A GUIDE TO
EXHIBIT DEVELOPMENT

Smithsonian
EXHIBITS
DEVELOP DESIGN BUILD

Welcome to Smithsonian Exhibits' Guide to Exhibit Development. This document is intended for anyone interested in developing exhibits, from curators planning their first exhibit to seasoned exhibit developers and designers.

Exhibit development is a team sport. It takes a variety of skills to pull off a successful exhibit, and collaboration is key. This guide provides an overview of the exhibit development process and offers tips on how to plan and create an effective exhibit. While not intended to be definitive or prescriptive, this guide provides suggestions and recommendations based on SIE's experience working with clients from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines.
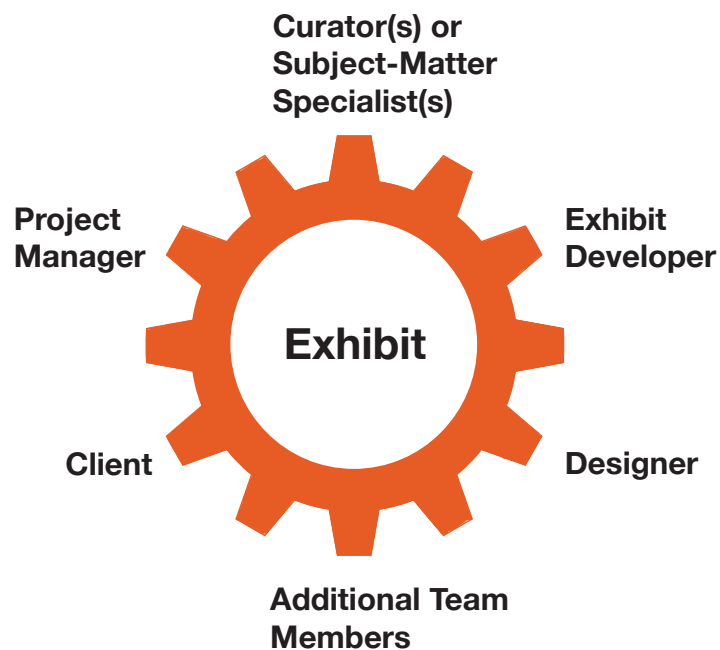
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THE EXHIBIT DEVELOPMENT TEAM

An exhibit development team is made up of several key players. Each person comes to the project with his or her own unique skills and perspectives and fulfills certain roles and responsibilities. Together, they strengthen the exhibit by providing varied points of view and new insights.

Exhibit teams are not restricted to the roles listed here. For example, an exhibit team might include a museum educator, a program coordinator, or any other staff relevant to the project. But SIE recommends keeping the core team small to keep meetings manageable and streamline the decision-making process.

Each team member may represent a larger group of specialists or stakeholders, with whom they meet at key stages throughout the project to provide updates and gather feedback.

Curator(s) or Subject-Matter Specialist(s)

Project Manager

Exhibit Developer

Exhibit

Client

Designer

Additional Team Members

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The **client** or project "owner" advocates for the organization. S/he communicates with key stakeholders, facilitates timely decisions, and ensures that the exhibit reflects the organization's mission and vision. S/he is usually the one who oversees the exhibit's budget.

The **curator** or other subject-matter specialist (such as a scientist, historian, etc.) advocates for the subject matter. S/he provides research and expertise, selects assets (including objects, images, and quotes), and ensures that the exhibit's content is accurate.

The **project manager** advocates for the project and the team. S/he guides the project through its various phases from concept to completion, determines if any additional staff or contractors are needed, and ensures that the exhibit stays on schedule and on budget.

The **exhibit developer** advocates for the visitor experience and the story. S/he helps define the exhibit's messaging, determines interpretive strategies, and ensures that the content is clear, concise, and compelling. The exhibit developer may be "deputized" by the subject-matter expert to assist in finding images, quotes, stories, etc.
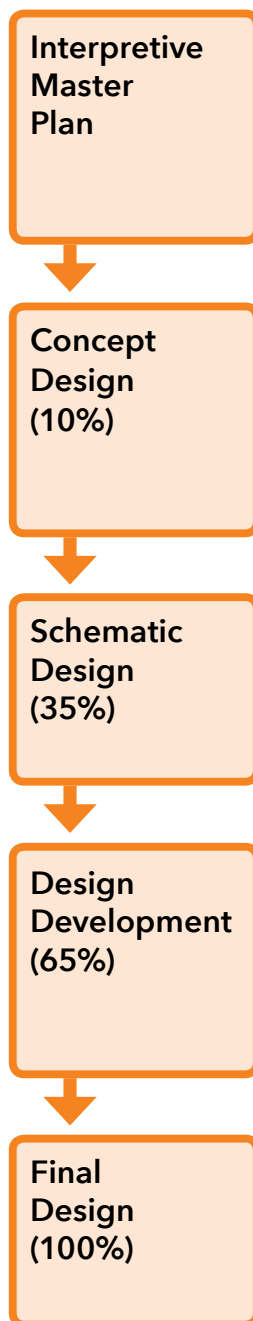
The **designer** advocates for the physical and sensory design of the space. S/he shapes the exhibit's design and ensures that it communicates its messages effectively and is engaging and accessible to all visitors.

Additional **team members** may include education and programming staff, media and interactive developers, and other specialists.

THE EXHIBIT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The exhibit development process has several distinct phases, each with its own content deliverables. Not every project includes every phase. This document focuses on the stages leading up to final design, at which point the exhibit enters the fabrication phase.

Interpretive Master Plan
Concept Design (10%)
Schematic Design (35%)
Design Development (65%)
Final Design (100%)

The **Interpretive Master Plan** phase identifies the exhibit's stakeholders and target audiences, outlines key goals and objectives, establishes an interpretive hierarchy (see p. 7), and provides a road map forward for launching a new exhibit. Content deliverables in this phase include the **interpretive master plan**.

The **Concept Design** phase develops a single conceptual-level solution for content and design. Content deliverables in this phase include the **content brief**, which provides an overview of the exhibit and its main messages and identifies potential themes, subthemes, and interpretive strategies, such as interactives and media elements.

The **Schematic Design** phase creates a framework for the exhibit's content. Content deliverables in this phase include the **outline**, which breaks content into sections and subsections, and identifies key objects, images, quotes, and other elements to be included.

The **Design Development** phase transforms content from an outline to a final script and articulates the design. Content deliverables in this phase include the **exhibit script**, which weaves content into a narrative form, incorporating object labels, image captions, and credits. Depending on the exhibit, there may be multiple rounds of drafts and edits.

The **Final Design** phase finalizes the script, design details, and graphic layouts into a production-ready biddable package. Content deliverables in this phase include the final copyedited and proofread **design files** (graphic layouts) ready for production.

CREATING AN INTERPRETIVE HIERARCHY

When planning a new exhibit, SIE recommends creating an interpretive hierarchy to focus the exhibit's main messages and provide a structure for content. This is generally done during the Interpretive Master Plan phase.
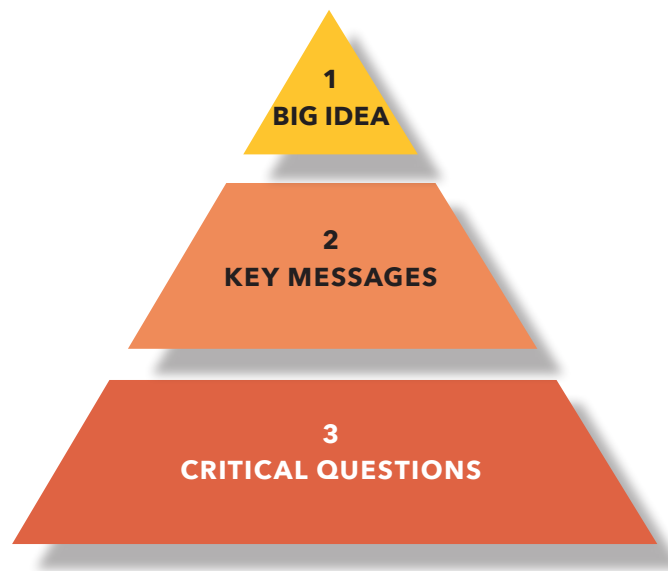
Exhibits start with a "**big idea**." This is the overarching message that visitors should understand upon leaving the exhibit. It is the basis for all the content presented.

The **key messages** are a small number of take-away statements that directly support the big idea. They provide a conceptual framework that drives content development.

The **critical questions** support the key messages and shape the content goals for the experience. These are the questions that the exhibit should answer for visitors.

Once you have established an interpretive hierarchy, it's time to decide how to organize the exhibit. Should the content be presented chronologically or thematically? How many sections are needed to tell the story? What are the potential themes and subthemes? These are questions that should be considered as the project enters the Concept phase.

VISITOR PREFERENCES

The most important thing to keep in mind when developing an exhibit is your audience. Who is the exhibit intended for and how will you reach your audience effectively? Visitors come to museums with their own interests, needs, and desires. They learn in different ways and are drawn to different types of content. The Smithsonian's IPOP (Ideas, People, Objects, Physical) model categorizes visitors according to their preferences for experiences based on ideas, people, objects, and physical interaction. Successful exhibits incorporate all four categories.

- **Ideas:** Visitors seeking conceptual and abstract thinking

- **People**: Visitors seeking emotional connections

- **Objects:** Visitors seeking visual language and aesthetics

- **Physical**: Visitors seeking multi-sensory experiences

ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility is a crucial part of the exhibit development process. The Smithsonian Institution is committed to creating exhibits that are accessible to all visitors.

SIE recommends consulting with accessibility experts and visitors with disabilities to develop accessibility strategies and prototype exhibit elements to ensure that they meet the needs of all visitors.

Accessibility strategies might include:

- **Tactile elements**

- **Verbal/audio descriptions**

- **Braille, raised-line, raised-character, and large-print materials**

- **Open captioning, verbal/audio descriptions, and assistive listening systems for media**

INTERPRETIVE TOOLS

The exhibit development team has multiple interpretive tools at its disposal. Content can be expressed in many ways, not just with words. The team should consider all available options when deciding how best to present an idea. Whatever tools you use, remember to leave room for the visitor to reflect. Exhibits are full of stimuli and can become overwhelming with too much content.

- **Objects** are what make exhibits unique. They lend authenticity and presence to exhibits.

- **Images** provide visuals and illustrate ideas and concepts that may be difficult to explain in words. These include photos, maps, illustrations, charts, diagrams, etc.

- **Media elements**, including video and audio presentations, add additional senses to the exhibit and help bring the content to life.

- **Interactives**, including electromechanical and digital interactives, allow visitors to participate in the exhibit in a hands- and minds-on way and learn by doing.

- **Models and tactile elements** allow visitors to see and/or touch things that would not otherwise be accessible. Scale models enable visitors to interact with very large or small objects in new ways. A large object, such as a building or space shuttle, can be seen in its entirety. Conversely, the complexity of a tiny organism can be shown in an enlarged scale model.

- **Text** is a key element, but it's important to remember that it's just one of many tools. Text is most effective when it's used strategically and graphically. Exhibits are not books on a wall. They should use all three dimensions of the space to tell the story.

STRUCTURING EXHIBIT TEXT

Layering or "chunking" exhibit text allows you to break big concepts into smaller, more manageable pieces of information. It also gives visitors more choice in what they read. Dense blocks of text discourage visitors from reading further. Research shows that people are more likely to read short paragraphs, 25 to 75 words long. Word counts vary from exhibit to exhibit, but some general guidelines are included below.

- **Titles and headlines** give visitors a quick preview of the content that follows and entice them to read on. Many exhibit titles include a catchy or attention-grabbing headline followed by a subtitle explaining it.

- **Intro text** introduces the exhibit and communicates its main messages.
  (150 words maximum)

- **Primary or section text** introduces the section's main themes.
  (100 words maximum)

- **Secondary text or subtext** supports the primary text and delves into subthemes.
  (100 words maximum)

- **Sidebars** provide fun and interesting facts and trivia.
  (usually 50–100 words)

- **Object labels** identify and/or interpret objects. These vary from "tombstone labels," which provide basic identifying information, to group labels (sometimes called "gang labels") which interpret multiple objects.
  (50 words maximum)

- **Image captions** identify and/or interpret images.
  (usually 25–35 words)

- **Quotes** provide a first-person perspective and/or bring a topic to a "human scale." Quotes can be used alone or can be pulled out in a label to break up text blocks. *(usually one to two sentences)*

- **Credit lines** provide credit information for objects and images. Often credit information for image use is mandatory, and the credit line must be used verbatim.

- **Talkback labels** ask visitors questions and invite them to share their opinions.

- **Wayfinding signage** can vary greatly by project. It helps visitors navigate the physical space. It can be as simple as an arrow and "the exhibit continues" or a graphic with a map. Wayfinding signage should be created in consultation with designers and visitor services staff.

- **Additional text** may be needed to provide acknowledgements, titles and running times of videos, instructions for interactives, guidelines for photography, and warnings (for loud noises, flashing lights, possibly distressing content, etc.).

EXHIBIT WRITING TIPS

- **Find the right slice of the story to tell**. Sometimes exhibits fail because they try to do too much. Exhibits can be effective at communicating messages, but they cannot provide comprehensive knowledge on a subject.

- **Make it relevant**. Give visitors a reason to care about your subject. What is its significance? How does it relate to contemporary life or popular culture? Make connections and ask visitors thought-provoking questions.

- **Make it accessible**. Use language and a tone that's accessible to your audience. Keep sentences short and to the point. Use concrete nouns and strong active verbs. Avoid using abstract concepts and unnecessarily scholarly or technical language.

- **Let each text stand on its own**. Don't assume that visitors will be familiar with the subject or will have read the text that came before. Give visitors the context and information they need to understand the content. Make sure that each label makes sense on its own.

- **Focus the text**. Use titles and headlines to help focus text. Make sure ideas are expressed as clearly as possible. Each sentence should have one idea. Each paragraph should have one main point.

- **Get a fresh perspective**. Ask someone who is unfamiliar with the subject of your exhibit to act as a test visitor. Is anything unclear or difficult to understand? Is anything repetitive or boring?

- **Read the words aloud**. Exhibits often work well when they're conversational in tone. Reading the words aloud can help you identify parts of the text that may be difficult for some readers. Try to establish a rhythm between short and moderate-length sentences. Time yourself and keep in mind that visitors will be looking at objects and images and interacting with other visitors as well as reading the text.

SCRIPT FORMATTING SUGGESTIONS

There's no right way to format an exhibit script, but it's important that the information is well organized and easy to find. The larger and more complex the exhibit, the more crucial this is. The exhibit script should include all the text that will appear in the exhibit as well as any associated information that needs to be tracked, such as accession numbers, dimensions, word counts, and notes. SIE recommends using multiple columns to keep track of this information. Please see an example of an exhibit script template below.

Exhibit ID	Element	Text	Word Count	Notes
Intro panel	Title	Fantastic Worlds: Science and Fiction, 1780–1910	7	
Intro panel	Primary text	Travel with us to the surface of the moon, the center of the earth, and the depths of the ocean – to the fantastic worlds of fiction inspired by 19th-century discovery and invention. New frontiers of science were emerging. We took to the air, charted remote corners of the earth, and harnessed the power of steam and electricity. We began unlocking the secrets of the natural world. The growing literate middle class gave science a new and avid public audience. Writers explored the farther reaches of the new scientific landscape to craft novels, hoaxes, and satires.	95	

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Interpretive Master Plan (IMP)
An interpretive master plan identifies the exhibit's stakeholders and target audiences, outlines key goals and objectives, establishes an interpretive hierarchy, and provides a road map forward for launching a new exhibit.

Content Brief
A content brief provides an overview of the exhibit and its main messages and identifies potential themes, subthemes, and interpretive strategies, such as interactives and media.

Outline
An outline breaks content into sections and subsections and identifies key objects, images, quotes, and other elements to be included.

Checklist
A checklist is a list of all the objects to be included in an exhibit. The curator may provide this to the exhibit developer, who incorporates it into the outline or script.

Exhibit Script
The exhibit script weaves content into a narrative form, incorporating object labels, image captions, and credits. This provides a complete record of all the words that will appear in the exhibit.

Design Package
Each design phase includes its own package of files. Depending on the phase, these may include bubble diagrams, floor plans, renderings, elevations, graphic layouts, and other drawings. The final design package includes the final text and graphics as they will appear in the exhibit.

Editing
There are several levels of editing. Depending on where the exhibit is in the process, this can mean restructuring or reorganizing ideas; tightening, focusing, and clarifying text; suggesting new titles and subtitles; and changing sentences from a passive voice to an active voice.

Copyediting
Copyediting is the fine-tuning of the exhibit script. It corrects spelling, grammar, and punctuation and ensures that style, syntax, and formatting are consistent throughout.

Proofreading
Proofreading is the final stage of review. The editor reconciles the design files (graphic layouts) against the approved final script to ensure that the text is correct and there are no typos, grammatical errors, or line-spacing issues, etc.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Leftridge, Alan. *Interpretive Writing*. Fort Collins, CO: InterpPress, 2006.

McKenna-Cress, Polly and Janet A. Kamien. *Creating Exhibitions: Collaboration in the Planning, Development, and Design of Innovative Experiences.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

Serrell, Beverly. *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

Wallace, Margot. *Writing for Museums*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

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