4. Tips & Tricks for Writing Interpretive Text

Writing engaging text can be a challenge. How many interpretive signs are read completely from beginning to end? Research shows that signs that are too text-heavy, or otherwise visually unattractive, will get passed by. In general, less is more when it comes to writing text. This section, along with Section 5, gives field practitioners’ tips and tricks for increasing the readability of a sign. Keep in mind that the average sign-reader’s attention span may be no more than 5-10 seconds! If there is no one on staff to write interpretive, thematic text, check Section 10’s List of Resources for recommended interpretive text writers.

“PORT”

Welcome kiosks and wayside panels are the methods suggested through the Signing Program to communicate educational and management messages to the public. Because it is not feasible to provide roving interpreters at all times, interpretive signs are the next best thing. Effective interpretative signs, in general, should be PORT: Pleasurable, Organized, Relevant, and Thematic (Ham 1992). Complementary to Tilden’s Principles of Interpretation (see Section 2), these four guidelines will encourage visitors to not only read signs, but make meaningful connections as well.

Pleasurable

Making signs pleasurable requires the use of colors, images and carefully chosen text that will engage the reader’s attention. A unique sign post or structure can be enough to draw a visitor in. Visitors may initially judge a sign by its text and graphic layout. If the sign panel is too crowded and offers no “white space” (open space that allows the eyes to rest) between text and graphics, the effort outweighs the reward of reading it. Refer to Section 5, ‘Laying Out Text and Graphic Elements.’
ORGANIZED

Thematic organization helps the reader make connections between all the information read at a site. Generally, a welcome kiosk would introduce the overarching theme for the site and wayside panels would develop the supporting main themes. If there is no Welcome Kiosk, each individual sign would deliver a main theme (referred to in Section 3) organized thematically into levels, or sub-themes. A thematically organized site helps visitors make meaningful connections and reinforces major concepts. Information that has been reinforced this way is more likely to be remembered and taken away with them.

RELEVANT

Interpretive messages should connect with something the visitor already knows. While a visitor is reading a sign, they should be able to make meaningful connections between the information and a broader context of understanding. For example, a sign about salt plant adaptations reads, “After a swim in the ocean, you may feel dry due to the salt on your skin.” The sign content should also be relevant to what a visitor can see, or imagine in front of them.

THEMATIC

Again, an interpretive site (or individual signs depending on the site) should be developed around one main theme. This theme should be the one thing visitors should leave knowing. The sub-themes are the additional information visitors should walk away with knowing (see Section 3: Telling the Story: Writing Thematically). Thematic organization greatly increases the readability of a sign.

BE PERSONAL

One way to engage readers is to use personal, informal language. Words like “We, us, ours, ourselves, you, yours, yourselves, his/hers, their(s)” are all-inclusive and help to sustain visitors’ interest and attention. For example, “Have you ever seen a marbled murrelet? If you visually follow the Elk River upstream, you will be looking at Headwaters Forest Reserve, where they nest.”
3 C’s: CLEAR, CONCISE, AND CORRECT (AND KISS!)

A general rule to follow when writing text is the 3 C’s: Clear, Concise, and Correct. Write clearly in short sentences and paragraphs. “Chunk” out information into smaller text blocks to create a more pleasant, readable layout (keep paragraphs to 3-5 sentences, for example). Clear text is jargon free, and scientific or technical words are defined. For example, “...this is a common characteristic of halophytes, or plants that can survive in salty soils.” or Creating concise text means reducing sentences to only the words that convey the most meaningful information. Correct text is exactly that. Check with experts in the field to be sure that all the information is accurate. Maintain content credibility by confirming text with local agencies and local experts (ie. Table Bluff Reservation-Wiyot Tribe, biologists, ecologists, etc.) KISS is short for Keep It Short & Simple. Enough said!

ENGAGE THE SENSES

“I see; I forget. 
I hear; I remember. 
I do; I understand.”

(author unknown)

People learn in a diversity of ways. Providing myriad learning opportunities for visitors will increase the likelihood that signs will be read and understood. The best interpretation encourages visitors to make meaningful connections between what they read and what they can experience. Build into text opportunities for visitors to use their senses and do something. Direct their attention to the horizon, or the ground beneath their feet. Have them scan the trees for the bird being described. Provide scenarios for them to imagine such as “Look out across the entire bay. Imagine what Humboldt Bay would look like on a busy shipping day in the early 1900’s.” Draw them in by engaging their sense of smell or touch.

ASK THOUGHT-PROVOKING QUESTIONS

Asking thoughtful questions engages critical thinking. It also encourages visitors to make their own meaningful connections without being right or wrong. Asking questions arouses curiosity and may inspire visitors to seek additional information about the subject. One example is, “Did you know you are standing on a fault line?”
**Use Everyday Examples (Analogies & Metaphors)**

Analogies, metaphors, and similes are helpful in breaking down complex scientific and technical terms into a language that visitors can readily understand. The use of examples, analogies and other comparisons can help visitors make a connection between the unfamiliar and the familiar. An example is portraying a watershed as a puzzle comprised of interlocking components (refer to picture on left).

**Use Active Versus Passive Tense**

Playing with sentence structure and words can greatly increase message effectiveness. Infinitives can be replaced with more active statements. For example, replace “The ERWS is a great place to view migrating birds” with “Viewing migrating birds at ERWS is a favorite past-time of local visitors.”

**Tailor Vocabulary to the 8th Grade Reading Level**

Studies in the field of interpretation have shown that text geared to an 8th grade reading level and vocabulary will reach the greatest number of recreational visitors. Keep words simple and clear, and be sure to define complex concepts. Most computers, have a function to find out the readability statistics of a document while working in Microsoft Word.

Click on Tools then Spelling and Grammar (for both PCs and Macs) then Options, and under Grammar, click Readability Statistics. Then, the next time the Spelling and Grammer tool is used, and the document is checked, a Readability Statistics dialogue box will appear. This dialogue box provides word counts, averages, and overall readability (refer to box on left). This indicates the average grade level of the text. The size of words, length of sentences, and complexity of words all contribute to calculations of grade level.