

Smithsonian Exhibits' Guidelines for Label-writers

October 2015

The goal: Make visitors care. Make them want to keep reading.

Make it fun, if possible. Make it personal. Tell the human story. Give it energy.

- Keep it brief.
An exhibit is an experience, not a reading exercise.
What are the three main points you want visitors to take away with them?
- Tailor your vocabulary to your audience.
Are you writing for kids? For general audiences?
You are NOT writing for scholars!
- Don't waste words stating the obvious.
- Visualize how visitors will move through the exhibit.
- Let each text stand on its own.
Don't expect visitors to read panel B before panels C and D.
- Put the most important idea first.
Many visitors read only the first line or two.
- Use the active voice as much as possible.
- One sentence, one idea. One paragraph, one main point.
- Use specific words, not abstractions. Concrete nouns. Strong action verbs.
- Use simple words as much as possible.
- Break long sentences and long paragraphs into shorter ones.
- Discard unnecessary adverbs and adjectives.
- Avoid sentences that don't deliver the point until the end.
- Don't tell the visitor how to react.
Avoid words like "beautiful," "stunning," "moving."
- Give each text a title, to focus the narrative and invite visitors to read more.