

INTERPRETATION
Lincoln Park Conservatory and Gardens
Greeter Training

- 1) Definitions of Interpretation
- 2) Freeman Tilden, "Principles of Interpretation," *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007
- 3) Dave Sutherland, "Ten Principles that Guide Interpretation," *You Can Be a Great Interpreter*. Colorado: Open Space & Mountain Parks.
- 4) Judy Rand, "The Visitor's Bill of Rights," *227-Mile Museum, Curator* vol. 44 #1
- 5) 100 Universal Ideas
- 6) Alan Gartenhaus, "Asking Questions," *The Docent Educator*, 2000
- 7) Mary Kay Cunningham, "Difficult Visitor," *The Interpreters Training Manual for Museums*.
- 8) Guidelines for Successful Interpretive Technique
- 9) Dave Sutherland, "Other Interpretive Tools and Tricks," *You Can Be a Great Interpreter*. Colorado: Open Space & Mountain Parks.
- 10) Maria Shomaker, "Watching Children Grow: A guide to Childhood Development," *The Docent Educator*, 1992
- 11) Prepared by Catherine with advice from Denise, Fabrizio, Jeanne, And Suzanne, "Survival Strategies for Touring Teens," *The Docent Educator*, 2006
- 12) Betsy Gough-DiJulio and Raymond M Leinbach, "Emphasizing the Noun, Not the Adjective: Touring with Older Adults," *The Docent Educator*, 2003

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

Interpretation

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.

Ten 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

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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.

The Visitor's 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, their 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.

100 Universal Ideas

Addiction	Fidelity	Pride
Alienation	Freedom	Progress
Ambition	Friendship	Purity
Anarchy	Gluttony	Race
Apathy	Greed	Reality
Atonement	Growth	Rebirth
Beauty	Happiness	Redemption
Belonging	Hate	Regret
Betrayal	Heroism	Renewal
Brotherhood	Hope	Revenge
Change	Humility	Salvation
Chaos	Identity	Savagery
Community	Imagination	Secrecy
Companionship	Individuality	Sexism
Conformity	Infidelity	Sexuality
Corruption	Innocence	Sloth
Courage	Jealousy	Solidarity
Curiosity	Justice	Solitude
Death	Knowledge	Stability
Desire	Longing	Struggle
Destruction	Loyalty	Submission
Dishonesty	Lust	Success
Dominance	Madness	Suppression
Doubt	Materialism	Survival
Duty	Maturation	Temptation
Dystopia	Mortality	Tradition
Ego	Obligation	Trust
Empathy	Obsession	Truth
Enlightenment	Patriotism	Vanity
Failure	Peace	Vengeance
Faith	Perseverance	War
Family	Poverty	Work
Fantasy	Power	
Fear	Predestination	

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

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one's thoughts will be valued and that one's attempts will be positively recognized. If anyone has an inkling 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.

Difficult Visitors

The Interpreters Training Manual for Museums, Mary Kay Cunningham

You are the face of the institution. How you interact with the public can make or break a visitor's experience.

When dealing with a frustrated or disappointed visitor:

1. Ask her to **review** the entire problem. LISTEN!
2. **Empathize!** Don't take her comments personally.
3. **Repeat** her comments and ask for confirmation and/or accuracy.
Refer the visitor to the proper authority if the problem is beyond your responsibility.
4. **Ask how** she would like to see the situation **resolved**.
5. Tell her **what you can do** and how you plan to **follow-up**.
6. **Offer something** as a gesture of gratitude (for her comments) or consolation (for her trouble). For example:
 - free tickets for another visit or special event
 - refund entire or partial cost of today's visit (parking or admissions)
 - provide discount at cafe or gift shop
 - offer souvenir (usually best for issues related to children)
7. **Give her options** for voicing her concerns elsewhere (comment box, manager, online).
8. **Thank her for taking the time** to share her concerns; assure her that the museum will learn from this experience, and invite her back (offer free tickets).

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.

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 wild flower 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

Other Interpretive Tools and Tricks

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 others' 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 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

Other Interpretive Tools and Tricks

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 tool box" (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 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 pine cone.

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.

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 ask children

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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 still need your help in drawing conclusions from the things they have observed. They like to talk

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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.

Maria K. Shoemaker is the Associate Curator of Education for Youth and Family Programs at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The recipient of the "1992 Outstanding Pennsylvania Museum Art Educator of the Year" award given by the Pennsylvania Art Education Association, Ms. Shoemaker is the author of numerous articles on museum education and a lecturer/presenter at museum conferences throughout the country.

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

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 answer questions that don’t seem to go anywhere. You can build higher-level questions into

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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: Touring with Older Adults

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,

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by asking older adults questions that work to establish an informal, accepting environment 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.

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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 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."

Betsy Gough-DiJulio earned her M.A. in art history from Vanderbilt University and is the partnership coordinator in the Office of Community Relations for Virginia Beach City Public Schools. Formerly, Ms. Gough-DiJulio was the education director at the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia in Virginia Beach, VA, a position she held for over eleven years. She has been a frequent contributor of articles to The Docent Educator over the past 12 years.

Raymond M. Leinbach, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the School of Community Health Professionals and Physical Therapy at the College of Health Sciences; and is the director of the Center for Gerontology at Old Dominion University, in Norfolk, VA.

Gough-DiJulio, Betsy and Raymond M. Leinbach, Ph.D. "Emphasizing the Noun, Not the Adjective: Touring with Older Adults," *The Docent Educator* 12.3 (Spring 2003): 10-11+.