



# The Art of Writing for Exhibitions

*"Since the beginning of museums, exhibit labels have been used as instruments of torture on helpless visitors."*

- Steve Bitgood  
Professor Emeritus,  
Jacksonville State University

Author  
**Tim Willis**

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### Writing well is hard.

Visitors have limited patience and energy for the words we put in our exhibitions. But they will read - if it interests them - if we do it briefly - if we find a way to connect to them.

The text in many museum exhibitions is boring. It's often written in haste, without real regard for the visitor. We can do better. And never should we accept the maxim, "people don't read anymore." It's not true.

### Our words are too valuable to waste.

Use this tool to learn more about visitors, their needs and expectations, about exhibition writing guidelines and good writing practices.

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Find more resources at  
**[museumsassn.bc.ca/brain](https://museumsassn.bc.ca/brain)**



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# About Visitors and Reading



## Willingness to read

There is excellent research about visitors and reading.

Here are a few revelations:

- The longer the text, the **less** likely it is to be read.
- The more text used throughout an exhibition, the less of it is likely to be read.
- On average, visitors spend **two seconds** reading any piece of text.
- The most-read texts are about things.
- The least-read texts are about ideas.

## Limits to attention

When it comes to reading, visitors have limits:

- Unlike someone reading a book, museum visitors are uncommitted readers.
- They have allocated a limited amount of time for the experience.
- They are reading while standing up, so they get tired.
- They can be easily frustrated, especially if the positioning and lighting isn't good.
- They are often distracted by other visitors, including their companions.
- Visitors will persevere only as long as their attention is held.
- Museum fatigue sets in after **one hour** – the cause is primarily mental overload<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Museum fatigue was first studied in 1928. The study established that mental fatigue was **more** consequential than physical fatigue.



*For more information about visitors, their learning styles and characteristics, read **The Art of Storytelling Tool**.*

## Conditions for Reading

Research reveals quite a lot about *the conditions under which visitors will read*.

Visitors tend to read:

- Mostly in the first 30 minutes of their visit. After that, they are selective.
- If they can relate to the information.
- If the text answers what they were already wondering about.
- If they know what the exhibition is about.
- If the exhibition panels and labels are short.
- If the text panels and labels interest them. Sometimes visitors will read panels and labels aloud and share the message with their companions.

If these conditions are met, visitors are more apt to read the exhibition text (that you have worked hard to prepare!) and they will tend to stay longer and enjoy the exhibition.

## What about visitors who want to read more?

While research indicates that the majority of visitors will only read a little of the content within your exhibition, there are some visitors that naturally want more. How do we ensure their needs are met?

A comfortable reading space can easily be an attractive part of any visitor experience. The idea of such a sitting space should be treated with some care.

Here are some tips:

- Locate the reading area where visitors will feel comfortable - not a solitary seat in a leftover corner.
- Think about making this space interesting, inviting, relaxing.

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**What other conditions make for a great reading environment?**

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We can seek inspiration from all sorts of places. Here is one of several inventive reading areas at Biblo Toyen, a youth library in Norway. Photo credit: aatvos / Marco Heyda.

## Tip



One simple solution is to create a comfortable sitting space within the exhibition with more reading material.

There are other simple solutions for providing a greater density of information to interested visitors:

- Create a listening station, or a booth, or even a hammock with headphones.
- Provide your visitors with a take-away that refers them to your website where they may be able to find more resources on the subject.
- Share your own innovative ideas with the BCMA. Email: [BCMAbrain@museumsassn.bc.ca](mailto:BCMAbrain@museumsassn.bc.ca).



Listening stations in **Our Living Languages** exhibit. Photo credit: Royal BC Museum

## Take this True or False Quiz!



Here are four short statements about visitors and reading.

True	False	Statements about visitors and reading
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	People just don't read anymore.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Visitors to any museum can be divided into three types: Streakers (visitors who race through an exhibit), Strollers, Studiers
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Make sure there is something in your exhibition for everyone.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Layered text (which is a headline, synopsis of content, expanded content over multiple paragraphs) is read more than un-layered text.

*The answers are revealed on the following page.*



Example of un-layered text panel. Photo credit: Anine Vonkeman



Example of layered text panel. FDR Library and Museum.



## True or False Answers

People just don't read anymore.

**False:** Indeed, people are reading more than ever in history. They are reading in different forms (i.e. not just on paper). They will read if they are interested in the topic. And the most important thing to know is people everywhere still enjoy a good story – no matter in which format it comes.

Visitors to any museum can be divided into three types: Streakers (visitors who race through an exhibit), Strollers, Studiers.

**False:** There is no evidence to support the notion that they naturally divide this way. In fact, it may be the exhibit's content and design that encourages rushing or pausing.

Make sure there is something in your exhibition for everyone.

**False:** It is by far better to write your exhibition text for your priority audience. If the exhibition is primarily for a family audience, then write for families. If you do the job well, the majority of your other visitors will enjoy it too. Remember: each visitor is unique, so very few exhibits will appeal to "everyone."

Layered text (which is a headline, synopsis of content, expanded content) is read more than un-layered text.

**False:** The benefits of layering text is untested, but in my experience, probably false. In fact, layering text often results with having too much text on any given panel, which may actually repel readers.

### ACTION



**Share this True / False test with your staff, volunteers and Board members.** See what they think. Discuss how these ideas may influence your exhibit writing in the future.

# Exhibition Writing Guidelines

Consider the guidelines below, **before** you begin writing your exhibition's story.

## Interpretive Guidelines

Writing for exhibitions is about more than just conveying facts and information. It is about telling a good story. It is about revealing something, getting your visitors thinking.

You cannot go wrong when you follow the wisdom of Freeman Tilden. Though Tilden wrote about the art of interpretation more than 60 years ago in his book *Interpreting Our Heritage*, his principles still apply.

In summary, here are five lessons drawn from Tilden's principles:

### 1. Reveal something

Interpretation is the art of revealing special, rather than describing what the visitor can already see.

**How can you reveal something new, unexpected, surprising in the exhibit?**

### 2. Provoke the visitor

Great interpretive writing gets people thinking.

### 3. Work hard to find the story

Write every exhibit panel and object label on the assumption that it may be the only thing a visitor reads. This means that each must be complete and satisfying in its own right.

Remember, people are visiting mainly to seek enjoyment and a good story, not just instruction and facts.

### 4. Share your love

To write well you must be passionate about your subject and in turn you must care about those who will read it - the visitors.

### 5. Be brief

The visitor is often standing. The visitor has unique interests and limited capacity for reading lengthy text.

## Action



If you haven't already done so, take 20 minutes to first read [The Art of Storytelling Tool](#) for an overview of visitors' needs and learning styles, as well as a full exploration of Tilden's interpretation principles.

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Remember, people are visiting mainly to seek enjoyment and a good story, not just instruction and facts.

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## Style Guidelines

### Get to the point

Make the first sentence count... and the last one. Writing with punch at the start and the end is important.

### Focus the visitor

Label copy should relate to what the visitor can see - and to what you want them to notice.

### Use humour sparingly

Humour is fine - if the subject warrants it - but only in small measures.

### Use questions carefully

Don't ask questions that visitors themselves are unlikely to ask.

### Be careful of "Why"

Don't ask "why questions" just to fulfill your own desire to tell the visitor something. "Why questions" are appropriate if it is something the visitor themselves would ask; for example, "Why don't the sharks eat the other fish living with them in the tank?"

### Cultivate understatement

Don't use hyperbole. You don't need to say something is beautiful, if it is obviously beautiful.

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A brilliant headline to **Failure Wall**, Pacific Science Center, Seattle.

### Use headlines

There is no better hook for exhibit panels and labels than intriguing headlines. They whet the interest for what is to follow and can convey a surprising amount of substance.



# Tips for Good Writing Practice

## Embrace Evaluation

There are four types of evaluation that can be easily used to improve your writing practice:

### Front End Evaluation

Find out what visitors (or your identified primary audience) already know about a subject, what they want to know, what their expectations might be, and the extent of their vocabulary on this topic.

### Formative Evaluation

As you develop drafts of text you can test them. Ask others to read them out loud. Ask visitors to read them. You will soon know what makes them stumble or what they cannot understand. You will also know what points are most of interest.

### Remedial Evaluation

After the exhibit opening, be open to further feedback from your visitors, staff and volunteers. Be prepared to replace text that is not working.

### Summative Evaluation

You can test how well your text works, and whether or not you have met learning objectives. Simple interviews or focus groups with visitors will suffice. The purpose of summative evaluation is to receive constructive criticism in order to improve your practice for the next project.

**Many museums – both large and small – do not regularly practice evaluation, especially when resources and time are in short supply. However, it can be done simply. Even small samples of visitor reaction are helpful and will be worth the effort in the long run.**

## Tip



If you want to begin incorporating evaluation into your exhibit plans, the easiest place to start is in at the **Formative** stage.

**How?** Here are some ideas:

- Ask a colleague to read your text out loud.
- Post a rough draft of your text in the exhibit area. Ask visitors to read it. Then, simply have a conversation with them to find out how well the text communicated its message
- Share your ideas and experiences; email:

.BCMAbrain@museumsassn.bc.ca

# Giving Structure to your Exhibition

Before you write, it is important to decide on the types of text panels you intend to create for your exhibition. This may be impacted by the physical space available. As mentioned above, it is important to not overwhelm visitors with information and text. Be ok with the limitations you may have and don't be afraid to get creative.

Below are general guidelines for panel word limits.

There is no hard and fast rule about text panels and labels, but this guide can be an invaluable tool.

## Title and Introduction

The purpose is to let the visitor know what's in store. Essentially, the introduction should communicate the exhibition's "Big Idea" and not much more. It must be short. It should draw the visitor in.

Word Limit: **25 words**

## Section Introduction

An overview of a thematic area (related content and stories).

Word Limit: **25 - 50 words**

## Topic Caption

An interpretive panel about a key story or feature.

Word Limit: **100 - 150 words**

## Object Label

An interpretive label about an object. Keep it brief, make it interesting, use a headline and don't try to cram too many ideas into it.

Word Limit: **50 words**

## Object Identification Label

Non-interpretive; minimal information, such as: title, age, maker/scientific name, origin, materials, accession number. Can also include donor information.

## Interactive Label

The Exploratorium in San Francisco has been a long-time leader in the development of interactive experiences. They recommend four simple parts to writing good interactive text panels or labels (especially if the interactive is demonstrating a process or phenomenon).

The four parts are:

- **What to do**  
How to use the interactive
- **What to notice**  
The things that are changing as a result of your interaction
- **What's going on**  
The phenomenon or process that is at work here
- **So what**  
Why this process is significant.

Word Limit: **50 - 75 words total**

## Have a Text Strategy

All exhibitions should have a *Text Strategy*.

A good Text Strategy can be expressed in one or two pages.

It should:

1. Identify the key audiences for the exhibition.
2. Set the Reading Level appropriate to the key audiences.
3. Specify the tone – Does the story warrant a formal, or more playful and conversational tone?
4. Define the types of signage you plan to use (see page 11).
5. Set word limits for each type of signage (see page 11).

## SUMMARY of TOP TIPS – Exhibition Writing Guidelines

### **What's the "Big Idea"?**

Every exhibition should have a Big Idea. So should every writing project. What's the point? What is the most important idea you want the visitor to come away knowing?

### **What is your "writing voice"?**

Try not to be overly formal in your writing. A conversational tone can be a way to break the barriers to reading. However, a playful tone may not be appropriate for certain topics or stories.

### **Be brief**

If you truly want as many people to read your text as possible, then you have to keep it short. Follow the word limit guidelines listed above.

### **Break it up**

Write in chunks. No long paragraphs - ever! Try to limit yourself to 50 words or less in each paragraph. Vary the length of sentences.

### **Answer the visitor's questions**

Before you start writing, identify your primary audience and think about what they would like to know. If you have time, ask them what they would like to know about the subject, then, as you write, make sure you answer those questions.

### **Write for your priority audience**

Don't try to write for everyone. Decide who is your priority audience...and write for them.

### **Don't aim for the lowest ... or the highest level**

Most exhibitions will work best if you write somewhere between a Grade 6 and 8 reading level.

### **Have a strategy**

If you haven't already started your Interpretive Plan for your exhibition, start one now! Be clear about your Big Idea, your primary audience, your space limitations, panel numbers and text strategy

# Award-winning Writing

Learning from the best is an important practice.

Each year, the Alliance of American Museums recognizes great text writing in its annual **Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition**. You can see this year's winners and winners of the past at this site:



[www.aam-us.org/programs/awards-competitions/excellence-in-exhibition-label-writing-competition](http://www.aam-us.org/programs/awards-competitions/excellence-in-exhibition-label-writing-competition)

Studying exemplary writing can be a great source of inspiration.

Let's look at five past award winners and what makes them stand out.

## Award Winner 1

### Portrait of Mary Leakey, failed\* scientist (b.1913)

After causing an explosion in a chemistry lab at one school and with a general habit of failing exams, Mary Leakey was expelled from every secondary school she attended.

*\*Mary Leakey uncovered evidence that gave us groundbreaking insights into human origins and is considered one of the most important paleoanthropologists of our time.*

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**From:** Failure Wall

**Location:** Pacific Science Center, Seattle

**Comments:** Ironic, succinct, eye-catching, powerful



## Award winner 2

### Clean-delivery kit

A bar of soap. A clean plastic sheet to slip under the mother's hips. A razor to cut the cord. String to tie it. And a 10-step diagram to guide the midwife. In rural Nepal, where 90% of deliveries take place at home, this box saves lives.

Loan from PATH

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**From:** True Northwest: the Seattle Journey

**Location:** Museum of History and Industry, Seattle

**Comments:** It's a list...but not written as a list. The simplest possible treatment for a display with just a few modest objects. And yet, it packs a remarkable punch.

## Award winner 3

### For sale

*at a Philadelphia slave market*

You stand high above a gathering crowd.

Everyone's staring at you. Inspecting you.

A man shouts. You don't understand his language.  
You don't know what he's saying. People in the crowd shout back at him.

He shouts. They shout. He shouts.

And then your child is torn from your arms,  
and you're in chains.

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**From:** Tides of Freedom: African Presence on the Delaware River

**Location:** Independence Seaport Museum, Philadelphia

**Comments:** A description of an auction without ever mentioning the word; powerfully empathetic, punch-in-the-gut ending.

## Award Winner 4

### The Mighty Rainforest

**It's hot.** You've stepped into the heart and lungs of the planet, an ecosystem fueled by relentless sun. **It's humid.** Frequent downpours feed mighty rivers. **It's filled with life.** From the mud-coated forest floor to the light-flooded treetops, living things scurry and grow. **And it's connected to you:** Discover how your own life is tied to the fate of these powerful tropical forests.

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**From:** Rainforests of the World

**Location:** California Academy of Science, San Francisco

**Comments:** An exhibition introduction that conveys each of the exhibition's key messages. Beautifully simple, yet evocative.

## Award Winner 5

### Charles Ephraim Burchfield

American, 1893–1967

#### *Song of the Cicada: A Study of Summer Heat and Insect Rhythms*, undated

Charcoal and India ink on paper

Imagine August. Feel the press of the hot, humid air against your skin. A sluggish breeze carries the scent of browning grass, and everywhere the swelling crescendo of cicada song rises and falls, rises and falls. How does Charles Ephraim Burchfield visually convey this experience? How does he evoke such physical sensations as summer heat and the sound of insects through the simple means of charcoal, ink and paper?

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**From:** Run Wild! American Imagination on Paper

**Location:** Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City

**Comments:** What a way to start a label – just two words! It speaks to the audience, captures their imagination, invites them into the story and helps them appreciate what they are looking at.

# Final Thoughts

In order of priority:

## 1. Always be brief

Visitors are standing. They have limited reserves of attention. Ask yourself: "Who am I doing this for?" If the answer is the visitor (and that should be your answer), then never write too much.

## 2. Have a point

Before you write, ask what is the essential message or Big Idea you want the visitor to take home?

## 3. Allow enough time

Don't underestimate the task or the time involved. Writing for exhibitions is hard work. Writing for labels even harder. The labels may look short and simple, but often it has taken lots of effort to get there.

## 4. Every object is a storytelling opportunity

Interpretation is the business of breaking the silence that surrounds objects. Very few visitors find that "the object speaks for itself."

## 5. It's about love

If you are having fun writing your text, your readers will have fun reading it. As Freeman Tilden said: "What is written without enthusiasm will be read without interest."

## 6. Let others inspire you

Study other museum's labels. Look for excellence. Read award-winning exhibition writing. Copy the masters!

## 7. Stretch!

Take a risk. Release your inner poet. Be surprising.

# Further Reading and Resources

## About Storytelling and Interpretation

**Interpreting Our Heritage.** Freeman Tilden. University of North Carolina Press, 2007

Check out the [BCMA Brain](#) for more resources on Exhibition Development, including **Interpretation Principles 1: The Art of Storytelling.**

Login to BCMA's member portal to access an archived webinar with Tim Willis entitled **Planning Successful Exhibitions: Learning from failure, planning for success** (BCMA webinar #10, February 2018)

## About Exhibition Writing Practice

**Judy Rand's** *Label Writing Activity*:  
[www.vimeo.com/21123015](http://www.vimeo.com/21123015). Watch video online.

**Judy Rand's** article, *Less is More. And More is Less.*  
Available online at: [static1.squarespace.com/static/58fa260a725e-25c4f30020f3/t/594d16c51b631be4c390c593/1498224358446/11\\_Exhibition\\_LessIsMore.pdf](http://static1.squarespace.com/static/58fa260a725e25c4f30020f3/t/594d16c51b631be4c390c593/1498224358446/11_Exhibition_LessIsMore.pdf)

## More About the Art of Writing for Exhibitions

**Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach.** Beverly Serrell. Walnut Creek, Calif: AltaMira Press, 1996.

**Stephen Bitgood's** *The Role of Attention in Designing Effective Interpretive Labels*:  
[www.researchgate.net/publication/251182204\\_The\\_Role\\_of\\_Attention\\_in\\_Designing\\_Effective\\_Interpretive\\_labels](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/251182204_The_Role_of_Attention_in_Designing_Effective_Interpretive_labels)

## Learning from the best

American Alliance of Museums. *Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition*: [www.aam-us.org/programs/awards-competitions/excellence-in-exhibition-label-writing-competition/](http://www.aam-us.org/programs/awards-competitions/excellence-in-exhibition-label-writing-competition/)

# Writing for Exhibitions Exercises

Put your new-found knowledge to practice!

## Writing for Exhibitions - Exercise 1 Create a Big Idea

- Think of an exhibition - current or past.
- Try to imagine a single idea that might lie behind the entire exhibition. A good "Big Idea" is just that: a single idea that propels the entire exhibition.
- It's hard to do, but worth it.
- Examples of effective Big Ideas:
  - *Sharks are not what you think*
  - *A healthy swamp has surprising benefits for humans*
  - *The story of the Titanic is one driven by class*

### Action



Do these exercises alone, or with others on staff or in your volunteer corps. It can also be a fun activity during a Board meeting if you dare.

## Writing for Exhibitions - Exercise 2 Introduce an Exhibition

Now, write an introduction to the exhibition from Exercise 1. It should include the Big Idea.

- Do it in **25 words**.

## Writing for Exhibitions - Exercise 3 Write a Label

Pick an object from the exhibition (or... this will work just as well if you pick an object in your home) and release its story.

**In 50 words** tell a story:

- a. In which the object serves as a portal to a much larger story.
- b. That speaks directly to the reader, connecting with them as a human being.
- c. That delights and surprises. Take some risks.

## Writing for Exhibitions - Exercise 4

### Engage with your peers

Have you seen an exhibition recently that is an outstanding example of The Art of Writing for Exhibitions?

If so...share your idea with the BC Museums Association community:

- Nominate the project for a [BCMA Outstanding Achievement Award](#)
- Share the example with others through the BCMA Brain: [BCMAbrain@museumsassn.bc.ca](mailto:BCMAbrain@museumsassn.bc.ca)



## Writing for Exhibitions - Exercise 5

### Apply for funding to support your exhibit's story.

Once you have developed the art of writing for exhibitions....consider applying to the Virtual Museums of Canada [Community Stories Investment program](#). The program supports the development of virtual exhibits for small, community-based museums.