

Exhibit Panel Design Basics



You have finished writing your exhibit text and have a great story to tell. One of the important next steps is designing exhibit panels that will capture your visitors' attention and make them want to read and engage with your exhibition's story.

This tool will help you create eye-catching exhibit panels which will add to the professional presentation and impact of your exhibits. **Inside, you will learn about basic design principles, suggested fonts and layout ideas, as well as a list of recommended resources for further exploration.**

The author has also made available on the BCMA Brain sample exhibit panel templates in Microsoft Word that are ready to use!

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Table of Contents

Overview 3

Resources needed to use this Tool . . 3

Let’s put this Tool in action! 9

Final Thoughts 18

Further Reading and Resources . . . 19

More inspiration 24

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Exhibit Panel Design Basics



Overview

Before you begin, remember that designing eye-catching exhibit panels can take years of practice. This tool is meant to provide some key guidelines and tips for consideration. Don't worry about getting everything right the first time. Practice makes perfect. Be kind to yourself as you experiment. And don't forget to proofread!

As always, the BC Museums Association looks forward to your feedback on this tool. If you have suggestions, ideas, examples or case studies of additional best practices to contribute, please get in touch:

BCMAbrain@museumsassn.bc.ca

Resources needed to use this Tool

Before you start, please consider the following resources you may need to use this tool:

Time



- Depending on the number of panels you want to produce and the content to be included, **you will need to set aside a minimum of 20 hours for the design, review, and revision of the work.** This is in addition to the time you have already taken to prepare the written content and to source images or other visuals to be included within the exhibit.
- **You will also need to plan for the time it will take to print and prepare the panels for installation.** Depending on the size of the panels, you can expect a turn-around of 4-10 days at a printing company, rush work will cost more. You can save in-house preparation time if they print the panels directly on a substrate. [A **substrate** is a backing material such as foam board, Coroplast, Sintra®, Mylar®, fabric or any other creative material you might consider.]
- **Create a reverse timeline for your exhibit.** Be sure that you include time for review of multiple drafts and proofreading.

Action



If you haven't already done so, take 30 minutes to first read [The Art of Storytelling Tool](#) and [The Art of Writing for Exhibitions](#) so that you have a clear understanding of best practices for developing written content for your exhibition.

Sample reverse timeline

Note: The sample below does not include the additional time it takes to plan and prepare for the exhibit.

April 15	Exhibit opens to the public
April 2-14	Exhibit installation
March 1-31	Panel and label preparation [if in-house]
March 1	Panels and labels printed/to printer
February 28	Final draft review/on site test
February 21	Second draft review/on site test
February 15	First draft review/on site test
February 1	Panel and label design begins
January 31	All exhibit panel design materials have been gathered
January 5	Exhibit design decisions

Tip



Don't forget to include time for gathering logos of sponsors and permissions for image usage!

Staff

- **You will need someone to design, prepare, mount and install the panels and labels.** Perhaps this is all you! Or perhaps you have volunteers, local high school students, summer students or other members of the community who may have some design experience and be interested and able to assist.
- **Connect with your local print company.** It is worth developing a relationship with your local print company. Print companies can provide design expertise, print at a variety of sizes, print directly onto a substrate, or dry mount your panels. They can also give you guidance on how to set up and provide files to them. Often local print companies are more than happy to provide design advice and assistance, if they are asked.

Materials

- **You will need, at a minimum, access to a computer and Microsoft Word.** If you are familiar with using Publisher, PageMaker or the professional Adobe Creative Suite products such as Illustrator or InDesign that is great. There are also free online design programs; a popular one is [canva.com](https://www.canva.com) if you have time to check it out. You will be asked to create an account, but otherwise it is a free resource.
- **Printer.** Ideally one that can print large-scale, print to the edges, and doesn't jam frequently. Be sure to have a supply of ink cartridges on hand.
- **High(er)-quality paper to print on.** The paper does not have to be expensive, but using better quality materials can really help your exhibit graphics stand out.
- **Panel backing materials.** Consider how you will present the information. Will it be: large, small, framed, mounted on a substrate [backing material such as foam board, Coroplast, Sintra®, Mylar®, fabric], back-lit, installed as vinyl lettering? Consider all the various supplies will you need for any of these options.
- **Other supplies to consider:**
 - Dry-mounting and cutting equipment, including spray adhesive;
 - Heat press and dry mounting tissue; and/or
 - Good quality knives and cutting surfaces.



Sintra®



Coroplast

Tip



If the printing company can print your work directly on a backing material [or substrate], your cost will be higher, but it can also save you time and other in-house resource costs.

And remember: if using spray adhesive, wear a mask and use in a well-ventilated area!

Budget Considerations

Even if you create the panels yourself, you will need to budget for their design.

- **No budget to spare?** Use the free templates (developed by the author in Microsoft Word) found on [BCMA's Brain](#). Plug in your text, print, mount and go!
- **Small budget?** Consider contacting or visiting a printing company near you. In larger centres, printing companies may have designers on staff who can do the work, especially if you will be printing at their establishment. If nothing else, they can likely offer advice. Don't be afraid to ask.
- **A little bit bigger budget?** Consider investing in learning graphic design basics for yourself, or hiring a designer to set up your exhibit panel templates for you in your chosen design program. This initial set-up fee may be worthwhile as it can help you create a standard look and feel for your exhibit panels (and perhaps even your entire museum) that can be repurposed for future exhibits.
- **Materials.** Have a solid plan in place of how you would like the final panels to look. This will keep design costs down.

Tip



Explore free online designs options such as [canva.com](#). Additional online programs are listed in the Further Reading and Resources section.

Using design software may help you produce a more polished look. Hiring a graphic designer to prepare exhibit panel templates for you, may be worth the investment.

Tip



Sample budgets can be found in the Further Reading and Resources section.

Keep in mind you may only be able to use two of these three options:

Time | Quality | Budget - what will you choose?

"THROWN TOGETHER" IN-HOUSE



LONGER PLANNING PROCESS IN-HOUSE



OUTSOURCED





- Find an exhibit partner or sponsor such as individuals / businesses, foundations, municipalities, tourism organizations.
- Use a free online design program.
- Invest in learning graphic design basics to save time and money in the future.
- It can be useful and cost-effective to hire a professional graphic designer to layout some templates for you to use and to determine a particular “look and feel” for your museum that can be adapted for future use.
- Exhibit development is often supported through project-based grant opportunities. The BC Museums Association has a list of [outside funding sources](#) on their website.



Remember to acknowledge your funders, partners and sponsors.

Acknowledge your supporters, including sponsors and volunteers, on a separate panel placed either at the start of the exhibit, or at the exit.

A sponsor can also be acknowledged on a panel specific to the sponsorship. Use high-resolution graphics supplied by your sponsors and ask for their logo use guidelines to be sure logos are properly used. (EPS or .png files usually work best; .jpeg is acceptable) You may have to get approval for logo use, so work this into your timeline as well.



Collaboration and consultation



- Do you have **volunteers** with design experience or **access to marketing or art students** who would like the experience of designing your exhibit panels?
- Perhaps **museum studies students** at a nearby educational institution could help you research, write the text, find the images, and even install the panels? If you plan ahead they can get course credit for the work they do for you.
- **Proofreading can be a great task for a dedicated teacher/writer/editor/volunteer.** Ensure your timelines account for outside editing time.
- A partnership with a printing company, or **sponsorship** for printing costs from a community partner may also help your budget.
- **Local businesses or firms** such as engineering firms or architectural companies may also end up being good partners and help with large format printing as well as design.
- **Municipal / county / regional planning departments** may have the capability to print large-scale and can possibly assist with your large-scale print needs at little to no cost.

Tip



Ask other museums or galleries to suggest graphic designers they have worked with. The BCMA listserv is an excellent resource for getting advice and recommendations from other BCMA members. Just email: bcma@lists.vifa.ca.

Other considerations

- When the exhibit is finally open – celebrate!
- Invite your local politicians to see your great work! Visit the [advocacy section of BCMA's Brain](#) to find sample template letters you can use to invite your local politicians to your museum. Create a photo opportunity with them and publish it in your next newsletter or local newspaper.
- Consider nominating your exhibit for a [BCMA Award for Outstanding Achievement](#).

Let's put this Tool in action!

Step 1. Familiarize yourself with basic design principles.

The overall principle is to create a balanced design – where all elements (colour, text, images) work together to convey your message. There are no hard and fast rules about size percentages of each, but you will want to keep in mind:

- How the elements are **aligned**
- The **hierarchy** of information is clear
- There is a **consistency** in how information is presented on the various panels
- There is enough **space** between elements
- There is a **balance** of shapes [blocks of texts, images, titles]
- There is **contrast** [in colour, sizes, texture].

There are many resources online if you need more specific graphic design information – a few to get you started are included in the Appendices.

Don't worry about getting everything right the first time. Practice makes perfect. Be kind to yourself as you experiment.

Step 2. Gather all the elements you will need before you start.

Such elements will include:

- finalized, edited text
- high quality images [with permission to use where necessary]
- graphs or other graphics that support your exhibit's story
- sponsor logos

Having to find room for additional elements after you've started your design is counter-productive.

Step 3. Decide on the printer you will use.

Will you be printing in-house or at a printing company? This will dictate the size of your panels and labels and perhaps whether or not you print in colour or black-and-white.

Below are some other important considerations – and questions to ask a printing company – before you get started:



- Can they print directly on a substrate? Or will they print on paper that will have to be mounted on foam core or other substrate?
- What is the maximum size they can print?
- Can they print all the way to the edges [i.e. bleed]?
- Are they able to print in full colour?
- Confirm the format in which they would like the files to be submitted.
- If you would like to be as environmentally-conscious in the materials you present, consider:
 - Are the inks used in printing vegetable or other non-oil based?
 - Does the substrate you are printing on off-gas?
 - Consider eco-friendly substrates: Are they made of recyclable/recycled materials? Can you reuse or repurpose them?

Step 4. Make sure you have the correct panel measurements worked out before you start.

Having to adjust your design because the panel size has changed is time-consuming.

Step 5. Present a cohesive look for your particular exhibit.

Use a consistent layout and formatting in all of your panels and labels, including colours, headers, line spacing, how quotes are presented, where text elements such as captions and credits are placed, how your images are presented, what size and shape your panels will be.

- Use [Sample Templates](#) (in Microsoft Word) that are available on BCMA's Brain. Or, use other programs you are already comfortable working in.

Step 6. Consider these important text tips.

- No matter what the size of your panels, white space is your friend – not every area needs to be filled. Too much information, including visual information, overwhelms a reader.
- Include a brief introductory paragraph; helpful for those who many not want to read the whole panel.
- Use minimum line spacing of 1.15 pt.

Tip



Consider "green" exhibit panels:

Foam board or foam core is paper-based. GreenCore is pulp-based. Canvas is fabric-based. Recycled or post-consumer recycled content paper stocks are common and come in a variety of finishes. Dry transfer lettering could be an alternative to vinyl lettering.

If you have access to an industrial sewing machine, vinyl or other fabric banners can be turned into bags after the exhibit!.

- Use body text that is left justified. Alignment of headers and quotes can vary but try to use consistent alignment in your panels.
- Turn off hyphenation.
- Use a maximum of two fonts, a **serif** and a **sans-serif**, one for the introductory paragraph and main body text, the other for titles, headers. Serifs are the little flourishes added to letters of serif fonts; sans-serif fonts do not use these.
- Experiment with fonts to find what is more readable at different sizes.
- Popular fonts used in galleries and museums [all shown here at 14 pt]:
 - **Serif:** Cambria, Garamond, Times New Roman, Palatino
 - **Sans-serif:** Arial, Candara, Gill Sans, Helvetica neue, Optima
- Avoid using font sizes that are too small – it makes for unpleasant reading experiences and will likely mean that the information gets skipped.
- Use **bold**, *italics*, and underline formatting options sparingly, for emphasis only. The last two in particular make reading text more cumbersome for visitors.
- Use ALL CAPS for titles or headers only; IT IS HARDER TO READ CAPITALIZED TEXT.



- Use contrast in presenting your text. Avoid light-coloured text on a light colour background, dark on dark, blue on green, red on orange... if you have trouble reading it, your visitors will too.



While the use of this particular green background mimics the colour of green screens in filmmaking, the colour creates difficulty for visitors with issues such as colour blindness. In addition, the black text is not bold enough to create enough contrast with the background.

RECOMMENDED FONT SIZES

PANEL SIZE	8.5" x 11"	11" x 17"	24" x 36"	32" x 48"
Title	40pt	50pt	80pt	100pt
Subtitle	24pt	38pt	48pt	75pt
Intro/Header	14pt	16pt	28pt	32pt
Body Text	12pt	14pt	24pt	28pt
Quote 18 pt	18pt	24pt	36pt	48pt
Caption	9pt	10pt	18pt	18pt
Image Credit	8pt	9pt	16pt	18pt

Step 7. Plan for effective use of your images.

What story do your pictures tell? Be sure they connect with the panel text.

If you are comfortable working with images in the design program or template, then you will want to consider the following guidelines:

- Placement – sketch out your panel layout first. Inexpensive graph paper works great for this.
- Use no more than 3-4 images [including graphs] on any one panel.
- Use high-quality images.
- Make sure you have usage permission for each image.
- Be sure to provide credit. Make space for credits on or near the image.
- Should your images be cropped? Cropping images allows you to remove extraneous information, improve composition, and/or highlight the subject.
- Resize images without distorting them: always use a corner handle, not one on the outer sides, and hold down the Shift key when dragging the handle.
- Borders or no borders? It's up to you. Never add borders to logos, or place logos in a box.
- Consider printing a few very large images on an entire wall for extra impact. You can include a small text panel nearby (as pictured below), or a little bit of text printed at the top of the photo.

Tip



Sometimes there are fees associated with permissions.

If this is the case – and if you did not account for this in your budget – consider asking the owner/artist for a one-time usage permission in return for appropriate credit and acknowledgments within your exhibit.



Step 8. Be creative with your use of colour. Be subtle with your use of lines.

Use colour as a unifying element throughout the exhibit.



Image source: Fernie Museum



Use colour on your panels to tie into colours used elsewhere in the exhibit



Use colour to emphasize different story panels.





Use coloured backgrounds on a single panel to set storylines apart or to create emphasis.



Avoid using outlines on boxes, they can be jarring visual elements. Use sparingly to create separation.

Step 9. Consider all abilities.

The *Accessible Canada Act: An Act to Ensure a Barrier-free Canada* came into force on July 11, 2019. It will benefit all Canadians, especially Canadians with disabilities, by helping create a barrier-free Canada. The new Canadian Accessibility Standards Development Organization [CASDO] will review accessibility standards, promote research, and share information related to accessibility.

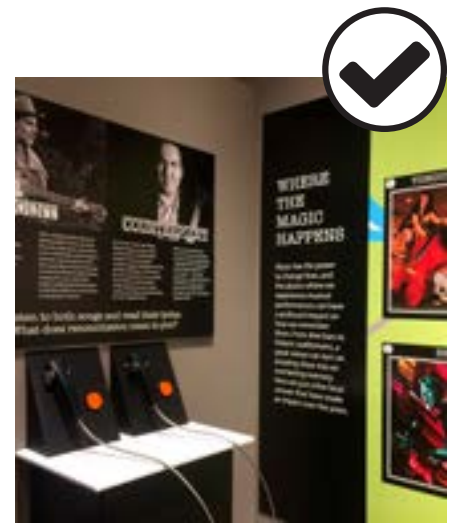
Take some time to research how design can play a role in creating **accessible exhibits**. Visitor age, physical limitations, medical conditions should be considered in how you present the information.

- **Is your audience older?** Visitors may have more trouble reading white text on a coloured background – unless the text is large enough – or text on top of a texture or image, and may not be able to read small print. The higher the contrast, the greater the legibility; use a minimum 70% contrast. Use a matte surface to avoid glare, which can make reading/viewing of elements difficult. People with low vision should be able to move close to a panel; greater viewing distances require larger type size.
- **Do they have vision loss or reading impairments?** Perhaps you can create an audio guide, or have volunteer docents specifically trained in being the eyes of the visitor, or creating tactile signage where appropriate.
- **Are they colour blind?** Avoid red/pink or green, and coloured text on a black or dark background.
- **Are they hearing impaired?** Providing transcripts of or subtitles on audio/visual presentations could be offered and/or have American Sign Language literate volunteers available.
- **Do they use a wheelchair?** Optimal height placement on the wall for all viewers is between 2.5-6.5 feet [0.75 – 2 metres] from floor level [Accessibility-wheelchair.jpg – image source unknown].

Visitors with dyslexia

People with dyslexia will benefit from your use of certain fonts, such as **Helvetica**, **Courier**, **Arial**, and **Verdana**. A font called **Dyslexie** was designed by graphic designer David Boer who suffers from dyslexia; every letter is uniquely shaped and helps eliminate common reading errors of dyslexia. **OpenDyslexic** is a similar font.

If you prefer not to use such fonts on the panels themselves, you could provide a binder or a clipboard with the same text printed in one of the suggested fonts. Use dark text on a light background that is not white.



Both images are examples where the design is accessible: the top image shows white on black text that is large enough and/or approachable. The bottom image shows that a visitor has access to a text panel to examine elements up close.



Step 10. Last, but certainly not least.....Proofread!

To avoid the embarrassment of having a visitor point out an error on opening day, proofread before printing. Then have someone else proofread before printing. Be sure to build proofreading into your exhibit timeline.

Print a sample panel and test it in situ – get opinions from others:

- Would they take the time to read it if they were visiting?
- What works/ what doesn't?

Be prepared to hear things you don't want to hear and to be flexible enough to make changes!

Tip



Proofreading can be a great task for a dedicated teacher / writer / editor / volunteer with a sharp eye.

Final Thoughts

Here are the Top 10 Tips to consider when designing your exhibit panels:

- 1. Familiarize yourself with this Tool and basic design principles.**
- 2. Create a reverse timeline for your exhibit.**
- 3. Know the size of the panels you are creating and how they will be presented (or mounted).**
- 4. Decide on a theme or “look and feel” with your team.**
- 5. Make sure your printer can accommodate your needs.**
- 6. Gather all the materials you need before you start.**
- 7. Take your time; and plan for extra time.**
- 8. Trust your instincts.**
- 9. Prepare for multiple drafts and build in time for proofreading.**
- 10. Enjoy the end result, even if it's not perfect!**

Further Reading and Resources

Sample Budgets

1. FERNIE MUSEUM - BENT ON ART: KOOTENAY QUEER & TRANS ART EXHIBIT

Intro lettering, artist statements, labels

- Graphic Design [Intro lettering] \$45
 - Intro lettering printing and installation \$150
 - Artist statements, labels* drymounting \$200
- Total design, fabrication, installation \$395**

* Statements and labels were designed using [canva.com](https://www.canva.com) and printed in-house.



Image source: Fernie Museum

2. FERNIE MUSEUM - BACKROADS: AN EXHIBIT BY MICHAEL HEPHER

Intro panel, 6 exhibit panels, supplementary didactics, $\frac{3}{4}$ scale Volkswagon bus

- Graphic Design \$480
 - Panel fabrication & installation \$709
 - Exhibit Panel printing \$826
 - VW Bus \$1,600
 - Dry mounting (secondary didactics) \$242
 - Exhibit Supplies* \$52
- Total design, fabrication, installation \$3,909**

** Plinths were already in-house and not included in budget.*



Image source: Fernie Museum

Printers / printing options

- Staples Business Depot [paper stock, larger-scale printing on various substrates, 24x36" max]
- Costco [canvas 40x60" max, or metal printing 24x36" max]
- Home Depot [Coroplast, 48x96" max]
- London Drugs [canvas or metallic canvas, 40x60" max]
- Michaels [cutting, acid free spray adhesive, dry transfer supplies]
- Other drymounting supplies [such as Trimount permanent dry mounting tissue]: drytac.com

Note: This information is current as of June 2019.

Sustainable materials or “substrates”

- **Sustainable Development Guide**, Chapters 4, 5 and 7:
museums.ca/client/document/documents.html?categoryId=361
- **Guidelines for Material Selection:**
www.greenexhibits.org/build/selection_guide.php
- **Madison Children’s Museum Green Guide:**
issuu.com/madisonchildrensmuseum8/docs/greenguide_2014_web
- **Oregon Museum of Science and Industry Green Exhibits Guide:**
www.sustainablepractice.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/OMSI-Green-Exhibits-Guide.pdf
- **An example of eco-friendly materials;** ask your local printer if they carry or can bring in:
www.epicdisplays.com/Eco-Systems-Green_Materials.html
- **Alternative substrate ideas:**
exhibitcitynews.com/graphics-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-1082

When To Seek Outside Help

If you are in need further advice on how to use the associated templates, you can contact the author of this Tool:

Anine Vonkeman [one match fire | design & communications](http://one.match.fire|design&communications)

If you are looking for help in sourcing printing materials, your BCMA colleagues at larger institutions can be helpful. Many are happy to share their knowledge and expertise.

You can email the BCMA listserv with your questions: bcma@lists.vifa.ca.

Bibliography of resources

Online graphic design courses

- **“11 Extremely Helpful (And Free!) Online Graphic Design Courses”**
format.com/magazine/resources/design/free-online-graphic-design-courses
- **“The Complete Graphic Design Theory for Beginners Course”** [low-cost subscription]: udemy.com/graphic-design-theory-for-beginners-course/
- **10 Best Graphic Design Course & Certification Online [2018 -19]**
digitaldefynd.com/best-graphic-design-course-program-classes-tutorial/
- **The 10 Best Online Graphic Design Software Programs”**
format.com/magazine/resources/design/online-graphic-design-software

Graphic design / Exhibit design

- **Glasgow Museums Display Guidelines: A Practical Guide for Exhibitions**
britishcouncil.in/sites/default/files/guidelines_for_museum_display.pdf
- **Graphic Design Tips Infographic**
www.amberddesign.com/my-uploadz/2017/11/graphic-design-tips-101-infographic.jpg
- www.amberddesign.com/graphic-design-tips-for-beginners
- **A Rookie’s Guide to Graphics**
www.exhibitoronline.com/topics/article.asp?ID=1449

NOTE: You will be required to create a free account to access this article.

Fonts

- **Typefaces for Exhibitions**
blogs.stockton.edu/southjerseyseminar/files/2011/09/Typefaces-for-Exhibitions.pdf
- **Explorit Science Center Guidelines for Interior Signs and Labels**
www.explorit.org/board/about/board/explorit-board-documents/Exploritsigns-labelguidelines.pdf
- **A type family originally developed for New York’s Whitney Museum, Whitney contends with two different sets of demands: those of editorial typography, and those of public signage:**
www.typography.com/fonts/whitney/overview/
- Freefonts.com
- DaFonts.com
- 101Fonts.com

Accessibility

- **British Dyslexia Association**, Dyslexia Style Guide
bdadyslexia.org.uk/common/ckeditor/filemanager/userfiles/About_Us/policies/Dyslexia_Style_Guide.pdf
- **Good Fonts for Dyslexia**
dyslexiahelp.umich.edu/sites/default/files/good_fonts_for_dyslexia_study.pdf
- dyslexiefont.com
- opendyslexic.org
- **Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design**
www.si.edu/Accessibility/SGAED#page_21
- **The Association of Registered Graphic Designers of Ontario**, A Practical Handbook on Accessible Graphic Design, 2010
www.rgd.ca/database/files/library/RGD_AccessAbility_Handbook.pdf
- **MuseumPlanner.org**
museumplanner.org/category/museum-exhibitions/exhibition-design/ada
- **Braille Literacy Canada**, Accessible Signage Guidelines, 2016
www.brailleliteracycanada.ca/CMFiles/Accessible_Signage_Guidelines_BLC-Print-Formatted.pdf
- **Making an accessible Canada for people with disabilities**
www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/accessible-people-disabilities.html
- **Science Museum of Boston**, Consideration for Designers
legacy.mos.org/exhibitdevelopment/access/design.html#Signage
- **2010 Americans with Disabilities Act Standards for Accessible Design**
www.ada.gov/regs2010/2010ADASTandards/2010ADASTandards_prt.pdf
- **UNHCR Convention** on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities: Accessibility
www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRPD/Pages/ConventionRightsPersonsWithDisabilities.aspx

More inspiration

1. Check out the [BCMA Brain Exhibition Development section](http://museumsassn.bc.ca/brain/tools-and-resources/exhibit-development/) for innovative case studies in exhibition design submitted by BCMA members: <http://museumsassn.bc.ca/brain/tools-and-resources/exhibit-development/>

2. Enjoy these images provided by the author of this Tool, Anine Vonkeman.

Vinyl Lettering



Home Free is also an example of a low-cost presentation: Descriptions of what artifacts mean to community members who selected them are printed in-house and presented in a scrapbook.

Substrates



These introductory panels are printed on Mylar® and placed in frames with LED strips. The larger panels are printed on Sintra® and lit with spotlights.

Other ideas

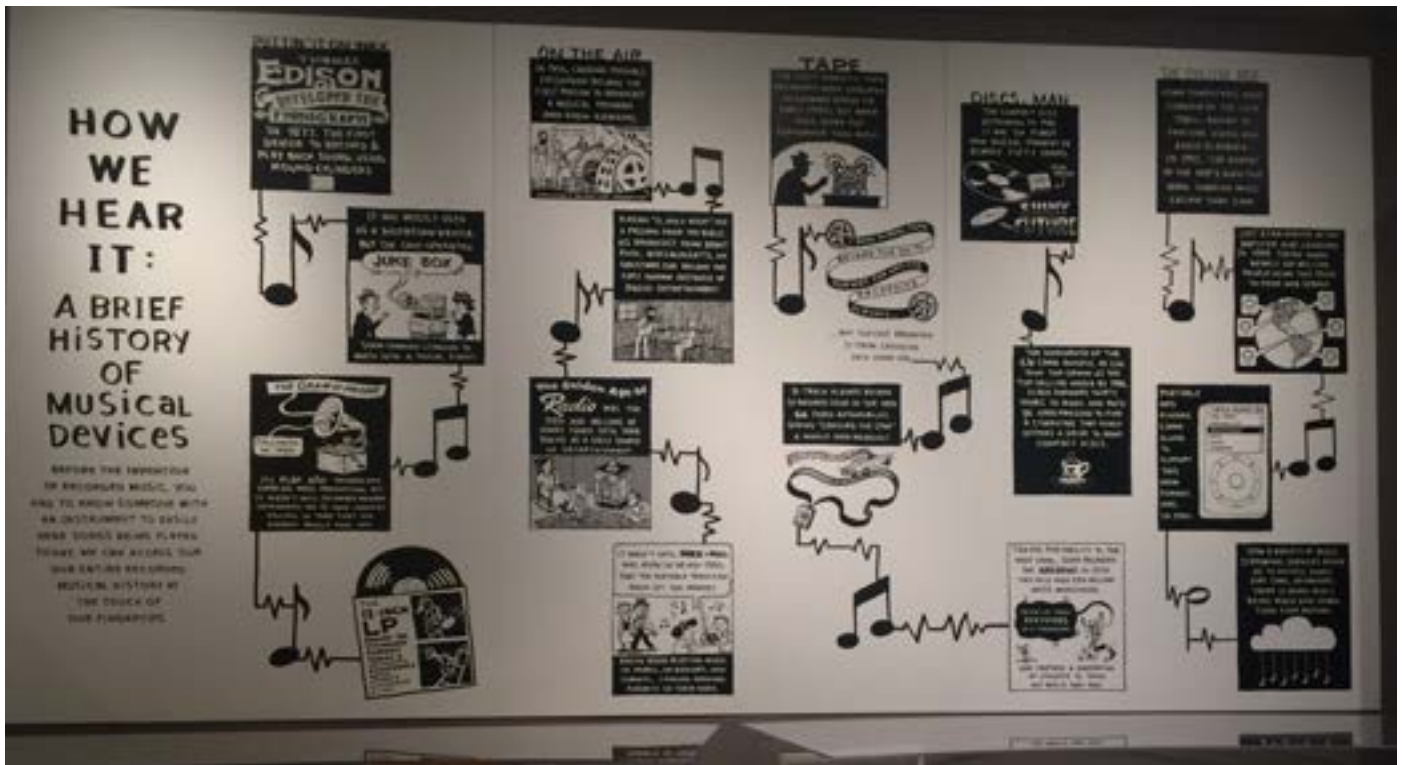


Consider different shapes and positioning for your panels.



Using minimal text, together with eye-catching shapes and graphics, can have a great impact.

Photo Credit: Amanda MacKay
(Member, Alberta Museums Association)



Don't forget to tap into the talent in your community. In this case, a local cartoonist was commissioned to create the exhibit panels.



Here you can see the cord running power to the LED strips in backlit frame. Another fun exhibit feature: popcorn made from expanding foam!