

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 6-8, 2000

Developing a Theme

Presented By Ginger Murphy and Fred Wooley

Why Develop a Theme?

What is the most important message you want visitors to receive from your exhibit or program? What is the key idea?

Research shows that visitors remember when they hear a theme at the beginning of a talk or at the end. Research shows that if there is no theme, all your efforts at organizing facts and information is no more effective than if you just spouted a random assortment of thoughts without any planning!

Without a simple theme that weaves through your exhibit or program like a binding thread, your work is simply a collection of facts and information. It is not interpretation. A good theme unlocks the story of your site for your visitors. The question "so what?" will be answered with "Ah ha!!! I understand!"

When Are Themes Important?

Using a thematic approach is important in all aspects of interpretation. This includes conversations you have with visitors, programs, exhibits, interpretive signs, brochures and articles.

How Do I Develop a Theme?

Choose a topic. The first step is choosing your focus, or topic. The topic is the general subject you are interpreting. For example, you may want to talk about reptiles.

Brainstorm! Using bubble diagrams or lists, brainstorm lots of directions you might go with the topic. This might include adaptations, habitat, property reptiles or poisonous reptiles, etc.

Narrow your topic. Next, you must narrow that down. The topic "reptiles" is much too broad to cover in a 30-60 minute program or in an exhibit! Narrow your topic to one subtopic. For example, you might want to talk about aquatic snakes of your site.

Write a theme sentence. The theme is generally a complete sentence or two stating the key concept you are trying to convey. What one thought is it you want visitors to leave

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 6-8, 2000

with? It should be a message that connects visitors with one or more of the subtopics. In this case, it might be "Aquatic snakes have unique adaptations that help them survive in Potato Creek's ponds and marshes."

What Next?

Only after developing your theme can you prepare the "meat" of your exhibit or program. Add subthemes. Remember to connect them together, and limit your subthemes to 5 (The Magical Number 7 +/-2). Research content and decide the format. Remember to use thoughts, words and props that convey universal concepts and compelling stories that will make the message relevant and personal for your visitors. Then practice, practice, practice!

How Do I Know If My Theme is a Good One?

Is this theme stated in a complete sentence? Does the theme contain one main idea? Does it reveal the overall purpose of the program, exhibit, sign or interpretive center? (Could visitors tell you the theme?) Does it tell an important story that will enrich the visitor's experience? Do we have the resources for research? Is it worded to appeal to the visitor? Will they be able to relate to it? Is it a theme that I personally care about?

Historic Southern Indiana

Interpretation Workshop, March 6-8, 2000

I	<i>Informational and Educational:</i> Good interpretation provides accurate, useful, factual content in simple terms.
N	<i>Natural:</i> Good interpretation is so well planned and researched that the main focus becomes responding to the visitor, the landscape or the resource rather than remembering the information to be presented.
T	<i>Thematic:</i> Good interpretation focuses on one main objective or idea with subthemes that contribute to the main idea. What is it that the visitor should remember about the program, trail or sign?
E	<i>Entertaining and Fun!</i> Good interpretation uses many methods and media to appeal to a broad variety of personality types and learning styles. Our visitors are on vacation - they want to have fun as they explore. Your job is to help them learn without realizing it!
R	<i>Relevant:</i> Good interpretation answers the question "so what" for visitors by using clear examples, similes, present-day language and universal concepts such as family, friendship, etc. to tell a story.
P	<i>Personal:</i> Good interpretation relates to the individual's questions and needs, and includes personal stories from the interpreter when appropriate.
R	<i>Resource Related:</i> Good interpretation is tied specifically to the plants, animals, geology, people, history and management issues of the site. Good interpretation is also supported by adequate financial, staffing and training resources!
E	<i>Emotional:</i> Good interpretation evokes an emotional response from the visitor, ranging from inspiration to laughter to joy to anger to tears.
T	<i>Thought and Action Oriented:</i> By asking the right questions, good interpretation provokes further investigation of the subject or site, facilitates self-discovery and encourages action without "preaching."