

Exactly what is “Interpretation”?

by

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It is pretty well accepted that parks, museums, etc. need interpretation. Many parks need to have, or have had developed for them, an Interpretive Plan. And there are classes and workshops on developing interpretive media as well. But what does “**interpretive**” actually mean? It is a word used quite freely, but probably without a clear definition of what it actually means. It’s sort of like the word “ecology”. You know the word, can you accurately describe what it means? Quite often interpretation and “interpretive” is simply another word for “*putting lots of information, photos, and text on panels*”. So for those folks involved in developing interpretive plans and media in the future, I thought this short overview of what “interpretive” actually meant might be useful.

The first book on interpretation was written by Freeman Tilden in 1957 - “Interpreting Our Heritage”, where he set out the six basic principles of Interpretation.

1. 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.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is **revelation** based upon information. They are entirely different things. However all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials 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 a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole person rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.

From these basic principles we have developed a short hand version I call Tilden’s Tips: Good interpretation must:

- Provoke the interest of the audience.
- Relate to the everyday lives of the audience.
- Reveal the main point through a unique ending or viewpoint.
- Address the whole (focus on illustrating a theme).
- Strive for message unity (use the right illustrations, vocabulary, etc. to present the message).

From these basic principles some definitions of interpretation have been developed. The one I like best and think is the most accurate was developed by *Interpretation Canada* in 1976. That definition of interpretation is:

*Interpretation is a **communication process**, designed to reveal meanings and relationships of our natural and cultural heritage, to the public, through first hand experiences with objects, artifacts, landscapes, or sites.*

Another way I like to think of it is “*translation from the language of the expert into the conceptual language of everyday people (non experts).*”

I think that the key element here is that ***interpretation is a communication process***, one that Provokes, Relates, and Reveals the message or story to visitors using a variety of media. Thus an "interpretive panel" is not interpretive because of contains information, it is ONLY interpretive if the communication process used in its design, copy development and presentation actually follows Tilden's Principles.

Here is a sample of label copy using an “interpretive communication” approach. This was developed for a self-guiding historic walking tour booklet. It is stop #4 on the tour.



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The Jackson Clubs' dark secret!

In 1842, this was the location of the *Jackson Club*, a club, for **Men Only!** This was the place where the elite of Jackson came to do business, visit, and talk about the news of the time. And becoming a member was not easy – you had to be somebody important!

Mike Sommerville was somebody! Arriving in Jackson in 1843, he quickly developed a reputation as a powerful businessman, and was invited to become a member of the *Jackson Club*. Mike served two terms as club president, and even helped increase the membership of this Men's Only organization. A proud member for 25 years, it wasn't until Mike's death in 1869 that it was discovered – that Mike was really ... Michelle – Yep! A Woman!

Your next stop on the tour is just one block down this street on the right, a large white home, number 321. It looks like an ordinary home, but there's an extraordinary story buried in the garden. I'll meet you there with a shovel.

This approach can be used for interpreting any subject matter, but the main point here was to illustrate the use of “interpretation” in creating the copy. Can you identify the “Provoke, Relate, and Reveal” used in developing the copy?

You see interpretation used every day!

You probably didn’t know this, but Tilden’s principles of interpretation are the same principles used in marketing and advertising – that’s where I think Freeman got them from in the first place. He was a journalist and saw these strategies being used in creating headlines and provocative writing, as well as in creating advertisements. . For example, all of the super bowl commercials used Provoke, Relate, Reveal – as well as most other TV commercials. Look at any ad in any magazine – you will see Provoke, Relate, and Reveal used in the design and copy for that piece.

Is your interpretive media “interpretive”?

If you want to check your work and see if your interpretive media is actually interpretive, not just full of “answers to questions no one is asking”, look at your panels, exhibits or publications and ask”

- Where is the use of **Provocation** – are there provocative headers or provocative graphics that will get grab viewers attention and spark their curiosity?
- Where is the use of **Relate** in using analogies, metaphors, and “examples” that will relate to the everyday life of the viewers and help them understand the concepts?
- Does the interpretation **Reveal** the main point – does the copy and presentation hold the visitor and gets them to want to find the answer or key point to the interpretation. Is there an “Oh – now I understand!” at the end of the interpretive communication?
- Did the interpretive panel or media relate this individual stop or site to the larger total byway theme, or was this just information on a stick?

In developing your interpretive media, interpretation communication asks two main questions for you to consider as you develop the content each panel, exhibit or tour:

1. **Why would a visitor want to know this (information)?** If you can’t answer this question, then you have a problem. If you can answer the question – you have the beginnings of your **Provoke**, and **Relate** components.
2. **How do you want the visitors to USE the information on the interpretive panels or from the interpretive media?** Because of they can’t use the information – then why are you giving it to them? Why would then want to remember it?

How you answer these two questions will help direct how you might use Tilden's Principles in developing REAL interpretation. There is not a "right" answer here – but this helps in the interpretive planning process for content and graphics selection.

Summary

Interpretation is not something that magically happens no matter what you put on panels, tour booklets or other media. Outdoor panels are not instantly "interpretive panels" – in fact most "interpretive" panels out on sites today are **not interpretive – just informational**. Real interpretation requires that Tilden's Principles of interpretive communication be used to create the message that is developed for the media in question. To be interpretive the communication must: *Provoke* the interest in the audience; *Relate* to their everyday lives in some way; *Reveal* the main point of the interpretation in a creative, unique or memorable fashion; *Address the Whole* interpretive theme for the total site; and *Strive for Message Unity* – using the correct graphics, colors, etc. that support the total byway interpretive theme.

And finally, good interpretation always leaves the visitor asking for more!

References

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