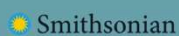


GIVE 'EM SOMETHING TO TALK (AND THINK) ABOUT: STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING AND PROVOKING EXHIBIT AUDIENCES

Erin McClelland
August 6, 2020



Why Fret So Much about Words?

- Many museums have more words on the wall than objects on display.
- Museums are considered authorities.
- (Ideally), your text is relatively brief, so you should choose every word carefully.
- Text is part of the visitor experience.
 - *It can set the tone for the experience*
 - *It can also help determine visitors' level of engagement*



The Basics

Yes, please:

- Active voice ("Chad gave Derek a gift.")
- 6th to 8th grade reading level
- Plain language
- Get to the point!

No, thank you:

- Passive voice ("A gift was given to Derek by Chad.")
- Below a 6th grade reading level or above an 8th grade reading level.
- Jargon and idioms
- Take your readers on your journey of discovery.

Tone

Compare this...



Beneski Museum of Natural History at Amherst College

Tone

with this.



Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Tone: Academic or Scholarly

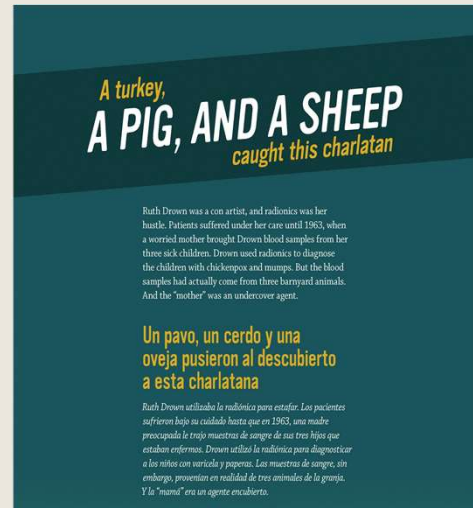
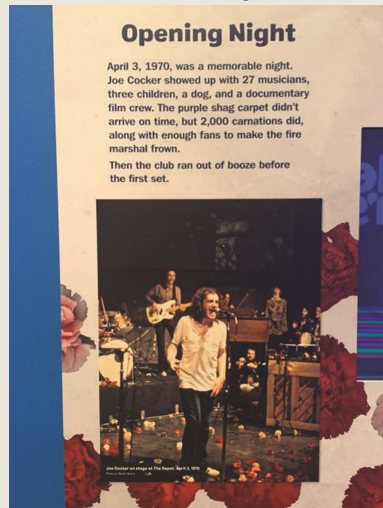
Proposed bill for married womens' legal, property, and custodial rights, sent to the Texas Legislature by Martha McWhirter, March 24, 1899

Members of the Women's Commonwealth, ca. 1900–1905
Women's Commonwealth Archive

Profound dissatisfaction with a lack of equal decision-making in household finances led Martha McWhirter (seated, third from left) and a group of women from Belton, Texas, to found the Women's Commonwealth, a self-sufficient, profit-making, all-female cooperative. Equality was elusive for the single man on the premises—William, a young black man who tended livestock and was not a full member.

"On with the Fight!", Briscoe Center for American History (Courtesy of MuseWork)

Tone: Playful and Fun



"First Avenue: Stories of Minnesota's Main Room," Minnesota History Center; "Weighing the Evidence," Minnesota Discovery Center (Adapted from AMM/NAME)

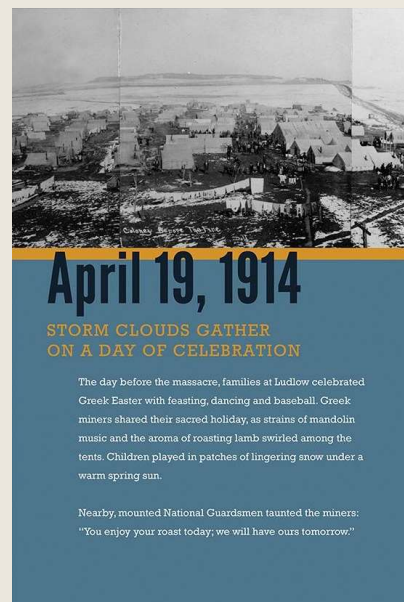
Tone: Dramatic

April 19, 1914

STORM CLOUDS GATHER ON A DAY OF CELEBRATION

The day before the massacre, families at Ludlow celebrated Greek Easter with feasting, dancing and baseball. Greek miners shared their sacred holiday, as strains of mandolin music and the aroma of roasting lamb swirled among the tents. Children played in patches of lingering snow under a warm spring sun.

Nearby, mounted National Guardsmen taunted the miners: "You enjoy your roast today; we will have ours tomorrow."



"Children of Ludlow: Life in a Battle Zone, 1913-14," El Pueblo History Museum (Adapted from AAM/NAME)

Tone: Additional Considerations

- Your institution may already have an established “voice.”
- What experience do you want visitors to have?
- If you’re integrating your local content into a traveling exhibit, that main exhibit is going to have an established voice. Do you want to match it?
 - *Matching creates a more cohesive experience for visitors*
 - *But, maybe that’s not the right tone for your content*



Juxtapositions

Jackie Robinson's jacket Courtesy of Rachel Robinson

A man puts on a jacket and makes history. Jackie Robinson bore the twin burdens of hope and hatred with legendary dignity and strength. A man of rare character and talent, Robinson bent the nation toward justice by excelling on the field. Proud of his race, his community, and his family, he asked nothing more of government than he asked of baseball: neither sympathy nor entitlement, but equal opportunity and a level playing field.



“Chasing Dreams,” National Museum of American Jewish History (Adapted from AMM/NAME)

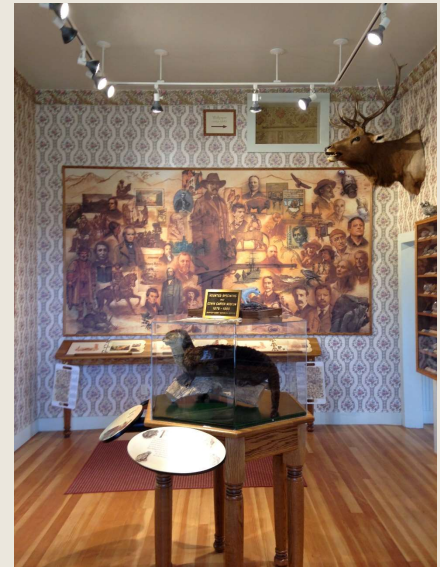
(Seeming) Contradictions

The Art of Taxidermy

The goal was to breathe life into dead matter.

Taxidermists today mount their specimens on machine-made, anatomically perfect polyurethane forms like the deer head to your right. The craftsmen of Carter's day had to build each mounting form by hand. With infinite patience and attention to detail, they turned wood into bone, straw into muscle, and putty into flesh. It wasn't enough merely to "stuff" the animal. The artful taxidermist restored it to life.

"The time is past when taxidermy should be called a trade," wrote the American Museum of Natural History's chief taxidermist in 1898. "It may now be placed on a level with painting and sculpture and be called truly an art."



Edwin Carter Museum (Adapted from AMM/NAME)

Storytelling

President Kennedy Is Shot

The news came over the floating wire, the long radio antenna that linked *Growler* to the world. Radiomen rushed to alert the officers, who delivered the shocking news: President John F. Kennedy had been shot. No further details were sent.

Crew members raced to their battle stations, the process made automatic through months of training. Unanswered questions crowded their minds. Who had killed the president? Was it the Cubans? Or the Russians? Was this war? Was this it? They steered *Growler* to a predetermined location and stood ready for an order that they had hoped would never come.

Listen to accounts from crew members who served on *Growler* on November 22, 1963.



"A View from the Deep," Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum (Adapted from AMM/NAME)

First-Person Narratives

Segregated drinking fountains in the county courthouse in Albany, Georgia, 1962

Danny Lyon (born 1942)

Gelatin silver print.
Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery © Danny Lyon and Magnum
Photos,
New York
DAM L-2018-4.7

Mame was the strongest, smartest most beautiful woman in my six year old world. On Saturdays she took me with her to the hair dresser and afterwards on a short stroll to Atlanta's municipal market. The market was alive with smells, and voices. Mame would treat me to a hot dog and a bag of warm roasted peanuts. Once while eating the peanuts, I needed water. Looking about, I spotted the fountain which had small wooded steps on one side so that children could climb up to fill tiny paper cups. Feeling pretty brave, I went to the fountain and started to climb the steps. Mame tackled me as I reached the top step and lifted me to a tiny bowl where she turned on the water spigot, and in a quivering voice announced that "this one is for us." Her voice frightened me—it was barely audible, awakening something for which I had no name.

Melva Lawson Ware
Trustee, Delaware Historical Society



"Danny Lyon: Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement," Delaware Art Museum (Adapted from AMM/NAME)

Second-Person Narratives

DOWN IN THE MINE

You're underground. It's pitch black. You travel in the dark along cavernous tunnels. The smell of dynamite and mule manure lingers in the air. Dust makes it hard to breathe. Shouts in dozens of languages echo off rock walls.

You light a single candle.

You and two partners get to work down here for the next ten to twelve hours. You might not speak the same language, but your lives are in each other's hands. The bosses don't care how much danger you face—they keep pushing you. Your pay depends on how much ore you can dig.

For underground miners on the Iron Range, this was daily life in the early 20th century.

"...the worst thing of all was the sound of the timbers. They creaked and groaned all the time. I would say to myself, will I get out of here alive today?"

— Matti Hillila Peltö, underground miner.



"Blue-Collar Battleground: The Iron Range Labor Story," Minnesota Discovery Center (Adapted from AMM/NAME)

Asking Questions: Closed-Ended



Hyde Park Barrack Museum in Sydney (Courtesy of Ajeng Arainikasih)

Asking Questions: Open-Ended

Challenge 6

You all spend the summer in Switzerland with your stepsister's boyfriend, another famous poet. The weather is stormy, so you mostly hang out by the fireplace, talking and reading stories out loud. One night, you're challenged to write your own scary story. What would you write about?



"Mary and Her Monster: Mary Shelley and the World that Created Frankenstein," The Bakken Museum (Adapted from AAM/NAME)

Asking Questions: Open-Ended

THIS NATION BELONGS TO EACH OF US

How do you embark on a life of public service?

~

*What does it mean to be a dedicated
representative of the people?*

~

How can we be truly engaged citizens?

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*What does it mean to be a dedicated
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~

How can we be truly engaged citizens?

The collections of the W. R. Poage Legislative Library, which focus on the legislative process at the local, state, and federal levels, help us begin to answer these questions. They reveal the moments that inspired dedicated lives of service, illuminate the dramatic impact individuals can have on our political process, and demonstrate how our representatives balance many competing demands.

As you explore these stories, ask yourself,

“Where do I fit in?”

W. R. Poage Legislative Library (Courtesy of Baylor University/MuseWork)

Asking Questions: Open-Ended



W. R. Poage Legislative Library (Courtesy of Baylor University/MuseWork)

Community-Curated Labels

AIR VIETNAM BAG

Courtesy of Heather Sharp [IL2015.02]

Heather Sharp arrived at the Presidio during Operation Babylift just before her 11th birthday. She came with her two younger siblings. She carried this bag with her on the flight from Vietnam. Air Vietnam was a commercial carrier that operated domestic and international flights from 1951 until the end of the Vietnam War.

As the North Vietnamese army glowed south, we were given limited amount of time to evacuate the security of home. This bag held few treasures of my young life. Where did it come from? Did Dad travel? Certainly we did not as a family. Unfortunately those treasures are no longer with me.

Heather Sharp
Operation Babylift Pre-teen Adoptee

Tattooed across my leathered skin, the name of a motherland I cannot claim because I was removed without my permission. While I was born Vietnamese and will die Vietnamese, I will never be seen as completely Vietnamese being labeled as an adoptee and will be forever a piece of misplaced baggage.

Anh Dao Kolbe
Operation Babylift Pre-teen Adoptee

How do you fit your life inside a bag? For all your favorite books, toys, family members, friends, history and memories? When your life is unpacked, how will they fit in your new home? Where can you hide the things you no longer wish to see, yet cannot let go?

Aimee Phan
Vietnamese American Author

I'm deeply moved by Heather's Air Vietnam bag. My daughter, who died weeks after arriving from Vietnam via Babylift, shares her name. I'm happy Heather has this extraordinary remembrance – sad for the loss shared by adoptees, birth families.

Lana Mae Noone
Mom, Author, Speaker,
www.Vietnambabylift.org



"Operation Babylift: Perspectives and Legacies," Presidio Trust and Adoption Museum Project (Adapted from AAM/NAME)

Community-Curated Labels

Write your own label

This is a bridge for ants. It's blue so it camouflages against the sky. The ants believe the smell of feet helps defend them against predators like echidnas. They are actually very common and you will see them every ~~where~~ ^{really} look. where if you

Name: Alison Age: 43



"Odditorem," Powerhouse Museum (Courtesy of Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, via Nina Simon, The Participatory Museum)

Additional Considerations

- Audience
- Exhibit/interpretive goals
- Visitor experience

If you're supplementing a traveling exhibit with your local content, then you should also think about:

- Do you want to mimic the approach in the main exhibit in order to provide a cohesive experience for visitors?
- Do you see some gaps in the main exhibit – missed opportunities to ask open-ended questions, for example – and if so, can you use your local content to fill those gaps?

Join us next week for:

Well, That Was Awkward: Interpreting Difficult Stories in Your Exhibits
Thursday, August 13, 2020, at 10:00 a.m.

Find this week's resource sheet at:

<https://www.thc.texas.gov/local-exhibits>

This training was made possible by:



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