

# INTERPRETATION

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Docent Training

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*Reading assignments supplement each week's lectures. Please read before the lecture*

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Read the following articles for class two  
3/7/2020

# Interpretation Basics

Interpretation is a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource. National Association of Interpreters, 2014

## Tilden's Principles of Interpretation

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or being 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. But 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 man 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.

### **In other words, Interpretation aims to “Provoke, Relate and Reveal”**

- To Provoke people is to engage them in thinking about things from a new perspective. Something they may not have thought about before.
- To Relate is to connect the site, object or idea to their own experience and interests.
- To Reveal is to share information at the appropriate time so that visitors can learn or engage most effectively.

### **Interpreters should be a “Guide on the Side, not a Sage on the Stage”**

- Almost everyone enjoys figuring out a problem or answer for themselves more than they enjoy being told. Help visitors connect what they already know to an idea or object (plant) at the Conservatory or Lily Pool.

### **Remember, “Comfort leads to Conversation”**

When visitors' needs are met, and they have established a relationship with you as someone who is both friendly and knowledgeable, you will have more chance to engage them in conversation.

# 10 Principles that Guide Interpretation

*You Can Be A Great Interpreter! Dave Sutherland Open Space & Mountain Parks*

Good interpretation is based on a number of ideas or principles--mostly common sense-- which reflect how people think and learn and what awakens their interest. Here are what I feel to be some of the most important guidelines. Become familiar with these principles since they will help you communicate with visitors.

- 1. Interpretation should be personal.** Interpretation that doesn't relate to the heart, personality, interest, past experience or prior knowledge of the visitor--in other words, something the visitor cares about--will not capture their imagination or hold their attention. We all need a context to understand new information. You must help visitors connect what you show and tell them with something they already know.
- 2. Interpretation is much more than just facts.** Although interpretation is based on data, is more than a scattered bunch of factoids and trivia. It uses information to provoke and stimulate people to think and feel, to imagine, and to come to new insights. Some naturalists approach visitor education with an information dump truck: the more facts, the better. But unless visitors are encouraged to think, imagine and see for themselves, the information is of little value and is quickly forgotten. Interpretation presents information for the heart as well as the mind. Good interpretation makes an emotional, as well as a factual, connection.
- 3. Interpretation isn't information overload.** Research shows that people can only concentrate on three to five separate ideas at once. When planning a program, limit your subheadings or subordinate topics to about three or four for best results. Arrange your presentation into organized "chunks." Look at the following string of letters: IRSFBIOSMPH20. Here they are "chunked:" IRS FBI OSMP H20. Which is easier for your brain to digest and process? Try "chunking" your facts into logical packages to help visitors fit the pieces of your message together.
- 4. Interpretation presents whole ideas.** One way interpreters avoid a mere presentation of facts and data is to base activities on complete ideas (called "themes") which provide a contextual framework, or reason, for the facts. If you heap on information from the dump truck without relating it to any central idea or message, most of what you say will be ignored or quickly forgotten.
- 5. Good interpretation is relevant to what people are seeing or thinking about.** It should relate to where you are or have a logical connection to something your visitors did or talked about earlier. It should be clear why you have chosen to interpret something. Make sure they understand the connection.
- 6. Interpretation is well-organized, with ideas presented in a logical sequence.** A good interpretive talk, like a joke, needs to be presented with background information first to lay the groundwork for understanding the more complicated material later on. Bad joke

## 10 Principles that Guide Interpretation

tellers foul up the organization of their jokes and may tell one part too soon or don't provide all the information you need to understand the punch line. Nobody laughs. A badly organized presentation is the same way.

- 7. Interpretation is flexible and spontaneous.** You should be able to change what you have planned to reflect the visitors' desires and interests. Avoid memorized "cassette" talks which always sound the same (you'll quickly get bored with your job and the visitors will realize it.) Be able to take advantage of unexpected occurrences (or at least adapt to them with a smile!)
- 8. Interpretive activities for children are fundamentally different from activities for adults.** Kids see the world from a different point of view than adults. Different things excite or bore them, and they are often more imaginative, active, playful, spontaneous and uninhibited than adults. Successful programs for kids will tap into youthful interests. Children are seldom excited by watered-down versions of adult programs! A slide show may appeal to adults but could be boredom incarnate for children. The flip side: adults may feel patronized by a children's program with lots of games.
- 9. Interpretation should present accurate information.** As a naturalist, you are in the information business. If you present false information or lie, you will lose credibility and the visitors' respect. It is much better to admit that you don't know than to falsify.
- 10. An experience is worth a thousand pictures.** People are much more likely to remember something by doing or experiencing it than by simply hearing about it. Successful interpretation gives people the opportunity to touch, feel, taste and try things for themselves.

## Interpretation

Read the following articles for the third class  
3/14/2020

# An Equation for an Excellent Presentation

***A Clear Message + Interaction+ Enthusiasm = An Excellent Presentation***

*Ethan Rotman, Legacy, May/June 2016, p.27*

We speak to make a point and to change an attitude, a behavior, or a belief. If that is not possible, we at least want to provoke the audience enough to cause them to re-think their current position. When added together, these three goals provide a solid platform for you to engage your audience in hopes of moving them from where they are now to where you hope they will be.



## **A Clear Message**

A clear message means you (and when you are done, your audience) should be able to sum up the entirety of your talk in one short sentence- just one simple statement: "At the end of my talk, I want my audience to know \_\_\_\_\_." (No "ands," no "commas," no "ampersands.") If you can be clear enough in your thinking to fill in that blank before you start speaking, you increase the likelihood your audience will understand your point.

## **Interaction**

Interaction is meaningful dialogue between either the speaker and the audience or between audience members. Audiences want to be involved in the conversation as active participants; they don't want to be merely passive receivers of information. Audience members will learn as they process information to form their own thoughts, and they will learn from others in the group. Providing time to discuss a topic allows audience members to take pieces of the talk and add them up to a sum greater than that of all the parts.

**You should take the opportunity to actively engage your audience by encouraging them to think, reflect, ask questions, evaluate, and express themselves.**

To be clear, interaction does not mean that you as the speaker get to talk for 55 minutes. You should take the opportunity to actively engage your audience by encouraging them to think, reflect, ask questions, evaluate, and express themselves.

## **Enthusiasm**

Enthusiasm demonstrates through actions, voice, and words that you like and are excited about your topic. Your energy is quite contagious and rubs off on the audience. Your enthusiasm alone is not enough to carry the day. A colleague recently reported to me that she watched a presentation in absolute awe based solely on the enthusiasm and energy of the speaker. It wasn't until later that the colleague realized the speaker didn't have a message-they were simply engaging and energetic.

A good presentation does not happen by chance or luck; it is created by a good presenter. These three elements -- a clear message, interaction, and enthusiasm -- are basic building

## **An Equation for an Excellent Presentation**

blocks to help you design outstanding talks that engage the audience and by doing so, may change an attitude, belief, or behavior.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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*The author thanks Andy Goodman and Jenn Tarlton.*

## It's All About the Story

Ken Wilk, *Legacy*, May/June 2016, pp.34-35

It's all about the story! Isn't that what interpretation is all about-the story? How do interpreters get the message across? After being in this profession for nearly 35 years, it finally dawned on me what interpretation was all about-the story. It doesn't matter whether you are a naturalist, living historian, zookeeper, cultural historian, academic, or interpretive designer. If you use interpretation to relay rules regulations, or messages about a site, you use a story to relay the specific information you want your visitors to take away with them. During my career, I have used interpretation as a tool to tell facts about living history, describe the flora and fauna of the lake at which I was working, enforce rules and regulations, and encourage visitors to comply with those rules. Additionally, interpretation is useful for employee training, in research and writing articles, and developing new programs for management 's consideration. I think most of us have used one or all of these at some point in our careers.



Currently, I have the luxury and honor of telling stories for my job honor of telling stories for my job. I work at the home of William Allen White-the "Sage of Emporia." Mr. White was a newspaper editor and political advisor who won national acclaim for his editorials and articles. The stories about his life, home, career, and family are far reaching and fascinating! One has to wonder how Someone born in the middle of Kansas just after the Civil War still impacts thinking and ideals today. Did I grab your attention? *Aha!* Now maybe you understand the power of the story.

**Whatever it is you interpret; stories can powerfully engage visitors with the information a site has to offer.**

Whatever it is you interpret, stories can powerfully engage visitors with the information a site has to offer. When I started this job, I was handed a three-ring binder with all the information I would need to give a tour of the house. In it is a script of the tour, a list of artifacts, some anecdotes to add if I choose to, available "teaching aids" in the house, a brief historical background, and a section on how to do interpretation .There are also scripts for three Kansas school standards tours developed for giving school programs.

Now, even as I write this, I felt several of you cringe when I used the word *script*. That's the same thing I did when it was first presented to me. But in all honesty, the script was a great tool. It gave a basis for conducting the tour, and newbies to the interpretive field could greatly benefit from using it as a starting point. However, it could easily be turned into the "Five-Cent Trap." You know what I mean-the tour where the guide sounds like a penny arcade machine. You drop in a nickel and the show starts. When every tour is the same scripted monotone information over and over with no opportunity to ask questions or get additional information, it's scary and very poor interpretation, and it fails to engage visitors as individuals.

So how did I avoid the Five-Cent Trap? I took the scripts and made them my own. Through more research, I learn new things to add to my repertoire. By adding new facts and stories to

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the script, the information comes to life. I relate the facts in a way each visitor can understand. I love when the light bulb comes on and the visitor grasps the point and suddenly starts asking poignant questions. I use Tilden's principles every day so I don't become the "Five-Cent Trap."



In order to tell stories, let me give you a few pointers that have helped me over the years: Make your visitors feel at home. Listen to their stories. This will help them get involved in your program without having them "volunteer" to help. Picking out a visitor in front of the rest of the group sometimes causes them anguish. Some of your visitors may have interesting facts about your program because they are an expert in the field or maybe they knew the person your program is about. You might get some free insight or research from them. Listening to your visitors will also help you guide your program. I try to fit the program to the visitor. If they are the anxious type ("Just the facts, ma'am!") I will try not to give many anecdotes and side stories. If they are the "I want it all" type, then I load up on the side stories and go into full, in-depth explanations. By being flexible and altering your program slightly to fit your audience, you give them a better experience. Some are also giving you feedback. By their comments and body language, you can tell whether you're doing a good job.

Talk with them; don't lecture. By having a conversation with your visitors, you put them at ease. When they are at ease, they have fun. When they have fun, they learn more and want to know more. Use humor in your presentation. Don't make fun of your topic, but adding good-

## It's All About the Story

natured anecdotes will lighten the mood. You may be asked to tailor your program to a group with specific interests or connections to your program. You can add facts to that specific portion to connect to their interest level. I have had a living history program for which teachers have made specific requests for their students. I was asked to alter my program to include more math, a specific point in history (locale), or to speak on the local flora and fauna in the area. This was all possible because of the character I had chosen to portray. It may be easy for you to do also. Be willing to be flexible.

If you are at ease with your tour or program, your audience will be at ease. One of the best compliments I ever received was from a visitor who came by and listened to me during a multiple-day event. They thanked me for a great program and then told me that I made me feel like they were the first person I had told this story to. Not realizing that's what I was doing, I now know I always try to treat each guest that way. I just told you a story. Was it convincing? Did you have a revelation based on my story? If you did, did I provoke you to check your own style and try to make it better? Did I present the whole package or just a part? Just some food for thought. Keep on doing what you do best, but don't hesitate to try something new. Have the passion for what you do and keep telling those stories. Remember, live in the present, learn from the past, but dream for the future!

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Ken Wilk recently retired as a park ranger/outdoor rec planner after 34 years with the National Park Service and the US Army Corps of Engineers. He is currently the site administrator for the Red Rocks State Historic Site in Emporia, Kansas, a holding of the Kansas State Historical Society. He is a longtime member of NAI and has served as both deputy director and director of the Cultural Interpretation and Living History Section*

# Visitors Bill of Rights

Adapted from Judy Rands “Visitor Bill of Rights” in 227- Mile Museum, *Curator* vol. 44 #1

**Comfort – “Meet my basic needs”** Visitors need fast, easy obvious access to restrooms, fountains, food, plenty of seating etc before they can open their mind to learning. If their stomach is growling, they are not focused on learning.

**Orientation – “Make it easy for me to find my way around.”** Visitors need to make sense of their surroundings. Customized exhibit suggestions and clear directions help them know what to expect, where to go, how to get there and what it’s all about.

**Welcome/Belonging – “Make me feel welcome”** Friendly, helpful staff eases visitors’ anxieties. If they see themselves represented in exhibits, programs and on the staff, they’ll feel more like they belong.

**Enjoyment – “I want to have fun!”** Visitors want to have a good time. If they run into barriers (activities they can’t relate to, intimidating language) they can get frustrated, bored and confused.

**Socializing – “I came to spend time with my family and friends.”** Visitors come for a social outing with family or friends (or connect with society at large). They expect to talk, interact and share the experience; interpreters can set the stage for this.

**Respect – “Accept me for who I am and what I know.”** Visitors want to be accepted at their own level of knowledge and interest. They don’t want exhibits or staff to exclude them, patronize them or make them feel dumb.

**Communication – “Help me understand, and let me talk too.”** Visitors need accuracy, honesty and clear communication from programs and interpreters. They want to ask questions and hear and express differing points of view.

**Learning – “I want to learn something new.”** Visitors come “to learn something new,” but they learn in different ways. It’s important to know how visitors learn and assess their knowledge and interests. Controlling distractions (like crowds, noise and information overload) helps too.

**Choice and control – “Let me choose; give me some control.”** Visitors need some independence: freedom to choose, and exert some control, touching and getting close to whatever they can. They need to use their bodies and move around freely.

**Challenge and confidence – “Give me a challenge I know I can handle.”** Visitors want to succeed. A task that’s too easy bores them; too hard makes them anxious. Providing a wide variety of experiences will match their wide range of skills.

**Revitalization – “Help me leave refreshed, restored.”** When visitors are focused, fully engaged, and enjoying themselves, time stands still and they feel refreshed: a “flow” experience that exhibits can aim to create

# 10 Reasons to Say “I Don’t Know”

Saga Briggs

Being an expert means you can admit when you have no expertise. And these moments are often the most enriching.

1. Learn something new.

If you don't know the answer, you're about to learn something new. That's never a bad thing. Pretending you know the answer, on the other hand, ensures that you never learn the actual truth.

2. Develop relationships.

Voluntarily learning from others is one of the best way to build relationships. People like to teach other people, so indulge your peer or colleague the next time you don't know the answer and they do.

3. Avoid complacency.

Actively realising you don't know the answer, and planning to do something about it, is one of the keys to successful self-driven learning. Saying "I don't know" should invoke interest, not indifference.

4. Stimulate engagement.

When one person admits they don't know, others feel more at ease to speak up. Discussions are great for deeper learning because they provide objective points of view, so take advantage of the opportunity to engage your peers.

5. Remain open-minded.

Immediate answers close up our minds to further possibilities. When we keep our minds shut tight, we end up making a lot of assumptions about life, many of which could be dead wrong. Let the power of "I don't know" keep you in line with the truth.

6. Build thinking skills.

When we say "I don't know," we don't necessarily mean we have no idea; often we mean we're not one-hundred percent sure. When we're unsure whether we know or not, we spend more mental effort to try to figure it out. That's why it's important to admit to ourselves when we aren't certain-it gets us thinking harder than if we assume we do or don't know.

7. Practise intellectual humility.

Stop trying to be right all the time; it's not the goal of an education. When we know our own intellectual limits, we can increase the efficiency of our learning and save ourselves from blind overconfidence.

## 10 Reasons to Say “I Don’t Know”

### 8. Improve credibility.

When you admit you don't know to someone else, they'll find it easier to trust you when you do. Alternatively, if you make a habit of pretending to know and end up being wrong too many times, your credibility will suffer.

### 9. Pursue meaningful problems.

The deeper you plumb an issue for answers, the closer you get to that kernel of truth. It takes effort to go beyond the shallow waters, where you seem to have arrived at a solution, and realise you've only just scratched the surface.

### 10. Gain academic confidence.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but you'll only gain more confidence in yourself if you remain aware of what you do and don't know. The next time someone asks if you understand something, when you don't, make a point of admitting your confusion so you don't feel insecure the next time someone asks you the same thing.

Saga Briggs is Managing Editor of InformED. You can follow her on Google+ or @sagamilena

## **10 Reasons to Say “I Don’t Know”**

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## Interpretation

Read the following articles for the fourth class  
3/28/2020

## Asking Questions

*Alan Gartenhaus Winter 1999 - 2000, Volume 9, No. 2*

Ask interesting, thought-provoking questions and you know what happens? People try to answer them! Whether they respond orally, or simply contemplate in reflective silence, visitors will actively participate when asked appropriate questions.

No matter whether you teach with art, history, or science collections, you can encourage active thinking and participatory learning by asking questions. Let the objects or specimens in your collection serve as the focus of your tours, but employ questions as catalysts, provoking investigation and reflection by requesting participants to consider and do something.

Not all questions will engage reflective thinking and active learning, and however in fact, some can do quite the opposite. Closed-ended questions, which test a person's recall of factual information or challenge their perceptual abilities, are counter productive. These questions, while useful when testing material previously learned in a classroom situation, may impede participation by visitors who are examining an unfamiliar object or site.

Closed-ended questions test a person's recall of specific information. Questions such as "Do you know which year the settlers first arrived at Jamestown?" or "How many trees do you see in this landscape?" request specific and correct responses. Such questions restrict participation to those who know the answers, and lead to judgments of accuracy rather than to involvement and discussion.

Open-ended questions, on the other hand, are questions that do not have presupposed or predetermined answers. They embrace a wide variety of responses, and call upon our individual perceptions, thoughts, and creativity to formulate a range of possibilities. They invite everyone to offer their ideas and join in the discussion.

For instance, the question "What is the distance in miles between Jacksonville, Florida, and Los Angeles, California, if driving on Interstate 10?" is closed-ended. It is not subject to interpretation. There is a specific, correct answer. However, the question "How many different ways might you measure the distance between Jacksonville, Florida, and Los Angeles, California?" is open-ended. This question has many possible responses, including:

- by miles or kilometers;
- by the time it takes to drive at different speeds;
- by the calories it burns to walk;
- by the time it takes to fly on different types of aircraft;
- by fuel consumption using different modes of transportation;
- by the geo-political units (states or counties) you would pass through;
- by time zones;
- by how far away the cities "feel" when a loved one is in the other location; and so on.

## Asking Questions

### ***How do open-ended questions work?***

Just as there are two types of questions — closed-ended and open-ended — there are two types of thinking — convergent and divergent. Closed-ended questions request convergent thinking, challenging the mind to narrow its focus to a specific answer, or specific set of correct answers. Open-ended questions call for the production of ideas, thoughts, and imaginings. They invite the mind to think divergently, acting as a pry to open thinking up in order to generate new, different, or more possibilities. Open-ended questions call for the “creation” of possibilities. Creating possibilities within a particular discipline is what artists do when they make choices about how to convey ideas, what historians do when trying to reconstruct the past, and what scientists do when beginning to formulate hypotheses. In other words, open-ended questions prompt the many, varied, unique, and detailed ways of thinking one needs to produce in order to fully understand and appreciate art, history, or science.

Questions or tasks designed to provoke a greater quantity of responses often incorporate phrases like, “How many . . . can you think of?” or “Develop a list of as many...as you possibly can.” Such interrogatives request fluent thinking.

Questions or tasks that serve to provoke a greater variety of responses often begin with phrases such as, “How else might you consider ...?” or “What other kind of answer can you think of...?” These interrogatives invite flexible thinking. Questions or tasks that provoke highly personalized responses should specifically request this form of thinking from participants. Phrases such as, “What would you do . . .?” or “Come up with your very own ....” can prompt original thinking by challenging participants to develop individualized ideas.

Questions or tasks that provoke highly detailed responses might begin with such phrases as “Tell us more about ....” or “What else do you know about ... ?” Such interrogatives extract detailed or additional information from participants through elaborative thinking.

### ***What kinds of responses are offered to open-ended questions?***

“Ask an open-ended question, get a multitude of responses.” Because they are designed to encourage the production of options more than solutions, open-ended questions will elicit responses ranging from the predictable to the hardly credible. Some will seem clever; others may seem “off-the-wall.” Keep in mind, however, that the reason for asking these questions is to have visitors spend time examining your collection and reflecting upon its significance, and NOT to have them retrieve correct answers to questions about things they are not well acquainted with.

Remember that the responses you receive will reflect differences in individual points-of-view. Each participant will see, think about, and decide different things when inspecting museum objects because each person will selectively focus and respond in their own, personalized way.

### ***How should a docent react to the range of responses received?***

Active thinking can be encouraged or discouraged simply by the manner in which the group leader reacts. Participation and the communication of ideas are based on trust — trust that one’s thoughts will be valued and that one’s attempts will be positively recognized. If anyone has an

## Asking Questions

inking that his or her thoughts are not respected, that person may quit participating, withdraw, and even shut down thought altogether.

Your responsibility when leading tours and activities is to facilitate and encourage reflection and active participation, NOT to sit in judgment. Be open to new, wild, humorous, or idiosyncratic thoughts. If you, or others in the group, are puzzled by a response, request elaboration. Without seeming to challenge the respondent, ask for more information or to understand how the person decided upon a particular idea. Then, accept the reasoning offered and move on. Sometimes, participants will offer answers that they, themselves, will choose to re-evaluate after more ideas are put forth or with additional time for reflection. That's fine. After all, we learn by trial and error.

As the facilitator, you should encourage idea production and not focus on idea evaluation. The purpose of your questions is to slow visitors down, encourage their investigation, and to provoke their thoughtful consideration. Remember that you are teaching people how to think about art, history, or science objects or specimens. That responsibility is challenging enough without taking on the further burden of testing their knowledge base.

Though it is difficult, avoid excessive use of positive feedback to reward or encourage responses that you like. Visitors will quickly learn the difference between being told "good answer" and being told "okay." The lack of a positive reaction is the equivalent of a negative reaction to most people. Remain consistent in both the type and the tone of your reactions.

Remember that everyone seeks validation from a group leader. Try to avoid having participants work for your approval, rather than for the internal satisfaction of thinking and investigating your intriguing collection. Offer such non-judgmental statements as "thank you" when acknowledging responses from participants.

And, finally, remember to be patient. Do not expect responses to your open-ended questions immediately after asking them. Give participants time to think, reflect, and reconsider something they may never have seen before, or thought about in that particular way.

*Alan Gartenhaus, Publishing Editor*

Gartenhaus, Alan. "Asking Questions," *The Docent Educator* 9.2 (Winter 1999-2000): 2-3.

## Helping Visitors Ask Better Questions

*Michael J Nelson Winter 1999-2000, Volume 9, No. 2*

As part of the weekly comedy television show *Whose Line is it Anyway?* comedians are given a variety of improvisational challenges designed to entertain. In one game, the comedians must carry on a conversation using only questions. While at first the “Question Game” sounds relatively easy, after five or six exchanges even these experienced performers struggle to keep going, finding it difficult to come up with yet another question.

A thirty- minute comedy television program may seem worlds away from the education that takes place at your institution, yet it can offer docents a few practical strategies. The “Question Game” gets us thinking about questions for their own sake — not questions in search of answers. Asking good questions is becoming an increasingly valuable skill. I believe that docents can do a great service for visitors if, in addition to asking their groups questions, docents encourage visitors to strengthen their own questioning skills.

What strategies can you develop to assist your visitors in asking better questions? You can use some of the same ideas put forth in the television game, namely, encouraging your students to:

- (1) rise to the challenge,
- (2) improvise, and
- (3) stretch for “yet another” question.

The first strategy, rising to the challenge, suggests that it can be difficult to engage in extended questioning. This is part of why the “Questioning Game” on *Whose Line* is so funny. Focusing on questioning rather than answering takes us outside of our normal realm. Watching performers on stage forced to converse in this way is unexpected, and in turn, humorous. It is as if listeners are hanging on the edge, waiting for what years of experience have taught them to expect— an answer.

Today’s society is very answer-oriented. There is great attention put on uncovering the right answer, without giving much importance to the question itself. Eric Booth, in his book *The Everyday Work of Art* addresses this habit, saying, “The value of questioning is grossly overlooked in the high-demand quick-fix nature of our lives and our nation. We are answer-oriented everywhere, having been trained to this through schooling that is almost entirely right-answer driven.” He goes on to point out that the root of the word question is quest. A quest is a search and a challenge, but not without rewards.

So, how can you set the stage for the participants on your tour to ask questions? One suggestion is beginning your tour by letting the group know that you value what each individual is bringing to the experience. Make it clear up front that you will not be lecturing and that instead you hope to engage in dialogue about the things that are of interest to them. As a group you will share ideas, stories, and questions.

Dr. David Carr, Professor of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has often pointed out the value of attending to thoughtful questions. In his

## Helping Visitors Ask Better Questions

keynote presentation at the 1996 Wisconsin Docent Symposium, he suggested, “You may want to say explicitly [to your visitors] that there are no keys or secrets here and that the purpose of what you do here is not to find answers but to ask questions. You might say, ‘Not everyone sees the same things in this object. How many different questions come to mind when you look at it? No one has any better answers than anyone else, but some questions help us to go farther than others.’”

The second lesson taught by the “Questioning Game” is the value of developing improvisational skills. The dictionary defines improvise as the ability “to fabricate out of what is conveniently on hand.” This seems a fairly accurate description of what a docent does when creating an atmosphere of learning. A good docent is a facilitator who is able to take the resources readily available, (e.g., the objects on view, the students’ minds, the docent’s experience) and weave or fabricate a meaningful experience. You can teach your students to do the same. By encouraging them to use their own minds as one of their resources, you will enhance the quality of their learning.

Jerome Bruner, author of several books on education, wrote, “Acquired knowledge is most to a learner, moreover, when it is ‘discovered’ through the learner’s own cognitive efforts, for it is then related to and used in reference to what one has known before.” If you challenge students to improvise by using their own minds, their peers’ ideas, and the objects you are exploring, you will help them construct their own meaning.

How can improvising help you on a tour? Well, let’s say your initial plan for a tour was to focus on a selected work or object in a gallery, but upon entering the area you notice that the visitors on your tour are intrigued by something else and it is generating conversation. You could try to re-direct their attention to the piece you had pre-selected, or you could improvise. With the object of interest, and conversation that has already begun, you can fabricate a quality learning experience. Encourage visitors to direct their energy into designing questions about the object that stirred their interest. What do they want to know about it? See if they can vocalize their interest in the form of questions. In this way you help them explore both the object and what they themselves are thinking about it.

The third thing we can learn from the comedians is the value of stretching for “yet another question.” On *Whose Line*, the farther the actors get into the “Questioning Game,” the funnier the lines become. It is by stretching the limits of questioning that the most interesting scenarios and connections are made. The more you move beyond the surface level, and peel back the layers, the more intriguing and meaningful the dialogue. Yet it can be difficult enough to motivate students to ask questions. Moving them beyond their initial inquiries may take extra effort and creativity on your part.

To assist you in this approach, here is an activity you can try at any institution with any object. It doesn’t matter if the object is a rare tree, a historic rocking chair, a zebra, a Roman vase, or an abstract painting. Give each visitor a sheet of paper and pencil. Have them individually list five to ten questions about the object you are discussing. Almost certainly they will write

## Helping Visitors Ask Better Questions

down their first and second question easily. However, as visitors get farther in their list they may pause more before writing. They will have to take a closer and longer look at the object. Some may insist that they can only come up with three or four questions. But encourage them. Challenge them. When finished, ask everybody to share the last question on their list. You will accomplish a few things with this activity. First, you will have given each person time alone to reflect on his/her unique questions about the object rather than putting everyone on the spot up front.

Secondly, you will be emphasizing the value of extended viewing and thinking. Finally, the activity will result in more interesting and varied questions to initiate your group discussion, demonstrating that pushing for the more involved questions was rewarding.

For younger students who might not be capable of much writing, you could make a game out of this “yet another question” approach. First, focus the students’ interest on an object. Then invite them to see how many questions they can come up with. Stress that the point of the game is not to have you, as the docent, answering the questions, but rather it is to see how many questions the group can come up with. Ask the students to raise their hands whenever they have a question ready, having them ask just one question at a time. Young students will find it particularly humorous and engaging if, as the questioning goes on, you pretend to look a bit fatigued trying to keep up with all of their questions. Their initial reward is the fun of “wearing you out.” The extended reward is the discussion you can have following the game, based on the questions they created.

Now that we’ve explored rising to the challenge, improvising, and stretching for more questions, let’s go further with the idea of having visitors ask questions. It is important to realize that not all questions are created equal. Eric Booth explores this, saying, “Good questions themselves are creative accomplishments. Of course, there is more to a good question than just its invitation to produce a lot of right answers.” Consider the example he gives related to questioning students about trees. He compares the questions “What are some kinds of trees?” to “What are various solutions that trees could offer to that empty part of the backyard?” He explains, “Each of the two questions in this paragraph evokes images of trees in the answering process; however, the first invites a recall-and-drop mental game while the second uses images of trees as part of a process you have a personal stake in.”

Educators can be most effective when they model for their students what they are expecting. If you are trying to help your students ask deeper questions, show them what you mean. For example, ask them to decide which of two questions you pose is more effective in generating discussion. For instance, you might ask (1) “What are the colors in this artwork?” and (2) “How does the artist’s choice of colors impact the mood created by this artwork?” Ask them to discuss why one question takes the group further than the other. The first question certainly has value in leading to the more involved question but comparing the two will help illustrate for the students what you are looking for.

To assist your visitors in designing their own great questions, here is another activity you can try. Break your tour group into small teams of two or three and have them choose an object to

## Helping Visitors Ask Better Questions

discuss. Ask each team to generate as many questions as they can about their chosen object. Challenge the teams to design questions that will promote thinking and dialogue. After giving them some time, bring the larger group together and travel to each object selected by a team.

Have the team members share the two or three top questions about their object that they think will get everyone most involved in a discussion.

Putting so much effort into having visitors do more questioning raises the issue of docents providing answers. Sometimes docents feel pressure to provide answers to all questions. Encouraging multiple questions from all participants would seem to create multiple opportunities for a docent to be “wrong.” You may have lots of factual information about your collection that you could use in answering, but a string of factual answers thrown at an audience does not always set the stage for the best educational experience.

There are times on a tour when you should provide information. But, you could not — and should not — be able to answer every question that is posed. First, this would make it seem as if you are the keeper of all information and the group must rely on you to receive it. Secondly, it is a wonderful gift to visitors to model how to handle not knowing the answer to a question, and that there is value in the questions themselves. You may want to let your audience know early in your tour that some questions will not be answered in the museum. In addition, some good questions are never fully answered — but the questions themselves still have value.

I am not suggesting that you design a strategy that avoids all answers, but you may want to consider the manner in which you provide information. When you share facts with visitors, it is helpful if you contribute the information as a member of the group, participating in the discussion rather than leading it. For example, if discussing an artwork, you might say something like, “I find it interesting that so many of you have asked questions related to the dark colors in this painting. Through reading, I discovered that this artist had recently experienced the death of a loved one, and he said that the experience influenced his mood and in turn his color scheme.” By sharing in this way, you are demonstrating that you are listening to and honoring their questions, and you now know they are ready to actively receive information. Imagine if you had walked up to that painting and started right in saying, “This artist had recently suffered the death of a loved one and as a result his color scheme is primarily dark ...” Students would never have had a chance to ask their own questions, formulate their own opinions, or develop a connection with the painting.

By encouraging better questioning skills, you are helping visitors develop strengths that will enhance their personal and professional lives. Eric Booth stressed “[if] we develop the habit and skill of pursuing personal interests with good inquiry, our possibilities for growth become infinite.” And Renate and Geoffrey Caine, in their book *Education on the Edge of Possibility*, describe business leaders looking for potential employees “... who are innovative and creative in their thinking, and who can focus on possibilities rather than ‘right’ answers or doing what they are told.” By designing a strategy that gets your visitors asking questions, you’ve helped them think about what they already know, and what they’d like to know more about, rather than just having your group wait for you to give the “right” answers.

## Helping Visitors Ask Better Questions

Eric Booth echoes the lessons taught by the Whose Line comedians when he says, "I wish I could give you a handy kitbag of reliable questions to try, but there can be no prescribable set of sure-fire questions. The whole game is one giant improvisation; it is unplannable. Also, the questions themselves are far less important than the habit of questioning. Having a tour group ask more thoughtful questions rewards the docent as well as the visitors. After listening to the questions your visitors create, you will almost certainly be able to say to yourself and others, "I've seen that object so many times, but I never thought about it in quite that way..." That, perhaps, is one of the most enjoyable rewards of being a docent and working with such a variety of people, with such a wide range of questions.

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Nelson, Michael. "Helping Visitors Ask Better Questions," *The Docent Educator* 9.2 (Winter 1999-2000): 10-13

## Helping Visitors Ask Better Questions

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## Interpretation

Read the following articles for the fifth class  
4/4/2020

# Guidelines for Successful Interpretive Technique

Remember, YOU are the warm, engaging person who makes personal contact with visitors. Visitors tend to remember their guide as much as the specifics about the site. Be a great ambassador and you will create a positive and memorable tour experience for visitors!

## Tips for Structured Programs:

Before the program:

- Review what's in bloom and be aware of potential obstructions they might encounter.
- Learn about the visitors.
- Build anticipation by alluding to program highlights. Let visitors know what to expect.

But don't tell them too much or you will spoil the surprise.

Introduction:

- Promise that you'll make it worth their effort. Introduce the themes and message.
- Start on time. Keep your introduction brief and move to the next site so that visitors know it is not a static activity.

Bridge:

- Answer the unspoken questions: "Why was that just said?" and "How does it relate to me?"
- Keep visitors interested and involved by asking questions that get them thinking about the theme. Use props to engage all senses.
- Frequent short stops give a sense of movement, rather than a few long stops.
- Make your stops purposeful, to see something, not just make a speech.

Body:

- Offer messages to support the theme. Provide factual support; never falsify information. Avoid scientific jargon.
- When addressing the group as a whole, wait until the whole group has assembled. Talk to people at the back of the group (to make sure your voice carries). Make eye contact with everyone.
- Use props and activities to engage visitors.
- Encourage them to use all their senses, not just sight, and to discover things for themselves. Give puzzles or mysteries to solve or questions to answer which relate to the theme. Encourage them to touch, feel textures, smell, listen, and taste as appropriate.
- You don't have to offer a linear presentation; ask for visitor questions and about visitor interests to increase relevance.
- Remember, most people on your walk are on vacation. Relax and have fun.

Conclusion:

- Summarize messages. Reinforce theme.
- Offer parting thoughts, call to action, and closing cues

# Guidelines for Successful Interpretive Technique

## In both structured and casual interpretation:

- Greet and welcome guests: set the tone, gather information.
- Create a dialogue: request visitor input, share perspectives, recognize prior knowledge.
- Inclusive comments: build on visitor comments, refer to visitors' names, hometown, etc., during the presentation.
- Be sensitive to any special needs in your audience, whether hearing or vision difficulties, the different attention spans of children and adults, or physical challenges.
  
- Grab their attention: ask a question, use a prop, offer amazing statistics.
- Be receptive to people's interests as indicated by questions or information provided prior to the tour. Tailor tour content to reflect these interests.
- Encourage questions, but don't pressure people to respond, as they may feel like they are being tested.
  
- Props: encourage sensory involvement, high light "the real thing."
  
- Project your voice: enunciate, make sure you can be heard, adjust volume as necessary. Use vocal and facial expressions to enliven the presentation.
- Body language: yours and theirs; consider facial expressions, eye contact, posture, gestures. Maintain good eye contact with all members of your group, from the oldest to the youngest. Avoid annoying but often unconscious habits such as jingling coins in a pocket or clicking a pen.
- Language: use words that generate mental pictures, use specifics. Avoid jargon and slang.
- Humor: if it comes naturally to you, use humor; but use it wisely and be sensitive and timely.
- "I don't know" should be a comfortable answer to a question but suggest, or offer to find out, where to get the answer.
  
- Transitions: create bridges between ideas, establish comparisons or connections, and link different ideas or objects thematically.
  
- If someone touches an object, walks where they should not, or otherwise breaks site protocol, address the problem politely, yet firmly. It often helps to say, "We work hard to preserve our site and ask that nobody, including staff, touch our objects."
- If a visitor becomes unruly or disruptive, be polite but firm in requesting that they respect the needs of other visitors and the site.
  
- If there is an emergency, stay calm and follow site protocol. If the guide is calm, visitors will be more likely to stay calm as well.

From: *The Interpreters Training Manual for Museums* and "You Can be a Great Interpreter!"

## Other Interpretive Tools and Tricks

Adapted from: *You Can Be A Great Interpreter!* Dave Sutherland Open Space & Mountain Parks

There are many ... things you can do to make your presentations more entertaining and memorable. Remember, ideally it should be more fun for the visitor to listen to you than to do anything else. So how can you make your talks fun and interesting?

The following list of strategies, or interpretive "tools," is **not just for use in planned presentations, but in everything you do**: in every question you answer, everything you point out and share, every activity you do with your visitors. These tools will help you build bridges of understanding between what visitors already know and the new environment of the forest. Some strategies will work with some groups but not others. You will learn from experience which you feel most comfortable with.

**Smile and be Enthusiastic**: This may sound obvious, but it is one of the most important parts of working with the public. If you look like you are having no fun and are bored, it will be very hard for your visitors to be interested in you.

**Use Simple Language**: As an interpreter, your language should be simple and conversational, rather than memorized, artificial, or formal. Avoid throwing around a lot of complex technical or scientific terms unless the group obviously understands these, or unless you define them all (technical words quickly bore most people). Find another way to explain the concept without the jargon. In general, I try to avoid plant family names and scientific names unless there is no common name, or unless I can interpret the name for effect or use it as a springboard to explain something (e.g., *Procyon lotor*, the scientific name of the Raccoon, means "Little dog who washes. Cute!"). Example technical terms to carefully explain or avoid ... with kids: habitat, herbivore, ecosystem, biodiversity, pollen, perennial, erosion, species, hunter-gatherer, predator, adaptation, entomology, spore.

**Use "You" When Speaking and Writing**: Using "you" makes a program or written text more personal ..., helps people imagine and reference their own experience, and sounds more friendly and natural.

Definitely avoid replacing "you" with "one" ("One could see animals here,") or the passive voice ("Animals could be seen here.") These sound boring and academic, and will make visitors feel like they're back at work or in school instead of receiving a fun program. Count how many times I used "you" in this handout!

**Encourage Participation**: Encourage visitors to think and share their ideas. Give them objects to feel, puzzles to solve about what they see. Ask them to tell about their own experiences if it might be interesting to others. Some visitors may know more than you do! ... You can enrich your interpretation by tapping these people and you may learn something yourself in the process.

## Other Interpretive Tools and Tricks

**Questioning:** Perhaps the easiest and most important way to encourage visitor participation, asking questions is also one of the most common oversights of beginning interpreters. You are not a lecturer! (If you start lecturing, people will leave). Keep your questions very simple and easy for anybody to answer. Ask, "What are some ways we could tell a bird from a mammal?" or "Touch this moss. What does it feel like?" as opposed to, "Does anyone know what family this wildflower belongs to?" or "Who knows when the first gold was discovered in Boulder County?" Visitors can answer simple questions without taking a risk. As visitors answer your questions, they begin to feel confident and good about themselves. This in turn helps them to open up and participate more. Questions also stimulate interest and creative thought, cause people to reference their own experience, help break the ice and help visitors share their own experiences and thoughts. They can also help you remember things you forgot!

**Use Extraordinary Facts:** ... "Ripley's Believe it or Not" has been popular in newspapers for decades. Wonder why? People love surprising or shocking information. For example, female prairie dogs share nursing duties for each other's young. The beautiful pinkish sandstone seen in Boulder's homes and gardens was towering sand dunes before dinosaurs ever walked the earth. Did you know that an underground mine fire has been burning for years on a vein of coal beneath the town of Marshal?

**Use Mystery and Suspense:** As with extraordinary facts, people love puzzles and mysteries (look at the vast quantity of mystery stories sold each year!). There are many ways to inject a little mystery and suspense into your activities. For example, on a guided walk you can tell them something big is coming up, but they'll have to wait and see what it is. You can ask them to solve a mystery on the walk, starting at the beginning and giving them clues along the way. ("How do you think rocks could form like that?

You'll see the answer farther up the trail here.") You can ask them questions like, "So what do you think happened next?" or, "Where do you suppose the miners went to?"

**Use examples:** Examples bridge the gap between what is known and what is new. They can illustrate something abstract and unknown by explaining it in terms of something we are familiar with or can easily imagine. Examples provide a case against which we can check our understanding. How many times in this handout have I used examples to clarify? Just on this page alone?

**Tell personal stories:** Most of our conversations with friends revolve around telling stories about things that happen to us. People like to do this in their spare time, and it follows that it's a good interpretive tool, in part because it evokes leisure settings that people look for during their vacation. You, with your experience ..., will have many personal stories that will interest visitors as they learn. Talk about yourself.

**Use physical objects:** Seeing and touching help people learn, and help make abstract ideas more concrete. (Why do you suppose that maps at popular visitor sites are often smudged with fingerprints, or worn smooth from the passage of thousands of hands?) Physical objects can

## Other Interpretive Tools and Tricks

include... [leaves (especially the sensitive plant in the Conservatory), fruits, or “ripe” seed heads. You can bring things to the site that show how plants are used, such as the bottle of palm oil from the loft, or samples of vanilla pods or cacao nibs. You can also invite them to smell flowers, or make observations of plants they can't touch,] so on. ... Be sure to let your audience know what not to touch.

**Use Comparisons and Contrasts:** People love to see the similarities and differences between things, to see how things relate to one another, and to look for patterns. There are thousands of things to compare and contrast: ....

**Use Other Senses:** Accustomed to using our eyes, we often ignore our other senses. Help visitors discover nature through touch, smell and hearing. For example, you can smell the ... [flowers in both Conservatory and Lily Pool], play a game of "What's in the bag?" with hidden objects, or invite visitors to close their eyes and listen to the wind and bird songs while feeling the sun on their skin.

**Make References to the Visitor:** Remember, interpretation should be personal ... People will learn and remember more if they have a sort of "mental glue" to help stick new ideas in their brains. This "mental glue" is often based on things they already know or have seen and done. When you ask, "How many of you have ever seen...." or "Has it ever happened to you that....", you make people reference their own experience and this helps them remember what you say next. You prepare a spot where the new idea can stick to the old one.

**Use Metaphors:** A metaphor is a description or comparison that uses terms or ideas from one setting in a very different situation to make a point. Metaphors help us visualize or conceptualize things that are unfamiliar. Some can be quite funny. Here are some examples: the "information dump truck" (no such vehicle exists in reality); the "interpreter's toolbox" (you can't actually carry these ideas around with wrenches and hammers); "mental glue." You are familiar with many other metaphors. Frequently, they are common sayings or expressions. (Can you think of any?)

**Use Humor and Jokes:** I pay better attention when I'm laughing. We all love a good joke or funny story, and many of these can teach. Don't hesitate to use goofy examples to illustrate, share stories from your personal experience, or make funny comparisons. Children often enjoy interpreters who ham it up a bit, talking in silly voices or accents, or dressing up like particular characters.

**Use Variety:** People like different kinds of activities. Try to avoid just walking or talking. For example, encourage them to explore an object blindfolded; to sit quietly and watch for birds or listen for sounds; or to look through binoculars at a distant landmark.

**Use Movement and Eye Contact:** Your tone of voice and gestures are important to keep people interested. Avoid a dull, monotone voice, or you will sound like that awful professor who's lecture you dreaded every week. Stand and walk around, don't sit or stay seated. Do interesting

## Other Interpretive Tools and Tricks

things with your hands: point, make shapes to illustrate what you're saying. Move close to the group, or suddenly move back. Single out an individual and make eye contact with them alone for about five seconds while you talk, as if they are the only person you're talking to. Don't stare at your shoes or the sky when you are talking! Podiums set up a barrier between the audience and restrict your movement. Avoid them whenever you can.

**Use visual aids:** Some interpreters carry small posters, maps or laminated illustrations with them which they pull out at the proper moment. You can also draw maps and diagrams in the snow or sand, or use your hat to represent a mountain. Real objects also make great visual aids: that tree over there, this pinecone.

**Observe Your Visitors:** Each visitor is unique in terms of interest, prior knowledge and stamina. You must choose your interpretive activities to match the visitor's needs. Learn to watch for subtle cues from the visitors to guess how they are feeling: yawning, complaining about heat or being tired, asking many questions about what you just explained, walking ahead or struggling to catch up, etc. Be willing to change your mental program instantly to accommodate your group's wishes, needs, interest level or energy level.

**Develop your Own Style:** We all have our own personal style of communication. Some people tell better jokes, some can tell a story that makes you shiver. Some of us are natural comics, others are natural teachers. You will have to develop your own unique style, using the strategies listed here as well as others, by finding what works for you. Relax and be yourself

## Other Interpretive Tools and Tricks

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## Interpretation

Read the following articles for the sixth class  
4/11/2020

## Teaching Tough Groups

*Christine Cave Spring 1996, Volume 5, No. 3*

As docents, we've all had them. Sometimes we get advance warning. Most of the time we don't. But we have all known those occasions when we find ourselves in the middle of a tour, and we realize that things are out of control.

How it happens will vary. It may be a situation where nothing we do seems to engage the group. Or, perhaps everyone is so excited and energetic that it feels like they are bouncing off the walls. Sometimes, one person demands all the attention, leaving others silent. At other times, the group's agenda and yours are simply miles apart.

As part of our training, we docents are taught how to give information and let visitors make discoveries. Such training on content and the learning process is essential. Also important, however, is understanding the dynamics of a group, and knowing how to regain control of, and to communicate with, a group that seems out of control.

I'd like to share some of the approaches I've tried with my "groups from hell." Perhaps they may help you with yours. I begin by looking at the overall characteristics of the group to see where the difficulty lies. First, I consider the group's energy level — is it too low; is it too high? Secondly, I check out the focus of that energy. Are people focusing on the tour or elsewhere? Thirdly, I look at how the energy is dispersed within the group. Are my interactions connecting with the group as a whole, only with a few people, only with one person, or with no one at all?

For those groups where energy is low and there is little or no interaction, I do what I can to increase my own energy output. I let my enthusiasm show. Often, humor helps — since humor is a means of engaging people in a fairly nonthreatening way. In addition, I try to be extra observant. I may have a group that is just not with me, or I could have a group of people who are with me, but don't wish to be verbal about it. To engage either type of audience I will ask questions that are very open-ended in content — questions where every answer is correct.

These would include questions about people's opinions or experience, like "which would you choose as something to hang in your home," or "consider how you would have painted this scene if you were the artist." I verbally affirm every answer with a positive response and will ask for additional responses from others, affirming them as well.

If energy is "off the walls," I may need to do the opposite. The group may need focus or containment. In this case, I would pull down my own energy level, begin talking very quietly, enticing the visitors to come in close to me in order to hear what I have to say. With younger children I may speak about a secret I've learned about one of the objects or something else that would grab their attention. If necessary, there is always the option with young kids of sitting them down so that they simply aren't on the move. With older audiences I might aim for an enclosed space, such as a room with a door or an end gallery, where the group is physically corralled.

## Teaching Tough Groups

With a high energy group, many participants may be talking at once. With one group I toured everyone was asking questions at once. I did what I could to acknowledge that by saying, "I'm hearing lots of good questions, but can only answer them one at a time." Then I proceeded to take charge by pointing and selecting one person to speak at a time.

With school groups the difference between high energy and pandemonium is often determined by the teachers' involvement. I have learned that with a group of 13 or more students, I cannot simultaneously tour and control without additional adult help. When it is needed, I will ask the teacher for his or her assistance and identify exactly what type of assistance I require.

Now we come to that one person who dominates the group. This situation shows itself in many ways. It may be the person who always answers the questions you pose first. With children, it may be the child who is literally four inches away from you — who is very present physically as well as verbally. With adults, it may be a person who is continually challenging your information or presentation and clearly needs to be both the center of attention and right all the time. Or, it may be the one who always connects what you say with their own personal experiences. "My, this looks just like a chair we had at home when I was a girl."

To be certain that everyone has an opportunity to contribute or participate I need to consciously involve them. With the child who is first (and often the loudest) in answering, I need to pose questions that have multiple answers and then request additional input from others. Again, questions about opinions, personal experience, or that allow for alternate ideas are well suited for this task. For instance, "If you created a symbol to put on your sweatshirt that told people who you were, what would that be?" Then, after the dominator answers, I would turn to the others for their responses. In extreme cases it may be necessary to withhold a response to the dominator's answer and to call on another child by name for their answer, returning to the dominator later for his or her contribution.

I find the "person who has to be right" the most challenging. I once had a docent-friend come to me after a tour feeling that she had nothing to offer and that she shouldn't be touring. I knew her work, and she was excellent. She had just finished a tour with a person who challenged all her information, asked questions in an accusatory manner, and didn't even let her answer before firing another challenge at her. The experience can be demoralizing.

For me, trying to remember that this behavior represents one person's agenda — to gain the center of attention and to make me feel inferior— and knowing that it is not a valid critique of my competence or presentation, helps a bit. Regaining group equilibrium, however, can be more difficult since everyone else in the group can be feeling intimidated and angry.

The tool of eye contact is a very useful one. Establish eye contact with everyone in the group, while consciously avoiding contact with the person who is attempting to dominate. Without your attention, it is possible that she will calm down. Again, consciously inviting others to give their thoughts or opinions is helpful. If all else fails, however, you might be forced to tell the

## Teaching Tough Groups

dominator, “I realize you have many concerns about what we are discussing, so I invite you to speak with me about them after the tour has concluded and, until then, allow us to finish uninterrupted.”

To shift power away from an individual to the group, try involving the entire group in some decision, thereby redistributing the energy. Decisions like whether people would like a chance to sit while seeing the next object, or whether they would rather see a painting or a sculpture, are examples. Of course, this (as with most aspects of good teaching) requires flexibility on the part of the docent. To give the group choices redistributes the power within the group, but also away from the docent. The docent needs to set up the question so that the outcome of the choice will still work for the lesson.

When determining the focus of attention of a group I try to make some allowances. Sometimes, members of a group will wander away from the tour. I feel it is important to appraise the “quality” of their wandering. I try to watch and eavesdrop on the wanderers. If they are talking about things other than the topic-at-hand, or if they simply seem distracted, I will try to pull them back into the group subtly (through my tone inflection) or directly (by calling them back to join the group). I might even take the group over to where they are and “surround” them and continue the tour from there. If, however, they are really looking at the collection, and the conversation is about what they are seeing, I will simply let them go. My hope as a docent is that they become involved with the objects, and even if it isn’t through my words and tour, if that involvement is happening, I feel good.

There are groups that have their own agendas. I recently heard about one group of adolescents who visited our museum from a halfway house. Their attention was definitely not focused on looking at art. As they wandered through the galleries, their comments continued to focus on one topic — death. The docent conducting the tour did what needed to be done. “You seem interested in death. Let me show you how death is depicted in some of the art we have here.” Being both aware and flexible, this docent picked up on their theme and used it to gain their involvement.

Alas, there are times when we try all our tricks but to no avail. We’ve changed our energy level and tone, we’ve asked inclusive questions, we’ve made (and avoided) eye contact as required, and have even tried to shift physically and mentally to a new vantage point. Nothing has worked. When that happens, I figure its time to sigh, get a cup of tea, and seek out a fellow docent to commiserate with as I tell the story of my most recent group from hell.

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Cave, Christine. “Teaching Tough Groups,” *The Docent Educator* 5.3 (Spring 1996): 16-17.

# Dealing with Complaints

London Museum Development

## Listening to the Complaint:

- Get all the information
- Listen!
- Look at the customer
- Do not talk
- Do not argue
- Take notes
- Maintain your temper and composure
- Devote all of your attention to the customer. Do not take other calls. Do not have other discussions. Do not do other work
- Establish a relationship.

## Taking Action:

- Reiterate the critical issue or problem
- Maintain a professional position
- Do not agree or disagree but identify all issues
- Clarify their needs and wants – sometimes just an apology may be enough, but if action is needed be clear what action will be taken
- Offer a resolution that is acceptable to both the museum and the visitor
- Thank the visitor for bringing an important issue to the museum's attention.

## Complaints can be positive:

- One of the best ways to help make unhappy customers feel better is to listen
- This shows that you care about your visitors and helps to keep the situation calm.
- Volunteers receiving customer complaints should always be friendly, polite, and helpful; and try their best to resolve the problem if they can
- Even if a problem cannot be totally solved, the fact that you did everything you could to help will make the visitor feel much less negative, hopefully enough that they will remain positive about the museum when speaking to others, and will want to return themselves
- Sometimes it can be difficult to feel like helping an angry visitor, particularly if the problem is not your fault; however it is crucial that you remain polite and helpful at all times
- Try not to feel that it is a personal attack – sometimes it is just the mood someone came with today.

## Body Language:

- Remember that body language is a large part of communication, so do give the person your full attention
- If someone does have their complaint taken seriously and feels supported they may actually leave feeling happier than someone who didn't complain!
- A museum can learn from every situation, so do feed issues that arise back to staff.

# Difficult Visitors

Corporate Coach Group

## 1. Listen

- Listen without too much interruption to what the other person has to say. Listening has some major advantages.
- Listening gives you time to gather your thoughts.
- Listening gives the other person time to vent. And often, all the other person wants to do is to vent.
- Listening allows you to gather information without giving any away.
- Listening is complementary and respectful to the speaker.
- When you think it is time to stop listening, then move to step two.

## 2. Reflect back and empathize with their feelings

- Empathy is the ability to understand how other people feel and the reasons why. Empathy is good because it makes you seem to be more *human*.
- Please note that, you don't have to agree with anything the other person says, to empathize with the other persons feelings.
- You can DISAGREE with everything the other has to say, and yet still be empathetic.

## 3. Question down

- Your task is to question the other person in order to separate the facts from the feelings.
- You need to try to get away from talking about feelings, derogatory opinions, and accusations and you need to get the conversation onto the "facts of the case".

## 4. Answer

- Once you have all the facts clear in your mind, then give the other person your best answer.
- Ensure that your answer is based upon a logical evaluation of the facts.

## 5. Confirm

- Confirm their understanding of your answer. If you are lucky, the other person will agree with your logical answer to the problem.
- If you are unlucky, they won't agree with your logical answer to the problem; and they come back at you.
- If they come back at you, still not happy, then you go back to step one, listen. Then you reflect. Then you question them even more, then you may revise your answer.

You may need to repeat steps 1,2,3,4 until you get a solution that either: Represents your very best offer, whether or not they accept it as one they like. Represents a compromise that you both can live with.

## 6. Close

- Once you have the agreement and/or an understanding, then close the conversation.

## Interpretation

Read the following articles during the break  
3/21/2020

# Watching Children Grow: A Guide to Childhood Development

*Maria Shoemaker Autumn 1992, Volume 2, No. 1*

Unlike most people in “the teaching profession,” docents engage students of many ages and backgrounds.

Think about it. Third grade teachers teach eight-and nine-year olds. Most of their students probably live in the neighborhoods near the school. These teachers can become experts on their students’ thought and behavior patterns. High school teachers might teach a broader range of students, but they still have the opportunity to spend day after day with students ages 14-18, really getting to know their thoughts and feelings.

Docents, on the other hand, teach any school group that comes to their institution. Classes may range in age from pre-schoolers to 18 year olds. Few of us have the opportunity to get to know any particular group of students in great depth. But while we may not have intimate knowledge about the characteristics of any single age group, we do need to be able to gauge, at least in a general way, the Children thrive on genuine interest. This docent’s acknowledgment of a student’s effort has obvious results. level of abilities and interests of students on our tours.

Much has been written about the developmental stages of childhood. My comments were culled from two sources, *The Good Guide* (Grinder and McCoy) and *Approaches to Art in Education* (Chapman), and my own observations gathered from almost 20 years spent talking with kids in museum galleries. Please note that the exact age at which children move from one stage to another is fairly fluid, but the ranges given below are the most common ages for each stage to be in effect. The titles given to each stage are my own.

## **The Magic Years – Ages 3 to 6**

These are years when nothing is impossible. Santa can still come down everyone’s chimney on the same night, and fairies can live at the bottom of the garden. These young children have vivid imaginations and cannot easily separate reality from imaginary events.

Their sense of themselves as separate persons with individual identities is still weak, which is why they move very easily in and out of becoming other people like princesses or super heroes (what we adults call pretending). Children in the magic years seem to be bundles of physical activity and feelings. Although they are beginning to make sense of their world, their impulse toward empathy (which translates into becoming or pretending) and physical activity (running, jumping, hugging, dancing) is much stronger than their intellectual curiosity. by Maria K. Shoemaker Children of this age have few inhibitions and will be eager participants if you plan activities that engage their imaginations.

Ideal activities for children of this age level are those that involve imagination and pretending, physical movement and activity. In a display of musical instruments, students might imagine they are playing one of the instruments and act it out for the class. Then, involve all the children in the same activity. Have an imaginary band concert while you parade around the room letting each child “play” an instrument. The docent’s job is to lead the parade, but also to

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ask children what instruments they have chosen and to make sure that they are “playing” it with appropriate body movements.

Children of this age associate their identity very strongly with their name. Ask teachers to put large name tags on these children so that you can call on them by name.

Two cautionary notes about children this age in museums. One, they have very short attention spans. Counter this by keeping them busy in imaginative activities. Discussions should be short and directly related to objects they can see, and a certain amount of wiggling is to be expected. Second, children of this age have very little impulse control. Pre-schoolers particularly cannot remember not to touch something just because you ask them not to. Their touching is not so much disobeying you as it is responding to their own, strong internal impulse to feel something. The best way to control this situation is also to keep them busy. If they are engaged in imaginative play, walking like an Egyptian pharaoh or making the sounds of various animals, they will not even think about reaching out and touching a display.

### **The Discovery Years – Grades 1 through 3**

The most wonderful thing about children at this age is their delight at discovering new things. Because their eyes are now fully developed, they love being challenged to find objects from visual clues. Having developed a stronger sense of who they are, these children have an increasing awareness about and interest in what is going on around them. They are avid observers of the world and its people! They continue to enjoy imaginary stories. They have also developed a great sense of humor and enjoy silly jokes, especially when they make them.

Perhaps because they are accomplishing remarkable things in school — learning to read, learning to write, learning how to interact with their classmates — they have a great sense of their own power and believe strongly in the power of others to accomplish things. They enjoy games, especially when they can participate with a classmate.

Their ability to express themselves verbally is increasing, although still somewhat hampered by limited vocabulary, making it easy to underestimate what concepts children this age can grasp. These are the students who enthusiastically raise their hands to answer a question even when they do not know the answer. It is an expression of their sheer delight at participating.

Activities that allow children to experience the excitement of discovery are critical for children this age. Don't tell them, ask them to find out. If you think about your tour in this way it will also lead you to discover the kinds of concepts you should be presenting. Can they find it out by looking and thinking? Or, is the fact or concept so separate from the object that you must tell them, adding another layer of meaning beyond that which they can discover. You will certainly want to tell them a few things, but for the most part at this age children should be given the chance to discover for themselves the joy of making sense of objects.

A look at the kinds of learning tasks children this age perform in school leads to the best ideas for museum activities. In science, children are asked to observe closely and describe accurately.

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In math, they count, match, sort, and place things into sets and subsets. Ask children to look at an object for a few seconds, then turn away and describe it. This appeals to their sense of power and also is a fun way to reinforce the notion that in a museum we must look carefully if we want to learn a lot about an object. Rather than telling them how a spinning wheel works, ask them as a group to try to figure it out. You can supply key pieces of information if they get stuck. Ask them to look at three animals and decide which two are most alike, and why.

Children this age love riddles and problem solving. A favorite activity for this age group at the Philadelphia Museum of Art is to ask them to go into a room full of armor and find ... a suit that would fit a child, a suit that would not fit a human (horse armor), and something that flies in the air (a stuffed falcon that served as the crest on a helmet). We can hardly contain their enthusiasm as we remind them not to touch or run while playing the game. Conversations center around the pieces they found and what can be learned from them.

Keep in mind that an understanding of historical time for this group is as yet undeveloped. For most of them, Moses roamed the desert at the same time dinosaurs roamed the Earth ... “a long time ago.” Efforts to place things in historical periods should be minimal and are best when linked to a person the children have studied, for example, “in George Washington’s time.”

In addition, although these children are wonderful at noticing specifics, they are not yet able to infer generalities from them. Don’t ask them to look at a group of paintings and decide what was important to the artists who painted them. Instead, ask them to find all the examples of outdoor painting in the room. Then you can tell them that all these painters liked to paint the out of doors, and that’s called landscape painting ... and so forth.

### **The Confident Years – Grades 4 through 6**

For many museums, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade classes constitute the largest single block of field trip visits among all the stages named here. Children of this age have, for the most part, mastered the skills they need to be able to take in information and process it. They can read, write, understand addition and subtraction, and are learning more complex ways of relating numbers. They now study subjects in school that are content driven, such as Colonial America or the Caribbean Sea. Because they read and learn more on their own about subjects that interest them you should always ask students this age and older, or their teachers, what they already know or have studied about the theme of your tour. Students this age still respond best to questions that are specific, not general. They are much more aware of, and interested in, the range of feelings people have. They have a growing interest in status and will often tell you, “She’s the smartest kid in the class,” or “He always acts like that.” Not yet rebellious against rules and authority, these children are eager to learn about new things and, for the most part, are still eager to take part in all discussions and activities.

Activities for this age should involve the whole child. Confident Years children do quite well at independent assignments. They like attempting to observe objects on their own, although they

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still need your help in drawing conclusions from the things they have observed. They like to talk and have a vocabulary adequate to discuss most things. At this age, it is appropriate to introduce new terms specific to the discipline of your museum.

Students are now slightly more self-conscious in imaginative activities requiring body movement, but they make up for it in their greater capacity to ponder intellectual issues. This age learner is particularly captivated by things that are odd or unexpected, such as hidden pictures and secret languages. They are very good at categorizing objects into groups, and love to do it.

In general, activities that these kids accomplish easily, such as “Tell me whether you think a rich, medium, or poor person would have owned this cabinet.” or “What kind of food do you think this animal would eat?” are wonderful when followed by, “Correct, how did you know?” Kids this age are very perceptive and quite able to reason, but are somewhat challenged when trying to explain their reasoning process.

Look at an abstract work of art and see if each youngster in the class can come up with one adjective to describe it. I promise you will see things in the piece you have never seen before. Do not neglect the emotional side of these children; they are very sensitive, especially when responding to the mood or feeling of a human drama. If they seem shy when asked to express their feelings (remember, you are a stranger), suggest opposite words to inspire them. “Is what’s happening in this painting exciting or peaceful? What makes you think so?” Or, “If you were that person would you feel scared, brave, or both? Why?”

### Looking in the Mirror – Grades 7 through 9

The transition from childhood into puberty has powerful effects upon young people in this age bracket. Bodies change shape. Girls begin menstruation; boys’ voices change. Some people shoot up in height, while others feel they will never grow. Hormonal changes associated with this volatile time of life cause skin blemishes to appear. Is it any wonder that people this age become self-conscious and terribly concerned about the way they look? These are the years of endless looking in the mirror. Students are keenly aware of their appearance, but also of their skills and talents, wanting to be recognized for accomplishments and chastising themselves for what they perceive as their shortcomings.

Emotionally, young adolescents are anxious to establish their own set of rules and values within their own peer groups. As they move slightly out from under the watchful eye and comforting safety of parents, their need to belong to a group of their peers is powerful. Intellectually, these children are just beginning to think abstractly. This means that you can discuss with them not only coins, but currency, the effect currency has on civilization, the political implications of coin design, etc. Young adolescents see themselves as very different from “children,” with good reason given all the changes they are going through. It is very important that we do not respect their desire to be treated in a more adult fashion, all the while understanding that, in fact, these young people still have a lot more growing to do.

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One of the wonderful things about young adolescents is that they are not so far away from childhood as to have lost their sense of fun and play. They have a very active sense of humor and love to laugh, and tease, and joke. If treated with respect, these students love to engage in looking activities of all kinds, particularly if allowed to do so with friends.

The discussion of activities for adolescents in museums brings us into new territory. Thus far we have talked about what kinds of games or questions engage an age group. With young adolescents we need to add another ingredient — the perceived attitude of the docent toward the students. This aged person will rarely run up to you and say, “Are you our guide? What are we going to do today?” Instead, they will stay in their peer groups and let you know that they are more comfortable with a slight distance from you. They will not immediately display trust in you by answering your questions, but will reserve judgment until they see *how you treat them*.

Three key attitudes on your part will help these young people open up to you. 1. Do not treat them in a juvenile fashion. Talk to them using adult words and intonations. 2. Do not criticize them or imply criticism for being who they are, even though their joking and teasing can be tiresome. 3. Express through your body language and general attentiveness your genuine interest in them and what they have to contribute. This can have a magical effect on kids this age, since they are very self aware. They will appreciate your interest in them, especially because they often do not expect it.

Activities similar to those named for The Confident Years work well for this age if introduced as mature projects. Worksheets are terrific, since they help ensure that all of the students will think about the questions you are posing. Try to develop strategies that allow students to work independently or in small groups. This will give you the opportunity to talk with them in fewer numbers or individually. Students this age will often engage in conversation with you one-on-one that they would not do in front of the whole group.

### **The Approach to Adulthood – Grades 10 through 12**

The great thing about working with high school students is that they think like adults on many levels. Though their experience base may be more limited, their abilities to process information, make assumptions, predict outcomes, and discuss generalities are now fully developed. Instead of focusing on what a work of art looks like and how the artist created those effects, you can also discuss whether a painting of similar’ subject matter would still be relevant today or what a feminist interpretation of the work might be. Older adolescents also have longer attention spans and can retain more information, especially when it helps to explain what they see.

This age group has formed fairly strong opinions about what they find interesting and relevant in their lives, so try to make as many connections as possible between the material you cover and what students are studying in school. If you have teenagers at home, or can make yourself aware of current trends, music, and so forth, by all means do so. But beware! If your assumptions are not up to date, the kids will let you know.

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Young people of this age have a great desire to be seen as competent, which leads them to resent, for instance, having to be chaperoned in a museum. They like doing things on their own and displaying their abilities. They are still very focused on conforming to the norms of their peer group. They may not be eager to answer your questions verbally, but will respond with a nod or a look. They typically have an overwhelming interest in male/female relationships, and this can be a rich area for discussion.

Ask students this age to go into an exhibit area and make some particular observations or decisions before you gather to talk. For example, in a historic house ask students to walk around the downstairs and decide the function of each of the rooms, or ask them to look around a room and come up with five activities that they think may have taken place there based on observations of the furnishings and so forth. In a gallery full of chairs, ask them to identify three chairs that are clearly different styles, and then name three that are in the same style. Students will appreciate the autonomy you give them as they look, and you can base your discussion on what they observed.

Finally, this age student is very critical of the adult-run world, and can be very articulate at criticism in general, especially when it is negative. If you have a particularly taciturn group, try taking them to an area of your institution that you think will affront their sensibilities. At my museum it's the contemporary art section. I know that even the quietest group will challenge me on how something can be considered art if it looks like "a monkey could have made it." Rather than perceive these challenges as a threat, use them as the point of departure for discussions. Do not feel you have to prove to the students that they are wrong to have the feelings they do. Instead, let them express their feelings, then express your own. If you feel positively, tell why you do. But, let the students be the ones who decide for themselves whether they should value something or not.

One of the truly wonderful things about being a museum docent is the opportunity to see young people at so many different stages of growth and understanding. Keep in mind what is positive about each of these stages and allow yourself some time to marvel at the amazing things they accomplish on their journey from infancy to adulthood.

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Shoemaker, Maria K. "Watching Children Grow: A Guide to Childhood Development," *The Docent Educator* 2.1 (Autumn 1992): 6-9.

# Peek and Do! Making Museum Visits Meaningful for the Youngest

*Cleta Booth Winter 1993, Volume 3, No. 2*

How can I get and keep their attention on the exhibits?" and "How can I make this meaningful?" are questions that confront docents, teachers, and parents as they participate in museum visits with young children. Good answers to these two questions mean you won't find yourself asking "How can I control them?" and "Should children this age even be here?"

Orientation and follow-up are the keys to success, along with careful watching and listening for cues from the children as you go along.

## **The Orientation**

An orientation need not be long to be effective, but it should include several components. **First, establish the groundrules, positively.** These will vary from museum to museum (and sometimes from exhibit to exhibit). In our hands-on children's museum and nature center we say:

- The things here are for you to touch, climb up into, crawl through, and explore. Be gentle with them so you can use them again and so other people can use them.
- The floors are hard and we don't want anyone to get hurt. Please walk.
- The live animals can get scared and hurt just like you. Be kind to them. They are wild and aren't for touching.
- We are here to help you. Ask any questions and we'll try to answer them.

In many museums "hands-off" has to be the rule. Children will comply if you explain: "These beautiful dresses will get stains on them and even fall apart if we touch them. That's why they have to stay behind glass. But I have a piece of brocade for you to feel and look at up close."

## **Second, present the alternatives.**

Briefly, let children know what there is to see or do. This will usually change somewhat over time and may vary with the age of the children. Currently we say:

- We have three rooms. In this one you can paint, draw, and use stamps and other things to create a portrait of yourself and what you like to do.
- In the room to the right you can learn about animals and the kinds of habitats in which they live. You can watch Hissy the owl; you can compare different kinds of animal bones; you can climb up into a bird's nest or crawl through a prairie dog tunnel. You will discover other things to do there, too.
- In the room to the left you can learn what it was like to be a young Arapaho Indian or Oregon Trail emigrant 150 years ago. You can go into a tepee, play Indian games, listen to stories and think about the boys and girls you see crossing the land in the covered wagons, or you can load a covered wagon, listen to stories about the long trip, and think about the Indian boys and girls you might meet at the trading post.

Giving children alternatives allows for individual differences of age, temperament, and interests. With a school group, a decent might be able to say, "I'm going to take everyone on a walk-through of two painting galleries. We'll be looking at colors to see how the different

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combinations make you feel (quiet, excited, gloomy, happy, etc.). Then we'll divide into two groups. If you want to look again at very new paintings, your teacher will take you back to the modern gallery. If you want to look again at the very old paintings, I'll take you there." If there is no way for the children to have choices in what they do or where they go, it is especially important that the docent create opportunities for mental choices in the activities and discussions that make up the tour.

**Third, conduct a warm-up activity that introduces the children to the exhibit, concept, or thinking process on which you wish to focus.** We have as one goal wanting children to look closely at the animals in our displays to begin to learn how animals are adapted to their habitats. We might begin by bringing to our orientation area one mounted bird specimen. After talking about its beak and feet, the children can guess about where it lives and what it eats. Then we encourage them to go on a "treasure hunt" in the nature center to discover how many different kinds of beaks and feet they can find that suggest different ways of life.

A class of 1st – 3rd graders I once observed in an art museum watched the process as a teacher made a silhouette of one class member— shining a light to create a shadow, tracing the edge of the shadow, cutting it out and mounting it on contrasting paper. She also mounted the remaining "frame" on contrasting paper to show them the idea of negative space. The class set off with great enthusiasm to look at a collection of silhouettes, with the promise they would make their own at the end of the class.

### The Tour

Once orientation is complete, the exploration or tour can begin. Whenever possible, build exploration in. Young children need to be active, moving, thinking, and talking — not standing or sitting and listening. **A key part of the adult's role is to listen and observe.** Whatever you may have planned to ask, tell, or show must constantly be revised based on the questions the children have, their observations, and their degree of engagement (as judged by their behavior). It's better to change the planned activity or shorten a program or tour when the interest runs out than to hold onto a predetermined plan and have it fail as children begin to misbehave

It is also important to be able to repeat or expand a planned activity if the children demonstrate interest. Once a group of parents and I took my class of four year olds from an inner-city public school to the art museum nearby. A traveling exhibition on "Dali's Jewels" featured a sumptuous display of Salvador Dali themes such as the melting watch done in gold and jewels and displayed against dramatic crystals. It was accompanied by a visitor-activated slide show.

The sub-group of the class with whom I explored the exhibit looked at the display with curiosity and amazement, then played the slide show through three times. I was wondering what was holding their attention. Finally, one little boy, with evident relish, announced, "That elephant (on stilt legs) is bad!" He thoroughly enjoyed the absurdity. Later I noted that he had even picked up the word "surreal" from the tape.

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Remember that each child, no matter how young, is an individual and that each one's responses, interests, and tastes may be unique. Another four year old, in a different institution, had spent so much time looking at geology museum displays and going on field trips with his geologist father that he incorporated into a typical preschool picture of "Springtime" (a child, the sun, and a rainbow) a whole underground cross section of geological strata. It was obvious that the child's individual interests had been noted and fostered by an attentive adult.

### The Follow Up

**The post-tour follow up may be the most essential element for making the visit meaningful.**

Whenever possible it should include some concrete, hands-on activity. The art class learning about silhouettes came back after a short visit to the silhouette collection. While the teacher and an assistant made silhouettes of each child, (they were too young to do this successfully themselves), pairs of children put simple objects under lights, traced outlines, cut out and mounted on contrasting paper both the silhouette of the object and the negative space from which it had been cut. Those children will remember most what they actually did — the process. Their silhouette portraits will serve as a bridge to remind them of their observations. The experience of making them will form a base to which other experiences with silhouettes or with negative spaces will connect.

The post-tour follow up has another important function. It gives an opportunity to correct misunderstandings and to clear up confusions. When my older son was still a toddler, my husband and I took him with us (for our convenience) when we visited an art museum. One time he wandered around a corner just ahead of us, then came tearing back to me, clearly frightened. "Mommy, mommy — part lady, part lady" was all he could manage. I rounded the corner and there, on a central pedestal, was a bust of a Roman goddess. To the unprepared two year old, whose perceptions of reality are distinctly different from adults, this armless, headless apparition was truly alarming. When we went home we got out the familiar playdough. I modeled an approximation of the bust and we talked about the "part lady." I introduced the word "sculpture" and noted that sculptures could get broken and fixed and that people who make sculptures can make them of parts of things if they want. Then he rolled a ball of playdough for a head for our small statue and "fixed" the part lady. Similarly, a docent might lead a preschool, kindergarten, or primary group in using playdough as a follow-up to a visit to a sculpture gallery or a ceramic or pottery exhibit.

This summer, as I toured a gem and mineral gallery at a major science museum. I observed a situation that recalled another experience with my own son when he was a preschooler. "Come on. Mom, there's nothing here!" I overheard from a five year old boy tugging his mother past the cases of gems and minerals. His mother, annoyed, glanced at a few cases, then walked quickly out the door. My mind leapt years into the past to a visit with my own four year old to an exhibit on stained glass at an art museum in New York. "This is boring!" was his response to the multi-colored wonders. But as I looked, we talked, and he began to look, too. "What kinds of pictures would you make if you had lots of bits of different colored

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glass?" "How would you hold them together?"

For years I kept the reminder, the follow-up, of that visit. When we got back to our apartment in the Bronx we noticed lots of different colored bits of glass from broken soda, beer, and wine bottles in the gutters. Very carefully we picked them up, took them indoors, and washed them. Carefully, reflectively, he glued them to a piece of shirt cardboard backing, creating his own stained glass marvel.

What did he learn from the experience? Not the names or dates of artists, or the location of masterpieces. Nothing about periods or styles. Not the technical intricacy of stained glass making. But I do think he learned to look and to wonder, and that a museum can be an interesting place. I also think he learned that beauty can be created out of improbable materials and that he himself could be a creator. At age four, that's a lot!

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# Survival Strategies for Touring Teens

*(9 do's and a don't)*

*Prepared by Catherine with advice from Denise, Fabrizio, Jeanne, and Suzanne 27 November 2006*

## **DO**

1. Mentally prepare yourself for a lack of eye contact. Teens will generally not make eye contact with you, so don't panic if you don't see it. As you converse with them, let your eyes move around the group so no one feels singled out or stared at.
2. Prepare teens for what they will experience. Make sure you go over museum rules so teens know how to be successful visitors. Orient them to your general plan – that you will spend time concentrating on a few works you think will be interesting to them rather than describing each piece; that you will be asking them questions because you are really interested in their ideas, opinions, and questions.
3. Ask easy questions at the beginning just to get the conversation going. “What did you do before you came to MOCA?” establishes your interest in the teens’ experience. “When I say the word fashion, what comes into your mind?” gets teens thinking about how to connect their own experiences to the exhibition.
4. Ask follow-up questions in a non-threatening way. I watched Fabrizio smile and enthusiastically ask teens who giggled and called the Hussein Chalayan video crazy and trippy, “What’s crazy about it?” “What’s trippy about this video?” Fabrizio showed appreciation for their initial tentative comments and gently pushed them to explain further.
5. Mentally prepare yourself for silence. If no one answers a question you have just asked, spend a few moments looking at the work of art you are discussing. This models careful looking, and takes the pressure off the teens who might feel put on the spot.
6. Remember you are not a teen. You do not have to know about high school students’ popular culture or current slang to earn teens’ trust or respect. In fact, most attempts by adults to use slang or refer to pop icons ring pretty hollow with teens. However, even though you’re an adult, you don’t have to be seen as a classroom teacher or a parent either. Instead, draw on your own personal strengths. Your status as an artist and/or representative of MOCA gives you a unique role with respect to teens – they may be looking at you as someone they might like to emulate. Let your enthusiasm, playfulness, and genuine interest in the teens come across.
7. Follow their interest. If teens show sudden interest in a work that is not in your plan, acknowledge their curiosity and interest by spending a bit of time there. Find out what drew their attention to the work of art and show enthusiasm for their observations.
8. Give them puzzles to solve. Teens like to be challenged to come up with solutions, not just

## Survival Strategies for Touring Teens

answer questions that don't seem to go anywhere. You can build higher-level questions into your tour ("What do architecture and fashion have in common?"), but cooperative learning can also be a great way to give students an idea to puzzle out. Fabrizio and Ismael, for example, asked Culver City High School students to investigate Skin + Bones using a worksheet. You can limit your cooperative learning exercise to one room, or to one question, but it can break the one-teacher-vs.-group-of-students dynamic of your tour into a bunch of mini discussions where even quiet teens get a chance to participate.

9. Praise their involvement. At some point during the tour and at the end, tell the teens you appreciate something about what they've done – been very careful not to touch the works of art, observing the exhibition carefully, giving thoughtful opinions. Teens need rewards and respect.

### **DON'T**

1. Lecture. No piece of information you can give is more important than the overall quality of the teens' experience. Any sense that you are in lecture mode will result in an immediate turnoff. Their bodies will be there, but their hearts and minds will not.

## Emphasizing the Noun, Not the Adjective

*Betsy Gough-DiJulio and Raymond M Leinbach Spring 2003, Volume 12, No. 3*

*This article first appeared in the Autumn 1992 edition of The Decent Educator. We believe the excellent counsel this text offers is worth repeating and is particularly germane to the topic of this issue.*

Successful tours for older adults, as with any group, are largely a matter of understanding the audience and reshaping one's perceptions and techniques accordingly. The media, which strongly influences many of our commonly held perceptions, abounds with negative stereotypes of older people. Consider the advertisement for an emergency response system featuring poor Mrs. Fletcher who has "fallen and can't get up." Examining stereotypical representations of people, whether in the media or elsewhere, is a useful starting place when attempting to better understand an audience.

A common stereotype related to education is that the capacity to learn diminishes with age. Thus, the adage "You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

While most experts agree that the capacity to learn is maintained throughout the adult life cycle, the reasons for learning can change. For instance, children in school often regard learning as the accumulation of information, ideas, skills, and literacies to be used later on. Adults, on the other hand, often regard education as something to be applied to an occupation or a family role.

We should, therefore, expect the goals of learning to be different for older adults than their younger counterparts, partially because of changed social roles brought about by retirement, grand-parenting, death of a spouse, or other life changes. Perhaps their goals become more general, such as to develop a more inclusive sense of how they relate to the world around them. While knowledge of what motivates learning can help docents provide a better learning environment, knowing something about theories and styles of learning allows docents to discredit erroneous stereotypes and provide older adults with more meaningful tours. In an article in the Journal of Museum Education (Winter 1991), Lynn Dierking identified 10 generalizations that are key to human learning. Docents should have an understanding of all of them, but for purposes of this article's emphasis, we will focus on three.

### **1- The learning process is strongly influenced by prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences.**

Heterogeneity may be the most obvious characteristic among groups of older adults. The range of individual differences increases with age and life experiences. In addition, all the other factors that differentiate people from one another (educational background; social, economic, marital, and health status; social, religious, and political attitudes/beliefs) will determine the behavior, personality, and learning process of older adults.

It becomes necessary, therefore, to establish a context in which visitors feel comfortable sharing highly diverse observations, ideas, and experiences. This can be accomplished, in part, by asking older adults questions that work to establish an informal, accepting environment

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while revealing more about each visitor's aptitudes, interests, and perspectives.

Though the benefits of inquiry teaching are well established, decades may have passed since adults on tour were engaged in this manner. Students, on the other hand, are exposed to this method in their classrooms. Therefore, docents should "ease" these older visitors into this mode of interaction.

Many docents find "life review" an effective way to structure interaction with older adults. History is meaningful to older adults in ways that it cannot be for younger people. Life review encourages individuals to reflect on their diverse personal histories and relate them to exhibited objects.

The docent's questions and comments should direct the discussion to help visitors forge connections for themselves.

### ***2- Perception is central to the learning process.***

Information is acquired through the five senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting). Making tours more multi-sensory is advantageous because it engages additional ways to perceive, while it acknowledges and accommodates differences in the variety of favored modes of perception.

The majority of older adults do not experience significant vision or hearing impairments. For those who do, however, tours that depend largely on the spoken or written word, or even upon viewing objects, may deprive them of a prerequisite for learning— perception.

### ***3- Memory is central to the learning process.***

Dierking defines learning as "a measurable change in behavior that persists over time, presumably because it becomes a part of our memory." While most older adults do not experience significant difficulty with short-term memory loss, those who do may be more apt to forget earlier parts of a discussion. Therefore, they may seem unable to link new information with prior knowledge, since what has been forgotten cannot be integrated.

To avoid creating problems for those who experience memory loss, docents should design questions that are not dependent upon visitors' ability to recall information introduced earlier in the tour, while still building on previous concepts. For example, in an art museum, replace a question like this: "Think about our discussion of Picasso's treatment of space in the last painting we looked at. How is de Chirico's different in this work?" with this: "We just talked about how Picasso flattened space and presented different sides of an object simultaneously. How is de Chirico's space different from Picasso's flattened space?" The latter question does not require visitors to retrieve earlier dialogue from their short-term memory.

Current philosophies of museum education recommend a slower pace for ALL visitors to allow time for them to realize new insights and contemplate more fully the object(s) being discussed. Though most do not, some older adults do experience a significant slowing in the assimilation

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and processing of information, as well as in response time. Speaking at a moderate pace will help. Also, repeating or rephrasing aspects of the dialogue slows the pace of exchange, making it easier to follow while teaching or clarifying vocabulary and concepts.

Slowing the pace of discussions will also aid visitors having hearing impairments. It is estimated that approximately 15 percent of people over 65 experience significant hearing loss. A person who appears not to understand what is being discussed or asked may simply not have heard. Presbycusis, the most common hearing impairment among older adults, is associated with difficulty hearing higher tones. Lowering the pitch of your voice, enunciating words, and looking directly at visitors is much more effective than shouting. Background noise, such as music or conversation, should be minimized. Similarly, conversations between people in a group are often difficult to follow for people with hearing impairments, unless care is taken to repeat or rephrase what was said.

Some physical changes that occur with aging may require that docents make adaptations for older adults. Slowing the walking pace accommodates those with decreased mobility. While walking more slowly, try asking questions or pointing out objects for visitors to observe. Rest and restroom stops may need to be incorporated into the tour. During a rest stop, pass an object around to shift attention away from the wait. If some of the visitors want to move more quickly, or don't want to rest, direct them to your next stop and suggest a focus. You might say, "If you walk straight ahead and enter the next gallery on your left you will see an exhibition of landscape. Try figuring out which country each scene depicts."

By understanding this audience and making a few adjustments to your teaching and touring techniques, you will find that when providing tours for older adults, you can emphasize the "adult" and not the "older."

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