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!)

Examples of Universals

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

“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.”

(Emad El-Eshb)
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Potential Universal(s)</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Bankhead Highway</td>
<td>• Interconnectedness</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mineral Wells springs</td>
<td>• Health/wellness</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• People exploiting resources to survive and thrive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# 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*
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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