

How do you do interpretation?

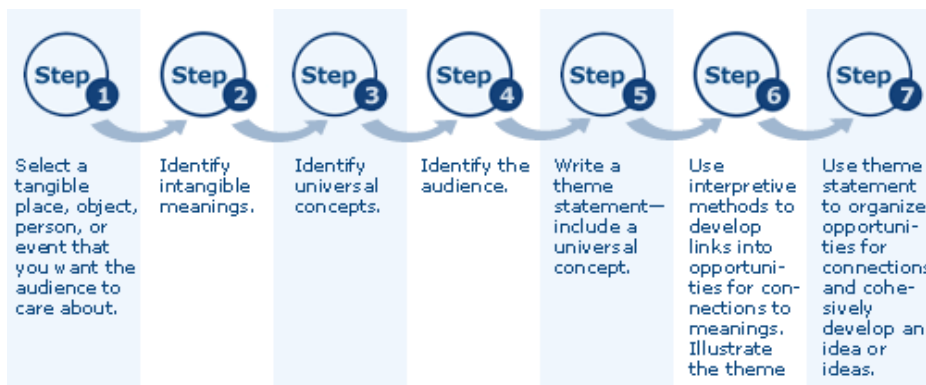
The Pieces

There are various approaches to developing interpretive services because interpretation is a very creative process. While the approaches may all differ, they usually include the following essential pieces:

- Recognizing the motivations, expectations, and prior knowledge of the visitors to a site
- Identifying the site's primary interpretive themes
- Identifying your goals and objectives for the service or product
- Selecting tangible resources and choosing one as an icon for the focus of the interpretive service
- Identifying intangible meanings that the tangible resources represent
- Verifying that your intangible meanings include universal concepts (such as life, love, death, survival, family) that most people can relate to in some way
- Identifying your specific audience for the service
- Brainstorming an imaginative idea, a thread that will wind its way through the service and tie all the parts together
- Writing a specific theme statement that expresses this idea
- Selecting appropriate techniques that link the tangible resources with the intangible meanings they represent
- Selecting a strategy based on your theme to organize the opportunities for intellectual and emotional connections to the meanings and significance of the resource in such a way that the audience can follow where you are leading

Putting the Pieces Together

One way the pieces of the interpretive process have been together can be found in the Process Model. The process model includes the following steps:



Step 1. Select a tangible place, object, person, or event that you want the audience to care about.

An interpretive product or service may provoke the audience to care about more than one tangible resource. A program might focus on a single plant but intend for the audience to also care about the species, place, and ecosystem. Similarly, an interpreter might use a specific artifact to represent the material culture of a particular time and the people who created and used it.

While an interpretive product or service may include several tangible resources, there is usually one tangible resource that acts as an icon or symbol. The icon is the engine that powers the presentation. It is a net that captures and reveals a myriad of ideas, values, relationships, contexts, systems, and processes. The icon provides a starting point and reference for an exploration of associated tangible resources and multiple resource meanings.

An interpretive product or service might use more than one tangible resource as an icon. An interpretive tour usually focuses on a different object or feature at each stop to explore a unique meaning or meanings. Sometimes an essay or talk uses two or more icons to describe multiple perspectives regarding the same topic. The more icons an interpretive product uses, however, the more complicated the development and delivery will be.

Step 2. Identify intangible meanings.

Considered only in terms of its physical attributes, a tangible resource has limited significance. Without the stories that go with it, the Liberty Bell is a cracked piece of metal with almost no value. Without the meanings of beauty, life, and the forest ecosystem, a tree might only be measured in board-feet. However, when a tangible is linked to broader intangible meanings its value becomes relevant to more people — its importance more apparent and accessible.

Each tangible resource has an incredible variety of intangible meanings. Those meanings can be obvious and popular, or obscure and controversial. The more Knowledge of the Resource (KR) and Knowledge of the Audience (KA) an interpreter has, the more meanings can be linked to the tangible resources.

Tangible-intangible links are the basic building blocks of interpretation. Connecting experiences occur when the tangible resource is linked to some larger intangible meaning in a way that the audience can personally relate to and that provokes understanding and/or appreciation. Intangible meanings speak to different people in different ways. Only when the tangible-intangible link is personally relevant does an individual connect to the resource. Or as Freeman Tilden states in his first Principle, “Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experiences of the visitor will be sterile.” (Tilden, 1957, p.11)

A tangible-intangible link occurs when the interpreter, in constructing the product or service, meshes the tangible resource with an intangible meaning or meanings. Audiences wish to connect personally to the subject and/or resource, and if this meshing is skillfully done and developed through the use of a specific technique (see below), this produces a tangible-intangible link in the mind of the audience member. Sometimes this occurs through the better understanding of context, a gaining of insight, discovery, or revelation — in other words, the intellectual. Other times the connection comes through the emotions — provoking a feeling of enjoyment, empathy, wonder, concern, amazement, or pride.

Step 3. Identify universal concepts.

Some intangible meanings are universal concepts — a concept that everyone can relate to, but that no two people will see exactly the same way. Universal concepts are intangible meanings that are relevant to almost everybody. They are powerful vehicles that reach many people in significant ways. Some of the intangibles in an interpretive product or service should be universal concepts because they provide the maximum amount of relevance to the widest audience.

Like all intangible meanings, universal concepts can, and must, be linked to a tangible resource in order to produce an interpretive opportunity. If presented by themselves, universal concepts can be abstract and too abrupt to help the audience make personal connections to the meanings of the resource. Merely stating a universal concept does not help visitors make meaningful connections.

Links that include a universal concept tend to work best when presented with other tangible-intangible links. For example, a program that proclaims the power of water without explaining the process of erosion might not reach a large segment of the audience. But if the program describes and uses erosion as evidence for the power of water to effect change (power and change are universal concepts), both erosion and the power of water might become more compelling. Similarly, standing in The Bloody Lane at Antietam National Battlefield and only speaking of death and bravery could seem disconnected to those unfamiliar with the Civil War. However, a description of the events that occurred there, the ways in which officers and soldiers maneuvered, stumbled, and fought — the significance of their equipment and technology to the results of the encounter might make more powerful impressions of both the tactics and the horror of war.

Universal concepts, joined with other tangible/intangible links, can provoke a desire to understand and appreciate intangible meanings that might otherwise seem uninteresting because these universals have touched a wider piece of the human spirit.

Step 4. Identify the audience.

All audiences who visit or read about a site are seeking something of value for themselves. They all expect something special. Each has a personal sense of what the place means to himself or herself. Many already know a great deal about the resource, some know what family or friends have told them, and others simply assume the resource contains something worthwhile.

For interpretive programming to be most relevant, audience group identity, culture, ethnicity, learning styles and motivations for visiting should be examined. What are the audience members' expectations and interests? What existing meanings, beliefs and attitudes do they bring to the resource? It is important to understand and respect the reasons visitors come to our sites. Visitors find value in park resources for a variety of reasons. Regardless of their motivation for coming, the interpreter's job is to ensure that each visitor has a positive experience that fosters care for the resource.

Step 5. Write a theme statement — include a universal concept.

An effective program has a focus and intends to clearly explore an idea or ideas. Yet, successful interpretation occurs when audiences make their own connections to the meanings of the resource. It may seem a contradiction — an interpretive product conveys an idea but the audience should take away their own meanings.

An interpretive theme solves the problem. An interpretive theme is a tool that develops an idea or ideas in order to inspire connections. An interpretive theme is not a message as much as it is a relevant point that encourages new thoughts and feelings. A well-presented program based on a solid interpretive theme will likely provoke connections the interpreter did not anticipate and may never become aware of. No one in the audience may be able to repeat exactly the interpreter's theme, but the focus should be clear and most people's versions will be related and recognizable. The theme

enables the interpreter to communicate and allows the audience to engage personally based on that communication.

Based on the goal for the interpretive product, the identified tangible-intangible links, and the knowledge of the audience, a theme statement is written that includes a tangible resource linked to one or more intangible meanings. The most compelling interpretive products have themes that tie a tangible resource to a universal concept.

Interpretive themes:

- Are single sentences that express meaning;
- Link a tangible resource to its intangible meanings;
- Organize interpretive products;
- Use tangible resources to focus on universally relevant concepts, linking them together.

In the past, interpreters and supervisors were advised that the success or failure of an interpretive product could be easily measured by the audience's ability to state the theme. This led to products where the theme was constantly repeated with the hope that the audience would be able to parrot the message. A theme is not a refrain, a sound byte or a "take home message." Products organized in this manner generally fail to cohesively *develop* an idea for the audience over the course of the delivery.

Crafting an interpretive theme takes care, time, and editing. It often takes several drafts of both the theme and the product for the interpreter to become clear about what to say and how to say it.

Examples of interpretive themes:

Topics (but Not Interpretive Themes)

Interpretive Themes

The power of water.

The power of water to carve, smooth, and continuously reshape this landscape provides opportunities for us to marvel at how a seemingly simple liquid can play such a profound role in every landscape on the planet.

Antietam was the bloodiest battle of the Civil War.

The Battle of Antietam was a pivot point in the American Civil War, halting the southern advance and making way for the Emancipation Proclamation — the moral, social, and economic legacies of which continue to profoundly influence the lives of contemporary Americans.

Lincoln's boyhood.

The values and life lessons that Lincoln learned here as a boy helped mold him into the man who would become President and typify the enduring connections that we all share in our progression from youth to maturity.

Fire in nature.

Fire is a natural process that creates life out of death and provides insight into tangible and intangible loss and renewal.

Step 6. Use interpretive techniques to develop links into opportunities for connections to meanings. The next step is to choose and develop tangible-intangible links that illustrate the idea or ideas expressed in your theme statement into opportunities for the audience to form personal connections

to the meanings of the resource. By themselves, links do not provide opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource. Links must be developed into opportunities for connections to meanings in order to present the resource in a compelling and engaging way through the use of specific techniques, such as stories, descriptive language, props, quotations, activities, and illustrations. A running narrative with facts is not a technique. It is information, not interpretation.

To be broadly relevant, an interpretive product must provide opportunities for both emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource. Some of the links should be intentionally developed to provide opportunities for emotional connections and some for intellectual connections. An interpreter needs to plan specific opportunities that are intended to inspire or provoke feelings like awe, wonder, sympathy, curiosity, amazement, regret, grief, and anger. Other specific opportunities should provoke insight, understanding of context, discovery, and reveal relationships. Some techniques are better at developing one type of opportunity over the other.

Remember that there are many techniques that may be used to develop a link into an opportunity for an emotional or intellectual connection to the meanings of the resource. Success depends on the link, the theme, the interpreter's KR and KA, style, and the purpose of the interpretive product. Stories, explanations, comparisons, quotes, activities, demonstrations, examples, evidence, illustrations, questions, and discussions are just some of the techniques interpreters use.

Step 7. Use the theme statement to organize opportunities for connections and cohesively develop an idea or ideas.

Think back to composition courses you may have taken in high school or in college. An interpretive product is not so very different. Remember how you would introduce your topic and theme in the first paragraph, then support your argument using specific techniques such as examples, citations from text, or comparisons or contrast in the next few paragraphs, and finally conclude your piece in the final paragraph.

The theme statement of the interpretive product should be used to organize the opportunities into a sequence that cohesively develops the relevant idea or ideas stated in the theme, much as you would in a composition for English class. It is important to plan effective transitions to move from one opportunity to another.

Opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource sequenced with effective transitions and arranged to support a well-crafted interpretive theme statement provide the architecture for a cohesively developed idea or ideas.

The best way to reveal meaning is through the exploration of an idea. To be relevant and provocative an interpretive product must cohesively develop an idea or ideas over the course of its delivery. A meaningful idea captures, organizes, and sustains the attention of the audience. A meaningful idea provides opportunities for audiences to make their own connections to the meanings of the resource. Without the cohesive development of a relevant idea or ideas, products are merely collections of related information or haphazard arrays of tangible/intangible links — they are not interpretive.

A tutorial has been developed to explain the process model in an interactive format. The tutorial is available online at <http://interp.eppley.org>.

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