Writing for Impact

Frameworks for Interpretive Writing

This workshop is sponsored by the Texas Historical Commission’s Texas Heritage Trails Program in partnership with the Texas Association of Museums. This project was supported in part by funding through TxDOT’s Statewide Transportation Enhancement Program.
It’s Time to Meet the Neighbors!

- Learn three things about the person sitting next to you:
  - Name
  - Where he/she works and what he/she does there
  - One other interesting fact about him/her

- In three minutes, you’ll introduce each other to the rest of the group.
Goal for Today:
As a group, we’ll learn how to make our writing more interpretive, impactful, and engaging to the public.

- What is Interpretation?
- Overview of Interpretive Writing Techniques
- Focus on Storytelling
- Focus on Thematic Structures
What the Experts Say...

- Freeman Tilden:
  Interpretation is “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.”

  *(from Freeman Tilden’s *Interpreting Our Heritage)*

- Translation:
  Interpretation goes beyond just the facts to reveal the meanings and relationships behind them.
What the Experts Say...

National Park Service:
Interpretation is “a catalyst in creating opportunities for the audience to form their own intellectual and emotional connections with the meanings and significance inherent in the resource.”

Translation:
Interpretation creates opportunities for visitors to connect with the stories that objects and historic sites can tell us.
A Working Definition

Interpretation goes beyond facts to reveal meanings and relationships, which helps visitors better engage with objects and places.
Why Be Interpretive?

The British Museum, London, UK
Why Be Interpretive?

from Ferris Bueller’s Day Off
Why Be Interpretive?

from National Archives and Records Administration Southeast Region, “Stories from the Great Depression” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpfY8kh5lUw)
Interpretive Techniques

Harrison County Historical Museum, Marshall, TX
1. Thematic Structures

Overarching Theme: “Mustang Island has always been a place where people learned to adapt to the environment, and to adapt the environment to their needs.”

Idea #1: The native people who lived here, the Karankawa, thrived in part because they adapted their diet to their coastal environment.

Idea #2: Anglo settlers made Corpus Christi a successful commercial hub by deepening Aransas Pass to accommodate deepwater ships.

Idea #3: Businessmen capitalized on Mustang Island’s natural beauty and developed it into a tourist destination that still draws visitors today.
2. “In Their Own Words”

TEXAS IS THE
FINEST PORTION
OF THE GLOBE
THAT HAS EVER
BLESS MY VISION.

SAM HOUSTON 1833

Bullock Texas State History Museum, Austin, TX
3. Establishing Relevancy

“If a story is not about the hearer he will not listen. And here I make a rule—a great and interesting story is about everyone or it will not last.”

- East of Eden, by John Steinbeck
4. Storytelling

El Paso Museum of History, El Paso, TX
Our Brains Experience Stories Differently

“The brain, it seems, does not make much of a distinction between reading about an experience and encountering it in real life; in each case, the same neurological regions are stimulated.”

Stories Are Universal

Panther Cave, Amistad National Recreation Area, Del Rio, TX
“Histories tend to generalize events... Stories, on the other hand, begin on an intimate, personal level. Stories tend to heighten the unique traits and foibles of each character and, more often than histories, they get expressed in the first and second voice. This intimate view proves very accessible to those who otherwise claim to have little interest in history. Empathy is naturally felt by one person for another...”

- from “A Practical Guide to Personal Connectivity” by Daniel Spock
A Non-Narrative Label

The refineries acquired additional security equipment and trained guards, who patrolled around the clock. Workers had to wear badges at all times and visitors were never left alone. Texas City Terminal Railway Company installed alarm systems in buildings and fencing around its docks, and added a security gate and guard house.

Taking fingerprints at Pan American in January 1941 (Photo from Moore Memorial Public Library)

Blackouts were directed to make it difficult for Axis bombers to target the defense plants and other vital parts of the community.

“Texas City During World War II,” Moore Memorial Public Library, Texas City, TX, http://www.texascity-library.org/wwii/index.php
Clarence Wood recalls blackouts in Texas City:

Luke Alvey-Henderson (interviewer): So another thing that was common around the time, especially in Texas City, was blackouts. Do you remember those well?

Clarence Wood: Oh yes, I remember them very well. All the people had to have dark shades for their windows and have very few lights inside the windows. And on the cars, they wouldn’t allow them to turn on the headlights.

Out in the Gulf of Mexico they might send bombs over from the Gulf. I do remember that during the war there were a lot of German submarines in the Gulf of Mexico, and every once in a while we’d find a body float up on the seashore from the Germans torpedoing the boats that went out from Houston and Galveston.

Listen to Clarence Wood’s entire oral history interview.

“Texas City During World War II,” Moore Memorial Public Library, Texas City, TX, http://www.texascity-library.org/wwii/index.php
Example #1

Olaudah Equiano
1789

Excerpt:
The first objects which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast were the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and awaiting its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, (which was very different from any I had ever heard,) united to confirm me in this belief. As well as the multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow. No, I no longer doubted my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted.

When I recovered a little, I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who brought me on board. They were receiving their pay. They seemed to take pity on me, and talked to me in order to cheer me. I was not cheered. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by these white men with horrible red faces, and loose hair. They told me I was not. One of these white men, to again cheer me up, brought me a small portion ofspirituous liquor.

“Slave Narratives,” Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA
“Turning Point,” The National WWII Museum, New Orleans, LA
Example #3

A Summer of Change:
The Civil Rights Story of Glen Echo Park

Glen Echo Park, Glen Echo, MD (National Park Service)
Rules of Good Storytelling: Keep It Simple
Rules of Good Storytelling: Know Your Audience (and Respond to Them)

Who am I trying to reach?
Rules of Good Storytelling: Show, Don’t Tell
Rules of Good Storytelling: Stories Have (a Specific) Structure

- **Exposition**: (sets the scene, introduces main characters)
- **Rising Action**: (conflict sets action in motion, increasing tension)
- **Climax**: (the turning point)
- **Falling Action**: (moving toward resolution, tying up loose ends)
- **Resolution**: (all details & conflict resolved, normal/new normal going forward)
Incorporating Stories into Exhibits
Technique #1: It’s One Big Story

Texas State Cemetery Visitor Center & Gallery, Austin, TX
Texas State Cemetery

“There is a mystique about our state, a belief that the best days of Texas are ahead thanks to the people who are buried here today.”

-Lt. Governor Bob Bullock

History does not make itself. People make history. The Texas State Cemetery is the final resting place of fallen heroes and cultural icons who by their actions forged the epic story of Texas. These individuals have inspired us to realize that as Texans and citizens of our time, we can each make a profound difference in our world. The past is present. We are living history.
Texas State Cemetery
Texas State Cemetery

Texas State Cemetery Visitor Center & Gallery, Austin, TX
Online Exhibit:
José Antonio Navarro

Casa Navarro State Historic Site
www.visitcasanavarro.com

Casa Navarro State Historic Site, San Antonio, TX, Texas Historical Commission
Casa Navarro online exhibit

Tragedy Shapes Navarro’s Young Life

Jesuit Antonio Navarro survived two tragedies in 1861, the year he was 15. Both would mark him for the rest of his life. First, he fractured his leg in an accident. The wound never healed properly and left him with a limp and chronic pain for the rest of his life.

The second tragedy occurred later that year when Navarro’s beloved father died. Ángel Navarro’s翅wyaryly guarded helpened Ántin Navarro develop into the man he became. He devoted himself to his own education and self-development, so as an adult, he proved himself a leader in his own family and in his fellow Tejanos.

A Perilous Expedition

President Lamar asked Navarro to serve Texas in an ambitious commission.

The Santa Fe Expedition left Santa Fe in June 1841, aiming to establish Texas’s dominance over territories extending up the Rio Grande to the commercial hub of Santa Fe. Accompanied by a large military force, the group’s mission was to enter the residents of New Mexico with trade opportunities, responsible government, and independence from Mexico, and then assume control.

Gen. Hugh McDowell commanded the operation. President Lamar asked Navarro to lead the diplomatic effort. Reluctantly, he agreed. Leadership conflicts, geographic confusion, and supply shortages began almost immediately. Harsh terrain, brutal heat, ignorant guides, and attacks by Kiowas and Comanches led to desertion and death. Worn from Mexican troops based in the area were forced to confront the issue.

An exhausted McDowell surrendered in October, 1841. The Mexican army marched the captives 1,600 miles to Mexico City and eventually released all but Navarro. President Santa Anna declared him a traitor to Mexico, originally sentencing him to death. Four years later, in January 1845, Navarro escaped.

Serving the People of Texas

Jesuit Antonio Navarro served tirelessly in elected and appointed positions throughout his life. He served as land commissioner for the Mexican government alongside various empresarios, as San Antonio’s city attorney, and as a city council member. He was the elected representative from San Antonio in the legislature of Mexico, the Republic of Texas, and the State of Texas. He was one of two Tejanos to sign the Texas Declaration of Independence. He helped write both the Constitution of the Republic of Texas and the Constitution of the State of Texas.

Challenging the "Know-Nothings"

An anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant movement known as the American Party—also called the "Know-Nothings"—pledged to stop immigration to America by offering Texas as a haven to fellow Mexican Americans. The Know-Nothing party was particularly strong in Central Texas, except the 1854 San Antonio municipal elections. With the 1853 governor’s race in the air, three combined movements among many people grew stronger. San Antonio’s Know-Nothing attempt, despite apparent contradictions, targeted the Native Americans’ belief in the future of the nation. Navarro recognized the manipulation and, though retired from public office, spoke out valiantly. His famous oratory might still ring in our ears.

A speech written by an alumnus Navarro was read to members of the Democratic "Mexico Texans of Bexar;" his voice was unforgettable.

"Yellow citizens, at last you have risen from the dunes of wildness! At last you have remembered that you are the sons of those Tejanos Mexican Indians who fought our liberty..."
Technique #2: Stories as Examples

Silent Wings Museum, Lubbock, TX
Example: “Crisis for the Airborne Forces”
Thematic Structures

A Christmas Story. Miss Shields did not know what a theme was.
These are Topics

Texas Forestry Museum, Lufkin, TX; Asian American Resource Center, Austin, TX
These are Themes

At the most basic level, computers count by controlling the flow of electricity from one place to another. But, computers are more than simply input and output. They embody the story of man’s passion for knowledge, inventing, tinkering and solving difficult problems.

Goodwill Computer Museum, Austin, TX
These are Themes

The formations of Hueco Tanks State Historic Site rise above the Chihuahuan Desert floor to mark an oasis of nature and culture. Due to its geology, relatively abundant water, and unusual structure, Hueco Tanks has served as a refuge for plants, animals and people for over 10,000 years. Thousands of pictographs left by prehistoric and historic Native Americans are testament to the life-sustaining power of Hueco Tanks.
These are Themes

“Ready & Forward!”
With this motto, the Buffalo Soldiers and their equine partners marched into the unsettled American West with courage, valor and patriotism. Both soldier and horse ready and willing to sacrifice their lives for the country we know and love today.

“Buffalo Soldier: An American Horseman,” American Quarter Horse Museum & Hall of Fame, Amarillo, TX
Why are Themes Valuable?

- Themes provide an organizing principle or framework for your entire exhibit.
- Themes encapsulate and relay meaning for visitors quickly and concisely.
- Themes allow you the opportunity to frame concepts in a way that is accessible and relatable.
Writing a Theme in Five Steps

1. Cast a Wide Net
2. Look for Common Ground
3. Draft and Test a Statement
4. Refine
5. Polish
Layering Information

- **Streakers**: Read top-level information (titles, subtitles)
- **Strollers**: Read introductory text, skim text blocks & captions
- **Studiers**: Read every last word

*Adapted from Exhibit Makeovers: A Do-It-Yourself Workbook for Small Museums by Alice Parman and Jeffrey Jane*
Layering Information
Layering Information

Temple Railroad & Heritage Museum, Temple, TX
Layering Information

Temple Railroad & Heritage Museum, Temple, TX
Layering Information

**Restoration & Recreation**

When the Civilian Conservation Corps built this park during the Great Depression, they transformed a tinderbox landscape into a place where generations of Texans have come to enjoy the outdoors.

**Back to Nature**

To build Tyler State Park, the CCC first needed to restore the landscape to what it looked like before the land was cleared for agriculture. They built dikes and terraces in central eastern Texas and planted over 100 acres with more than 200 different shrubs that they raised on site.

**A Working Education**

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) developed Tyler State Park in the 1930s. The CCC was a work program created during the Great Depression to put young men to work planting trees and developing parks across the United States. In addition to earning a daily paycheck, the men also learned valuable skills on the job and could take classes in trading, writing and other subjects.

**A Legacy You Can See**

Many of the park’s most popular features today were built by the men of the CCC. The most obvious of these is the lake, where generations of Texans have enjoyed canoeing, boating and fishing. They also developed many of the park’s trails and built the bath house and lodge. The CCC did all of this to help people better appreciate and enjoy the outdoors.

*Tyler State Park, Tyler, TX*
Layering Information

CONFEDERATE REUNION GROUNDS
state historic site
1738 FM 2705 • Mexia, TX 76667
254.472.0959 • www.visitorsguide.com

Preserve the Future
Help the Texas Historical Commission preserve the past while visiting this historic site. Please be mindful of fragile historic artifacts and respectful of the historic structures. We want to ensure their preservation for the enjoyment of future generations.

Friends of Confederate Reunion Grounds
Join us in protecting this special place. Consider volunteering, or as a donor or becoming a member of the Friends of Confederate Reunion Grounds. For more information, please contact 254.472.0959.

See the Sites
From weathered bricks and adobe structures to Victorian mansions and grand battlegrounds, the Texas Historical Commission's state historic sites exemplify a breadth of Texas history. Come explore the real wilderness at the real place.

Plan your next trip at www.texashistoricalsites.com

VISITORS GUIDE
CONFEDERATE
REUNION GROUNDS
state historic site

Welcome to Confederate Reunion Grounds State Historic Site. People have gathered at this place where Jack's Creek enters the Navasota River for thousands of years. Evidence within the site suggests the earliest campers were nomadic hunter-gatherers more than 5,000 years ago. However, this property is most notable for its use by the Confederate veterans of Limestone County for their annual reunions from 1888 through 1946. As reunions grow larger, veterans from North Texas down to Houston and across East Texas joined them. Families camped under the giant bur oak trees, enjoying speeches, dances, fellowship, and food while remembering their comrades who fought and died in the Civil War.

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254.991.0100

Confederate Reunion Grounds State Historic Site, Mexia, TX
As many as 7,000 people attended the annual reunions held in late July or early August under a full moon. They arrived by horse, buggy, and special trains from Dallas and Houston. The Camp financed the purchase of the museum grounds by selling camping lots to the veterans and their families. Families built summer cottages or camped in tents or broadcast playing music in tents that still bloom each spring.

Each day at dawn and dusk the veterans proudly fired "Old Val Vend" one of several Federal rammers captured by Confederates in the battle at Mansfield, Louisiana. Two of those guns saw action for the Confederates in the Louisiana campaigns with the Yal Vera Battery. At the end of the war, Captain T.D. Nettles burned the two cannons under a buggy house in nearby Vicksburg rather than surrender them to Union troops. Today "Old Val Vend" is on display beneath the puppets at the center of the historic site near the intersection of Robert E. Lee and Vicksburg Jackson avenues.

During the reunions, veterans celebrated these soldiers who in the words of General Stonewall Jackson, had "imprinted ever their name and not under the gun." The gatherings also included parades, brass band concerts, patriotic speakers, games, and traditional Southern foods. Afterward, the ladies stayed away on the wooden floor of the pavilion, now recognized by the National Register of Historic Places for its unusual architecture. By the end of World War I, the town had taken a noticeable shift on the aging veterans. The gatherings continued, but on a smaller scale.

The Great Mexia Oil Boom
In November 1936, wildcatter Albert E. Humphreys struck oil in Limestone County. Everything changed— the county population exploded and Mexia became a boomtown at the center of one of the largest oil fields in the world. The entrepreneurial Humphreys contracted with the Joseph E. Johnston Camp 94 for water and built a pump house on Jack’s Creek to supply his wells.

Affectionately known as "The Colonel," Humphreys was a devotee of Confederate history and often to promote the Confederate Reunion Grounds. He built the Pony Oil Company clubhouse and a large bathhouse on the creek. Miss Mamie Mann, one of the last officers of Camp 94, hosted lavish parties for "The Colonel" during those boom times. She designed and landscaped gardens around the "Colonel's Spring," which became known as the "Betroth Spring." Eventually the membership of Camp 94 named Humphreys on honorary number in recognition of his generosity in preserving and beautifying the grounds.

By the 1930s, as the number of Confederate veterans dwindled, the reunions became smaller and less elaborate. Finally, in 1946, the charter of Camp 94 expired and the grounds fell into disuse. In the 1960s, community members began restoring the grounds, which continues today. The historic site remains a gathering place for family reunions and group activities. The Friends of the Confederate Reunion Grounds host events each year to promote awareness of the site's historic significance.
Implementing Your Theme

Texas is fusion. Texas is hybrid. Texas is invention.
Texas is kielbasa and tamales, ranches and research
centers, fields of bluebonnets and gleaming
skyscrapers. Texas is country, bluegrass, rhythm and
blues, rock and roll, and Tejano. Texas is a blend of
cultures, knowledge, and skills from around the world.
Enter and discover the food, technology,
manufacturing, fashion, art,
and music that are
Made in Texas!

“Made in Texas,” Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio, TX
Implementing Your Theme

From the formally trained to the self-taught, Texas artists draw inspiration from a variety of traditions. The range of influences is as far and wide as the state of Texas itself.

How do you express yourself?

Texas is home to the second largest economy in the nation. From the oil and gas industry to farming and ranching, Texas produces the things we all need and want, as well as products exported around the world.

What things would you want to make?

Texas music reflects the confluence of cultures that define our state’s history. Music traditions from around the globe commingle with newer sounds to produce everything from country, rock and roll, and conjunto to zydeco, rockabilly, rhythm and blues, and more.

What’s your favorite Texas beat?

“Made in Texas,” Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio, TX
Implementing Your Theme

“Made in Texas,” Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio, TX
Implementing Your Theme

Nineteenth-century German writer Karl May molded an image of the American West and Southwest built from his imagination and his study of scientific, historical and literary works. European audiences devoured his prolific works of more than 100 books, several of which are set in New Mexico. Widely translated in languages other than English and adapted for the screen, his works were action-packed stories of a “wild” West that imprinted itself on generations of readers. Incredibly, May never saw the American West, having visited the United States only once when touring New York state in 1908. This exhibit invites you into the world of an author whose creation of the West still inspires hobbyists and re-enactors to tell the stories of Winnetou, Old Shatterhand, and a mix of sometimes improbable supporting characters.

“Tall Tales of the Wild West: The Stories of Karl May,” National Ranching Heritage Center, Lubbock, TX
Implementing Your Theme

Karl May’s Winnetou

May’s most famous character was fictitious Mescalero Apache Chief Winnetou, whose home was a conjured Pueblo along the Pecos south of Roswell on the Llano Estacado. Winnetou exhibited a humanistic European education and a basic knowledge of French and German, but not Spanish. He was never out for revenge or out to kill his enemies. He was brave, honest, and just. In short, May idealized Winnetou as the noble savage of romanticism, a man morally superior to his white counterparts—except for Old Shatterhand, his German Blutsbruder [blood brother], who taught him European standards, values, and morals.

Winnetou and Old Shatterhand (in other stories called Old Shurehand or Old Firehand) pursued adventures that took them deep into Mexico and as far north as Yellowstone and Wyoming. May convincingly told his readers that he was Old Shatterhand and that he had encountered all the adventures conveyed in his stories: “I have visited these countries and speak their languages.”

May’s Winnetou trilogy profoundly influenced Europeans’ image of the American West. His use of real geographic locations, his application of selective anthropological and ethnographic findings of the time, and his public insistence that his fictional heroes were real led readers often to regard his works as authentic. His use of first-person narration not only strengthened May’s illusion, but put the readers into the narrator’s place and made them the hero.

“Tall Tales of the Wild West: The Stories of Karl May,” National Ranching Heritage Center, Lubbock, TX
Implementing Your Theme

Adventures Around the World

May’s creative works went beyond the well-known series of Winnetou and the American West. Initially, he developed his characters in writings about the prairies. He matured the characters of Winnetou and Old Shatterhand, introduced rifles such as the Silberbüchse, and established the Apaches’ homeland near the Pecos in the Llano Estacado. Many of his works were later re-worked to fit editorial and publishing needs.

In the Western hemisphere, his imagination took readers into Central and South America. In half a dozen treatises, May used historical situations, well-known geographical backdrops, and early American civilizations to anchor his fantasies. The title characters often had little to do with the story lines but were used to provide May with appropriate plots. The stories set in South America catered to Germany’s increased interest in the geographic, ethnographic, and socio-political situation on that continent, yet they never reached the popularity of May’s other novels.

The narratives set in the “Orient” were dear to May, and his main character, Kara Ben Nemsi, has almost as much name recognition in Germany as Old Shatterhand. May undertook one lengthy excursion into Africa and the Near East in 1899–1900. Although he named his home “Villa Shatterhand” and filled his garden with numerous sculptures and statues of the American West, his study held Asian ornaments and curios.

“Tall Tales of the Wild West: The Stories of Karl May,” National Ranching Heritage Center, Lubbock, TX
Additional Information

You can find additional resources on the THC’s Museum Services webpage:

http://www.thc.state.tx.us/preserve/projects-and-programs/museum-services/technical-assistance

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