



Inklings

Bulletin of Interpretive Ideas

September 2003 Volume 3, Issue 3

Current/Recent Project List

- Consultant, Bloomington (IN) Park and Recreation, Bloomington
- Exhibit Planner, Chilo Lock and Dam, Clermont County Park District (OH), with Lifespace Design
- Exhibit Planner, Mansfield Mill, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with Lifespace Design
- Interpretive Sign Design, Cataract Covered Bridge, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources
- Interpretive Sign Design, Falls of the Ohio, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources
- Interpretive Sign Design, Moores Hill Iron Bridge, Bloomington (IN) Parks and Recreation
- Trail Sign Plan and Design, W. Lafayette (IN) Park and Recreation
- Interpretive Sign Design, Miller Showers Park, Bloomington (IN) Park and Recreation
- Exhibit Planner, McCormick's Creek State Park, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with Lifespace Design

Writing for Exhibits

Don't make your exhibits a challenge to read.

It was a quiet day at the nature center. Labor Day had passed and fall school field trips hadn't started up. For the most part, visitors were seniors who had the flexibility to visit the park during a quieter time.

A couple stopped by the office and asked a question about information in a particular exhibit. I was stumped. I couldn't even think which exhibit they were referring to. Finally they led me to the exhibit to show me the text. I was fairly embarrassed by the fact that after three years on the staff, I hadn't read all of the exhibit labels.

But I wasn't the only one.

The exhibit was a 3-sided kiosk. On each surface were six pen and ink illustrations, 6" x 6" in size. Next to each illustration was a block of text that was larger than the illustration and written in all capital letters. Even across the room one could see that more space was devoted to text than to graphics.

Over the next few months, I observed visitors in the exhibit hall. Most of the visitors (families with children and school classes), were not investing time in the exhibit. For the most part, the exhibit went unread. Those who did read it were older adults without children – a small percentage of the visitation.

A visually attractive exhibit will attract visitors from a distance. Once there, the

text labels are a key to keeping them there and achieving your objectives.

Some things to keep in mind when writing exhibit labels:

1. Brevity. People spend roughly 45 seconds in front of an exhibit (this comes to about 225 words of text). If the text takes longer to read, visitors will move on without investing the time.

2. Themes. The exhibit theme should be understood in 1-2 seconds. This means a bold heading that is clear and short.

3. Multiple labels. Although the word count may be the same, several short labels are less intimidating than one block of text. Use the labels as captions under engaging graphics.

4. Each label stands on its own. People rarely read an entire exhibit. Different people will be attracted to different graphics, artifacts or interactive component within an exhibit. For this reason, it is important that each individual label tell its own story.

5. Write for people who aren't experts. We've been so immersed in our site's story that we forget it's all new for our visitors. Terms that are sprinkled throughout our conversations are unfamiliar to our visitors. Research that absorbs us does not hold similar interest for those who are trying to comprehend the bigger picture. A successful exhibit needs to address the novice and provide

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“for more information, contact . . .” to those who wish to take it further.

6. Lettering size. Unlike a book that is held close to our face, an exhibit is read at a distance. Paragraph text should be at least 24 points.

7. DON'T USE ALL CAPS AS IT IS MUCH MORE DIFFICULT TO READ. OUR BRAINS ARE PROGRAMMED TO RECOGNIZE CAPITAL LETTERS AS PROPER NOUNS AND AT THE BEGINNING OF A SENTENCE. BECAUSE OF THIS, A LABEL WRITTEN IN ALL CAPS TAKES MUCH MORE EFFORT TO READ.

When exhibit labels are well written, your exhibit will be read by all, not just by those visitors who want a challenge.

References

- Ham, Sam H. 1992. *Environmental Interpretation, A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets*. North American Press
- Serrell, Beverly. 1996. *Exhibit Labels, An Interpretive Approach*. Altamira Press.