Tips for Better Exhibition Scripts

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What is an exhibition script?
Every exhibition, no matter how simple, should have a script. The script pulls together in a single document the elements that comprise an exhibition: label copy, the graphics (reproductions of images and brief historical texts that help to tell the story), lists of artifacts (both three-dimensional and original printed images such as engravings and period photographs), and educational or interactive elements.

This document offers advice on improving one part of the script, the exhibit labels.

The most important principle of exhibition script writing:
Words are expensive.

Remember that most visitors generally have less than 45 minutes of “high-quality” attention to give to your exhibitions. Further, many of them only have a limited time to spend in your entire museum. Think about the way visitors encounter content. Almost all of them are reading labels while they are standing, moving, and talking with the other members of their party.

Your task is to help visitors make effective, and enjoyable, use of your exhibition, and of the limited time they have in your institution. This requires clear priorities in developing your exhibition and discipline in script writing.
A Hierarchy of Information: Exhibition Content Labels.

There are four levels of exhibition content labels: the exhibition master label, the section head label; the case or group label and the artifact identification label. Note that the levels are ranked in order of general importance. This relative importance is also reinforced by design elements such as graduated type size, bold type, and color.

Research shows that most museum visitors read at least some of the labels; only a few read them all. A script establishes the most important information for your exhibition; it forces you to decide what a casual visitor really needs to know. Visitors will read the exhibition master label and the section topic labels – IF they are clearly marked. Beyond that, only the most motivated visitors, perhaps ten to fifteen percent of your visitors, will read all labels.

**Exhibition Master Label.** Associated with exhibition title graphic. Introduces and summarizes the exhibition. Presents exhibit thesis and/or reason for exhibition. Has a headline or title. 125 words or fewer.

**Section head label.** 75 -100 words. Summarizes the content of each section. Has a headline or title. Interactive components of the exhibition are often identified with headlines and short labels in this size of font, so that casual visitors can find them with ease.

**Case or group label.** 50 - 75 words or fewer. May be used to present information on one of the points of the section. Often used for a small collection of related objects. Occasionally has a headline or title. Sometimes groups of related objects need no more identification than a case or group label.

**Artifact ID label.** The catalog information on an individual object. Typical formats vary for art objects, historical object, natural specimen, or reproductions and other graphics used for interpretive purposes.

**Artifact caption.** Follows the ID. When necessary, presents specific information about an artifact or small group of objects. (25 - 50 words)
Special types of labels.

**Instructional labels for educational interactives.** No further explanation is needed; clarity is essential.

**Inquiry labels.** These labels ask the reader a question. In some cases, the question has a specific answer, and this answer needs to be provided as part of the label text. (It may be an interactive element in the exhibition; the answer may be under a sliding panel or door.) Other inquiry labels ask the reader a question for them to consider as they move through the exhibition.

**Brief quotations from historical sources.** Exhibition scripts often include direct quotations from historical sources, comments from artists about their own work, or other excerpts from written sources. Deciding the best way to handle these pieces of information can be tricky. Sometimes quotations can stand as a content label of any level (except possibly the master label). Other times, the quotations are in effect exhibition graphics and need to be treated in such a way that they are distinguishable from content labels (through the use of color, font, or other design elements that make them compatible with other exhibition graphics. In all cases, remember that quotations are more text, and be judicious in their use.

**Additional signage.** In addition to these content labels, exhibitions contain additional signage, which needs to be factored into design plans.

**Exhibition title.** The title may be repeated at both the entrance and the exit of the exhibition, and its design, which often includes graphics along with type, may be repeated in directional labels.

**Funder list.** Identifies donors and sponsors. Usually located at the beginning of the exhibition, in association with the title and master label.

**Credit panel.** Lists primary staff members, consultants, and guest curators associated with the exhibition content and design.

**Directional label.** Helps move visitors to the exhibition, and then from space to space in the exhibition, as when the exhibition is divided into
multiple galleries. Some directional labels may include a floor plan of a complex exhibition, identifying the sections and highlights and locating the visitor in relation to these.

**Tips for saving expensive words**

1) Don’t describe the object; after all, visitors are looking right at it. The exception to this rule is when the label discusses a particular feature of the object and is intended to guide the visitor looking at the object.
2) Don’t tell visitors how wonderful the object is; let them decide that.
3) Avoid passive voice.

**Dealing with specialized vocabulary.**

This is a difficult issue. The answer depends partially on who your targeted audience is for the exhibition. Here are some tips.

1) What do visitors really need to know to understand your main points? Consider carefully whether you can limit specialized and difficult vocabulary to case and group labels, which tend to be read by the most motivated visitors.
2) Can learning specialized vocabulary (example: the parts of a building façade or a chair, the parts of an animal’s anatomy) be turned into an interactive educational element?
3) Can you present a diagram with labeled parts or provide visitors with a special glossary that is cued by some design element like color or italics?

**Working scripts and display scripts**

Normally, two versions of an exhibition script file are produced.

**Working script.** The first version of the exhibition script is a working version, which contains all sorts of production notes. For clarity, these notes may be presented in a type font other than the exhibition text blocks and/or in *italics*. Sometimes the production notes are bracketed to further distinguish them from the label text. Another technique is to run these notes in a second column down one side of each script page. With color printers, putting instructions and notes in color is a useful option.
Depending upon the availability of scanned images, pictures of the artifacts and graphics to be used in the exhibition can be added into the text or included as a separate set of images after each section of the script. Original artifacts and images should have size noted, along with accession number. The size of reproduced graphics is a design decision, and this information may or may not be included in the working script.

**Display script.** This contains only the text that will actually appear in the exhibition. If a panel is being printed in full from a digital file in a publishing program, this version may also include all graphical elements such as explanatory photos, diagrams, maps, and other graphics in their correct locations and their proper size relative to the text.

**Remember:** ONE PERSON has to be in charge of updating and maintaining the scripts.

Working scripts typically “grow” over time, as graphics and artifacts are selected or removed and as more information on the exhibition is made final. For the mental health of the entire staff, someone on the exhibition team (or the department head who has primary responsibility for the project) must have responsibility for maintaining the master working script in a HARD COPY as well as in a computer file. All changes must be approved by this person (who may want to also do the data entry, or have a designated assistant do it). Approved changes should be sent to the entire exhibition team.

**Closing the script.** And, at some point in the exhibition planning process, the script must be closed to further revision. The timing for this depends upon the size and complexity of the project.

**Designing Labels for Enhanced Legibility**

Remember: your visitors are reading and looking while they stand, walk, and talk with the other members of their party. Under these conditions, it is easy for readers to lose their places in the text. Here are techniques to prevent this.

1) Dark type on a light ground is less tiring to read. (Consider using light type on a dark ground as a special design element only.) Be cautious about using patterned backgrounds for text.

2) Consider using a typeface with serifs. Serifs help visitors keep their places in the text as they read labels on a wall.
3) Mixed upper- and lower-case letters are easier to read than all of one of the other.

4) Lines are most legible when they have 60 or fewer characters.

5) DO NOT justify right margins. Labels with “ragged right” margins are easier to read.

6) DO NOT divide words into syllables on different lines. Do not divide hyphenated word pairs, either!

7) Wherever possible (and it is not always possible), consider the label as a kind of poetry, where the lines have a kind of rhythm that will aid “moving reading.”

Here are two options for the same label, a case label for a collection of pamphlets, paper reward cards, badges, and historical photographs of Bands of Mercy. It has 34 words.

Between 1880 and 1920, the humane education movement promoted kindness to animals by publishing free lesson plans for teachers. The movement also helped schools form clubs called “Bands of Mercy” after similar English groups.

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**Bibliography on exhibition scripts**


Exhibitions and their scripts as works of scholarship: accountability for content

What are our responsibilities to public audiences as trained scholars working in museum settings? Visitors believe what they read and see in our galleries, yet exhibitions do not (and should not) display the conventional apparatus of scholarly writing, especially notes, or bibliographies. Can we adapt the conventions of scholarly documentation for the exhibition medium?

I worked at a museum where each exhibition that did not have a catalog began with the preparation of a scholarly essay called an “exhibition narrative.” This narrative contained full documentation. It was kept on deposit in the museum’s library and was available to visitors who wished to read it. Needless to say, these visitors were rare individuals. Still, we felt that we had met our professional obligations as historians by creating a fully documented text in support of each exhibition, whether based on original research or a digest of secondary sources.

Whatever your museum’s policies on, and practices of, exhibition scholarship, consider ways that you can make the full results of your exhibition research available to both public audiences and the academic community. Your standards of scholarship for exhibitions should be as high as they are for other scholarly media.

Catalogs are one option, but they are not always appropriate for short-term exhibitions. Your museum’s web site is a good place to post an exhibition narrative or script with notes and bibliography.

Archiving the script

After the exhibition has been taken down, the script should remain as part of the permanent record of the project in the museum’s files, along with a set of photographs or slides that document the exhibition.