Selecting Strong Imagery for Interpretive Stories
Exhibitions are a Visual Medium

Settlement to City Museum, Grapevine, TX
Exhibits of All Kinds are Visual Media
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In 1793, Eli Whitney created the first cotton gin that would separate upland cotton. His invention used a hand crank to turn wires on a drum with small hooks to pull the lint away from the seeds. The gin, whose name was derived from the word "engine," consisted of five parts: the frame, the cylinder, the breastwork, the clearer, and the hopper. While built later, the Eagle Gin closely resembled the Whitney version, but with one main difference. The Eagle Gin replaced the wires with saws, a design that Whitney would use in his later models. Gins revolutionized the cotton industry in the United States and changed the nation's economic history. By 1850, America was responsible for three-quarters of the world's supply of "white gold."

Bayer Museum of Agriculture, Lubbock, TX
Audience Expectations
Visual Variety

Donald Schoolhouse Museum, Grapevine, TX
Outdoor interpretive sign, Garner State Park, Concan, TX
Choosing the Right Type of Visual

Step 1: Figure out what it is you’re trying to communicate.

Step 2: Figure out which type of visual will best communicate that.

Step 3: Assess the quality of your options.

Step 4: Choose your visual.
Maps

The Basics

- Need to be reproduced at a scale large enough that people can see what it is you’re interpreting.

- If necessary, it’s okay to reproduce just a segment of a map.
Maps

Historical maps are good for giving people a snapshot of what a particular place looked like at a given time.

“Bird’s Eye View of the City of Austin,” by Augustus Koch, 1873, from Texas Bird’s-Eye Views, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, TX
Maps

When historical maps are used together, they can also be used to show growth and change over time.

“Bird’s Eye View of the City of Austin,” by Augustus Koch, 1887, from Texas Bird’s-Eye Views, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, TX
Charts, Graphs and Tables

Battleship TEXAS State Historic Site, La Porte, TX
Images of Documents

Moses Austin petitioned the Spanish Governor permission to settle an Anglo – American colony in Spanish Texas. At first he was spurned. Austin sought the assistance of Baron de Bastrop. Along with Bastrop, Austin met with the Spanish Governor Antonio María Martínez to request the establishment of a colony.

Moses Austin died. Mexico gained independence from Spain.
Images of Documents

Waves of Hope: Asian American History in Austin, Asian American Resource Center, Austin, TX
Wardroom Pantry

While most of the food was cooked in the Officer’s Galley, Stewards plated all of the Wardroom Officers’ meals in this Pantry. They were usually Pacific Islanders or African Americans and were responsible for serving officers’ meals, cleaning staterooms and doing laundry.

Battleship TEXAS State Historic Site, La Porte, TX
Photographs: The Basics

Donald Schoolhouse Museum, Grapevine, TX
Photographs: The Basics

*Time Exposures: Picturing Isleta Pueblo in the 19th Century, Museum of Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX*
Photographs: Simple is Strong

*Time Exposures: Picturing Isleta Pueblo in the 19th Century, Museum of Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX*
Photographs: The “Rule” of Thirds

From Horse-Drawn to Horsepower, National Ranching Heritage Center, Lubbock, TX
Photographs: The “Rule” of Thirds

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division
Photographs: The “Rule” of Thirds

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division
Photographs: Lines and Movement

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From Horse-Drawn to Horsepower, National Ranching Heritage Center, Lubbock, TX
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Photographs: Action Images

Outdoor interpretive sign, Garner State Park, Concan, TX
Photographs: Action Images

Outdoor interpretive sign, Garner State Park, Concan, TX
Photographs: Static Images

Mail Call, Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, at Grapevine CVB, Grapevine, TX
Fonts: Serif vs. Sans Serif

Serif
- Serifs have “feet” or “tails” on the letters.
- Examples:
  - Garamond
  - Times New Roman
  - Bookman Old Style

Sans Serif
- Sans serif fonts lack the “feet” or “tails” on the letters.
- Examples:
  - Franklin Gothic
  - Tahoma
  - Arial
Fonts: Print vs. Web

Print

- Serif fonts are considered more legible in print.
- In general, use serif fonts for body copy and larger.
- Exception: serif fonts are harder to read at small size. Use sans serif fonts for smaller print (e.g., captions).

Web

- Sans serif fonts are considered more legible on screen.
- Use sans serif fonts at any size.
Fonts: Sizes

- Captions: 20 to 24-point type
- Body copy and Titles: 28 to 42-point type, depending on:
  - color of type
  - spacing between letters (kerning) and between lines (leading)
  - type of font (regular, bold, italic)

Note: the actual print size of a 20-point font will vary depending on the font. For example:
- Garamond at 20 point
- DilleniaUPC at 20 point

When using a font that runs on the smaller side, make sure you compensate for this by using it at a larger size.
Fonts: More Readable

- In general: regular typefaces (not BOLD or italic)
- Don’t set text in ALL CAPS
- Serif fonts:
  - Times New Roman
  - New Century Schoolbook
- Sans serif fonts:
  - Helvetica
  - Univers 55
  - Futura

Source: Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Design
Fonts: Less Readable

- **Script**  Because all the letters connect and contain flourishes, script fonts make it harder for the eye to distinguish one letter from the next. This makes these fonts harder to read overall.

- **Eroded**  Eroded fonts don’t have smooth edges, which makes it difficult for the eye to recognize the letter forms. Use them sparingly in both print and web applications.

These fonts all evoke a particular feeling or mood. There are some cases where they might be your best option. If you choose to use these types of fonts, use them sparingly and at a very large size, and recognize that you are sacrificing readability for some viewers.
Texas State Cemetery, Austin, TX

Alexander Alvarez de Pineda was the first European to see Texas as he mapped the coastline of the Gulf of Mexico. Pineda set out from Jamaica to improve upon the work of earlier Spanish explorers and to discover whether a sea route to Asia was possible through the Gulf. Historians believe that Pineda did not land in Texas, but saw a broad swathe of the Texas coastline from his ship. Before Pineda and other early explorers (including Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca who shipwrecked in Texas in 1528) arrived in Texas, native Indian tribes lived throughout Texas. The largest groups of Indian populations in early Texas included the Tonkawa, Karankawa, Apache, Comanche and others. Pineda likely saw Karankawa and Coahuiltecan territory as both tribes lived primarily on the Texas coast.

The first serious European colonization effort in Texas began with French explorer René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle in 1685 to 1689. La Salle was tasked with finding the mouth of the Mississippi River, but mistakenly landed at the mouth of the Colorado at Matagorda Bay. There La Salle founded Fort St. Louis, in what is now Victoria County. Although the colony failed due to mutiny and Indian attack, it was the first European colony in Texas. Spanish explorers discovered the ruins of Fort St. Louis in 1699 and claimed the region for Spain. Between 1716 and 1800, the Spanish colonized Texas with missions and settlements in East and South Texas.
Looking for an alternative font? I often use www.dafont.com for free, downloadable fonts that are fully licensed for non-commercial use.
Composition: Balance

Texas State Cemetery, Austin, TX
Composition: Colors and Contrast

Time Exposures: Picturing Isleta Pueblo in the 19th Century, Museum of Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX
At War on Two Seas

As World War II progressed, the United States continued to collaborate with Allied forces, and Battleship TEXAS fought in both the European and Pacific theaters.

STORMING THE BEACHES

On June 6, 1944, the Allied forces embarked on the largest amphibious invasion in history, TEXAS helped land on Omaha Beach, successfully storming the position. TEXAS also shelled Omaha Beach, neutralizing and destroying ships of war, including 23 German.

A GAIN...

After D-Day Allied forces turned their attention to the nearby port of Cherbourg. Capturing the port would allow them to get supplies to troops on the front lines. On June 20, 1944, TEXAS and several other American ships bombarded German fortifications near Cherbourg and provided gunfire support for the attacking U.S. 6th Infantry Division. The operation was successful, and Allied forces secured the crucial port.

AND A LOSS

During the bombardment of Cherbourg, a German shell struck TEXAS and landed on a German crewman's nest; the shell exploded, killing 12 crewmen and totally wrecking the stern superstructure. Ensign Carl Christiansen, the ship's executive officer, was mortally wounded. Christiansen was TEXAS' lone combat casualty in her 34 years of military service.

A TYPHOON OF STEEL

TEXAS joined the invasion of Okinawa in February 1945,bombarding the island and supporting the landing U.S. Marines. TEXAS continued on to Okinawa where she also provided support for Army and Marine forces. Because of the threat of Japanese kamikaze attacks, TEXAS remained at battle stations for 36 straight days. The battle was so intense that it was called "a typhoon of steel."
Composition: Capacity

Tall Tales of the Wild West, National Ranching Heritage Center, Lubbock, TX
In 1793, Eli Whitney created the first cotton gin that would separate upland cotton. His invention used a hand crank to turn wires on a drum with small hooks to pull the lint away from the seeds. The gin, whose name was derived from the word "engine," consisted of five parts: the frame, the cylinder, the breastwork, the cleaner, and the hopper. While built later, the Eagle Gin closely resembled the Whitney version, but with one main difference. The Eagle Gin replaced the wires with saws, a design that Whitney would use in his later models. Gins revolutionized the cotton industry in the United States and changed the nation’s economic history. By 1850, America was responsible for three-quarters of the world’s supply of “white gold.”
Composition: Capacity

Asian American Resource Center, Austin, TX
Take-Aways

- Choose the right type of visual for your message.
- Look for simple, well-composed, and dynamic images.
- Rely on fonts that are highly readable (and limit use of those that are not).
- Think about balance, contrast, image orientation, and capacity when putting it all together.
Resources

Useful (free!) resources:

- PicMonkey (http://www.picmonkey.com): free web-based photo editing, good for touching up modern images.
- http://www.dafonts.com: downloads of all types of fonts, free licenses for non-commercial uses
- Colour Contrast Check (http://www.snook.ca/technical/colour_contrast/colour.html): check the contrast between your text (foreground) color and background color by inputting color values or using a slider to select your color. Sidebar tells you whether your contrast is at least 7:1.
- Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design (http://accessible.si.edu/pdf/Smithsonian%20Guidelines%20for%20accessible%20design.pdf)
- Library of Congress (http://www.loc.gov/pictures/): free image downloads, usually free of copyright issues)