

INTERPRETATION AND TIPS FOR LEADING TOURS

Wildflower Walk Tours



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

Tips for Leading Interpretive Walks

Planning and Preparation

1. On an interpretive walk, *flexibility is a key ingredient*. Some people want lots of information, some just want to take pictures or don't care much about nature. Some will enjoy activities, games and presentations while others may find them dull or condescending. Groups may also change in their desire over the course of a trip. Don't be crushed if an activity or talk flops, or if some visitors choose to leave your walk while it is in progress. Take cues from things like how many of a group ask questions, if their attention seems to wander, if people sit down whenever there is a stop, if people complain about the heat more than usual, etc. Don't demand that people listen to you unless it's very important (i.e., safety and rules)
2. A typical walk consists of:
 - a. A number of stops in which the guide speaks to the entire group, giving planned presentations which develop and support the theme.
 - b. Many spontaneous visitor questions, often asked between stops, about the surroundings *which may not relate to the theme*. Make sure that the entire group hears the planned parts of the thematic presentation, but you may answer the spontaneous questions one on one as you walk. Nobody should feel like they are missing anything.
3. Remember that vacationing people are on your walk to relax and have fun. Don't overburden them with information or cause tension. Keep your interpretive walk relaxed and loose. Those who want lots of information will show themselves by asking a lot of questions. With experience you will develop a sense of how much information to give them.
4. Don't memorize scripts for your programs. It sounds terrible! Rather, work from an outline which is based around the programmed stops you intend to make. Find your own spontaneous words each time you do the walk. This keeps the program from sounding too canned or artificial.
5. Maintain a clean, neat, professional appearance. Don't try to be overly fancy or dressy. If you can, wear a uniform since it adds greatly to your credibility and the respect visitors will show you.

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6. Know the site before you take people there, and plan your walk and stops based on what there is to experience.
7. Be aware of potential dangers such as obstructions on the trail and warn people ahead of time.
8. Emphasize good rules of visitor conduct to protect resources. But never say, "Hey! You can't do that!" without explaining why. And don't ever say, "Because it's against the law" and leave it at that. Interpret why the law exists.
9. Discourage collecting of natural materials. Be sure to explain why.
10. It may take many repetitions before you're truly satisfied with your interpretive walks. Hopefully, you'll never be totally satisfied but rather will look for ways to make your hikes even better.

Starting your Interpretive Walk

1. Get to know early arrivals before the walk starts. What interests them? What did they come here to see? You can also get to know people by listening to the type of questions they ask throughout the walk. If interpretation doesn't relate to people personally, then it falls flat.
2. Start on time!
3. Establish your authority as the leader from the beginning by taking charge of the group and directing it.
4. Give people *an idea of what they will see on the walk* (but don't tell them too much or you will spoil the surprise and the joy of discovery) Draw a map in the sand or snow if it seems appropriate.
5. State the theme of your talk in the introduction.
6. Let people know how long and strenuous the walk will be.
7. Ask for their help in protecting the resource: staying on the trail, packing out garbage, not collecting forest materials.
8. Try to keep your introduction brief, then move to second spot even if it's not very far, to show that it won't be a static activity.

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9. If you are leading a large group, start off walking quickly to get the whole group moving, then slow down.

The Main Part of the Walk

1. *Avoid scientific names and jargon.* Names in general are not interesting or remembered unless woven into a larger meaning.
2. *Never falsify information.* If you can't answer a question, be honest and say, "I don't know." Learning to say, "I don't know" takes practice!
3. When addressing the group as a whole (for important pieces of a thematic or sequential presentation) wait until the whole group has assembled. It may help to stand above and up wind from the crowd so everyone can see and hear you.
4. *Talk to people at the back of the crowd* (an old trick for making sure your voice carries). Make eye contact with everyone.
5. Don't try to talk to the whole group while walking unless the group is very small.
6. Always be patient with a visitor, even if you are tired or their question seems stupid. Do not speak to them condescendingly. Give them credit for wanting to learn.
7. Generally, keep the group on the trail. Explain that this reduces impact to a heavily visited area. If you leave the trail, you must have a good reason and do so with extreme care not to crush plants or erode soil. You are setting an example.
8. Encourage people to use all their senses--not just sight--and to discover things for themselves. For example, give puzzles or mysteries to solve or questions to answer which relate to the theme of the walk. Encourage them to touch, feel textures, smell, listen.
9. Take advantage of spontaneous occurrences as "teaching moments" even if they don't fit your theme.
10. Keep the lead (or at least stay close to the front) at all times, but do not lose sight of the slowest.

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Choose your Stops Carefully

1. Frequent short stops give a sense of movement, rather than a few long stops.
2. Make your stops purposeful, to see something (especially something related to your theme). Don't stop just to make a speech.
3. Stop for photo opportunities. If a better photo opportunity exists farther along the walk, let visitors know and keep moving.
4. If you stand in a hazardous place while addressing a group, they will worry about your safety and won't hear a thing that you say.
5. If it's hot, stop in the shade; if cold stop in the sun. Children, being smaller, are much more susceptible to temperature than adults. A long stop in the hot sun may be uncomfortable for you, but torture for the kids!

Concluding your Walk

1. Your final stop on the walk should present your conclusion, and restate your theme.
2. This is best done before they see the final destination/parking lot. As soon as they see their car, they will quit thinking about your program and start thinking about their next activity: lunch, back to school, whatever.

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Other Interpretive Tools and Tricks

Themes are an important interpretive tool, but there are many other 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!").

Use "You" When Speaking and Writing: Using "you" makes a program or written text more personal (see Principle 1 on p. 4), 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! The mountains attract biologists, geologists, artists, foresters, photographers, and so on. You can enrich your interpretation by tapping these people and you may learn something yourself in the process.

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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 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: (This should be easy around Boulder!) "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 living in the Boulder area, will have many personal stories that will interest visitors as they learn. Talk about yourself.

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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 dead leaves, pine cones or seed pods, arrowheads, skulls and bones, a piece of Fountain Formation sandstone, a pioneer Bible, and so on.

Historical objects especially beckon to people's fingers! 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: Ponderosa pines and Douglas firs; burned and non-burned areas; various visitor uses on OSMP land, etc.

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 bark of a Ponderosa pine, 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 (see Principle 1 on p. 4). 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 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.

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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.

The Visitor's Bill of Rights

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.

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

Guidelines for Successful Interpretive Technique and Good Communication Skills: Tips for Guides

In both structured and casual interpretation:

- Greet and welcome guests: set the tone, gather information.
- Grab their attention: ask a question, use a prop, offer amazing statistics.
- Project your voice: enunciate, make sure you can be heard, adjust volume as necessary. Speak slowly and clearly. Use vocal and facial expressions to enliven the presentation.
- Avoid jargon and slang. Avoid annoying but often unconscious habits such as jingling coins in a pocket or clicking a pen.
- Be aware of 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.
- Be receptive to people's interests as indicated by questions or information provided prior to the tour. Tailor tour content to reflect these interests. Build on visitor comments, refer to visitors' names, hometown, etc., during the presentation.
- Create a dialogue: request visitor input, share perspectives, recognize prior knowledge.
- Encourage questions, but don't pressure people to respond, as they may feel like they are being tested.
- Props: encourage sensory involvement, highlight "the real thing."
- Humor: if it comes naturally to you, use humor; but use it wisely and be sensitive and timely.
- Language: use words that generate mental pictures, use specifics, watch slang.
- "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 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.
- 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.
- If a visitor becomes unruly or disruptive, be polite but firm in requesting that they respect the needs of the other visitors and the site.
- *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.

Possible Wildflower Walk Tours - Alfred Caldwell Lily Pool and North Pond Nature Sanctuary

(possible themes/messages)

Please note, these are tour ideas and possible messages. They could/should probably be revised to meet your own person interests and knowledge.

Possible Tour #1: Uses of Wildflowers

Wildflowers, such as the ones we see here today, have been used for a wide variety of purposes throughout history – sometimes successfully!

- Native Americans and early settlers used the plants you will see here today to cure everything from lovesickness to cancer.
 - Columbine, Boneset, Culver's Root, Milkweed, Nodding Onion, Spiderwort, Joe Pye Weed, Bergamont
- Modern medicine looks at traditional uses of these plants, as well as other factors, to try to find treatments that have real results.
 - Rose,
- Even when plants didn't have medicinal purposes, people used the plants for food or shelter
 - Iris, Elderberry, Milkweed, Spiderwort, Bergamot

Possible Tour #2: Plant/Animal Connections

Wildflowers provide essential food and or shelter to wildlife of all types

- Plants provide nectar or pollen, or even poison, that keeps insects alive and serve the plant's purpose
 - Milkweed
- Mammals and birds use the plants for food
 - Elderberry,

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Possible Tour #3: Names Tell a Story

Both scientific and common names of plants, including those we see here today, connect us to ideas and attitudes of the past, including what people thought plants were good for...

- Latin names (the scientific names) show relationships between plants around the world as well as possible uses for plants, even those found in the Midwest.
 - Columbine, Black-Eyed Susan, Iris, Foxglove Beardtongue/*Penstemon digitalis*, Milkweed, Nodding Onion, Coreopsis, Bergamot
- Common names for wildflowers often reflect what people thought they looked like or were used for.
 - Boneset, (Culver's Root), Foxglove Beardtongue/*Penstemon digitalis*, Milkweed, Coreopsis, (Joe Pye Weed),
- Names can both clarify and confuse our understanding of plants, their uses, and relationships to other plants.
 - Spiderwort,

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Main Message (What is the ONE concept they should remember when they leave?):

- Complete thought w/ a point of view
- Answers the question "so what?"
- Connects concepts to specific plants
- Engaging and interesting

Objectives: What do you want participants to do or know? How will you know if they do?

Introduction:

- Who you are
- Who the Conservancy is & what we do/our Mission
- Basic needs (water, bathroom, etc)
- What's going to happen on the tour
- Where are you going on the tour
- Where will the tour end
- How long it's going to take
- What will be required of visitors (will they have to answer questions, touch things, DO something, etc.)
- Message statement

Body: Supporting points, stories about plants, activities for people to do

Conclusion:

- Summary of the main message
- Suggestions of things they can do to keep learning/exploring
- Opportunity to seek further information from you
- Restatement of LP Conservancy mission and
- Promotion of a good feeling about the site
- Thank you!