

# Quality Interpretation

## The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore

At the Zoo we tend to talk about education and educational opportunities because we teach in both a formalized way and an informal way. The formal setting -- or education program -- includes programs that fulfill standardized curriculum for schools. Informal programs -- or interpretation -- includes Outposts, EdZOOcation Stations, and puppet or animal shows.

The outcomes for education or formal programs tend to be tied to curriculum standards and require presentation of facts through interactive teaching methods. Whereas, informal or interpretation programs tend to be about inspiring guests, leaving an impression of the whole or leaving the guest with a desire to wish for more information.

There are substantial overlapping characteristics of what makes a quality presentation between the formal and informal, but some noteworthy distinctions exist. Freeman Tilden in his 1957 book *Interpreting Our Heritage* began a field of study and practice that focuses on educating in the informal setting. The definition of interpretation provided by the National Association for Interpretation is:

"Interpretation is a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource."

Mr. Tilden outlines six principles of interpretation:

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.

- Information as such is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
- Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
- The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
- Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole person rather than any phase.
- 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.

(Tilden, F. (1957). *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, pg. 9.)

## Evaluation

How do I know I did a good job? Certainly, watching the guests' response will be immediate feedback on how you are doing. Time is limited for Zoo visitors, they vote with the feet. Just because a guest walks away, does not mean you are not doing a good job, but it can.

We have created or borrowed a couple of different matrix for evaluation that provides objective review based upon the following criteria.

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### Preparation:

#### Be prepared with:

Message or theme that you are teaching  
Approved facts  
Appropriate teaching tools / activities / bio-facts

#### Be in uniform:

Mental attitude  
Name tag  
Appropriate dress

#### Choose an appropriate location:

Enough space for audience expected / desired  
Not interfering with guest traffic  
Safe location for props/animals  
Give thought to: other area distractions and noise  
Consider the novelty of the space

### Presentation:

#### Greeting:

Hello/ Thank you for coming / Welcome to the...  
Introduction of self  
Introduction of rules  
Statement of purpose for this presentation

Physically and verbally invite the audience to participate

Good eye contact (but not freaky intensity)  
Eye contact with entire audience

#### Body language:

Smile  
Face your audience  
Use open body language (no crossed arms)  
Be at a comfortable distance  
Don't tower over your listener physically

#### Appropriate use of voice:

Warm tone  
Appropriate volume – loud enough and clear  
Unrushed speed  
Not monotone! Use inflection and emphasis.

### Accommodate the audience:

#### Meet the needs of your audience:

Address their interests – listen to what the guests ask or say to you  
Be helpful  
Answer guest questions to the best of your ability  
Respond or be aware of guest time constraints

#### Be inclusive:

Read your audience  
Who approached you first?  
What are they trying to do or see?  
Who in the group is interested and what are they responding to?  
When are they ready to quit and go see other things?  
Start with the person who approaches (adult or child)  
Transition to include everyone by addressing everyone in the group  
Include information in age-appropriate ways for your audience

#### Content:

Approved facts / information (accuracy)  
Relevant and personalized information for the guest  
Age-appropriate information  
Don't fact vomit; interpret

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Information that is relevant to the exhibit or what is in front of the guest  
Respond to answers / comments with respect (even if incorrect)  
Appropriate answers to guests' questions, including "I don't know"  
Be reasonable about how much you expect to present  
Clear relation to the Zoo's conservation and education message(s)

Customer service and knowledge of Zoo guest services information

## Interpretive Techniques

Dialogue or conversations

Variety of questions including:

- Hook -- questions that provoke the visitor or introduce a topic
- Cognitive/Memory -- questions that require recall of information or indication of understanding
- Convergent -- questions that require manipulation of given information, focusing on a specific answer
- Divergent -- questions that are open-ended, reflecting production of new ideas
- Evaluative -- questions that ask for judgments or informed opinions

Games

Objects/biofacts

Activities that use multiple senses

Role-playing or play acting

Hands-on activities

Measuring, observing, comparing and contrasting, counting

## Conclusion

Thank you for coming

How to find more information

Other neat opportunities coming up

Answer individual questions

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### A good education station has:

Well-prepared, knowledgeable and friendly interpreters.

Show enthusiasm for subject.

Be welcoming to the visitors.

Don't be too pushy (often a fine line)

Present only what you know.

Don't be afraid to say you don't know (If it's a guess, let them know you are guessing based on what you know – I've done this several times with some of your questions. I may not know the answer but I have an educated guess based on what I do know)

Know where the nearest restroom and food court is. (We'll provide you with a map and you'll have a chance to scout out the zoo prior to presentations.)

Know how to contact zoo personnel in case there's a problem.

Act politely and appropriately (ie: no bad language, arguments, fights etc.) – remember you are representing both your school and The Zoo when staffing a station!

Written information presented in an interesting and easily retainable way.

TEXT

Large type

Very short Paragraphs (mostly one or two sentences)

Only the most important information is on the poster.

The rest can be filled in verbally by the interpreters.

Interpreters should use the information on the poster much like a speaker uses an outline during a speech.

GRAPHICS

Lots of visuals related to the subject to attract an audience. (remember a picture says a thousand words)

Magazine Pictures

Colorful drawings

Opportunities for interaction:

Artifacts and other objects (provides 3-dimensions and opportunity for exploration with other senses – potentially hearing, touch and smell (never taste)

Games and Activities

Play-acting

Contests

Physical Challenges (races, performing a task etc.)

Mental Challenges (trivia etc.)

Songs, poetry, stories

Prizes for participation (stickers, stamps, never food)

### Safety

Activities conducted in safe environment (ie: running or jumping games on grass not concrete)

No tackling, hitting, etc. allowed

Nothing goes into mouth of interpreters or guests

No sharp or otherwise dangerous objects used as artifacts

No peanuts or other potentially allergenic materials