

# If You Can't See It Don't Say It

A NEW APPROACH TO INTERPRETIVE WRITING

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Museum-Ed • Minneapolis

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# Introduction

I have two books about writing. One, *If You Want to Write* by Brenda Ueland, who wrote that art and writing is a generosity: "... you tell somebody something not to show off, but because you want to share it with them."<sup>1</sup> The other, *Beyond the Writer's Workshop: New Ways to Write Creative Nonfiction* by Carol Bly, who gave this advice (so relevant for art museums) on proofing your final draft: "... it is a good idea to check for fancy tone possibly emanating from unpleasant psychological smoke."<sup>2</sup> Both of these are Minnesota women, and that's what I am. Midwestern, practical, plain spoken; and that's what you'll find in this guide. Interpretation is not information, as Freeman Tilden the great National Park Service interpreter tells us, it is revelation based on information; it is provocation rather than instruction.<sup>3</sup> This guide is about interpretive writing, about practical ways to provoke our visitors to revelation about the works of art in our galleries. What you won't find here are guidelines about font, type size, etc. or strategies for producing layers of interpretation for entire exhibitions. Those guidelines are given elsewhere, and you can see those resources in the attached bibliography.

I came to this guide after putting on a two-day online conference about writing for museum educators. I created the conference because I was interested in writing, and the audience of 250 people convinced me that others were interested too. Next I taught several online interpretive writing workshops with Philip Yenawine, whose guide to writing for adult museum visitors was a great inspiration.<sup>4</sup> The workshops were free, but participants had to apply and we received many more applications than we could accept. Later I started conducting interpretive writing workshops for art museum educators in real time, and I thought I might turn those workshops into a guide so that more people could participate.

What I've learned along the way is set down here. You'll read about ways to write about a work of art so that you can effectively share your ideas. Of course we seldom write about just one work of art, but writing about one work of art is a place to start, and you might later apply these ideas to a whole gallery, or an entire teacher packet. You may not be the one responsible for writing about art for your museum visitors, but that's no reason not to write anyway. Garrison Keillor, another Minnesotan, said that you never really know what you think until you put it into words. So even if you're not currently writing for visitors, write so that you know what you think about the art in your museum. Let's get started.

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<sup>1</sup> Brenda Ueland, *If You Want to Write* (St. Paul: The Schubert Club, 1983), 163.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Bly, *Beyond the Writers' Workshop* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 126.

<sup>3</sup> Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977) 9.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Yenawine, *Writing for Adult Museum Visitors; Thoughts on Writing in Museums*. Brooklyn: Visual Thinking Strategies, 1999.

# Acknowledgements

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## If You Can't See It Don't Say It

The first rule of writing about art, whether you're writing a gallery label, an audio script or copy for a Web site is: If you can't see it, don't say it. Never write about what the reader cannot see. At first this might seem too restrictive, but give it some thought. You'd be surprised what can be seen after all. Take a look at this former didactic label from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts:



**Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin**

French, 1699-1779

**The Attributes of the Arts and the Rewards Which Are Accorded Them, 1766**

Oil on canvas

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund 52.15

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

J. B. S. Chardin, born in Paris, had his first art instruction from his father, a master cabinetmaker. In 1713, he began his academic training, and achieved his first recognition in 1726. He was elected a member of the Académie Royale in 1728 and thereafter exhibited at the Paris Salons. He specialized in still life and genre and was championed by the encyclopedist Diderot. There are several extant versions of this subject, which features a plaster model of Pigalle's famous work. The Hermitage painting is closely related to Minneapolis's and has a provenance reaching back to Catherine II. It may well be the original Salon of 1769 work, though both pictures are signed and dated 1766. Neither should be confused with the Moscow canvas entitled *Attributs des arts avec une tête de Mercure en plâtre*, which shows a bust of Mercury, since this is not Pigalle's Mercury but, instead, a cast of a famous antique portrayal of the messenger of the gods. Recent studies suggest that Minneapolis's painting may in fact be a replica Chardin executed as a gift for Pigalle himself.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Interpretation at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts* (Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1993), 39.

See what happens here? There's hardly any point in looking at the picture at all. Here's another label for this painting after the Minneapolis Institute of Arts applied the "If you can't see it don't say it" rule.



**Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin**

French, 1699-1779

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The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

This picture may appear to reproduce the casual clutter of an 18th-century tabletop. Not so: Chardin carefully selected objects to convey specific meanings. A palette with brushes, placed atop a paint box, symbolizes the art of painting. Building plans, spread beneath drafting and surveying tools, represent architecture. An ornate bronze pitcher alludes to goldsmithing, and the red portfolio symbolizes drawing. The plaster model of J. B. Pigalle's Mercury, an actual work by a friend of Chardin's, stands for sculpture. The cross on a ribbon is the Order of St. Michael, the highest honor an artist could then receive. Pigalle was the first sculptor to win it. So this painting sends multiple messages: it presents emblems of the arts and of artists' glory and honors a specific artist, Pigalle.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Interpretation*, 38.

Here's another example that works, about a sculptural object from a different culture:



Chinese

**Bowl**, 18th century Nephrite

The John R. Van Derlip Fund and gift of the Thomas Barlow Walker Foundation  
92.103.12

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

The form of this little bowl is based on a bronze food vessel used in ceremonies in ancient China. It was especially appealing for 18th-century Chinese scholars interested in studying antiques and collecting old objects, just as many of us are today. The owner of this bowl probably used it as a water container on a writing table in his study, displaying his appreciation of China's past. The subtle color, called "mutton fat" in Chinese, was preferred by 18th century collectors to the brilliant green and white colors of jade.

(Fictitious label, based on *Interpretation at The Minneapolis Institute of Art*)<sup>7</sup>

Notice that the label tells us Chinese scholars loved this kind of bowl because it represented their interest in ancient China. That's an example of using the label to say something about who might have owned a work of art, while sticking with what visitors can see: "It (this bowl) was especially appealing for 18th-century Chinese scholars..." The last sentence gets readers looking again at the bowl to examine its color.

There is plenty of evidence out there that visitors don't spend a lot of time reading labels in our galleries. But all the research that's been done on this topic seldom answers this question: are the labels interesting? One of the biggest reasons I think visitors don't read our labels is because there's nothing written on them about what the visitor is trying to understand – the work of art that goes with the label.

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<sup>7</sup> *Interpretation*, 40.

## Simple, Core and Compact

The next rule of writing for visitors is that the message must be simple, core and compact. Good examples of elegant simplicity are proverbs: a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. A proverb isn't a sound bite, it's an encapsulation of an abstract idea in a easily remembered, simple sentence. Visitors don't want our ideas simplified into sound bites, they need real information and insight. Our readers' problem isn't lack of intelligence, it is inexperience dealing with our subject matter. Simple means compact and elegant, not dumbed down information.

In their book *Made to Stick*, the Heath brothers wrote about a college journalism instructor who gave his students information about teachers at a local high school traveling out of town the following week to a national teaching convention. The instructor included the theme of the convention, and presentations that local teachers would make. Margaret Mead was a keynote speaker at the convention. The journalism students were to write leads for a news story in the community paper about the event, and when they turned in what they had written the instructor quickly reviewed them and set them aside. "The lead," he said, "is that there will be no school on Thursday."<sup>8</sup>

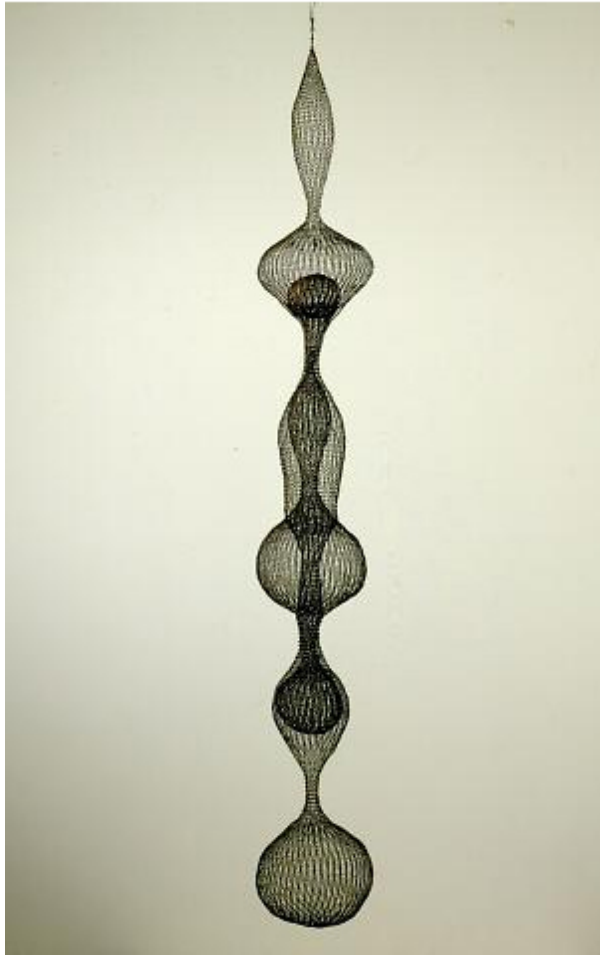
The core message is not necessarily subject of the text or a work of art. The core message is what the work of art or text means; in this case, there will be no school on Thursday. It isn't always easy to figure out, but it's worth working on to make your message both core and compact.

At the Oakland Museum of California, poet Jaime Cortez was hired to write "personal perspective" labels for pieces in the collection. Consider the way this label never veers away from the sculpture, and describes what it is, what it does, and what it means (the core message), "a winding map of transformation."

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<sup>8</sup> Chip and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick* (New York: Random House, 2007), 51.





Ruth Asawa  
*Untitled*, 1959  
H. 93 in.

Collection of Oakland Museum of California, gift of the  
Women's Board of the Oakland Museum Association  
A59.74

This is a hard working sculpture. It is defining an inside space without enclosing that space. It is turning its own shadow into art. It is showing you many faces as you circle it. It is taking the delicate art of crocheting and making it lift weights. Most of all, it is using one plain piece of wire to map a winding path of transformation.<sup>9</sup>

Put yourself in the visitor's shoes, and ask yourself: What is the essential question about this work of art? Or, ask yourself: What is the most interesting thing about this work of art? This is a good time to workshop your ideas, talk to your colleagues or visitors about your notion of the most interesting thing. Do they agree?

Visitors are depending on you to determine what is core about your message, and they will swallow it hungrily if you deliver it in a simple, elegant and compact package.

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<sup>9</sup> Gail Gregg, "Your Labels Make Me Feel Stupid," *Art News*, Summer 2010, <http://www.artnews.com/2010/07/01/your-labels-make-me-feel-stupid/>.

# Schemas

Because most art museum visitors lack experience dealing with our subject matter, they can most easily stretch and build their understanding when the information starts with something they already know. As we experience the world, we all build schemas to organize and interpret information as it comes in. Tapping into these schemas helps build bridges for readers from what they already know to new concepts. For example, consider the following definition of pomelos:

Also called Shaddock, the largest fruit from the citrus family with a thick soft rind that is easy to peel away. The resulting fruit has a yellow to coral pink flesh and can vary from juicy to slightly dry, and from sweet to tangy and tart.

Do you have a picture in your head of a pomelo? What if I told you a pomelo is like a supersized grapefruit with a thick soft skin?



Analogies, comparing two different things in order to highlight some similarity, are very useful, because they can tap into our visitors' schemas – what our visitors already know. Describing the functions of the human brain by comparing them to functions of a computer is a popular analogy.

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“Analogies prove nothing that is true,” wrote Sigmund Freud, “but they can make one feel more at home.”

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One of my favorite didactic labels of all time taps into people's schemas, and is core and compact. This label isn't for one work of art, but rather for an exhibition at the Phillips collection. Notice how it sticks to what visitors to the exhibition will see.

**El Greco to Picasso from the Phillips Collection**

The contents of a stranger's shopping cart, the books in an acquaintance's living room—every collection of objects says something about its owner. This one is no exception.

Duncan Phillips put together his art collection like a host making a guest list—always searching for the right mixture, harmonious yet diverse. Looking through these rooms, you may notice his preferences. He had a weakness for color. He avoided art that he considered overly intellectual. He was drawn to emotion, wherever he found it: human gestures, haunting color, expressive brushstrokes.

What is it that makes you like the art you like? How much do your tastes match those of Duncan Phillips?

This label is so admirable because it starts with something most people know a little about – shopping and bookshelves. It's quite simple, only 110 words. It also begins in concrete rather than abstract terms, something we'll cover in the next section. When the label does venture into the abstract it gives an example. Art expresses emotion, but what does that really mean? In this label the abstract idea of emotion as expressed by art is laid out quite clearly and in more concrete terms: for Duncan Phillips, it meant human gestures, haunting color and expressive brushstrokes.

## Concrete Versus Abstract

People are able to connect more easily to things that are concrete, especially unfamiliar things. If you want to explain something to a large group of people, the easiest language for them to understand is concrete language. That's one of the reasons Aesop's Fables are so enduring (the other reason is that they are stories, but we'll get to that later). Aesop's Fables take an abstract concept like "slow and steady wins the race" and put it into concrete terms. An oil painting is concrete, expressionist mood is not.

Related to the idea of instructional scaffolding in education, concreteness helps people build on their existing knowledge (schemas) to advance into abstract ideas. Abstraction is the luxury and the curse of experts. How many of us would care to read a peer-reviewed journal article about differentiating synchronic and diachronic analysis in semiotics? A professional chef wants to discuss the philosophy of haute cuisine, not swap recipes. The notion that abstraction is the luxury of experts might help to explain what happens when museum curators are in charge of writing for the general public.



Paul Cezanne  
*Still Life with Bottle and Apple Basket*, 1890-94  
Oil on Canvas  
Private Collection

Ask yourself *why* to avoid the curse of the expert:

**Expert:** Paul Cezanne was influential in the development of the Cubist movement.

*Why?*

**Expert:** Objects in his paintings shift in and out of perspective.

*Why?*

**Use this:** He wasn't interested in how things looked, instead he tried to record the act of looking.

Concrete details help make lasting memories. Memory is like Velcro. Lots of little loops on the brain side of the tab connect with hooks created by experiences on the other side. Concrete experiences create lots of hooks to connect with the loops, and as a result stick one tab more firmly to the other. Try this exercise from *Made to Stick*.<sup>10</sup> Answer the questions below by taking some time to think about each one.

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<sup>10</sup> Heath, *Made to Stick*, 110.

- What is the capital of Kansas?
- What is the first line of “Hey Jude”?
- What does the Mona Lisa look like?
- Remember the house where you spend most of your childhood.
- What is the definition of truth?
- What does a watermelon taste like?

As you moved through the questions, you probably noticed that it feels different to remember different kinds of things, depending on how concrete the answer is, whether you ever knew the answer in the first place, and how many hooks you already have in place to help you remember. We all use different parts of our brains to remember different things.

Remembering the house where you spent most of your childhood was probably pretty easy. All the different experiences you had in the house created lots of sticky Velcro hooks. The definition of truth was probably a lot harder – it’s an abstract concept. The Heath Brothers who wrote *Made to Stick* recommend that if you don’t know the Hey Jude song you trade their book for a Beatles album. They think you’ll be happier.

## Helpful Topics

According to surveys conducted by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts,<sup>11</sup> visitors are most interested in reading and/or hearing about, in this order:

- Subject (a location, an environment, a person, a concept)
- Content (beauty, personality, repression)
- Function (a memorial, a portrait, worship, education)
- Cultural and historical context (the Italian Renaissance, the Mende people of west Africa, ancient Greece)
- Why the work is considered art and why it's in the museum
- The artist (statements that pertain to the work, intention and/or style, other related work by the same artist)
- Technique (materials, innovations, specialized methods)
- Economics (commissioned by ..., created for sale, created for trade)

Not helpful are

- Unsubstantiated assertions of aesthetic quality or judgments (masterpiece, most profound, naïve, primitive)
- Stylistic development (genre, "influenced by the Mannerists," Japonisme, in the Gothic style)
- Discussions of art theory ("...critical to the development of Analytic Cubism." "New class identities." "Included in the salon of 1866.")
- Lengthy artists' biographies
- Provenance ("the painting remained in the Valpinçon family until it was sold to ...")

Consider this sentence, written for the public about the Charleston period room at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts: "The outstanding quality of the rococo carving over the fireplace and the precise classical proportions of the woodwork were probably executed by the English trained craftsman Ezra Waite, who was responsible for numerous other prerevolutionary Charleston interiors." It covers every point on the unhelpful list, leaving the reader to wonder: so what?

A word about using artists' quotes. Visitors love to hear from artists, or at least that's what they will tell you. Often I think visitors ask for this information because they know to ask for it. They logically assume that since an artist made it, the artist must be able to explain what it means. People know to ask for what they know about, they can't ask for what they don't know about. Confirming my suspicion, Reach Advisors report that in a survey of 40,000 visitors, what museum visitors say they want is different from what they actually found meaning in.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Interpretation*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Reach Advisors, "The Lens of Meaningful Experience," accessed September 1, 2013. [http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum\\_audience\\_insight/2012/10/the-lens-of-meaningful-experiences.html](http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum_audience_insight/2012/10/the-lens-of-meaningful-experiences.html).

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*“Silhouettes are reductions, and racial stereotypes are also reductions of actual human beings.”*

– Kara Walker

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If you think about it, giving people what they ask for misses the opportunity to use our specialized expertise to amaze and astound them with fascinating new information. Of course if you have an artist’s quote that actually sheds light on a work of art, by all means use it. But not all artists are great at talking or writing about their work. If they were, they might be writers or performers instead of visual artists.

Regarding unsubstantiated assertions of aesthetic quality or judgments, visitors do not like to be told what to think or how to feel. Put the emphasis on unsubstantiated here. If you’d like to tell people that something is a masterpiece, or that a work of art is designed to create discomfort, tell them why and/or how. Taking the time to explain these things moves your writing from unsubstantiated assertions of aesthetic quality or judgments (the not helpful list) into explaining why something is considered art and why the museum decided to display or own it (the helpful list).

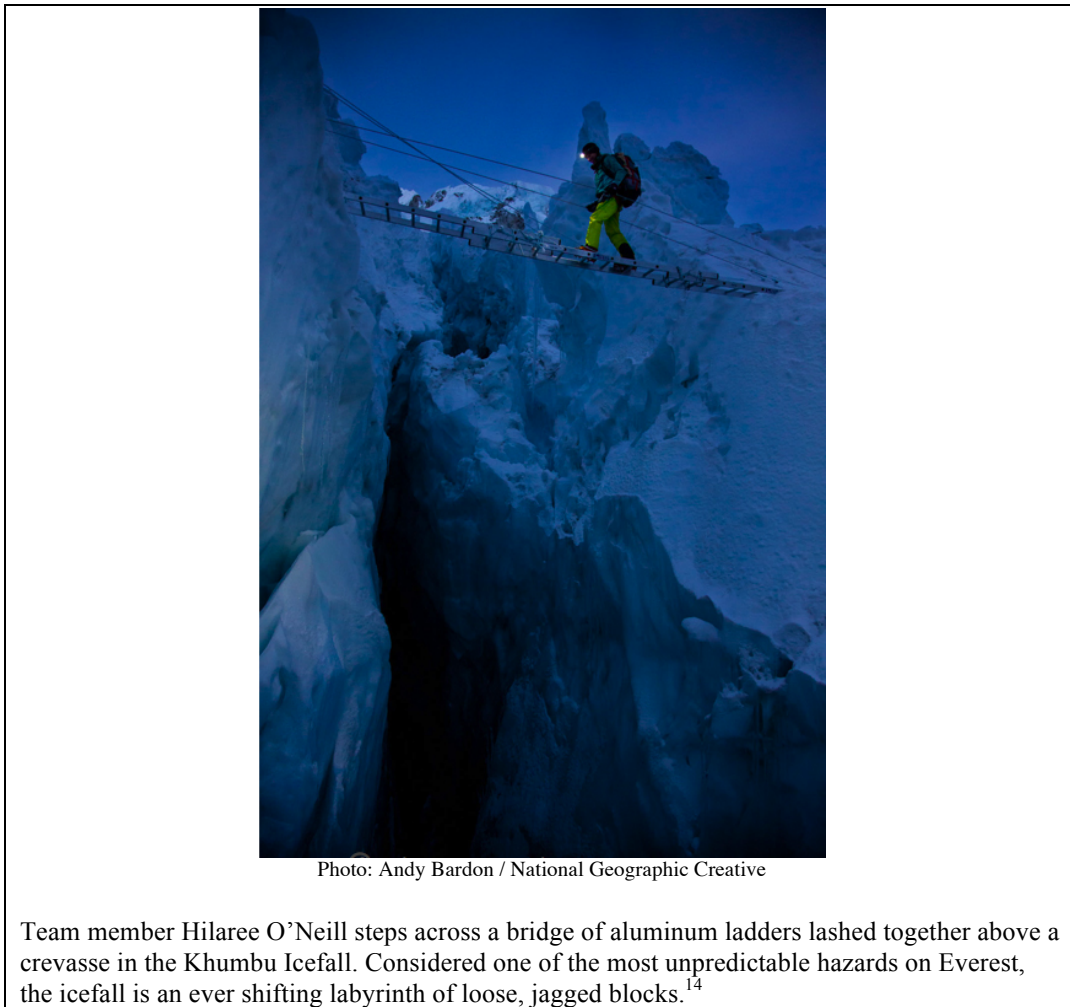
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Kara Walker  
*The Rich Soil Down There*, detail 2002  
Image courtesy of Lori L. Stalteri, Flickr

## Journalism Is Not a Model

According to Beverly Serrell in *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, journalism is not a good model for interpretive writing. “It is a bad model because newspaper articles are written with the assumption that most readers will not read the whole thing. After the headline or subhead that communicates a short teaser or summary, the body of the article that follows has the most important information up front, then goes into detail, often repeating information.”<sup>13</sup>

Interpretive writing should start with the details and then move out to more general information. For a perfect example of this, we can take a page from *National Geographic Magazine*. The folks at National Geographic know that their readers flip through the magazine looking at pictures and reading the captions, and then decide if they want to read the whole article. As a result, they have become masters at caption writing; they start with the details and add more information about the subject of the picture at the end. Let’s deconstruct this example:



<sup>13</sup> Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Walnut Creek CA: AltaMira Press, 1996), 90.

<sup>14</sup> Caption from "Maxed Out on Everest," *National Geographic* (June 2013)



The first sentence of this caption, part of a story about climbing Mount Everest, tells you in very compact terms not only what you are looking at, but exactly who it is. That helps you connect with the human part of the story. But where is the Khumbu Icefall and what is an icefall? That's answered in the next sentence, but notice that the second sentence doesn't start out answering the where and what question. It grabs your attention by putting this information first: Considered one of the most unpredictable hazards on Everest.

Here's another one:



Photo: Rob Leeson, Newspix/Rex USA

Australia—Anzac the kangaroo and Peggy the wombat—each about five months old—snuggle at the Wildabout Wildlife Rescue Centre in Kilmore, Victoria. Both animals' mothers were killed by cars. Officials hope to return them to the wild eventually.<sup>15</sup>

This is not just any kangaroo and wombat. This is Anzac and Peggy. The first sentence of the caption helps us make that human connection by disclosing the human names bestowed on these two animals. We don't need to wonder where the Wildabout Wildlife Rescue Center is, because the "dateline" beginning, Australia – answers that question. But why are Anzac and Peggy in a rescue center? The second sentence holds the answer: their mothers were killed by cars. Notice that these animals weren't "orphaned." Their mothers were killed by cars. Being very specific in this case helps send an emotional message to readers, quite possibly encouraging them to be more careful with their cars. What will happen to Anzac and Peggy? The third sentence answers that question.

Go to the library or head to the bookstore and pick up a copy of National Geographic. Study the way the photo captions anchor the reader with specific visual information first, go from the specific to the more general, anticipate the readers' questions about the image and answer those questions in compact and concrete ways.

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<sup>15</sup> Anzac and Peggy Caption from "Visions of the Earth," *National Geographic* (June 2013).

## The Power of the Unexpected

Surprise at the beginning gets our attention. Interest keeps our attention. Surprise at the end is like a little gift for reading the whole thing. Or in this example, watching the whole thing.



<http://youtu.be/7HMHJ4UTLXM>

My favorite label from the Schemas chapter uses the power of the unexpected right up front. You wouldn't expect a label that introduces an exhibition to begin: "The contents of a stranger's shopping cart, the books in an acquaintance's living room..." Readers are compelled to keep reading to find out what this surprising beginning has to do with the exhibition. To avoid being gimmicky and make sure that the surprise produces insight, it's targeted at the core message of the exhibition: it's a collection.

According to the Heath brothers in *Made to Stick*, the most basic way to get someone's attention is this: Break a pattern. Humans adapt incredibly quickly to consistent patterns, like the art historical drone of didactic labels in an art museum, for example. The only time we become consciously aware is when the pattern changes.<sup>16</sup>

Related to this idea are mysteries. Have you ever sat through a stupid movie or TV show that you couldn't quit watching just because you had to know what happened? Gaps in understanding cause discomfort. We need to close them. To hold a reader's interest, create a gap and then close it. Mysteries are perfect for this; they're so powerful because they create a need for closure. The Aha! experience is much more satisfying when it's preceded by a Huh? experience. Art museums are filled with mysteries. Interpretation is fluid and subjective. It changes over time and offers great opportunity for mysteries. Conservation is more commonly thought of as the core message

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<sup>16</sup> Heath, *Made to Stick*, 127.

of zoos and, to a lesser extent, science museums, but the art conservation lab is like the CSI of art museums. Share these activities with your readers, and help them solve the mysteries of the art museum. For example:

*The day this Chinese bronze vessel arrived in the Walters Art Museum conservation lab, it came with a mysterious message. The museum's director, who delivered the vessel, said he had some questions about it and ask if conservators could investigate its origins.*

So begins the text in the Walters Art Museum's [Integrating the Arts](#) online unit for students.<sup>17</sup> The online program proceeds to walk students through all the steps that conservators took to answer the question: real or fake? The program is written for middle school students and their teachers, but could also easily be a mini-exhibit in the museum.



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<sup>17</sup> The Walters Art Museum, "Integrating the Arts: China" accessed September 1, 2013 <http://thewalters.org/integrating-the-arts/china/>

# Help Readers Care

Caring is part of interest. People get interested and keep reading because they care. You can help people care about what they read by making it personal and emotional. Remember the picture of Anzac and Peggy? Part of what helped us care about what would happen to them is that the caption called them by name – human names. Reading about Anzac and Peggy is so much more personal than reading about a kangaroo and a wombat. Even though analysis is a lot of what we do in art museums, reading about it turns people off, it's too impersonal. Consider this example:

There were 16.7 million cars registered in Australia in 2012, up 13.3% since 2007. As a result, cars killed millions of animals last year.

Anzac and Peggy need your help. Their mothers were killed by cars.

Which makes you care more? Making Anzac and Peggy's story personal also makes it emotional. One of the ways this works is by addressing the reader directly. Use the word YOU whenever you can, as in "Anzac and Peggy need your help."

For art museums, this means adopting an active voice. Don't write "It interesting to note..." instead write "You might find it interesting..." You can create triggers to action by directly telling people where to look or what to do. "Look at the fleur-de-lis on the mast of the ship. They're a symbol of France." Don't write "We've created an audio tour..." Instead write "You'll enjoy listening to our audio tour."

According to [Grammar Girl](#)<sup>18</sup> an active voice means that the subject of the sentence is doing the action: Kris loves museums. In the passive voice, the receiver of the action, museums receiving love, gets promoted to the subject position: Museums are loved by Kris.

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### TIP!

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To write in a more active voice, go through your text and remove the words "that" and "then" where ever you can. You'll find ~~that~~ you don't need to replace them, and removing them will ~~then~~ make your message more compact and your voice more active.

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The passive voice is usually harder to understand for the general population. But Grammar Girl notes: "An exception is that scientists are often encouraged to write in passive voice to lend their writing a sense of objectivity—to take themselves and their actions and opinions out of the experimental results." Does this sound familiar? It should, because a lot of art historians write in the passive voice too.

*The musical iconography of Cubism has often been the subject of general discussion. Only recently, however, has a picture of the artists' musical inclination during the early Synthetic Cubism years begun to emerge. This expanded vision is based largely on the lettered names of composers and song title, and on the inclusion of collaged portions of sheet music found in many of these compositions.<sup>19</sup>*

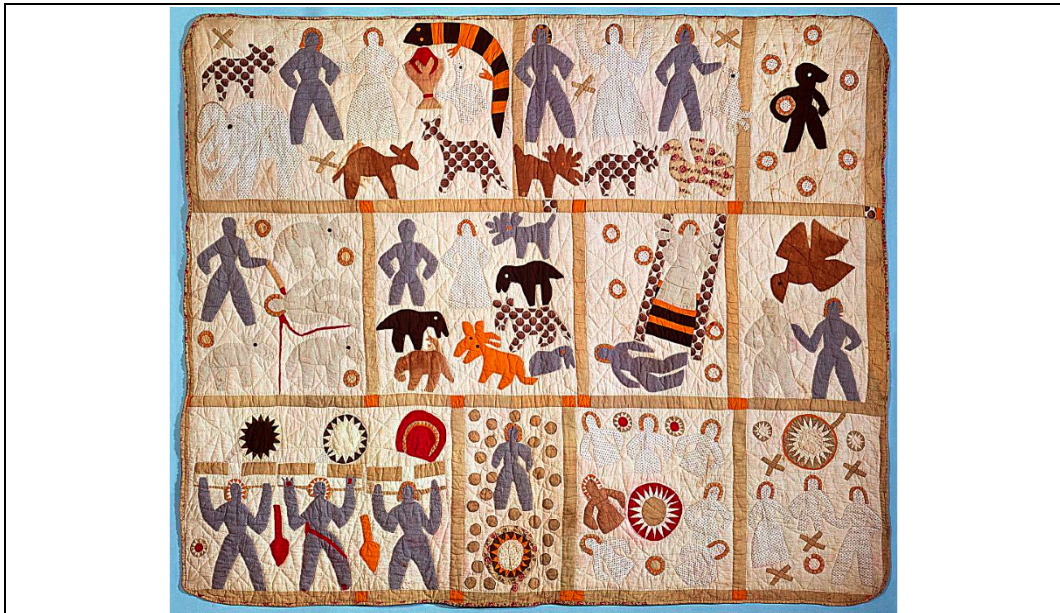
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<sup>18</sup> Grammar Girl, accessed September 1, 2013 <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/active-voice-versus-passive-voice>.

<sup>19</sup> *Art History*, Vol. 19 No. 1, March 1996. 102.

This kind of writing might be fine for art historians, but given to our visitors is it any wonder that many are surprised to hear about all the people who work in art museums? People want to hear from other people. We can make our museums and our writing more interesting by making it personal, from one person to another. This often requires that we adopt a point of view. Take a stand, reject objectivity, let readers know there's a real person behind the writing. The current fashion in some museums is for the authors of didactic labels to sign their work to achieve this understanding. But take a closer look at the content of the label. If authors continue to produce incomprehensible art history gobble-dee-gook, and then sign the label to add a personal touch, we still haven't achieved our aims.

Appealing to reader's emotions helps them care more about what they're reading and by extension, looking at. Research also suggests that emotional ideas are more memorable, and that readers rate emotional parts of text as more important. One of the ways to tap into the strength of emotions and to create empathy is by asking your reader to imagine. The following example represents an obvious and compassionate point of view, and asks readers to imagine:



Harriet Powers, Athens, Georgia

**Bible Quilt**, 1886-1886

Cotton

National Museum of American History

In 1890 Harriet Powers fell on hard times. A white art teacher named Jennie B. Smith admired Harriet's bible quilt at a local fair and Harriet accepted five dollars for it. Jennie entered the quilt in the Cotton States Exposition, where a group of women from Atlanta University saw it and commissioned Harriet to make another. Eventually this quilt made its way to the Smithsonian, and the other was given to Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. That is all we know about the needlework of Harriet Powers. We can only imagine what other quilts she might have made.<sup>20</sup>

*(Fictitious label, adapted from The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art, Penguin Books, 1998)*

<sup>20</sup> The Guerrilla Girls', *Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1998) 54-55.

Another way to create an emotional connection is to appeal to your reader's identity. John Falk has done a lot of research regarding museum visitors and identity, theorizing that museums have something to contribute to visitors' idea of who they are – their identity as art lovers.<sup>21</sup>

In *Made to Stick*, the Heath brothers share a story about a math teacher trying to come up with an answer that would satisfy his students' questions: Why should we study algebra? When will we ever use it? In 1993 a group of math teachers pondered the question and came up with this: "Algebra provides procedures for manipulating symbols to allow for understanding of the world around us." Not very satisfying for high school algebra students. Another reason commonly cited for studying algebra: "Every future math and science class you take will require a knowledge of algebra." Also not exactly satisfying, especially if you're more interested in literature, art or the social sciences. It wasn't until the math teacher came up with this that students were finally motivated to study algebra: "Math is mental weight training."<sup>22</sup> This winning reason taps into kids' schemas about weight lifting. Learning algebra, it suggests, makes you realize more of your potential, a powerful goal for most people, including kids. If we can help art museum visitors realize more of their potential as art lovers, they'll likely form a stronger connection to what we have to say.

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<sup>21</sup> John Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Heath, *Made to Stick*, 125.

# Authenticity

Lack of authenticity implies a lack of respect for your audience. If you don't believe what you're writing, your readers won't believe it either. Consider the math example we just read about: "Algebra provides procedures for manipulating symbols to allow for understanding of the world around us." Really? Do you know anyone who manipulates algebraic symbols in order to understand the world around them? There's a reason that we (and also the kids it's supposed to address), see right through this. It's not authentic.

Writing authentically helps fix the potential problem of talking down to your readers too. If you don't respect your readers they won't respect what you have to say. Remember the TV show "Frasier?" The show was under some pressure to halt the highbrow language and tone of Frasier Krane and his brother Niles, for fear the TV audience wouldn't get it. But Kelsey Grammer, who played Frasier Krane, refused. "I am solidly convinced, and I always will be, that the audience is hungry for us to play up to it," said Kelsey Grammer. "They are engaged by language that is not commonplace. I think they find intelligence fascinating. Most people do. The most interesting thing people do, after all, is think."<sup>23</sup> And he was right. "Frasier" was on for 11 years and won numerous Emmy, Golden Globe and other awards.

The best advice I've seen on writing authentically is to write the way you talk. Your interpretive writing should be a conversation with the reader. As museum educators, we all try to be friendly experts when it comes to our visitors, and we care intensely about meeting the visitors where they are. Write as if you are talking to a visitor, sharing your enthusiasm about art, and your writing will be authentic.

Questions on labels or in text produced for students, teachers or in a gallery guide are fine, but only if they're authentic. Too often questions appear written on labels or gallery guides that ask in various ways: What do you think? It's a rhetorical question, there's really no one there to hear your

answer and so it becomes an empty exercise. Worse, it implies that you haven't been thinking up to that point and now you should think, which is downright insulting. Questions are good if they are authentic. Go back to my favorite label as an example. Remember that the label tells you a bit about Duncan Phillip's tastes in collecting art and then it ends with an invitation in the form of a question: compare your tastes with Duncan Phillip's. It's an enticing idea – pretend you're filthy rich and reviewing a friend's collection – would you have collected the same?

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The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers.

– *James Baldwin*

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<sup>23</sup> Bruce Newman, "All in Their Family," LA Times, March 1, 1998 accessed September 1, 2013. <http://articles.latimes.com/1998/mar/01/entertainment/>.

# Storytelling

We think in stories. Call them schemas, scripts, cognitive maps, mental models, metaphors, or narratives, they are how we explain the world to ourselves and share our worldview with others. We tell ourselves stories about our selves (identity), stories about the world (perceptions), stories about others (relationships), and stories about our experiences (interpretation). This hard wired impulse, to document and share our

experiences, is at the root of all of the arts. At the same time we are attracted to seeing the world through another person's eyes. Listening to someone else's stories is like being in a flight simulator trying out a flight path. Stories are simulations we run on the mental machinery of our own imaginations. Because of the human attraction to stories, storytelling is a powerful way to connect with visitors.

When we tell the story of a work of art, it creates personal, emotional and memorable pathways to meaning. Consider the story of Harriet Powers and her quilts. Because that interpretation was written as a story, with a particular point of view, it is so much more powerful than an analysis of the iconography found on the quilt. In fact, connecting with Harriet Powers might make you curious to know more about the iconography on the quilt!

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## **TIP!**

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Do you admire someone else's writing? Would you like your writing to reflect the same tone? Copy it. I mean literally, type out the text you admire. Copy a paragraph or two and when you work on your own writing the tone will carry over. I don't know why this works, it just does.





Photography of Lascaux Cave Painting, Professor saxx.

Have you ever noticed that when we talk about the power and science of stories, the cave paintings at Lascaux (France) are often present? Pictures of the cave paintings appear as illustrations to articles and on the cover of books about storytelling. The cave paintings are presented as evidence of our history of storytelling, evidence that from the beginning we've told stories. But the cave paintings are not stories. They are paintings. They've become evidence of our storytelling as a species because of the stories we tell about them. Let that sink in. If anything should convince you of the power of the connection of art and stories, that should be it.

# Checklist

Here's a list of everything covered in this guide. Use it as a checklist to score your writing about a work of art. Not all of the items on the list are required, but the more the better.

- Simple
- Core
- Compact
- Schemas
- Concrete
- Unexpected
- From Details to General
- Personal
- Emotional
- Active
- Appeals to Readers Identity
- Authentic
- Tells a Story

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## Resources

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For back issues of the *Exhibitionist* cited in this article contact Whitney Watson at [wmw@mkohistory.org](mailto:wmw@mkohistory.org). Back issues are \$10 each.

For back issues of *Museum News* cited in this article contact the AAM Bookstore, 202-289-9127 or [aam-us.org](http://aam-us.org).

For back issues of the *Journal of Museum Education* contact [http://www.spry.org/publications/Background\\_Book.pdf](http://www.spry.org/publications/Background_Book.pdf).

For Monterey Bay Aquarium resources contact Elizabeth Labor, Monterey Bay Aquarium, 886 Cannery Row, Monterey, CA 93940, Tel: 831-648-4843, Fax: 831-644-7583 or [elabor@mbayaq.org](mailto:elabor@mbayaq.org).

### ONLINE TOOLS

Grammar Girl, Active Voice Versus Passive Voice.

<http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/active-voice-versus-passive-voice>.

Fry's Readability Graph. <http://www.millerandlevine.com/stpaul/readabilityscores.pdf>.

Online readability calculator. <http://www.editcentral.com/gwt1/EditCentral.html>.

### FOR FUN

Arty Bollocks Generator. <http://www.artybollocks.com>

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## About the Author

Kris Wetterlund is a founder and current Editor of Museum-Ed, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing museum educators opportunities to ask questions, to exchange ideas, to explore current issues, to share resources, to reflect on experiences, and to inspire new directions in museum education.

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