



INKKLINGS

Bulletin of Interpretive Ideas

September 2007 Volume 7, Issue 3

Keeping Text Brief

How Many Words is Too Many?

Current Project List

• Interpretive Sign Design, Indiana Department of Natural Resources.

Current projects include:

- Lincoln SP
- Spring Mill SP
- Brown County SP
- Brookville Reservoir
- Charlestown SP
- Falls of the Ohio SP
- Fort Harrison SP
- Patoka Reservoir
- Shakamak SP
- Ouabache SP
- Potato Creek SP
- Lieber SRA
- Shades SP
- Turkey Run SP
- Hardy Lake Reservoir
- Mounds State Park
- Wyandotte Caves
- Clifty Falls SP
- Versailles SP

• Interpretive Sign Design, Champaign County (IL) Forest Preserve District

• Interpretive Sign Design, Westfield (IN) Parks and Recreation

- Interpretive Sign Design, Wabash and Erie Canal, Delphi, IN**
- Interpretive Sign Design, Park Forest (IL) Parks and Recreation**
- Interpretive Sign Design, Laporte County (IN) Parks Department**
- Interpretive Sign Design, Hobart (IN) Parks and Recreation (with Dragonfly Graphics)**
- Interpretive Sign Design, Logansport (IN) Memorial Hospital**
- Trail Map Design, Kalamazoo Nature Center, Kalamazoo, MI**

Most of our interpretive audiences are voluntary. They are primarily visiting a site



Figure 1

to walk a trail and to socialize with friends and family. Learning about the site is frequently a secondary goal. The result is that if sign text is too long, visitors will walk past it without stopping. The time it would take to read a lengthy text is more than they have to spare from their primary goals.

But, how many words is too many? Some agencies have a set policy that states that sign text shall be no more than _____ words.

I have found that while there is a maximum number of words you don't want to exceed, the size of the sign can have an influence.



Figure 2

Figure 1 is a 12" x 12" sign that has 77 words of text on it. Keeping in mind that a 24 point font is as small as you can go on a sign, this sign still has breathing room (white space) and an image. Figure 2 is a 36" x 24" panel with 210 words. Although there are three

times as many words on it as in Figure 1, the larger panel size still allows white space and graphics. Figure 3 by contrast is a 12" x 18" sign with 308 words. It lacks the room for white space and graphics.

There are a few ways to keep word count down:

1. Interpret only what people are looking at. Ideally a panel interprets the object in front of the reader. Do not get into the bigger story except where absolutely



This sign interprets the specific wetland in front of the reader not wetlands in general.

necessary for understanding. An interpretive panel is not the media for a broad topic such as the Ice Age, but for a specific focus such as the glacial moraine before them.

2. Start with clear objectives. What do people need to know to understand the object before them? Objectives keep your text focused.

3. Thinking ahead to the graphics. You could write down the definition of a moraine, or use a diagram and eliminate 40 words. A picture really is worth 1000 words.



Figure 3



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Interpretive Ideas

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This interpretive kiosk consists of three 6' x 4' panels. Will people read every word? Some will. Many won't. Most people will gravitate to the graphic or heading that catches their eye. Because of this, it is important to break up text into chunks that can be understood alone as well as within the larger body of text.