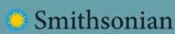


# MAKE THEM CARE: HOW TO CREATE MORE MEMORABLE AND COMPELLING EXHIBITS THROUGH INTERPRETATION: PART I

Erin McClelland  
July 23, 2020



## Before You Can Write, You Have to Research

### Local Sources

- Local public libraries and archives
- County Historical Commissions
- Local colleges and university archives
- Local history centers
- Local archives
- Local historical societies
- Local genealogical organizations
- Local civic groups (e.g., Rotary)



*(Courtesy of Austin History Center)*

## Before You Can Write, You Have to Research

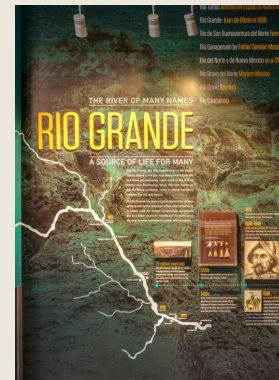
National, State, & Regional Highlights

- Digital Public Library of America
- Portal to Texas History
- Texas State Library & Archives Commission (TSLAC), General Land Office (GLO), Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT)
- Perry-Castaneda Map Collection at UT-Austin
- DeGolyer Library at SMU
- Galveston Immigration Database and Indianola Immigrant Database



(Courtesy of Perry-Castaneda Map Collection)

## What Is Interpretation?



Varner-Hogg Plantation State Historic Site, Log Cabin Village, Laredo Water Museum (Courtesy of MuseWork, Log Cabin Village, CORE Design Studio)

## 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.

## Working Definition

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



Arkansas State University Museum (Courtesy of MuseWork)

## Relevance and Universals

*“Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.”*

- Freeman Tilden, Interpreting Our Heritage

# Relevance and Universals

Two ways to create relevance:

1. *Connect to each visitor's individual experience (HARD!)*
2. *Connect to a common (universal) human experience (LESS HARD!)*

“ 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)

## Examples of Universals

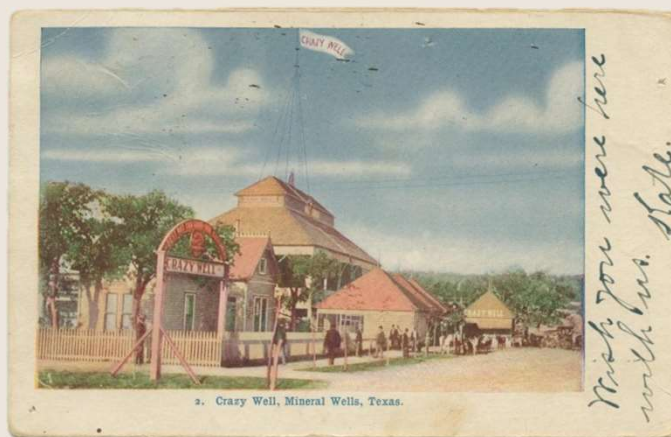
- |                                 |                    |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| ■ Birth                         | ■ Discovery        |
| ■ Death                         | ■ Loss             |
| ■ Love                          | ■ Conflict         |
| ■ Struggle                      | ■ Human connection |
| ■ Need for food, water, shelter | ■ Joy              |
| ■ Family                        |                    |

## Examples of Universals: Bankhead Highway



Bankhead Highway entering Royse City (Courtesy of Rockwall Historical Foundation Museum)

## Examples of Universals: Mineral Wells, Texas



Postcard of Crazy Well in Mineral Wells, TX (Courtesy of Sam Rayburn House State Historic Site via Portal to Texas History)



## Themes



## Themes: What Are They?

### Are:

- Specific
- A message
- An argument

### Are Not:

- Broad
- An incomplete sentence
- A potential heading for a Wikipedia article

These are topics!

## Theme: Examples

Theme = specific message or argument, about my topic, incorporating one or more universals.

Topic	Potential Universal(s)	Theme
The Bankhead Highway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interconnectedness</li> </ul>	Once called “The Broadway of America,” the Bankhead Highway helped usher in the modern age by better connecting small towns to big cities, and Texas to the rest of the nation.
Mineral Wells springs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Health/wellness</li> <li>People exploiting resources to survive and thrive</li> </ul>	People came from all over to visit these mineral springs, hoping to heal themselves, partake in the latest wellness fad, and socialize and recreate with each other.

## Themes: Why Bother?

- 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.
- Themes provide an organizing principle or framework for your entire exhibit (*we’ll cover this next time*)



## Themes: Writing a Theme in Three Easy Steps

1. Select your general topic and use it to complete the following sentence:

"Generally, my presentation (talk, exhibit, sign etc.) is about \_\_\_\_\_."  
(put your general topic here)

2. State your topic in more specific terms and complete the following sentence:

"Specifically, I want to tell my audience about \_\_\_\_\_."  
(put your specific topic here)

3. Now, express your theme by completing the following sentence: "After hearing my presentation (or reading my sign or brochure, etc.), I want my audience to understand that \_\_\_\_\_."

(put your theme here)

Adapted from Sam Ham, *Environmental Interpretation*

## Themes: Writing a Theme in Three Easy Steps

1. Select your general topic and use it to complete the following sentence:

"Generally, my presentation (talk, exhibit, sign etc.) is about the Mineral Wells springs."  
(put your general topic here)

2. State your topic in more specific terms and complete the following sentence:

"Specifically, I want to tell my audience about people's motivations to visit the mineral springs and what it meant to them."  
(put your specific topic here)

3. Now, express your theme by completing the following sentence: "After hearing my presentation (or reading my sign or brochure, etc.), I want my audience to understand that People came from all over to visit these mineral springs, hoping to heal themselves, partake in the latest wellness fad, and socialize and recreate with each other."

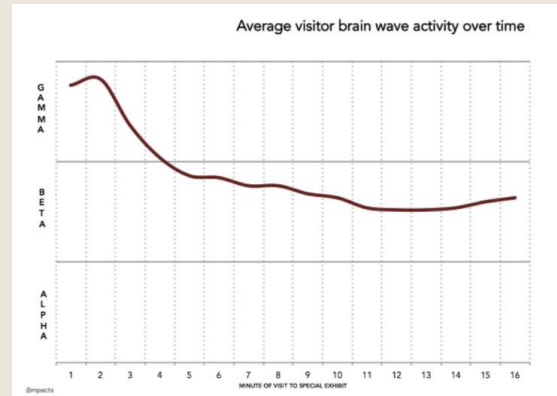
(put your theme here)

Adapted from Sam Ham, *Environmental Interpretation*

## Some Tips for Writing Themes

### Keep it brief

- Research shows you have 1.5 minutes of peak attention.
- Being brief and clear helps you maximize your time with – and impact on – the visitor.

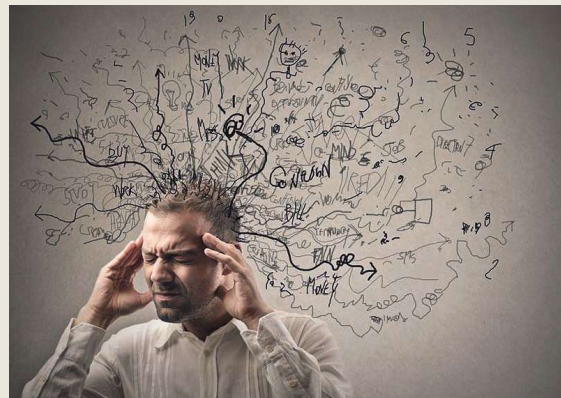


Colleen Dilenschneider, "Average visitor brain wave activity over time," Know Your Own Bone

## Some Tips for Writing Themes

### Be specific

- You could write a dissertation on any topic, so embrace specificity and use your theme to limit what you present.
- It will keep you – and your visitor – focused. You don't want to lose them because you've overloaded them with information.



## Join us next week for:

Make Them Care, Part 2: How to Create More Memorable and Compelling Exhibits  
through Interpretation, Part 2  
Thursday, July 30, 2020, at 10:00 a.m.

## Find this week's resource sheet at:

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

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