Making Meaning: An Introduction to Interpretation

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Today’s Agenda

9:00 – 9:30 Introduction and Welcome
   i. Learning Objectives
   ii. Agenda
   iii. Personal Stories

9:30 – 10:30 Introducing Interpretation
   i. Definitions
   ii. Tilden’s Original Six Principles
   iii. Tangibles/Intangible
   iv. Universals

10:30 – 10:45 Break

10:45 – 11:15 Maslow’s Hierarchy

11:15 – 12:15 Essential Qualities of Interpretation I
   i. Enjoyable
   ii. Relevant

12:15 – 12:45 Lunch

12:45 – 1:45 Essential Qualities of Interpretation II
   i. Thematic
   ii. Purposeful

1:45 – 2:00 Break

2:00 – 3:00 Making Meaning
   i. The NPS Interpretive Equation
   ii. Staircase to Stewardship
   iii. Interpretation in the Field

3:00 – 3:30 Review and Wrap-up
1. Attendees will use principles of interpretation in informal interpretation.

2. Attendees will recognize tangibles, intangibles, and universals concepts.

3. Attendees will identify and create opportunities for interpretation.
• What was the best historic site, museum, or program you attended?

• What made the experience memorable?

• What would you improve about that experience?
What we’ll cover in this section:

• Definitions of Interpretation
• Tilden’s Original Six Principles
• Tangibles and Intangibles
• Universals
• Maslow’s Hierarchy
Definitions of Interpretation

- “An educational activity which aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.” (Freeman Tilden, 1957)

- “A mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and meanings inherent in the resource.” (National Association for Interpretation)
1. Any Interpretation that does not somehow relate to what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.

2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.

3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials are presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.

4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.

5. Interpretation should aim to present the whole rather than the part and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.

6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults but should follow a fundamentally different approach(es).

Tips from Tilden

• **Provoke** attention, curiosity and interest.

• **Relate** to the everyday life of your visitors.

• **Reveal** the theme through some creative or unusual viewpoint.

• **Address the Whole**: make sure your program relates to your theme.

• **Message unity**: use supporting elements to illustrate your theme.

https://www.heritagedestination.com/hdc-library---tildens-tips/
Tangibles

• The physical elements of a site or object.

• They are things you experience with your senses.

• Examples: A boat, a tree, a battlefield, a mountain, a zoo specimen, or an ecosystem.
Activity

• Provide a one-word **description** of the object.

• What are the physical characteristics of the object?

*We’ll see an example first*
Intangibles

• Intangible meanings are abstract concepts.

• They include ideas, feelings, relationships, values or beliefs.

• Examples: Democracy, freedom, death, health, and loss.
Activity

• Provide one-word about what the object signifies.

• What is the meaning of the object?

*We’ll see an example first*
Universals

• Ideas or emotions that can be related to, contain meaning, or appeal to almost everyone.

• Examples: Family, death, prejudice, love, hunger, survival.

Universal Themes
1. Change
2. Conflict
3. Order vs Chaos
4. Patterns
5. Power
6. Structure
7. Systems
8. Relationships
Activity

• Make a list of tangibles and intangibles using the object provided to your table.

• Identify one universal from the list of intangibles.
BREAK TIME!
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

- Basic Needs: Physiological, Safety and Security
- Growth Needs: Love and Belonging, Esteem, Self Actualization
- Interpretation can help people spend less time concerned over their basic needs so that there is a better chance to achieve higher-level thinking.

https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html
Audience Needs and Wants

Frankle’s Hierarchy of Visitor Needs

Accessibility and Safety Needs: Am I safe here? Am I welcome here? Am I able to experience and learn in this place? Can I enter the front door?

Physiological Needs: Where is the bathroom? Where am I? Where can I eat? Where can I sit down? How long will I be here? Where do I go next?

Basic Psychological Needs: What is this place? What do I do here? What will I learn? How will I learn?

Higher Psychological Needs: What am I learning? How does this concept connect to something I’ve seen before?

Highest Psychological Needs: How does this affect my life? How can I take action on this?

Self-Actualization: How will this change my perspective on life?
Using Frankle’s Hierarchy of Visitor Needs, brainstorm ways to meet visitor needs.

- Address:
  1. Accessibility and Safety Needs
  2. Physiological Needs
  3. Basic Psychological Needs
  4. Higher Psychological Needs
What we’ll cover in this section:

• Qualities of Interpretive Programming
• Themes
• Goals, Objectives, and Mission Statements
• Falk’s Visitor Categories
• Best Practices
What distinguishes interpretation from other forms of communication?
What audiences love to hear, see, and experience:

- **Quality stories**
- **Unusual facts**
- **Inspiring quotes or thoughts**
- **Information in terms they understand**
- Things that evoke emotional or physiological responses

National Association for Interpretation, Certified Interpretive Host Trainer Workbook, 2003.
What audiences don’t care about:

• Ordinary data

• Gloomy predictions or rehashing of catastrophes

• The same information they’ve heard at every other site

National Association for Interpretation, Certified Interpretive Host Trainer Workbook, 2003.
Group Discussion

What are some ways *you* make interpretation enjoyable?
Ways to make interpretation enjoyable:

- Use **active verbs**
- Involve the **senses**
- Show **cause and effect**
- Link **science to history**
- Use **visual metaphors**
- Use **personification**

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National Association for Interpretation, Certified Interpretive Host Trainer Workbook, 2003.
How to make interpretation relevant:

• Personalize

• Use ‘labeling’

• Relate to universal concepts

• Connect to the audience’s frame of reference

• Bridge gaps with metaphors, similes, analogies, and comparisons

National Association for Interpretation, Certified Interpretive Host Trainer Workbook, 2003.
Interpretation is Relevant

Experience Seekers
Want to see the most renowned pieces and make memories.

Explorers
Want to learn new information and understand new concepts.

Facilitators
Want to ensure that their companions meet their visit goals.

Hobbyists & Professionals
Want to see and study specific pieces or exhibits.

Rechargers
Want to relax in a peaceful atmosphere.

https://forartsake-uk.medium.com/
Group Discussion

- What reasons do visitors have for coming to your site?
- What are frequently asked questions by your visitors?
- What can that tell us about their motivations?

Arkansas State University Museum (Courtesy of MuseWork)
Workers take a break and enjoy lunch during a rice field harvest.
Photo courtesy of UNT Portal to Texas History
Themes:

• Complete ideas that express a message
• The critical points you want to express
• Connects tangibles to intangibles
• Helps keep your audience (and you) on track

Topics:

• A broad, general category
• Not a complete sentence
• Can be an encyclopedia entry
• Do not place limits on your program
Activity: Theme versus Topic

- Bluebonnets exemplify the character of Texas.
- Endangered Texas animals
- Modern agriculture has roots in the not-so-distant past.
- Planes, trains, and automobiles
- This old house
- Historic houses reflect the life and times of their owners.
- The old west wasn’t so wild after all.
- Famous cowboys and their horses
Interpretation is **Thematic**

Why bother to develop a theme?

- Reach a larger audience
- Connect your audience to a resource
- Be effective with your audience’s time

“People remember themes. They forget facts.” – Sam Ham
Interpretation is **Thematic**

Developing a theme

- What’s the big idea?
- Why does this matter?
- Why should I care?

Answer the “so what?” question

*Wittliff Collections, San Marcos, TX*
Activity: Write a Theme

- Use your topic to complete the following sentence:
  - “generally, my presentation is about…”

- Express your theme by completing the following sentence:
  - “After hearing my presentation, I want my audience to understand that…”

- **Tacos**
- **Telephones**
- **Pottery**
- **Mechanised Agriculture**
- **Furniture**
- **Photographs**
- **Cookbooks**
- **Pets**
Interpretation has a **Purpose**

**Required Elements:**

- Educational in scope
- Describes the institution’s unique purpose/focus/role
- Approved by the governing authority
Post Oak County Museum
Mission Statement

The Post Oak County Museum preserves and interprets the history, culture, and stories of Post Oak County. This is for the enrichment of all residents, descendants and any with an interest in this esoteric Texas county.
15 Minute Break
What we’ll cover in this section:

• The Interpretive Equation

• Staircase to Stewardship

• Interpretation in the Field
Knowledge of the resource (KR), combined with knowledge of the audience (KA), can be shared through an appropriate technique (AT) to provide an interpretive opportunity (IO).

In other words, what do interpreters need to know?
What to know about the resource:

• Honest, accurate, and current information

• Intangible meanings associated with the resource

• Universal concepts and their different meanings

• References and Sources

Varner-Hogg Plantation State Historic Site (Courtesy of MuseWork)
What to know about the audience:

- Familiarity with visitor backgrounds and needs
- What visitors want to know most
- Meanings that visitors associate with the resource
What to know about techniques:

• Involve/engage the audience

• Provide access to the resource

• Introductory and follow-up questions

• Props or aides
Staircase to Stewardship

Curiosity
Awareness
Understanding
Care About
Care For
Stewardship

What is this about?
I’ll think about it.
I think I care.
I do care.
I want to help!
I do care.
I think I care.
I’ll think about it.

I want to help!
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I’ll think about it.
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Activity

What is this about?
I’ll think about it.
I think I care.
I do care.
I want to help!

Write down a one task you perform daily.

How does this task contribute towards stewardship?
Group Discussion

• What topics are typically discussed by visitors?

• What are some strategies we can use to turn these topics into interpretive opportunities or programs?
Write one thing you’ve learned during this workshop.
For additional resources and this slideshow presentation, visit the THC’s Museum Services webpage at:

http://www.thc.texas.gov/museumworkshops