

MEANINGFUL INTERPRETATION

Interpretive Themes



Interpretive Themes **WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?**

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Visitors to a National Park Service site are seeking a valuable experience, and site resources are full of valuable and remarkable stories. It would seem that an interpreter is the perfect person to say something of consequence and make a connection between the audience and the resource. However, with familiarity comes the temptation to be an expert.

An interpreter may wish to answer all the questions, even before they are asked. But that would take away the audience's satisfaction of having a "good question" or of being able to consider what interests them. Interpretive success is measured by increased curiosity in an audience, not by the belief that they may have gotten it all. Instead of telling the audience all that they know, interpreters must select what may be most compelling. By paring down information to what is most consequential, and presenting a theme, interpreters give visitors something worth their consideration and retention, something comprehensible and provocative. They also give audiences the idea that the resource is something special, and worth their attention and consideration.

A resource is something that is more than the sum of its parts. It speaks at many levels to an audience. It may have relevance to a wide range of disciplines and interests — science, philosophy, history, religion, and art — to name a few. Rather than focusing exclusively on any one of these areas, or trying to cover all of them, an interpreter may find the most provocative and powerful story is the one that has universal meaning. Stories that have universal meaning provide the greatest degree of relevance to the greatest number of people. Not everyone will relate in the same way, but those stories do have some significance to all.

The art of interpretation is knowing which facts have the potential to inspire interest in, and appreciation for, park resources. By using information that has universal import, an interpreter maximizes opportunities for audiences to connect to resource meanings. Freeman Tilden referred to these universal meanings as "the greater truths behind any statements of facts."

Tilden said, "Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part," and that interpreters should address the "whole person" when doing interpretation.

But how can anyone take a resource and address it for all that it is, and how can anyone begin to delve into the complexities of what it means to be human? Vacationers are not usually interested in being loaded down with information and details, and they certainly are not interested in revealing too much about themselves to strangers.

By using universal concepts interpreters can quickly gain people's interest and attention, and make their information relate to the "whole." Concepts such as struggle, family, survival, friendship and discovery all have human appeal. When one or more concepts are blended into the central message or theme, interest is heightened.

Many aspects of a place or thing may personally fascinate an interpreter, but if

audiences are to share that appreciation they must first come to form their own connection to it. Programs and products for park audiences should not be about what an interpreter knows. They must be framed around what an audience may care most about. This involves considerable research and collecting information that has the potential to appeal to people's interests and intellects. The things they care most about. If an audience only sees the resource as a passing curiosity or as an amusing diversion, it may never occur to them to care about or for it.

How then does one select and refine resource related information to be its most compelling? How can one convey something unexpected, consequential, and worth consideration? Before preparing anything, the interpreter should ask: What's so special about it?; What's the big idea?; Will the topic selected be related to the resource and the interests of people, or will it simply be a take-it-or-leave-it fact?; What is the most significant and compelling thing you can say about an ecosystem, a battlefield, a historic structure, an event, or a geologic feature?; What would most audiences find interesting and worth remembering?

The following are examples of factual statements that apply to the Declaration of Independence:

The Declaration was a revolutionary manifesto of grievances.

The Declaration declared the American colonies as free and independent states.

The Declaration was a declaration of democratic principles.

The signers risked their "lives, property and sacred honor" to issue their proclamation that "all men are created equal."

All are important, and all are based on facts related to the Declaration of Independence. However, only one truly grabs our attention and is something that intrinsically interests most people — risking your life. Risking your life implies, sacrifice, courage, commitment and even recklessness, universal concepts most people find appealing and provocative. Suggesting that equality could be a radical concept may also help stimulate thinking, and a program developed around the idea that "all men are created equal" may even lead people to reconsider what that concept means for them.

The easiest way to identify the "greater truths" about a resource is to brainstorm what is known about it. As an exercise, take any park-related place, thing or topic and begin to brainstorm, writing down factual statements about it. After listing all the statements identify the ones that have the most universal appeal. In all probability they will be statements that have relevance to people's emotions, values, and/or interests.

After identifying the statements with universal appeal, consider which ones are backed up by the greatest narrative potential and the most provocative facts. Will exploring any of these statements lead an audience toward a greater appreciation for the resource? If the answers are yes, then refine the statements of your choosing into one statement. Paring down information may seem difficult at first, given the number of interesting facts that may be worthy of interpretation. But it is a necessary part of the process that will help you determine what is most evocative and cogent and what information has the greatest potential to heighten retention and appreciation.

Once you identify a compelling message it may still be possible to finesse it further. Even the best ideas for a topic can fall flat, or seem overly pedantic, if they aren't framed in a manner that catches an audience's attention and interest. For example, one may want to improve on "the Signers risked their lives" statement. How can the statement be rephrased so that it makes people think, so that it contains an element of mystery, so that it appeals to the imagination? Try it this way:

The signers risked their "lives, property and sacred honor" to issue their proclamation that "all men are created equal?"

What does this remind you of? What analogy can you make from it? Here is one:

By signing the Declaration of Independence the signers were signing what could have been their own death warrant, but they needed this declaration to give life to their cause.

This statement is actually a paraphrase of several statements made by different Signers in 1776. They knew the King would consider the Declaration treasonous. There is plenty of supporting documentation to develop an interpretive product from this statement. In fact, the possibilities seem endless when you consider the pertinent material — the lives of the 36 Signers, the British Monarchy, strongly held beliefs about rights, and the implications of the words "all men are created equal."

No matter what direction the interpretation takes, the unifying idea selected will not lose its inherent emotional and intellectual appeal, and will guide interpretation in a direction that engages the audience. Using a surprising analogy such as "death warrant" to describe a political document is one way to get people to look at something differently and consider its implications. Juxtaposing the life of the cause with the mortal lives of the Signers is also intellectually stimulating and opens up interesting possibilities for thematic development.

The resource is like an appetizing pie. By refining a resource-related topic to its essential and most captivating characteristics, the audience is given a slice of significance. When an interpreter gives the audience only a slice, they'll always want more.

As Anatole France said, "Do not try to satisfy their vanity by teaching a great many things. Awaken people's curiosity. It is enough to open minds; do not overload them. Put there just a spark. If there is some good inflammable stuff, it will catch fire" [1] In other words, just pick one idea and frame your interpretation around it.

After you have developed a unifying idea, review all that you know about a resource, and select information that compliments the idea. Then determine what topical research may be required to further support and build on the idea that becomes the foundation piece to develop your interpretive product. If what you select is intellectually and emotionally stimulating, as well as artfully presented, it will help some in your audience connect with the meanings of the resource, share their connections with others, have a deeper appreciation for the resource, and a desire to connect with it in additional ways.

By selecting statements of consequence and relevance, interpreters do more than inform. They target information that has the potential to inspire people to make their own connections to the meanings inherent in the resource.

¹ NATIONAL PARK SERVICE DIRECTOR GEORGE HARTZOG, QUOTING ANOTOLE FRANCE IN HIS FORWARD FOR, INTERPRETING OUR HERITAGE VOL. 2

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