

# LABELLING YOUR DISPLAY OR EXHIBITION

**Whether you are creating a whole new exhibition or a small display in an existing museum, there is a lot to think about before you even start writing. This information sheet explains the processes involved in labelling your exhibition or display, from knowing and understanding your audience to shaping and editing your content, and producing and installing your own labels.**

## Audience

Consider who your audience is before you begin writing for your display or exhibition. This will help determine the sort of content you provide in your labels, as well as how you format and present them.

Audience research has shown that the attention span of visitors vary depending on their level of engagement. Baer and Wise (2014) explain that typical museum visitors can be divided into three categories:

- **Streakers** — who read headings as they ‘streak’ through an exhibition space but don’t get into detail.
- **Strollers** — who are more selective and cherry-pick content according to their interest.
- **Readers** — who read everything in detail.

Keeping this in mind, it’s important to remember that not all visitors are readers. Drafting label content that is clear, concise and as brief as possible will help accommodate all types of museum visitors.

## Interpretation

Interpretation is the story you communicate to your visitors through labels. What is your exhibition or display about? What is it about your story that will make visitors want to connect with it? Interpretation looks at the ‘Big Idea’ (Beverly Serrell, 2015) of your exhibition.

The Big Idea is a sentence or statement of what the exhibition is about. Think of your Big Idea as an elevator pitch. How would you describe your exhibition to another person who didn’t know anything about it?

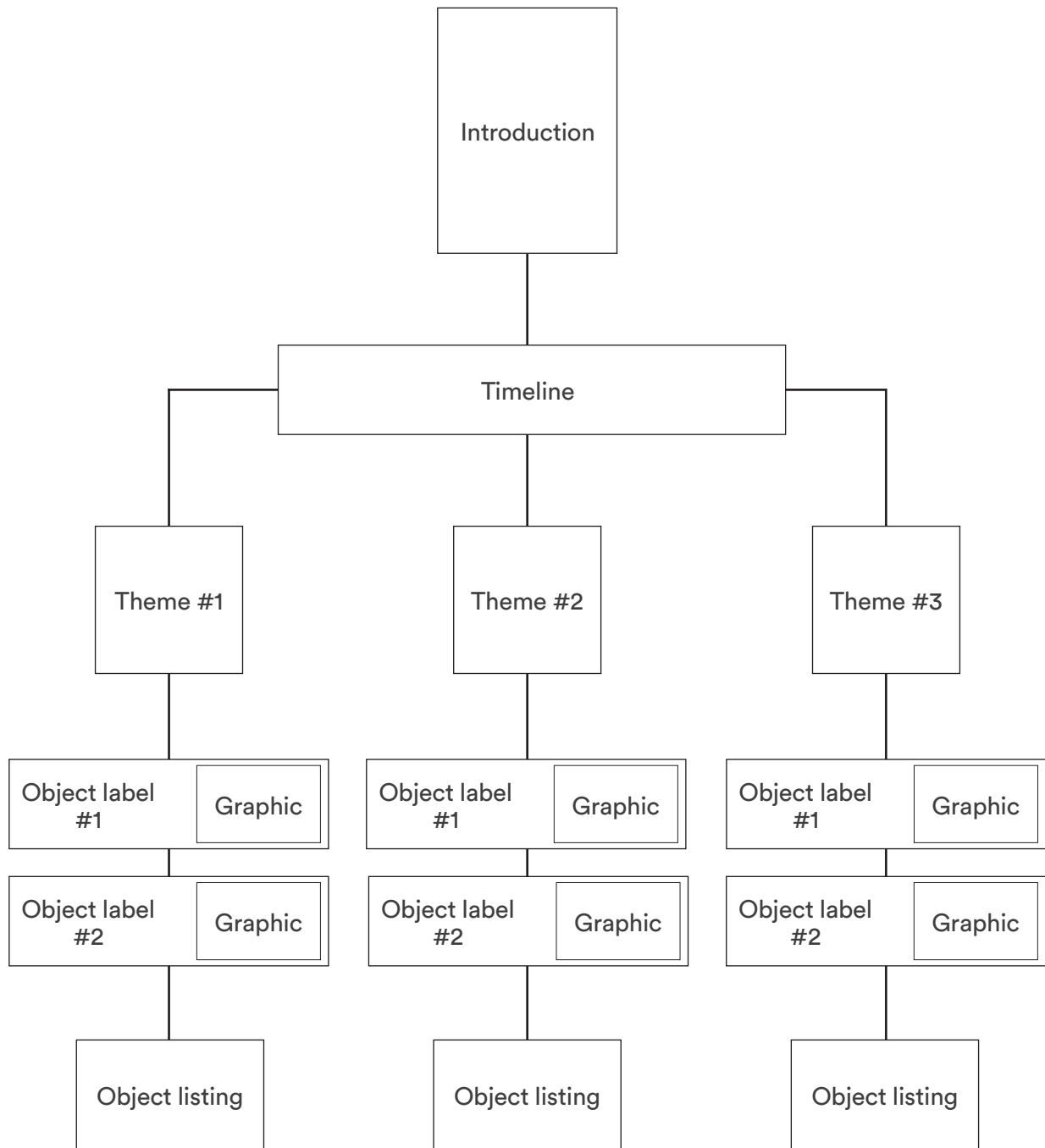
Once you have clarified your Big Idea, take the time to develop an interpretation plan, mapping out the different components that tell the story of your Big Idea. Even in small displays and galleries, interpretation plans can help establish key messages and sort out storylines, isolating the main points and how they link. Start your labels with general information and work down to the specifics.

A label may not be the best or only way to get your message across. Diagrams, timelines, images, graphics, audios, videos, publications, demonstrations and guided tours all do things that labels can’t.

A basic interpretation plan can include:

- **Introduction** — this should communicate your exhibition or display’s Big Idea and lets visitors know what they are going to see.
- **Theme** — depending on the size of your exhibition or display, you can divide it up into themes, like the chapters of a book, and give a brief introduction to each theme.
- **Object label** — this tells the story behind each object.
- **Object listing** — if you are displaying a group of objects together, it might be easier to use a basic listing that includes a short description of each object.

## Example of interpretation plan



Example of rough interpretation plan to help guide the planning of your exhibition or display. Note that there might be some elements you plan to include in the early stages, but might exclude as you further refine your ideas.

## Writing labels that work

Finding ways to connect with the visitor is key to writing effective labels. Not only can this be achieved with content, but in the way in which your text is communicated. Engaging text catches the visitor's attention and sustains their interest. Is there a fascinating fact or intriguing tale behind the object on display?

Labels don't have to be boring. Techniques like questions, changes in rhythm, quotes, humour and the unexpected can all bring a label to life and draw your visitors into your subject. As you write your text, think about what questions your visitors might likely ask: What is it? What is it made from? Who made it and why?

Here are some important principles for writing effective labels:

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- **Use the active voice:**

An electric motor drives this cylinder-talking machine.

**not**

This cylinder-talking machine is driven by an electric motor.

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- **Adopt a conversational style:**

Merryweather and Sons built this steam fire pump in England in 1896.

**rather than**

Steam fire pump, Merryweather and Sons, England, 1896

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- **Involve the reader by addressing them in the text:**

You can think of electric current as being like water. Water flows through pipes; electric currents flow through pipes.

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- **Use plain English** (clear simple language), particularly when explaining complex or technical terms:

Steam engines use steam, or water vapour, to work.

**rather than**

Steam engines rely on thermodynamics in order to function.

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- **Use short sentences:** Average sentences should be 15 to 20 words long.

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## Editing your labels

After interpreting your exhibition and drafting text to align with your Big Idea, the next step is to edit your work. The main purpose of copyediting is to ensure that your text is clear, readable and communicated as clearly as possible. When editing your own work, remember the five Cs:

- **Clear** — easy to understand, not confusing or ambiguous
- **Concise** — succinct and precise
- **Consistent** — text style follows established guidelines
- **Correct** — accurate
- **Complete** — full context is provided, and no important details are missing

Along with the five Cs, edit your text for your audience. Is your tone informative and engaging? Have you used plain English to explain more complex terms, avoiding jargon where necessary? Shaping and refining your text in this way allows the visitor to fully engage with your content and the story you are trying to tell in your exhibition.

It might be helpful to make a checklist of things to do as you refine your text. Use the example below to guide you.

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### Editing checklist

- Is my content engaging?
  - Is my information accurate?
  - Have I double-checked all names and terms are spelt correctly?
  - Have I answered questions visitors are likely to ask?
  - Are there unnecessary descriptions I can cut out?
  - Are there words I've repeated too much that I can replace with an alternative?
  - Have I used the active voice?
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MAAS Editor Cristina Briones mounting label, Powerhouse Museum, 2018.  
Photo by Marenco Kojdanovski, MAAS

## Producing your labels

There are ways you can produce labels using programs and tools available to you. At this stage of the process, think about how the label's design — such as format, type of font and size and label placement — will engage the visitor in reading the content.

Avoid A4 labels (297 x 210 mm) — this might be a good size for printing out a document, but not so much for labels placed on walls or in display cases! Keep to a compact size that allows for shorter lines to help with ease of reading (eg Powerhouse Museum standard sizes are 200 x 200 mm or 150 x 150 mm, or within those dimensions).

### How to create your own label template using Microsoft Word

1. Open Microsoft Word. At the top toolbar, select 'Layout'.
2. In 'Layout', select 'Size.' This will give you a range of options from the drop-down menu.
3. Select the A5 option (21 x 14.8 cm). Out of the preset options, this has optimum dimensions for a label.

## Designing your labels

Here are some tips to guide you when designing your own labels. Refer to the corresponding diagram below for examples.

### Fonts

- To establish hierarchy, use bold for large headings or label titles. For credits, use a smaller size.
- Sans-serif fonts are easier to read, as they are clearer and less ornate:

Sans-serif font (Calibri) **AaBbCc**

Serif font (Times New Roman) **AaBbCc**

- Use a line length for text that facilitates reading (max 60 characters per line).

### Colour contrast

- The higher the contrast, the more legible the text (eg black text on white background or white text on black background).

### Hierarchy

- A clear hierarchy provides structure and helps visitors navigate. Create distinction between labels through size, typography etc.

## Proofreading

Once you have designed and formatted your label, it's time to proofread your text and fix surface errors and issues. Proofreading ensures that your label is presentable and professional before it is produced. Check for spelling mistakes and double-check that all information is accurate. Look for font errors that may have been introduced at formatting stage and ensure that typography is consistent and clean.

## Printing your labels

If you are using a Microsoft Word template to format your label, simply print out as guided by the dimensions provided, then stick on cardboard using double-sided tape. For extra durability, and if you have access to one, laminate your label so that it will last longer. Otherwise, talk to your local printers about options (eg Kwik Kopy can produce durable labels on laminated card or foam core, and these can be quite economical and professional).

## Label examples

A

### Australian engineering icons

B

The Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Opera House are two of Australia's most recognised and loved engineering projects. The bridge was constructed between 1923 and 1932; the opera house was constructed between 1959 and 1973.

Both projects stretched the engineering and construction techniques of the day and demonstrate extraordinary creativity and problem-solving skills. These images reveal differences in approaches to design, engineering and construction.

#### Theme label

200 × 150 mm

#### Hierarchy

Larger than object label

#### Font

Circular (sans serif)

#### A. Heading

Font size 24.5 pt

#### B. Body text

Font size 21 pt

#### Colour contrast

Black text on white background

C

Construction of spans one and two of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, July 1927.

Men laying concrete for the north approach underpass tunnel of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, June 1928.

View from the creeper crane on the southern approach to the bridge at The Rocks, August 1928.

View of the southern approach to the Sydney Harbour Bridge from the water, February 1929.

D

• Silver gelatin photographic prints, NSW Department of Public Works, Sydney, Australia.

E

Gift of Dorothy Stuckey, 1987

#### Object label

150 × 150 mm

#### Hierarchy

Smaller than theme label

#### Font

Circular (sans serif)

#### C. Body text

17 pt

#### D. Object description

15 pt

#### E. Credits

11 pt



Example of exhibition using labels in different sizes to indicate hierarchy.  
Photo by Ryan Hernandez, MAAS

## Installing your labels

When deciding where to install your label, it's important to consider how it will be accessed by your visitors. Is it close to the relevant display? Can the label be easily located? Below are some tips for label installation:

- Place labels next to or close to objects (no more than one metre).
- Set the top of the label at the average eye level of one and a half metres. Too high or too low will make it difficult to read.
- Avoid placing labels on columns or obscure places where the visitor has to find them.
- Label and location should be situated in an area as open as possible.
- Make sure area around label is well lit.

## References

Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretative Approach*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015

Kim Baer and Karen Wise, 'The role of information design in sparking visitor interest, engagement and investigation', *Exhibitionist*, 33, no 1, Spring 2014. (Search the journal title and article name in Google and you should find the full text pdf.)

## Resources

Alison Grey, Tim Gardom and Catherine Booth,  
*Saying it Differently — A Handbook for Museums  
Refreshing their Display*, London Museums Hub,  
2006

[https://www.swfed.org.uk/wp-content/  
uploads/2012/05/Saying-It-Differently.pdf](https://www.swfed.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Saying-It-Differently.pdf)

*Museum Methods: A Practical Manual for  
Managing Small Museums and Galleries*,  
Museums Australia, 1994 (updated 2002)

*Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers*,  
John Wiley and Sons Australia, Commonwealth  
of Australia, 2002

Museums and Galleries NSW  
[https://mgsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-  
resources/](https://mgsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/)

Macquarie Dictionary (for Australian English,  
requires an online subscription)

<https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/>

Lexico powered by Oxford Dictionary  
(free online)

<https://www.lexico.com/>

Plain English Foundation

<https://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/>

Hemingway Editor App (an online editing tool that  
checks the readability level of your writing)

<http://hemingwayapp.com/>

**Please note:** the websites referred to in this information  
sheet were available and suitable at the time of publication,  
June 2020.

For more resources and information about Powerhouse Museum Regional Programs,  
visit <https://maas.museum/about/regional-program/>

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