog or through a series of talks.



A mixed age audience at Stretton Watermill

What is the message?

It is always worth spending time to think about what the key messages are which you'd like people to take away. Most people will remember two or three things about their visit. Consider how you could theme your interpretation around these, or alternatively, perhaps introduce people to new ideas instead of reinforcing what they already knew.

For example, the 'Selling Sunlight' exhibition at Port Sunlight Museum had as its messages to show that William Lever was a pioneer in advertising, and that he deployed a wide range of approaches to make his brand a household name. The artwork and artefacts on display could then do the work of interpreting these messages.



Part of the 'Selling Sunlight' display at Port Sunlight Museum



Methods of interpretation

There are many more ways to interpret museum collections than just graphic panels and labels. Written forms are useful, but can exclude people who have reading difficulties or don't speak English. Some visitors may be in a hurry, or caring for children, and so may not have time to read.

Alternatives could include image-led panels, short films, (no longer an expensive option), guided tours, or event programmes of storytelling, historic skills demonstrations and craft activities.

How much should we write?

Avoid the temptation to get everything across in your interpretation panels. Several studies have shown that few people can absorb more than 120 words on a single panel, so anything longer than this is going to be missed by most people. Ideally aim for 80-100 words on an interpretation panel, and 40-60 words on an object label, fewer if possible.

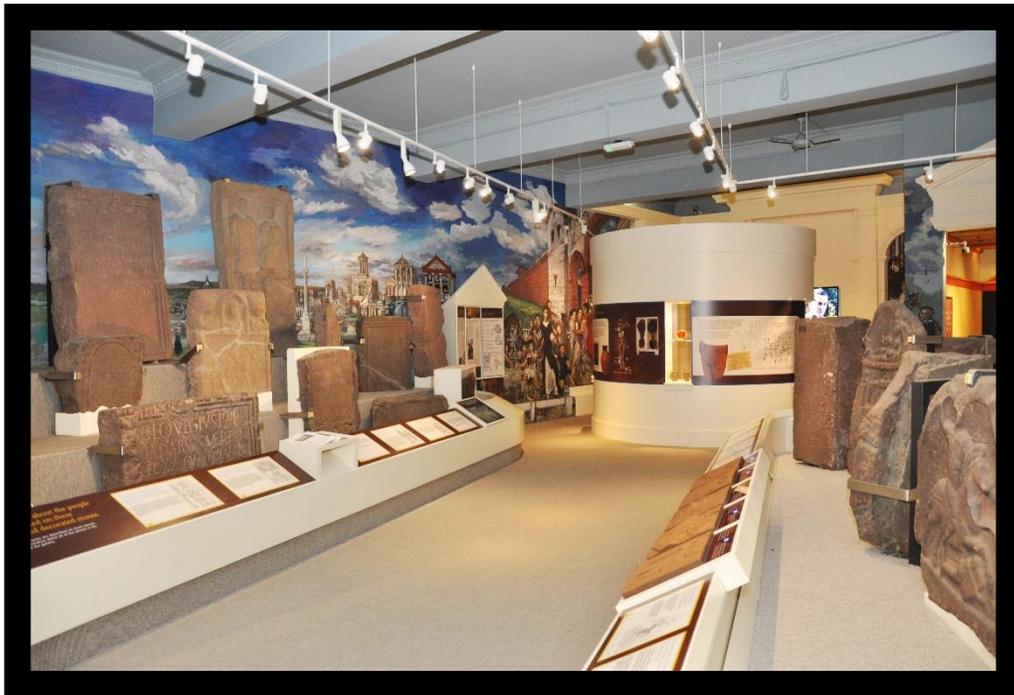
Studies with museum visitors have also shown that the way that people approach an interpretation panel. Most will first look at the pictures, then they may read the captions for those pictures.



Some of the image-led interpretation at Norton Priory

Around half of the people may then move on to read the first lines of text and a few will continue onto the later paragraphs. If your key message appears low down in the text it is likely to be missed.

Sometimes a single image can work better than a chunk of text. For example, instead of trying to explain that a small whetstone was used to sharpen knives, perhaps have a photograph of one in use.



This display of Roman tombstones display at the Grosvenor Museum in Chester uses very little text. A short film and simple interactives help people engage with fairly complex story without needing to read a lot of text.

Making text accessible.

Ensure that as many people as possible are able to read your interpretation. Make sure that text is at least point 20 in size, larger if possible, and remember that the actual size can be slightly different between fonts. Writing in capitals is harder for everyone to read, so avoid this. Use a sans serif font as these are more accessible to people who have dyslexia or visual impairments.

Take care to ensure that there is a good contrast between the text and the background. Avoid text overlaid on a picture or pattern. Many designers favour white text on a colour background,

however several focus groups consulted during the development of the major new museum at Norton Priory found this difficult to read, and so it was changed to black text on a very pale cream background.



The exterior interpretation boards at Norton Priory are limited to 80-100 words maximum. As with the main displays inside the museum, the text is black on a pale cream for good contrast and legibility.

Checking the reading age.

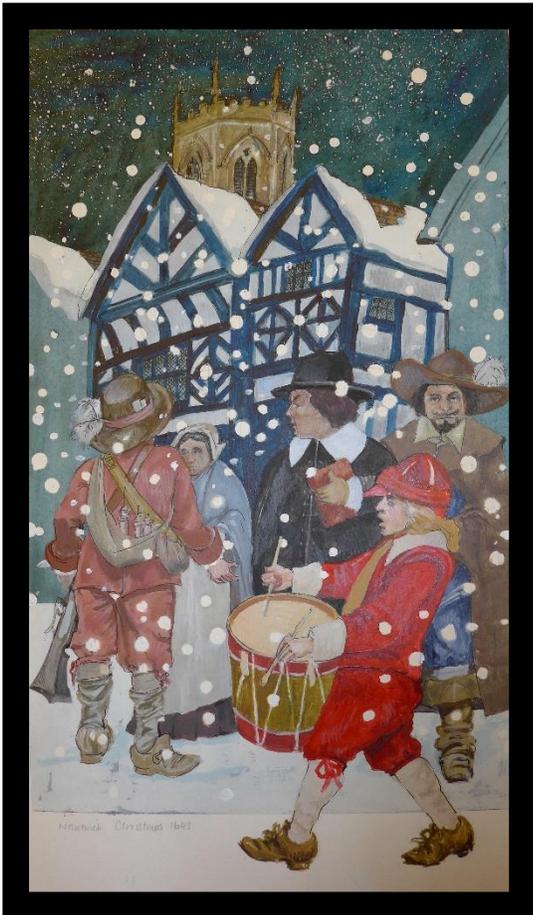
The average reading age in the UK is equivalent to 9 years old. As a comparison, the reading age of the text in The Sun newspaper is 8 years, and in The Guardian it is 14 years. If your text is at a reading age of above 12 years old it is likely to lose some of your audiences. There are free online tools for checking reading age. Just copy and paste your text into it.

Specialist words relating to an exhibition theme can push up the reading age. Can they be altered for something more accessible? If it is a word which occurs regularly, can it be explained in a way where people will see it as they begin their visit? Remember that visitors won't always read panels in an order which you predict.

Making the personal connection.

Visitors tend to better engage with an exhibition if they can see how it relates to their lives today. If you're working on a technical or industrial theme, consider highlighting working conditions, or how a development changed people's lives in the past, or perhaps still has an effect today.

If possible include the faces of people within the images in the exhibition. If historical images aren't always available, then consider getting an artist to draw reconstructions, or a photographer to produce images of re-enactors. Norton Priory used both of these techniques to good effect. Nantwich Museum used specially created illustrations to accompany an exhibition about the Civil War siege of the town.



Nantwich scene by Les Pickford.

Involve colleagues in telling the story.

It's always useful to work across the whole organisation and consider the ways in which an exhibition might be used by the different audiences you have. Working together to establish the messages of the interpretation helps keep things accessible and also makes the editing process easier as you can work out what is important.

Wherever possible, all staff and volunteers should have seen the interpretation for the exhibition before it opens. This ensures that they are able to answer questions, build up their own interest in the theme, and help to direct visitors.

Don't forget the importance of getting several colleagues to proof read and check interpretation before it goes to the printing stage!



Discussing narrative ideas with colleagues at the Museums of Cheshire conference.

Remember - Every museum has its own character

Try to allow the character of your museum to come through in the interpretation. This can be as simple as having a house style in appearance, but a tone can also be set in the style of writing. If you're working on a shoestring, don't try to emulate the larger museums with big budgets for exhibitions. You can still have attention to detail and creativity without as much cost, and the end result can be engaging and accessible.

Toolkit produced by Tom Hughes, former Interpretation Officer at Norton Priory and Chair of Museums of Cheshire.