

Writing Effective Interpretive Text

Text is the most common device used for interpretation in displays and exhibitions. This guide aims to help you write text that communicates effectively with your visitors.

What is interpretation?

Interpretation is the way you help a visitor engage with and make sense of an experience. The experience could range from viewing a display of objects or a natural landscape, a walk through a constructed environment like an exhibition or a natural one such as a forest, to a visit to a historic site.

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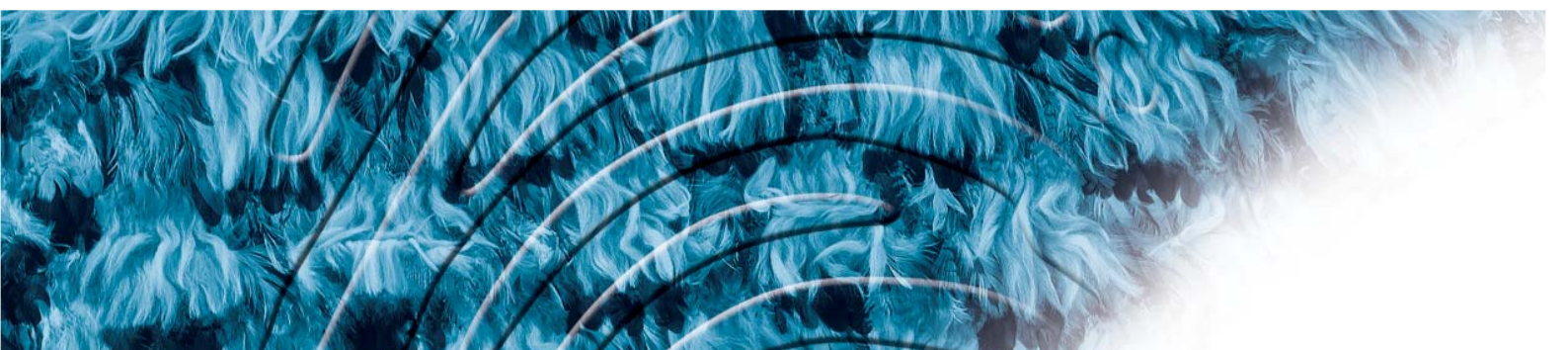
Interpretation involves:

- identifying your audience and the kinds of approach needed to engage them
- identifying the relevant background, meaning, or context of what you are bringing to your audience's attention
- thinking about the audience's response to what you offer – the visitor experience
- shaping what you know into communication that enhances the visitor experience.

Labels and interpretation

Text on labels is the most popular – and cheapest – form of exhibition communication available. Though many exhibitions use a variety of media, such as videos, audio stations, and interactives, both mechanical and computer, the label remains the 'bread and butter' tool of interpretation.





Who are you *writing for?*

Writing labels that communicate effectively, like any activity that involves attracting customers, depends on knowing who your message is aimed at.

There are two main things to consider:

- your audience's background
- the state of the readers when they read your text.

Visitor background

Basic information such as your visitors' age range and educational background and the make-up of groups of visitors will have a bearing on what and how you write.

- How old are your visitors?
- What kind of groups do they visit in?
- What might they already know about this subject?
- What kind of language do they like being talked to in?
- What kind of language excludes them?

The broad topic of visitor research is introduced in *He Rauemi Resource Guide 3: 'Know Your Visitors'* and 4: 'Introduction to Visitor Surveys'. This kind of awareness assists in writing for visitors as much as catering for other needs.

If your organisation does this research, make sure you know what it has to tell you about the suitability of your approach to what you write.



Writing for a moving target

Bear in mind the state your audience is in when they encounter your text.

- They are in the middle of a stroll in which the act of reading is an interruption.
- They have probably allocated a limited amount of time for this experience.
- They are reading while standing up, so they get tired.
- They are easily frustrated, especially if the positioning and lighting of what they read means they have to stoop, crane, squint, or use binoculars.
- They are distracted by all the other diversions around them, including social interaction with their companions.

The ideal reader ... not!

Are you hoping to cater for the visitor who reads all text, studies each label, and relates one label to another? Keep looking – less than 5 per cent of your audience will come near such a paragon, and that's on a good day!

Museum visitors are 'uncommitted readers'. Unlike the reader who sits in comfort and good light, intent on giving full attention to the reading material at hand, the exhibition visitor tends to regard reading as a hold-up, persevered with only as long as attention is held.

Sample testing

If you're not sure about the suitability of your approach, arrange audience testing of draft texts. Tap into regular visitor research if it's available or organise a trial with your typical audience. Check out what the people surveyed do or don't understand and do or don't like about your samples.

At the very least ...

Here are two types of action research you can undertake in your museum:

Observe visitors

Observe visitors as they make their way through an exhibition – note their movements and time their pauses. If possible, eavesdrop on conversations that arise as they read labels.

Observe yourself

Put yourself in the visitor's shoes – take in all kinds of exhibitions and displays and critically observe your own responses to text. What's your average 'time on task' for reading in these circumstances? What kind of text approach works? What doesn't?

Sobering reading

Here are some key findings from research on what and how people read at exhibitions.

- The longer the text on a label, the less likely it is to be read.
- The more text there is in an exhibition, the less of it is likely to be read.
- Visitors read, on average, 20 per cent of the text in any given exhibition.
- Visitors spend, on average, two seconds reading any given text in an exhibition.
- The most read texts are about things – object labels or captions.
- The least read texts are about ideas – labels not immediately associated with objects.
- Giving your text a headline can sharply increase the frequency with which it's read.

However, reading behaviour is notoriously difficult to observe directly. Think about this finding: given good legibility, visitors can take in 20–30 words during 2–3 seconds' movement towards or past a label within their field of vision – with no apparent 'reading'.

The **big** picture

Every writing task – for an exhibition, a display, or a single item – fits into some broader scheme of things. You will find it always helpful and often essential to make sure you have that big picture sketched out.

These are the four main things you need to think about:

- the big idea
- the communication objectives
- the target audience
- the voice and tone requirements.

What's the big idea?

What, in a nutshell, is this exhibition or display about? You should be able to state this in 10-15 words (an essential preliminary to any marketing material you write).

You should be able to see the big idea as an umbrella for any individual item or element you want to develop.

What's the point?

Hone in on what you are trying to get across – your overall aim. Again, in about 10-15 words you should be able to state what the point is of bringing people's attention to the exhibition, display, or item. Start it off with the words: 'The visitor will ...'

Ask yourself: If I do an exit survey after visitors have experienced this offering, what is the ONE message about it that I'd want them to come away with?



Big picture	Description	Aim	Target audience
Wings: an exhibition at a city museum	An examination of flight in nature and the human imagination	The visitor will learn how wings enable living things to achieve flight.	Cross-generation groups, school groups, repeat visitors
Taurua midden: an updated display at a provincial museum	Latest findings from Taurua midden, a nearby archaeological site	The visitor will get an impression of everyday life in the past in this district through these midden findings.	Locals – treasure on your doorstep; outside and international visitors – little knowledge of local culture
Single item: Museum of Farming Technology's recent prize acquisition	Display of the only known example of New Zealand's earliest traction engines	The visitor will drool over this amazing relic from the steam age.	Fans, buffs, nostalgics, capturing the uninvolved



The target audience

Who are you setting out to attract to this exhibition or display? A specific age group? Family or other groups with a mix of 2–3 generations? Lifelong learners? School groups? Local people? The regulars? International visitors? What do they know about the subject?

How does your knowledge of the audience translate to engaging them with the experience you plan to present?

Striking the right note

Tone and voice are important tools for engaging with your audience. They inform your choice of language and your approach to delivering the message.

As you plan for your text, think about what will strike the right note with your audience: what kind of language do they like to be talked to in? What language excludes them?

Voice

The idea of voice is a strong element in exhibition text. Research shows that visitors to exhibitions often respond to labels as the other side of a conversation. The writing style that works for labels has more in common with oral language than formal writing. A conversational tone is an important component of your voice, especially if the voice represents your organisation.

Whose voice is behind the text? Is it the authoritative voice of your organisation? Label text is the most obvious expression of this. Or is the author an identified curator or expert?

How do you bring range and variety to the voices presented through text? First person accounts or opinions? Quotes? Characters? Think about how you may have to represent different points of view, for example, in debates, community portrayals, or complex stories.

Tone

A conversational tone is often the sustained note in label text writing. But there are many other tones that can be adopted to suit a message.

Here's a selection:

humorous, personal, theatrical, solemn, sober, informal, cheerful, celebratory, gung-ho, poetic, austere, friendly, provocative, quizzical.

Tones noted for their high turn-off rating include:

didactic, earnest, flippant, presumptive, ironic, evangelistic.

Caution: Who's this 'we'?

Avoid loose use of the first person plurals: 'we', 'us', and 'our'. Are you using them to project inclusiveness to the readers? There are dangers.

Examples

'We feel that the artist is exploding reality in bursts of paint.' Who is the 'we' here? Is the writer presuming a like-minded reader? Does this inclusiveness preclude the reader's own point of view?

'Our know-how in genetic manipulation has outstripped our ethical capacity.' Who is the 'we' here? Genetic researchers? All scientists? The human race?

'We Kiwis' – where does this place international visitors?

If you intend the 'we' to be inclusive, ask yourself if every reader will be comfortable in identifying with it. You may find it best to avoid 'we' unless the visitor clearly understands that this is the voice of the institution.

Scope of the writing task

How much are you going to write? How many individual text elements or labels are you planning? How much time have you got – for the research or the gathering of expertise? How much time to draft? How many words will that amount to?

It is important to identify every written element in an exhibition or display, just as you would every object, case, mount, or audio-visual presentation. And because every piece of writing, apart from audio-visual scripts, will end up as a graphic presentation, it's best to account for the writing and the graphics together in the overall planning.

How much time to allow

Don't underestimate the task or the time involved. Labels may look short and simple, but they have often been highly worked to get that way. It's not unusual to spend 2-3 hours immersing yourself in background material and then writing a 100-word text dressed to hook readers and deliver the message to them. And that does not allow for peer or expert review and editing.

Remember the quote often attributed to Mark Twain: 'As I did not have time to write you a short letter, I have written you a long one instead.'



Label **text** *briefs*

When you plan the writing for an exhibition or display, look on each piece of text that will appear on a separate label as a specific writing task. The function of the 'label brief' is to define this task. Even if you are the person who is going to write the text, you will benefit from undertaking this kind of planning.

In the brief, you can work out the sorts of messages and information to be conveyed in a text without getting bogged down in matters such as word limits, spelling, grammar, punctuation, or style. A fully documented label brief also allows someone else to take up the writing task.

See the example on page 8 for one way of organising information in a label brief.

Messages

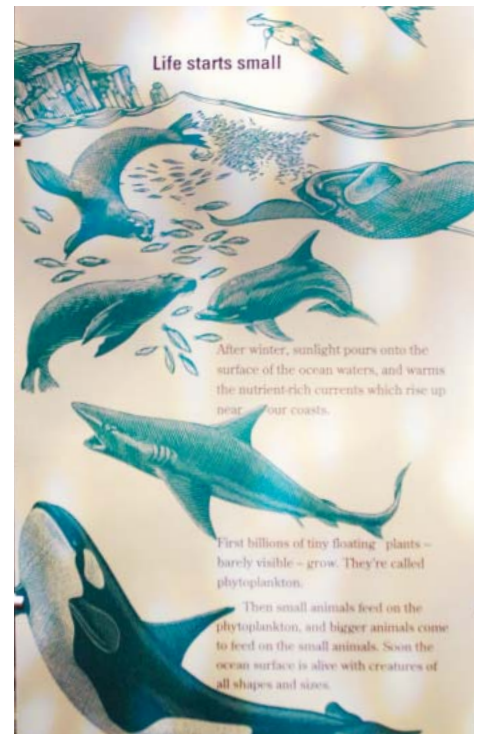
Identify the purpose of this piece of writing – the key message. What is the number one thing that the reader should take away from an encounter with your label? If it concerns an object, what is the purpose of inviting the reader to spend time with this text about that object?

Decide what other important things you should get across. When you assemble the materials for this label, it is helpful to identify:

- which points you consider absolutely essential
- which points you would like to see go in if possible
- which points you could take or leave.

Note any special voice or tone requirements. For example, in a cross-generational show there may be some text targeted at 7-12-year-olds. Or in a history exhibition, there may be a place of recollection that requires a marked change such as a poetic or very personal voice.

Quotes are a way of introducing different voices to your labels. They can add relish. But avoid plagiarism. Beware of copying other people's words verbatim into your notes without inserting quote marks. If you do include quotes in your materials, make sure you note details of the source. Also double-check that you have copied the quote correctly.



In summary: essentials of a label text brief

Putting together a brief can be useful whether it's you or someone else who is responsible for drafting the text.

- Assemble too much information rather than too little.
- Specify your audience and tone.
- Identify the point of this piece of text – what's the take-home message (maximum 10-15 words)?
- Divide the information into points, presenting pieces of information as building blocks.
- Note which points are vital, which are desirable, and which you don't have strong feelings about.
- Note all phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that are quotes or even near-quotes from someone else's writing.
- Assemble a good spread of background information, including links to authoritative websites if any are available.
- Have an image of the associated object(s) attached for reference.

Exhibition label brief

Here is a sample format for bringing together the information for a specific writing task.

1. Specifications (where the label fits, and any other requirements in the overall planning)	
Exhibition segment	Identify the part of the exhibition where this text will appear.
Focus	Identify the object, topic, theme that is the focus of the content.
Reference	Place in any numbering system you have for the show.
Deadline	Time for delivery, for example, signed-off text to the graphic designer.
Type (and word count) (see page 14 for details of the ones mentioned here)	Type of label within the range you have established (text hierarchy), for example, overall introduction, section introduction, topical, feature object, teaser, instructional, graphic with captions, object functional description; should be indicative of the word count for the finished text.
Language/s:	Useful if you regularly include more than one language in your labels, for example, English and te reo Māori; more than one language will affect the overall label word count.
Communication objective	The purpose; the key message to be communicated.
Target audience	Any special requirements for this text beyond those specified for the show overall.
Voice/tone	Any special requirements for this text beyond those specified for the show overall.
2. Content (the substance of the text)	
Key points of message	Information, bullet point form is useful, shown in order of priority: essential, if possible, take or leave.
Related material	Image of object; selected references, websites; photocopied background notes (with relevant passages highlighted); copies of associated images.
Mandatories	Credit and copyright requirements for any quotes, associated images, and so on, for the text.
3. Object details (range of functional information for the object to be included, if relevant)	
Object descriptor	Name/title, date of origin (Natural history) Common name, Māori name, scientific name.
Made by	Maker, artist (with birth/death date), iwi/nationality, place of origin/where active
Place	Where originated, found; distribution (natural history)
Made from	Media, materials
Provenance	Details of acquisition (gift, purchase, and so on) or loan

Doing the *business*

Label writing offers little scope for sidling into your subject, or building up to it, or working around to its main point over the length of a paragraph.

Your challenge is to interest the walking reader enough to detain them. Start your text with an interesting sentence and make every sentence that follows at least as interesting. Their attention must be won anew with every line.

Ask yourself: will the reader feel pleased, maybe surprised, that they have been delayed from their pressing business by this text?

Get straight to the point

An effective label starts with a statement of fact about the subject at hand. From that starting-point it progresses through its chosen topic, clearly signalling its links to the reader.

Sentences in a paragraph should be like a clear path of stepping stones for the reader. Paragraphs should also have that feel – building to a close that rewards the sustaining of attention.

In labels for objects, make sure you address the object early on – this is what the visitor has in front of them so build on the opportunity.

Break it up

Labels are primarily a form of display. Text needs to be chunked small for rapid assimilation. Here are some numbers – they are conservative, but if you push yourself to respect them, they will help to focus your writing.

As a general rule, paragraphs should be no more than 50 words. Look to break that up into 2–3 sentences of varying lengths. An individual sentence should be no more than 25 words. Avoid a sentence with more than three main parts (clauses) in it.

If you need to have any piece of text longer than 150 words, organise it into sections with subheadings.

For more detailed suggestions on various types of labels and their word counts, see page 15.

Sample labels

The label below appeared with Fiona Pardington's 1994 photographic work *Choker*:

Marked woman

A ring of 'love bites' adorns the neck of the woman in this portrait. Marks of passion have been used to form a necklace of deliberate bruising. The title *Choker* points to the paradox the artist is illustrating. Is this woman marked for love or control? Is the necklace a passionate adornment? Or is it a sign of domination?

Fiona Pardington here explores the ambiguous ideas that arise from such images – beauty mixed with brutality, violence with affection. Much of her work focuses on the human body – male or female – as a site for the contest of sexual politics.

Comment. The first sentence addresses a striking feature of the image. The next sentence picks up the reference to the 'ring of love bites' and redefines it. The next sentence links from the 'necklace of bruising' to the work's title and its idea of paradox. This is followed by a series of questions which invite the viewer to explore the paradox. The next paragraph sets the work in the context of the artist's wider concerns.

The label below, from an exhibition on flight, introduces the visitor to a series of graphics and objects on feathers.

Feathers – from warm-up to take-off

Feathers are among the most extraordinary things in nature. They probably evolved in dinosaurs as a way of keeping warm long before they were used for flight. They started out as scales – an outgrowth of skin – and developed over millions of years into the complex structure they are today.

The earliest birds used their feathers simply to glide from point to point. Flapping their wings came later. But flight feathers need special air-catching qualities. Birds with downy feathers, like those on a young chick, cannot fly – they cannot even glide.

Feathers are made of keratin, the same protein that forms hair and nails. The material allows them to be large and strong and at the same time extremely light. Feathers also give excellent insulation. Birds can survive in places of extreme temperatures – ranging from the cold of polar regions and high altitudes to the heat of deserts.

Comment. The heading signals an overview and hints at two major features on feathers. The key message comes in the first sentence. Note the stepping-stone approach to the subject over the course of each paragraph.



Focus on engagement

Labels are a prime opportunity to engage, and satisfy, curiosity and wonder. They can give context and voice where objects are mute. Use your text to involve visitors in what they can see and do (which includes thinking) in relation to the subject at hand.

Puzzling it out – no thanks!

There is a huge gap between the reader doing their bit to make sense of a label and being thrown a challenge to figure things out. The biggest turn-off in labels is where your hovering reader feels they have to puzzle over meaning. They won't hang around for it. And if they do so once, they won't get caught again. There are some predictable conditions for this.

Jargon or specialist language overload

Use technical language judiciously, with plain language glossing where necessary. This does not mean 'dumbing down' – an expression some specialists use to belittle the efforts of people who aim to connect with a non-expert, time-limited, mobile audience. Be realistic about what an exhibition can achieve. The exhibition experience is not the place for impressing your audience with your vocabulary!

Long and complex sentences and paragraphs

Be aware of the demands of length and complexity on a walking reader. Long sentences with lots of qualifiers frustrate rapid comprehension. There is often a problem when you invert sentences, putting a qualifying clause first, especially if it's introducing new material.

For example:

'The artist has often been called "the environmental engraver", a description he has gladly embraced. Developing from his earlier work that was often located in the Raglan wetlands, he here moves inland to the Waikato source for his inspiration.'

Be careful how you begin sentences. Make your point, and close it. Respect the demands on the visitor's memory. Long paragraphs are for comfortable readers, not temporarily detained ones.

An excellent practical guide to this approach can be found in the Australian Museum's publication *Meanings and Messages: language guidelines for museum exhibitions* (see 'Further reading' on page 20).

Helping communication between the generations

Here's another benefit of clear and simple writing. In exhibitions where families and other cross-generation groups are visiting, you can invest in the adults' interest and experience to help the younger generation make sense of the messages.

Give the adults the tools, in lucid words and expressions, to get information or concepts over to children who may not be up to reading or working them out for themselves. Make the information very clear – the adults will rarely persevere if they have to puzzle out the message first.

Just this one

Write every label on the assumption that it may be the only one a visitor reads in the whole show. This means that it must be complete and satisfying in its own right. Don't assume familiarity with other labels, even those near at hand.

The case for repetition

Remember that visitors read on average 20 per cent of the text in an exhibition. Repeat things, especially if they are key to your communication objectives. Say them in slightly different ways. In exhibition text some redundancy can be a virtue.

Active and passive

Active forms of verbs emphasise what the subject is doing: 'The militia drove the local people away. New settlers poured in and took over their houses and lands.'

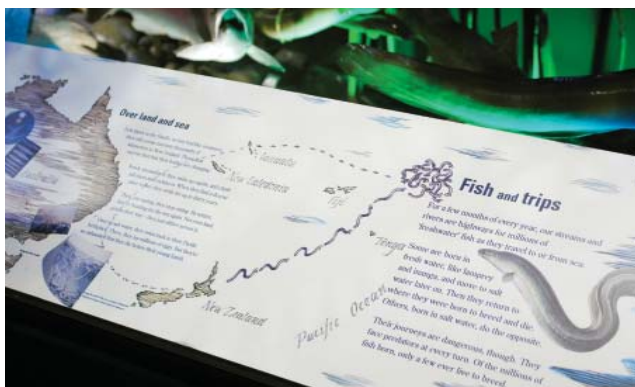
Passive forms of verbs emphasise what is being done to the subject: 'The local people were driven away by the militia. Their houses and lands were taken over by a mass of new settlers.'

Both forms have their valid uses, depending on your emphasis for the subject of the writing. But the active form promotes clarity about what or who are the doers and the done, and its simpler structures can energise your writing.

Using the passive form can be a device for obscuring background or deficiencies in knowledge or avoiding awkward questions.

Headlines

There is no better hook for labels than apt, pithy headlines. They whet the interest for what is to follow and can convey a surprising amount of substance. They hint at a promise, and the reward for persevering with the text is to have that promise delivered.



Example of a headline that uses wordplay

Start delivering within the first two sentences – don't keep the reader waiting till the last paragraph to work out how the headline is relevant.

Caution: humour and wordplay are powerful tools for catching attention. Beware of going over the top with witty, punning headlines. They can run the risk of seeming self-conscious, clever, facetious, flippant, or of trivialising or even contradicting the message.

If in doubt, try it out.

Jokes and irony

It's nice to brighten the tone of label texts with wit or a good joke. However, a sad fact of exhibition writing is that humour is frequently misunderstood, especially if you are relying on the reader's knowledge of local politics, history, sporting or entertainment personalities, or social mores for effect.

Irony is more commonly a source of puzzlement than enlightenment, and is usually lost on children or non-native speakers of the language.

Be cautious with the use of these powerful devices – thorough audience testing will show up the pitfalls.

Colloquial terms

Watch out for an overuse of colloquial and informal language if international visitors make up a significant portion of your audience.

Make the functional stuff work for you

The functional description of the object includes details like its date, maker, materials, place of origin, and provenance. Visitors' eyes gravitate towards this part of the label.

Avoid repeating such information in the text of the label unless you are making something of its significance. If your reader is attending to the text, they are likely to check the functional description to make sense of the whole.

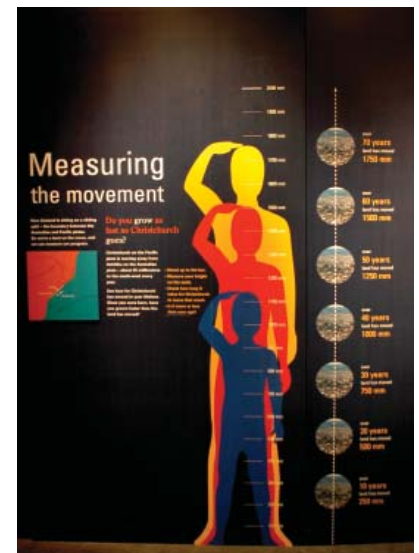
Editing (very briefly)

There are many obstructions on the route to making meaning – misleading signposts for the subject, grammatical skid patches, spelling and punctuation potholes. The primary task of editing is to ensure that a writer's intention comes through, that they say what they mean to say. If what they mean to say is not clear, the editorial role is to clarify what the writer intends.

A key condition for editing text is unfamiliarity – a fresh pair of eyes. As a writer you can revise your own work, but you need to distance yourself from the heat, and sometimes peculiar light, of its composition. That usually requires time – preferably counted in nights, at least two.

Another pair of eyes brings an immediate change of perspective.

An independent and experienced editor will always add value to your writing. They will also deal with consistency in the way things are written across a range of texts – in an exhibition or throughout an organisation, for example.



Catching the eye? **Sample headlines**

Headline	Topic of label
You spineless things!	Introducing New Zealand invertebrates
Fish and trips	River highways for New Zealand fish migration
Jaur's!	Mosasaur skull
Baby clothes	Plumage of juvenile gulls
Cat nipping	Cat family's varieties of teeth
Continental blockbuster	A/v on split-up of Gondwanaland
Check out those pecs!	Bird's muscles for powering flight

Varieties of *labels*

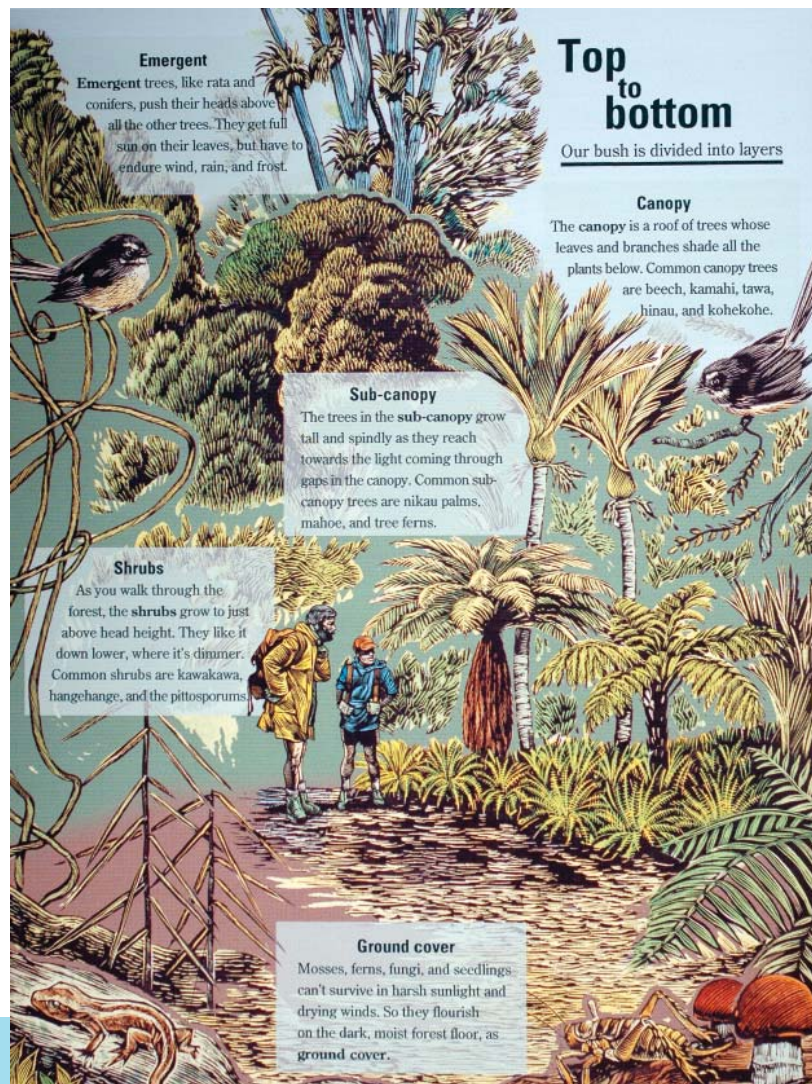
Here's a model for a set of label types that reflects how an exhibition is organised. It's based on Te Papa's 'text hierarchy'.

A text hierarchy is a key part of an exhibition team's communication toolkit.

- It offers a framework for organising the expression of an exhibition's ideas.
- It specifies various types of label for doing this.
- It outlines the general communicative purpose of each.

There are three broad types of labels in the hierarchy.

- **Orientation:** helping visitors locate themselves and find their way in storylines, ideas, and physical space.
- **Object:** delivering the interpretation related to specific objects.
- **Graphic:** stand-alone treatments of topics, combining text and graphics.



Example of a graphic treatment of a topic label

Label type	Description	Word count
Orientation labels		
Exhibition title and tagline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snapshot of the exhibition subject and scope, designed to be taken in at a glance. • Key contributor to an exhibition's successful interpretation and marketing. • Tagline not essential when title has impact and comprehensive meaning in itself or in association with its graphic treatment. 	Title up to 3, exceptionally 4 words Tagline up to 6 words
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The big idea in a nutshell, often the visitor's initial encounter with exhibition content. • A flavour of the exhibition's tone and character. • Invitational – for example, welcoming, enticing, provocative. 	20–45 words
Section label	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signpost for main subset of the big idea. Prominent. • Links to a major communication objective for the exhibition. • Avoids detail that is not amplified within the section. 	40–100 words
Topic label	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treats sub-themes within exhibition or subtopics within segment. • Supplementary theme or topic, or background to group of objects. 	100–150 words
Instructional label	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Associated with interactive or a/v experience. • Gives title, purpose, explanation, running time. • Invitational in tone. 	As required
Object labels		
Extended label	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storytelling or informative label. • Sets an object or group of objects within context of exhibition narrative or argument. 	40–100 words plus functional object description
Teaser label	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimal interpretive device offering succinct nugget of information. • Highlights specific feature or idea. 	20–30 words plus functional object description
Special feature label	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive treatment of a stand-alone exhibit (for example, Phar Lap skeleton, Britten bike) or object of exceptional interest within an exhibition. 	Up to 300 words plus functional object description
Object label	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional description of an object: name, title, description; maker details; where found; media, materials. 	As required
Graphic labels		
Graphic panel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graphic treatment of a topic label. • OR a quasi-object combining image and text in treatment for special purpose (for example, timeline, map, process explanation). 	As required, but no more than 300 words, with heading, subheadings, text in discrete blocks, or simply captions and credits

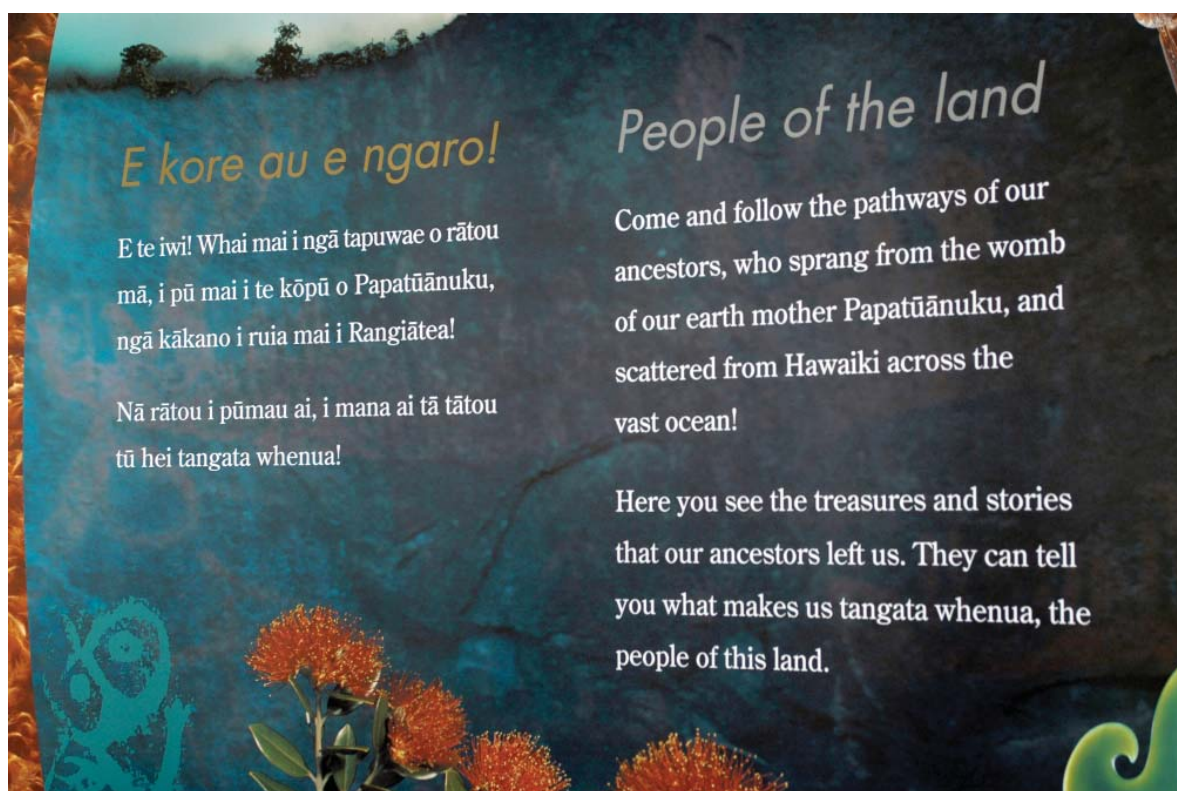
Te reo Māori and bilingual text

Using te reo Māori is becoming common in many organisations' exhibitions. There are also about a thousand Māori words and terms that feature in New Zealand English.

Glossing these terms is essential for international visitors and probably a good percentage of your local visitors.

If you are planning exhibitions or displays written solely in Māori for a Māori-speaking audience, the considerations covered in this guide for planning your interpretation and writing will apply. Come back to the basic question – what is the focus of the experience for the visitor and how do you aim to achieve it?

If you are planning bilingual text, such as Māori and English, for all or part of an exhibition or display, again those considerations apply. However, you will have to scale back on label word lengths in both languages – probably by half – to avoid text overload.



Label legibility

How often have you seen good text rendered useless by its physical presentation?

Basic tools for graphic design are now available to anybody with a computer, and many people take advantage of that in preparing exhibition labels. Here are some guidelines for how to display your labels.

Type size. Use nothing less than 18 point for text you want people to read, even when they can get close to it. Smaller sizes are fine for mandatory text such as credits or provenance details.

Typefaces. The arguments about serif versus sans serif typefaces are largely academic in a display environment where the reading task is (should be) relatively short. There are a huge range of both kinds available – put a priority on clarity and simplicity. Classic fonts offer understated elegance, never diverting attention from the message to themselves.

Type style. Use *italics* sparingly for emphasis in text. They are fine for short captions, but very tiring to read extensively. **Bold** is useful for contrast.

Leading. This is the space between lines within a paragraph – it should range from a comfortable minimum of 130 per cent of the type size to a generous 150 per cent. An 18-point typeface should have 24–27-point leading, a 24-point typeface should have 32–36-point leading, and so on.

Contrast. For legibility, nothing beats the maximum contrast of black type on a white background. Reversed-out text (white on black) tends to flicker and blur. Treat other colour combinations of text and background with great restraint. Test for legibility in exhibition conditions before you commit to it – that is, low and possibly indirect lighting.

Placement of labels. Bear in mind the focal length of older visitors. The comfortable height for display on the wall is around 1400–1500mm. If you have to go lower, angle off the wall to avoid readers having to stoop. This will also help the label to catch maximum available light.

Ensure people can get near labels on the wall. Avoid placing labels on walls behind barriers, unless you can markedly increase the size of the label and type.

Don't be tempted to put labels on the floor or at the base of objects. If you're using label rails or stalks, the minimum height for comfortable reading is 700mm.

Avoid labels at the backs of cases – these are distancing in every way.

Amount of text per line. Avoid making your column width narrower than 30 characters (average 5–6 words) per line – less and you get dizzy from the rapid returns. Avoid making it wider than 72 characters (average 10–12 words) – more and you feel you're never going to stop.

More sample labels

Label for māhiti (dog-hair tassel cloak)

Chief of cloaks

Of all the traditional cloaks, those incorporating dog hair were the most highly prized by Māori.

Putting on a māhiti (dog-hair tassel cloak) signalled the wearer's power to lead – an instantly recognisable sign of rangatiratanga (chiefly authority). Such a cloak was charged with the mana (prestige) of its owner, as well as the mana of its previous wearers.

The tassels attached to the woven body of the cloak were usually tufts from the dog's tail. The woven part of this māhiti has been dyed black (using an iron-rich mud dye) giving the cloak its striking contrast.

Label for pigeonpost stamps

Original airmail

These are believed to be the world's first airmail stamps. In 1898 and 1899 eight different stamps were issued – all privately, because the pigeon post was never recognised or supported financially by the government.

Maintaining the service was a struggle, but the stamps were a hit with collectors worldwide. Only about 10 percent of the thousands printed were actually sent, and collectors especially prize used pigeongram stamps.

Pigeongram stamps were issued by two competing agencies in Auckland. They were bitter rivals and their competition resulted in the charge for sending a message dropping from two shillings down to sixpence within a year – a fall of 75 per cent.

Label for *Architectonica* specimen and photograph of spiral staircase

Masterful mollusc

From galaxies to goats' horns, nature uses spirals time and time again. This *Architectonica* (ancient Greek for 'master builder') is one of many molluscs with spiral shells. The shape is strong and compact – something human master builders also appreciate, especially when it comes to building staircases.

Label for Joan Wiffen's first geological map and significant fossil finds

'Reptilian bones'

Joan Wiffen bought this geological map from a toyshop in Hastings in the early 1970s. To her surprise it had a reference to 'reptilian bones in beds of brackish water in the Te Hoe Valley'. This led her to the Mangahouanga Stream where she eventually made her amazing fossil discoveries.

The theropod vertebra is the first dinosaur fossil found in New Zealand. The pterosaur scapula is the first fossil evidence that flying reptiles once lived here.

Last word

Here are two thoughts about interpretation and writing:

Interpretation is the business of breaking the silence that surrounds objects. Very few visitors find that 'the object speaks for itself'.

Interpretation is also the business of ensuring visitors don't just feel dumb – or numb – in response to what you are saying.

And a last thought about engagement with the task:

Chances are that if you are having fun writing your text, your readers will have fun reading it. But maybe you don't want your visitors to have fun. If so, what do you want them to have?



Further reading

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