



UMC GUIDE RECREATION PARKS & LEISURE

University of Missouri-Columbia Extension Division

Methods of Interpretation

JUL 10 1981

BY GLENN WEAVER

Department of Recreation and Park Administration

Have you ever overheard a conversation in a foreign language and wondered what the people were saying? You might have thought, "Are they talking about me?" Or, "What are they saying about this country?" Visitors to wildlife refuges or national parks may be equally bewildered by their environment and feel they are missing out on an experience that could be more meaningful if they could understand the phenomena around them.

Nature interpreters in an outdoor setting or *historical interpreters* at a museum have responsibilities similar to language interpreters: they translate a *message* into words and images an *audience* can understand. The message to interpret may be the natural phenomena of the site, the history of the area, or the concerns of the managing agency (such as ecology, conservation, and so on). Whatever the theme, the interpreter must relate the unfamiliar to the familiar and at the same time stimulate interest and concern for the subject matter.

This guide will introduce the subject of interpretation. Separate guides will show how to use various media and techniques (trails, brochures, slides, bulletin boards, recordings, demonstrations) to interpret a theme or concept to an audience.

Many resource management agencies (state and national parks, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Refuges) offer interpretive services. Why "interpretation" rather than entertainment, information-giving services, or education? Because interpretation *can* do so much more. Freeman Tilden in *Interpreting our Heritage* describes *interpretation* as an educational activity that aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to relay factual information.

- Interpretation may enhance the visitor's experience in the park and give him or her a greater understanding of the area being visited.
- Interpretation is enjoyable and an enjoyable experience is more likely to be remembered. Interpretation is communication that can provoke audience interest.

- Interpretation can be used to accomplish management goals. Effective interpretation can reduce vandalism and protect the environment.
- Interpretation can promote public understanding of an agency and its programs. It can improve the public image of an agency and gain support for its goals.

Interpretation involves an *audience*, an *interpreter* and a *message*. The interpreter must study and analyze all three components in planning a presentation.

THE AUDIENCE

The most important partner in this trio is the audience—no interpretation can take place without an audience. Visitors vary greatly in age, background, and experience, and their characteristics determine the content of the message and the way it's delivered. Numbers of visitors, length of stay, and the frequency of visits also affect how and when presentations are given. The interpreter should study actual and potential audiences to find out who they are and why they visit the site. Knowing their interests, expectations, and similar information will help in planning an interpretive program relevant to the audience.

THE INTERPRETER

Interpreters must be fully aware of their personal abilities and weaknesses. They should plan presentations that will use their strengths. Some persons are better in informal encounters with visitors; others are creative writers and do well in preparing interpretive media. Still others have the ability to deliver more formal presentations and feel at ease with large audiences. Interpreters must know what they do best and work around—or seek to improve—their weaknesses.

THE MESSAGE

An essential step in developing an interpretive program is to determine the theme of the site and the message to be communicated.

The decision on theme is an arbitrary one: no formula will determine the right one for the park or program. The theme must be based on the inventory

and analysis of the site. The theme must provoke the interest of an audience and relate meaningful concepts rather than bits and pieces of information. Theme and objectives must support the wishes of the managing agency. The theme must also be "interpretable" with the available resources: personnel, budget, and the assets and limitations of the site. It may reflect the elements of the site that are uncommon and rare or the features that dominate the landscape or both.

The message must incorporate the chosen theme, objectives of the agency, and the principles of interpretation.

THE SIX PRINCIPLES: Freeman Tilden's "Six Cardinal Principles of Interpretation" have been widely accepted as guidelines for developing interpretive programs: the interpreter should plan media and personal presentations following these objectives.

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best, it will require a separate program.

METHODS

The interpreter may deliver the message through a personal encounter with an audience (staff-directed) or through media the interpreter develops (self-directed). In interpretation the method is as important as the message because the method distinguishes "interpretation" from "information giving." The test of an interpretive program is whether the audience becomes *involved* mentally (or physically and mentally) in the presentation. The method chosen for interpretation must:

- Be enjoyable
- Relate to what the audience already knows
- Develop an appreciation and understanding of man's place in his environment.

STAFF-DIRECTED PRESENTATIONS: The interpreter is physically present with an audience in a staff-directed presentation. These are referred to as personal-centered presentations and include campfire talks, guided tours, demonstrations, and other programs. Visitors and interpreter can interact and the interpreter can adapt remarks to a particular audience and atmosphere.

Most audiences prefer staff-directed presentations. However, hiring trained interpreters is expensive and most budgets will probably not accommodate the staff necessary to have an interpreter present during every presentation.

SELF-DIRECTED PRESENTATIONS: The interpreter may also reach an audience through media such as slide/tapes, recordings, exhibits, publications, bulletin boards, and media-guided tours. Also called media-centered programs, self-directed materials are used at the discretion of the visitor. Visitors decide when they want to go on a nature walk, view an exhibit, or read a publication interpreting a topic in the park.

Media programs offer certain advantages over staff-directed presentations:

- The quality is constant
- Although initial production can be expensive, the cost to maintain the program is very low
- Professional skills may be acquired for the media production which would not be available on a daily basis.

Of course, media are non-personal. No interaction takes place between visitor and interpreter and a prepared program is not readily adaptable to a particular audience. For example, a self-guided nature trail may interpret the action of water in the creation of a setting. But an interpreter on the same trail may adapt the message to relate to last night's rain storm.

CHOOSING A MEDIUM FOR THE MESSAGE

The specific interpretive techniques to use will depend on a careful assessment of resources (money, personnel, equipment, facilities), the type and size of audiences, and the nature of the information to be interpreted. Because of costs, media may be the only alternative for some parks. In most settings a combination of personal and media services is desirable. Ideally the advantages of both types can be used and the disadvantages avoided. Where large crowds must be handled, in a museum for instance, media services (brochures, tape recorded messages, labels, exhibits) may be the only practical approach. An interpreter on the scene could provide additional communication.

SLIDE TALK PRESENTATIONS:

Advantages

- The presentation is live and interaction may occur.

- The slide provides a visual “anchor” for what is being said.
- Once slides are selected and script written and rehearsed, the slide talk is ready for presentations.
- The slide presentation provides a common experience for interpreter and audience.

Disadvantages

- The slide talk requires time and effort to produce a quality presentation.
- The presentation requires practice time and an effective delivery voice.

CAMPFIRE PRESENTATIONS

Advantages

- The presentation is “live” and interaction may occur between audience and interpreter.
- Questions from the audience may be answered immediately.
- The activity competes with few other attractions in the park since it occurs at night.

Disadvantages

- Interpreter must be able to sense and adapt to the audience.
- Interpreter must be well-prepared and appear at ease with the audience.

DEMONSTRATIONS

Advantages

- Showing and describing an activity is a very effective communication and learning technique.
- A “living” exhibit can better relate to an audience than a static exhibit.
- It’s an especially effective technique to use with children.

Disadvantages

- It requires both technical and interpretive skills.
- It’s an expensive technique to use on a large scale.

RECORDINGS

Advantages

- Recordings can provide a voice to accompany an exhibit.
- They can supply background sound effects and illustrations for a guided tour or exhibit.
- Recordings attract attention and establish an atmosphere.
- Recordings may be used in many settings and for many purposes.
- Commercially prepared recordings may be purchased.

Disadvantages

- Time and effort are required to produce a quality recording.
- Mechanical failure is a potential problem.
- The expense to repair and maintain good equipment may be a disadvantage.

BROCHURES

Advantages

- Brochures are useful in many different settings. They may be used for both interpretation and strictly “information giving.”
- They provide a concise and ready answer to frequently asked questions.
- An agency can use professional services to produce brochures, which might not be available on a regular basis.

Disadvantages

- The expense of printing may be a problem.
- A brochure can deliver an interpretive message *only* if it’s read.
- Litter and keeping literature racks stocked are potential problems.

SIGNS

Advantages

- Signs are relatively permanent.
- Signs are quickly read.
- Signs are useful in many different settings.
- Signs don’t create litter problems (unlike brochures).
- Signs are always in place, ready to be used.

Disadvantages

- Signs are subject to vandalism.
- Maintenance and production costs may be problems.

BULLETIN BOARDS

Advantages

- Bulletin boards are an inexpensive medium.
- They receive wide exposure.
- They are quickly read.
- They don’t generate litter.
- They are always available to the visitor.

Disadvantages

- Bulletin boards are subject to vandalism.
- They must be kept up-to-date.

EXHIBITS/DISPLAYS

Advantages

- Original objects may be safely shown in an exhibit.

- Displays can present a complete theme with all necessary objects present.
- Visitors can view displays at their own pace.

Disadvantages

- Quality equipment can be expensive.
- Periodic changes are necessary.
- Study and effort are required to create an effective interpretive display.

A more complete review of the uses and “How to’s” of the above methods of interpretation is available in guidesheet form from the Recreation Extension office, 623 Clark Hall, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, MO 65211.

A Final Step: Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Program

While planning a presentation, and again when the program is practiced and ready to give, evaluate its “interpretiveness”:

- Is the theme provocative?

- Will the audience react? Will audience members be challenged by the theme?
- Will the techniques chosen challenge the audience?
- What techniques will best interpret the theme to a particular audience?
- Am I “overloading” the program with too many ideas?
- Am I presenting concepts—the whole—rather than merely parts of a whole?
- Am I meeting and evaluating program objectives?
- Above all, will the audience enjoy the presentation?
- Have I presented the agency in a favorable light by showing they care about the environment, our culture (or whatever the park is about)? Have I shown that rules and regulations are established to protect and preserve the uniqueness of the park?
- Have I explained other opportunities and encouraged further participation?

For further information, see RG-8, “Interpretive Slide Talks,” RG-9 “Interpretive Demonstrations,” RG-10 “Interpretive Recordings,” RG-11 “Interpretive Brochures,” and RG-12 “Interpretive Bulletin Boards.”

■ Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914 in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Leonard C. Douglas, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Missouri and Lincoln University, Columbia, Missouri 65211. ■ An equal opportunity institution.