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High quality, effective interpretation helps visitors to connect with Scotland’s nature and landscapes.

Introduction

Planning your natural heritage interpretation will help you to structure the process, avoid wasting resources and produce a successful result. Your interpretive plan should also fit in with the business, marketing and/or visitor management plans for a site.
The best interpretive text brings natural heritage to life through storytelling and the use of various creative techniques. Sticking to some simple rules when writing interpretation will make sure that you grab your audience’s attention – and keep it.

Evaluation will tell you whether your interpretation is working well or must be tweaked to meet your set objectives. You should be prepared to make changes to your interpretation in light of your evaluation results.

Providing equal access is a basic principle of good interpretation. It’s also a legal requirement to do so where practicable. For the best results, involve people with disabilities as you plan and develop the interpretation.

High quality interpretation panels in the right setting can be very effective. But they can be counterproductive if badly made or sited. Make interpretation panels attractive and accessible at first glance – people may decide in seconds whether or not to read them.
Interpretive planning

An interpretive plan is essential. It should also fit in with the business, marketing and/or visitor management plans for a site.

Objectives

Decide at the outset what you wish to achieve with your interpretation.

Your objectives might be:

- behavioural
- educational
- emotional
- promotional

Be specific and realistic when setting objectives, and ensure that you can measure how well you achieve them. Objectives help to justify the resources you'll need for the interpretation, and you'll refer to them in your evaluation.

Keep it subtle if you want to change people’s attitudes or behaviour: it pays to let people think for themselves.

Partners in the planning process

Interpretive planning happens at many different scales – from a single display to an entire region. Involve the right people in the process from the start.

It may make sense to involve several agencies, communities and voluntary groups if the interpretation relates to a large area. For example, you might want to link your site to your local museum or another relevant facility.

A single person may be able to plan a simple interpretation, however.

Subject and audience

Think carefully about what you want to interpret. What makes the feature, collection or site special?

To keep your interpretation relevant, you must also know your audience:

- How many visitors are there?
- Who are they and where do they come from?
- Why do they visit? What interests them?
- How often and for how long do they visit?

Also ask yourself:

- What visitor facilities are/will be on offer?
- What other interpretation is there in the area?
- What resources are available?

Don't just interpret what you're interested in – make sure your audience is able to relate to the interpretation. Visitors shouldn't have to know much about your subject matter already, but don’t assume it’s entirely new to them either.
Stimulate all the senses where possible. What can your visitors see, hear, feel, smell and taste?

**Themes**
Refine what you want to say into themes. These are the ideas that you want visitors to take away with them. The interpretation for a single site might have several key themes, each containing one big idea.

**Media**
Your objectives, subject, audience, themes and resources should dictate the media you choose, rather than vice versa. An interpretation panel won’t always be the most suitable way to achieve your objectives.

**Implementation**
Cost and schedule the production of the interpretation, and work out who will manage the work. Part of this process is deciding what can be done in house and who you might need to hire in.

Effective interpretation requires great skill. Use only writers and designers who are able to deliver high quality work. Don’t write text yourself unless you’re suitably qualified to do so.

**Monitoring and evaluation**
You should assess whether your interpretation meets your set objectives. What you discover can inform your next interpretation project.

**Maintenance**
Be clear about who is to maintain the interpretation.

Maintenance tasks might include:

- cleaning surfaces
- clearing away vegetation
- checking that interactives and lights work
- tightening fixings

**Related Links**
[Perth College UHI Centre for Interpretation Studies](https://www.pacificperthcollege.ac.uk/interpreter)
[Interpret Europe](https://www.interpretation-europe.eu)
[Association for Heritage Interpretation](https://www.heritageinterpretation.org)
[National Association for Interpretation (USA)](https://www.nationalassociationforinterpretation.org)
Writing effective interpretation

A great deal of thought and practice goes into writing good interpretive text.

One of the main ways it differs from visitor information is that interpretive text should relate to the audience. Various writing techniques can help you to do this well.

Always think of your audience
Write simply and clearly, just as you would talk to a friend. Don’t just try to get across as many facts as you can. Tell a story that your audience will read and remember.

Address the reader directly
Use ‘you’ when talking to your audience. For example: “You can see the lichen clinging to the trees, taking in water and nutrients from the air.”

Active not passive verbs
Your text will flow better, your point will be clearer and you’ll use fewer words. For example, “We manage the National Nature Reserve” reads better than “The National Nature Reserve is managed by SNH”.

Pitch the reading age right
In general, a reading age of 9 to 12 is a good level at which to pitch your interpretive text – roughly the same as for tabloid newspapers. Writing at this level uses very few technical or scientific terms, and is easily understood by most older children and adults.

Include metaphors, analogies and comparisons
Your audience may understand better if you relate what you’re writing about to something that’s already familiar to them. For example: “Loch Ness is so deep, you could stand 100 Nelson’s Columns in it, one on top of the other.”

Use humour – with care
Write for your audience’s enjoyment. Your visitors are just like you – they like to be amused, challenged and entertained.

Humour can be a great way to get your audience on side. But remember, what one person finds funny may turn another reader off.

Fire their imagination
Ask your audience questions and invite them to imagine aspects of the story you’re trying to tell.

For example:

• “What famous drink comes from this innocent looking bush?”
• “Can you imagine living here during the Clearances, when your whole village was thrown off its land?”

Use first-person narrative
Adopting a character to tell your story in the first person can be a very effective way to grab people’s attention – and keep it.
Keep it clear and concise
Use short and simple sentences and paragraphs. Vary sentence length here and there. And stick to one idea per sentence.

It all helps to avoid boring your audience or putting them off before they even begin reading.

Avoid jargon and technical terms
Use plain English. Jargon and technical terms aren’t widely understood. If you use them, you’ll lose many readers.

Pictures can be very useful where you must describe something that’s difficult to put into words.

Choose your words carefully
You should talk in general about ‘people’, rather than refer specifically to ‘men’ or ‘women’. And use gender-neutral job titles – for example, ‘firefighter’ instead of ‘fireman’.

Edit, read and edit again
Get your writing as tight as possible. If you can do without a word, lose it.
Evaluating interpretation

For meaningful evaluation, you must begin by having clear objectives.

You should also be prepared to make changes to your interpretation in light of your evaluation results.

**When to evaluate**

**Front-end evaluation**
This is done while you develop your objectives, to help you pitch your interpretation correctly for your audience.

It helps to answer questions like:

- What do visitors already know about this topic?
- What interests them most?

**Formative evaluation**
Asking visitors what they think of early versions of your interpretation means you can tweak the text or design before producing the final piece. For example, you might test a leaflet to see if it attracts attention and gets your message across.

**Remedial evaluation**
Here you are checking that the various elements in a display work when they are put together.

For example, consider whether:

- lighting is suitable
- visitor flow patterns are as good as they can be
- competition between elements is minimal

**Summative evaluation**
This happens once your interpretation is in place, to ask whether it is meeting the objectives you set for it.

**Evaluation methods**
Quantitative methods count and measure things. The end result is numerical data that can be analysed statistically.

Qualitative methods try to describe opinions, attitudes, feelings and views. The information produced will need to be interpreted and organised.

Each method below has its own strengths and weaknesses. A mixed methods approach usually gives the best results.

**Observation**
Visitors are observed to see how they behave.
For example, this could tell you:

- how long visitors spend looking at a specific exhibit
- whether they repeat any of the content aloud (a ‘text echo’)

**Tracking/behavioural mapping**
Visitors are tracked to find out:

- where they go
- how they use a space or area
- how long they spend in different places

**Questionnaires**
Visitors can complete a questionnaire or an interviewer may do so on their behalf.

Closed questions can be coded and treated statistically, as they’re answered by referring to a scale. Open questions aim to gather insights into opinions, feelings and views.

**Focus groups**
Information is gathered through in-depth interviews with a group of people. They are usually semi-structured, meaning that the interviewer will cover set themes but doesn’t need to stick to the same questions each time.

Interviews are usually recorded and analysed later.

**Critical appraisal**
This involves seeking the expert opinion of an interpretive professional.

**Related Links**
[Visitor Studies Group website](#)
Making interpretation accessible for all

Make your interpretation more accessible by following the points below. Better yet, involve people with disabilities as you plan and develop the interpretation.

Text size and type
Using large point size text for graphics helps the more than 2 million people in the UK with sight loss. It's also easier for everyone to read.

Minimum point sizes are:
- 60pt for headlines
- 48pt for introductory text on graphic panels
- 24pt for body text on graphic panels
- 12pt for text in publications and on websites

Avoid using italic, bold or all upper-case text, which are harder to read.

Text and background should contrast well in colour and brightness. Red-green colour blindness is the most common form, so avoid using these colours.

Use a text hierarchy for clarity, plus boxes and bullet points to add interest.

Images, audio and Braille
Pictures with simple captions often tell a story better than lengthy text, especially for people with learning difficulties.

Audio clips can be used alongside text, to enhance the story you're telling. You can also use Braille or ‘talking labels’ that read text out loud.

Try to engage other senses too, particularly touch. Invite your audience to hold objects and feel tactile surfaces.

A virtual tour lets visitors with disabilities experience parts of a site that they couldn’t access otherwise.

Environment
Offer plenty of places to sit down. It helps people with walking difficulties and other mobility problems as well as anyone with tired legs and feet.

Fix panels and labels so that wheelchair users and wearers of bifocal glasses can read them. Consider the angle, distance and height for each item.

Keep labels to the front of display cases, and make sure the interior is well lit. Text and labels on reflective surfaces can be tricky to read.

Induction loops can be installed to help people with hearing loss. Counters should be split level, so that wheelchair users can use them just as easily.

Website accessibility
Your website should work with screen readers. These translate online text into speech or Braille (on a display) for blind or partially sighted users.
Producing interpretive panels

High quality interpretation panels in the right setting can be very effective. But they can be counterproductive if badly made or sited.

Good interpretation panels use text and visuals creatively to tell a story about a natural heritage feature or site. An information panel only directs or instructs.

Simple is often best
People will walk past panels that are too busy or complex. Limit each panel to no more than 200 words, and opt for a simple but appealing design.

Make an impact where it counts
Research tells us that adverts (and panels) are read in this order:

1. Headline
2. Main image
3. Subheadings
4. Bullet points
5. Other imagery
6. Main text

Put your main points in your headline, main image and subheadings. This is called ‘layering’ your interpretation. It helps to get your message across however much text people are willing to read.

Visuals
The text shouldn’t do all the work. Visuals should also feature on panels as another way to engage with your audience.

Visuals can be:

- photos
- drawings
- graphics

All visuals should:

- clearly relate to the text
- show the visitor something they can’t see for themselves
- have a label and/or annotations

Budget enough time and money to source suitable visuals. You may need to commission drawings or pay to use images under licence.

Drawings give you complete freedom to show your audience exactly what you wish, so are often more useful than photos.

Maps
Use a map on a panel only if:

- necessary to do so
- it’s clear and easy to understand
• you have permission to reuse the map
• it is big enough for the panel

A three-dimensional (3D) map may be a better option, where feasible.

**Design and production**
Ask your designer to be involved early on. It’s vital that the designer is aware of the panel’s purpose and intended audience as well as where it will go.

To decide on the most suitable materials for the panel, consider:

• what will make for the best visitor experience
• how the panel can blend in with its surroundings

Panels may be produced in a number of ways: manufacturers can provide technical advice on the techniques they offer. The design, budget and how long you wish the panel to last will help you to narrow down the choices.

Consider long-term panel maintenance at the outset, when you plan an interpretation panel.