



## Foundational Competencies for All NPS Interpreters

*This is the revised and updated curriculum for what was formerly known as Fulfilling the NPS Mission: the Process of Interpretation (Module 101). It builds and evolves from those original ideas and the input of many interpretive professionals who have contributed. This revised curriculum presents the competency descriptions and competency standards for the following NPS core interpretive competencies: Foundations of Interpretation, Knowledge of the Resource, Knowledge of the Audience, and Knowledge of Appropriate Techniques.*

### Authors of this document:

Kevin Bacher	Interpretive Park Ranger, Mount Rainer National Park
Alyssa Baltrus	Supervisory Park Ranger, C&O Canal National Historical Park
Beth Barrie	Curriculum Designer, Eppley Institute for Parks and Public Lands
Katie Bliss	Curriculum Revision Coordinator, Eppley Institute for Parks and Public Lands
Dominic Cardea	Chief of Interpretation, Haleakala National Park
Linda Chandler	Interpretive Park Ranger, Castillo De San Marco National Monument
Dave Dahlen	Superintendent, Mather Training Center
Jana Friesen	Natural Resources Program Writer, Washington D.C. Office
Richard Kohen	Interpretive Specialist, Intermountain Support Office
Becky Lacombe	Training Specialist, Mather Training Center

## Foundations of Interpretation

### Competency Description

National Park Service interpretation directly supports the preservation mission. Interpretation is driven by a philosophy that charges interpreters to help audiences care *about* park resources so they might support the care *for* park resources. Interpretation establishes the value of preserving park resources by helping audiences discover the meanings and significance associated with those resources. This competency requires interpreters at all levels to understand the core definition of interpretation, the professional standards for interpretation, the purpose of interpretation, how interpretation can be measured, and how successful interpretation works. These understandings continually evolve and increase in sophistication throughout an interpreter's career.

Entry level interpreters use this philosophy and best practices to create interpretive products. Full performance interpreters use these philosophies and best practices to refine interpretive products as well as to plan and deliver special events, interpretive media, and other interpretive activities. Supervisors and managers use these philosophies and best practices to articulate, apply, and measure interpretive choices and functions, and to support the work of resource management and preservation. All interpretive applications, evaluation, and training should incorporate the philosophies and best practices contained in Foundations of Interpretation.

### Competency Standard

#### All Interpreters:

- Understand their role to facilitate connections between resource meanings and audience interest.
- Understand their role to facilitate connections between resource meanings and audience interests.
- Understand, recognize, and create opportunities for audiences to make their own intellectual and emotional connections to resource meanings.

- Understand, recognize, and cohesively develop an idea or ideas in interpretive products and activities.
- Understand the roles and relationships of resource knowledge, audience knowledge, and interpretive techniques in interpretive products and activities.
- Purposefully reflect on interpretive philosophies and best practices, deepen their understandings, and apply these philosophies and best practices to all interpretive competencies.

## What is Effective Interpretation?

### What is an interpreter?

When most people hear the word interpreter they think of someone who translates the meaning of one language into another. In a museum, zoo, or park setting interpreters “translate” artifacts, collections, and physical resources into a language that helps visitors make meaning of these resources. Credit for using the word interpretation to describe the work of exhibit designers, docents, and naturalists goes to John Muir who penned in his Yosemite notebook: “I’ll interpret the rocks, learn the language of flood, storm and the avalanche. I’ll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens, and get as near the heart of the world as I can.” (John Muir, 1896)

The word interpretation is, at times, awkward for describing what naturalists, exhibit designers, docents, and park rangers do because it does not always adequately capture the full range of what an interpreter does. Another term for interpreters could be visitor experience specialists. They provide orientation, information and inspiration in the right amounts and at the right times so that visitors will have more enjoyable, meaningful and complete experiences.

### The history of interpretation

Interpretation, as a profession, has evolved over time. Some of the important people who helped define and develop the profession of interpretation are listed, with their significant contributions, below.

- John Muir, (April 21, 1838 – December 24, 1914) was one of the earliest modern preservationists. His letters, essays, and books telling of his adventures in nature, and wild life, especially in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California, were read by millions and are still popular today. His direct activism helped to save the Yosemite Valley and other wilderness areas. The Sierra Club, which he founded, is now one of the most important conservation organizations in the United States. But more than that his vision of nature's value for its own sake and for its spiritual, not just practical, benefits to humankind helped to change the way we look at the natural world. (Wikipedia, 2006) (taken from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Muir](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Muir), retrieved December 14, 2006)
- Enos Mills (1870-1922) founded the first nature guide school after serving as a guide to his various hotel guests. He became the prime motivator for creating Rocky Mountain National Park. His enthusiasm for preservation flourished during a serendipitous friendship. While walking on the beach near San Francisco he asked an elderly passerby about a piece of kelp he found. The passerby just happened to be John Muir and his response about the kelp started an enduring friendship. Muir encouraged Enos to join the conservation movement and write about his adventures in nature. Mills wrote 20 books including *Adventures of a Nature Guide*, a work that is still relevant to interpreters.

- Freeman Tilden, (1883-1980) a newspaper columnist and author, decided he needed a change in his life at age 58. When his friend National Park Service Director Newton Drury invited him to work with the National Park Service, he entered the field of interpretation and forever changed the profession. In traveling to various parks to write books about the national park system he became concerned about the quality of interpretive programs in parks. This concern eventually led him to write his foundational book, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, published in 1957. It is in *Interpreting Our Heritage* that Tilden outlines his enduring principles of interpretation:
  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. (Freeman Tilden, 1957)
  
- William J. Lewis's *Interpreting for Park Visitors*, first published in 1980, provided practical wisdom and guidance for presenting specific kinds of interpretive programming. Like Tilden's book, Lewis's book remains a valuable classic that has helped establish the profession of interpretation and continues to be useful and relevant. In the *Fine Art of Interpretive Critiquing* and *The Process of Interpretive Critiquing*, Lewis also provided some of the first training and guidance in interpretive coaching.
  
- Sam Ham directs the Center for International Training and Outreach at the University of Idaho's College of Natural Resources, where he is a professor in the Department of Resource Recreation and Tourism. His book *Environmental Interpretation* (1992) contained 4 qualities that distinguish interpretation from other communication. These qualities have become central to the profession of interpretation.
  1. Interpretation is pleasurable.
  2. Interpretation is relevant.
  3. Interpretation is organized.
  4. Interpretation has a theme.
  
- Larry Beck and Ted Cable authored the book *Interpretation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (1998) to provide direction in the field at the turn of the millennium. As professors that teach coursework in interpretation they have written extensively in the fields of natural resource management and interpretation. Building upon the work of Enos Mills and Freeman Tilden, they developed *Fifteen Principles of Interpretation*:
  1. To spark an interest, interpreters must relate the subject to the lives of visitors.
  2. The purpose of interpretation goes beyond providing information to reveal deeper meaning and truth.

3. The interpretive presentation – as a work of art – should be designed as a story that informs, entertains, and enlightens.
4. The purpose of the interpretive story is to inspire and to provoke people to broaden their horizons.
5. Interpretation should present a complete theme or thesis and address the whole person.
6. Interpretation for children, teenagers, and seniors – when these comprise uniform groups – should follow fundamentally different approaches.
7. Every place has a history. Interpreters can bring the past alive to make the present more enjoyable and the future more meaningful.
8. High technology can reveal the world in exciting new ways. However, incorporating this technology into the interpretive program must be done with foresight and care.
9. Interpreters must concern themselves with the quantity and quality (selection and accuracy) of information presented. Focused, well-researched interpretation will be more powerful than a longer discourse.
10. Before applying the arts in interpretation, the interpreter must be familiar with basic communication techniques. Quality interpretation depends on the interpreter's knowledge and skills, which should be developed continually.
11. Interpretive writing should address what readers would like to know, with the authority of wisdom and the humility and care that comes with it.
12. The overall interpretive program must be capable of attracting support – financial, volunteer, political, administrative – whatever support is needed for the program to flourish.
13. Interpretation should instill in people the ability, and the desire to sense the beauty in their surroundings – to provide spiritual uplift and to encourage resource preservation.
14. Interpreters can promote optimal experiences through intentional and thoughtful program and facility design.
15. Passion is the essential ingredient for powerful and effective interpretation – passion for the resource and for those people who come to be inspired by the same.

### **Defining effective interpretation**

Webster New World Dictionary defines Interpretation as, “The expression of a person’s conception of a work of art or subject through acting, playing, writing, etc.”

However, the definition for interpretation in relation to the work performed by docents, park guides, and/or naturalists continues to evolve. Here are a few quotes defining interpretation in this capacity. Notice how they share the common assumption that interpretation helps visitors relate to the resources of a place which, in turn, makes their experiences personally relevant and meaningful.

- Interpretation is “an educational activity which aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.” (Tilden, 1957, p. 8)
- "Interpretation is the helping of the visitor to feel something that the interpreter feels - a sensitivity to beauty, complexity, variety, interrelatedness of the environment; a sense of wonder; a desire to know. It should help the visitor feel at home in the environment. It should help the visitor develop perception." (Wallin, 1965)
- “Interpretation is an attempt to create understandings.” (Alderson & Low, 1976)

- “Interpretation seeks to achieve 3 objectives. The first... is to assist the visitor in developing a keener awareness, appreciation and understanding of the area he is visiting. The second... is to accomplish management goals. The third... is to promote public understanding of the agency’s goals and objectives.” (Sharpe, 1982).
- "Interpretation is an approach to communication. It is separated from other forms of information transfer in that it is pleasurable, relevant, organized, and has a theme" (Ham, 1992).
- "Interpretation “give[s] meaning to a ‘foreign’ landscape or event from the past or present. What is being translated (say glaciation of Yosemite Valley, ecosystem dynamics at Yellowstone, or events surrounding the battle at Gettysburg) may well be ‘foreign’ to substantial numbers of visitors.” (Beck and Cable, 1998, p. 2)
- The National Park Service (NPS) defines interpretation as “a catalyst in creating an opportunity for the audience to form their own intellectual and emotional connections with the meanings and significance inherent in the resource (National Park Service, 2001)
- The National Association for Interpretation (NAI) defines interpretation as a “communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource.” (Brochu and Merriman, 2002).
- “Interpretation enriches lives through engaging emotions, enhancing experiences and deepening understanding of people, places, events and objects from past and present.” (Association for Heritage Interpretation AHI, 2005)

“The true interpreter will not rest at any dictionary definition. Besides being ready in his information and studious in his use of research, he goes beyond the apparent to the real, beyond a part to a whole, beyond a truth to a more important truth.” (Tilden, 1957, p. 8)

**Developmental activity:** Now create your own definition of interpretation. Imagine sharing this definition with friends and family.

### **Making connections**

Both of the recent NPS and NAI definitions include the idea that interpretation facilitates connections between the interests of the visitors and the meanings of the artifacts, collections or natural resources of a site. It is these personal connections and powerful meanings that visitors will remember long after their site visit, more so than the tactics involved in a battle, or the names of wetland species. Truly meaningful interpretation relates what is being interpreted to the hearts and minds of the audience and answers the question “Why should I care?”

Connections involve moments of intellectual and emotional revelation, perception, insight, or discovery. Opportunities for visitors to meaningfully connect to a site occur when an interpreter successfully links a site’s tangible resources to the intangible meanings those resources tend to represent.

### **Using Tangibles and Intangibles**

Interpreters use the word tangibles when talking about the physical elements of a site. A tangible is concrete. It is a thing that has material qualities that you can see, touch, taste, hear or smell. Examples include:

- a boat
- a tree
- a place like a battlefield
- a mountain
- a zoo specimen
- an ecosystem.

However, important people, events, stories, and processes (geologic, biologic, or historical), although not necessarily concrete, also have physical qualities and may be considered tangible.

Interpretation involves connecting these tangible resources to the concepts and ideas they represent — to their intangible meanings. Intangible meanings are abstract and include processes, relationships, ideas, feelings, values and beliefs. Examples include:

- democracy
- freedom
- death
- health
- loss

Connecting a site's tangible resources to their intangible meanings makes the resources more personally relevant and valuable to visitors. For example, when the home of former United States president Harry Truman is linked with the concepts of social equality and democracy, the site becomes more meaningful to the visitors. In turn, the importance of preserving the home for others to visit is easier to see and support.

“The nature guide [interpreter] is at his best when he discusses facts so that they appeal to the imagination and to the reason, gives flesh and blood to cold hard facts, makes life stories of inanimate objects.” Enos Mills – *Adventures of a Nature Guide* p. 126

### **Types of interpretation**

There are essentially two ways to deliver interpretation: personal services and media (non-personal) services. Personal services provide opportunities for visitors to interact with an interpreter in person. They include such things as informal contacts, talks, guided walks and demonstrations. However, personal services reach only as much as 22% of the visitors. In contrast over 62% of visitors receive interpretation through media services such as brochures, newspapers, audio tours and exhibit labels. Regardless of the type of interpretative service being provided, the definition of interpretation remains the same for both (Visitor Use and Evaluation of Interpretive Media, 2003)

So what is interpretation? It is a bridge between the meanings of the resources and interests of the visitors. It connects the tangible artifacts, collections or natural resources of a site to the intangible concepts they can represent. It is the role of the interpreter to ensure that those connections are built on the interests of the visitor. And it is the role of the visitor to determine which bridges will be crossed.

## Why do we do interpretation?

A question often asked and possessing countless possible answers, “Why do we interpret the places we are entrusted with?” should evoke both practical and philosophical replies. In *The Fifth Essence*, Freeman Tilden provided both a solid definition of interpretation and a sound reason to provide interpretive services to visitors.

*It is true that each preserved monument “speaks for itself.” But unfortunately it speaks in a language that the average visitor cannot comprehend. Beauty and the majesty of natural forces need no interlocutor. They constitute a personal spiritual experience. But when the question is “why?” or “what?” or “how did this come to be?” [interpreters] must have the answers. And this requires both patient research and the development of a program fitted to a great variety of needs. (56-7)*

The tangible resources we preserve in parks, museums, forests, zoos, and heritage sites are relevant to many people. Part of their power lives in the ability of these national treasures to convey many different things to many different people. The reason we do interpretation is to help visitors discover and understand the meanings of these sites. For those visitors that already relate to the site, interpreters offer opportunities to discover a broader understanding, to see the site with new eyes. The meanings that sites provide can help to inspire and rejuvenate – perhaps leading to an appreciation for the richness and complexity of life.

Translating the meanings of sites into languages visitors can understand ensures the “fullest and finest use of Parks” in three ways: it reveals the meanings a site represents, facilitates valuable experiences for visitors, and fulfills the NPS mission.

### **Resources possess meanings and have relevance**

*Each resource, private or public, subtle or obvious, has enough relevance (spoken powerfully to enough people or powerfully enough to a few people) to have achieved protected status.”*  
(Larsen, p. 16)

The reason a language translator interprets a message is because someone has a message they want to share – or more accurately, because someone wants to understand the message. The resources at a site have messages and relevance that can enrich visitors’ lives. Interpretation helps visitors to explore the importance of site resources and understand their larger significance.

These sites have been put into public trust because they are viewed as having enough meaning, enough significance, to our society to be preserved. It is the meanings and significance of the site that drive its preservation and inspire visitors to visit and to care. Interpretation highlights those meanings so they are not lost or forgotten. Often, we take for granted the beliefs and values that drive our actions and choices. For example, while many Americans value the ability to travel or speak freely, few ponder the meaning of freedom on a daily basis. “Interpretation facilitates the process by which meanings move from being taken for granted to being actively engaged” (Goldman, et al., 2001, p. 24). This active engagement may result in more memorable experiences as visitors find new meanings in the resources they enjoy.

*We walked through [the Korean War memorial area] and we didn’t understand what we were seeing. [What the ranger] described changed the whole picture for us. We were not educated very much*

[about] the Korean War. We saw that and I said, “Yeah.” I recognized it for what it is. But I didn’t know what it means. Response from a male visitor in study by Goldman, et al., 2001, p. 23.

For those who do not yet understand a resource they are visiting, interpretation can help them discover meanings and relevance, while understanding that visitors control the opportunities they will pursue in order to connect with the resource. As representatives of our site, we may believe we are holders of the official “truth.” But even historical and scientific “facts” are subject to personal bias and perception. While some meanings may be generally held by members of a society, the value and acceptance of those meanings is personal.

In fact, frequently the meanings audience members find in interpretive products are not those intended, or even previously known to the interpreter. There may be many other meanings and opportunities provided in a product in addition to those that are planned by the interpreter because interpretive products are open to a range of interpretations. Because interpretation is not about delivering a take home message, the fact that visitors find their own meanings and significance in an interpretive product is not a problem. Unintended bridges and paths to caring about the resource are as legitimate as intended opportunities to connect with the resource.

### **Visitors are seeking something of value for themselves**

*At best, interpreters promote enriched recreational experiences that turn to magic, where everything comes together, where there is unencumbered delight in knowledge and experience – a greater joy in living, a better understanding of one’s place in the overall scheme, a positive hope for the future. (Beck & Cable, p. 3)*

People visit parks, museums, cultural and historical sites for a variety of reasons: relaxation, recreation, socialization, solitude – the list can be as varied as the visitors. The one thing that all visitors share is that they are looking for something they value. Humans, by nature, seek to make meaning of their experiences. Some psychologists believe that searching for meaning is the primary motivation in life (Frankl, 1946).

In 1951 Freeman Tilden explained that visitors “want to idle, browse, inhale deeply, hike, go horseback riding, take pictures, mingle with folks doing all these things, and forget their jobs or their routine existence” (*The National Parks*, p. 33). But Tilden also understood that visitors are seeking something more. He recognized that after interacting with the resources at a site, for many visitors these things they initially wanted are “not enough.” The resources “are no longer something just to look at; they are something to wonder about” (p. 34). The resources spark curiosity and “hold out a hand. There are few [visitors] who do not grasp it. There are secrets. There are few who do not want to penetrate some of them” (p. 34). Interpreters are the professionals that reveal those secrets by translating them into a language the visitor can understand.

Whether the visitors are actual or virtual, the resource is the foundation of any interpretive experience. Since visitors come to the parks to experience the genuine artifact, facilitating access to those resources and resource meanings contributes greatly to the relevance these special places hold in our society. It is the resources contained within our parks that bring visitors to experience them, thus resources serve as the foundation of interpretive programs. The experiences visitors have with the places are what make interpretation and education in a national park setting so rich, vivid and powerful. The most powerful experiences come from direct interaction with the resource itself. The opportunity to have these experiences is why our resources are preserved in the first place.



Just as there are many motivations for visiting a site, there are countless ways visitors may find meaning and value in a site. It's important to respect the variety of experiences visitors are seeking. It doesn't matter why visitors come to parks and love parks as long as they aren't breaking the law or damaging the resource or impacting the experience of other visitors. Part of an interpreter's role is to recognize when interpretation will aid and when it will hinder the visitor's search for a valuable, meaningful experience.

### **Fulfilling the NPS mission**

The NPS Organic Act of 1916 sets out the agency's overarching mission: ". . . to conserve the scenery, and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." Interpretation helps do this by introducing visitors to meanings and ideas, while allowing them to retain and express their own values. As Tilden suggested, some of what the site has to say can be understood by the visitor, but there may be additional meanings that the visitor may not yet have discovered. Interpretation can build upon these opportunities to expand the visitor's experience and understanding of the resources.

The larger significance of the site resources provides the reason they have been preserved and protected. Providing visitors with opportunities to form their own intellectual and emotional connections with the significance of a site should help them care about the site. Caring about something is the first step toward caring for it. Interpretation, as the voice for the site, can be a critical tool in the preservation of the resources at the site.

*"In the end, we conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught."*

- **Baba Dioum**, Senegalese poet

Visitors who discover personal relevance and meaning will be more inclined to participate in conserving a site's resources so that future generations can enjoy them. This may then translate into larger, overarching support for resource protection and preservation on a national level. Through the preservation of NPS units that encompass places, ideas, meanings, events and habitats, we preserve the base-line components of a healthy, evolving society and environment. The NPS cannot preserve these national treasures forever without the public taking an active role in their preservation.

## What skills do interpreters need?

What skills are needed to facilitate valuable, enjoyable experiences while translating the meanings of the resource? Combining solid knowledge of the resource, knowledge of the audience and appropriate interpretive techniques is essential to providing interpretive opportunities. These elements underlie every successful interpretive service.

### Visualizing the components

There are many ways to visualize the relationship between the elements that comprise effective interpretation. Three ways are described below. The interpretive equation describes the relationship as a mathematical formula where the proper combination of the elements results in an interpretive opportunity. The interpretive triangle shows how elements must be in balance to have the desired effect. The last model describes interpretation as an art, comprised of teachable elements.

*The Interpretive Equation:  $(KR + KA) AT = IO$*

An interpreter's knowledge of the resource (KR), combined with their knowledge of the audience (KA), can be shared through an appropriate technique (AT) to provide an interpretive opportunity (IO). The better the interpreter's knowledge of resource and audience, and the more appropriate their techniques for presenting their knowledge to that audience, the more likely an opportunity will be offered for the visitors to form their own personal connections with the resource. While clearly it is impossible to fully represent an interpretive product with a simple mathematical formula, the interpretive equation is a useful tool to help remember the key ingredients of good interpretation and how they relate to one another.

*Interpretive Triangle*



Firefighters know that three ingredients are needed for a fire: fuel, oxygen, and heat. Without all three elements, there can be no chemical reaction leading to combustion. Fire educators have often used a fire triangle to illustrate this. Adapting this visual aid for interpretation, the sides of the triangle are knowledge of the resource, knowledge of the audience and appropriate techniques. Without a proper balance and application of all three elements, an interpretive opportunity cannot be sparked. For example, an interpreter may have a solid knowledge of the resource, but little knowledge of the audience, so they may select interpretive techniques that are inappropriate or ineffective for that audience.

### *Interpretation as Art*

Another way to think about the fusion of elements in effective interpretation is to visualize the combining of knowledge and intuition through artistic expression. In this case interpretation is an

**ART...**

**A** = knowledge of **A**udience

**R** = knowledge of **R**esource

**T** = appropriate **T**echniques

...which combines many **ART**s. And any **ART** is in some degree teachable.

These three models are tools for remembering the elements of effective interpretation. But it isn't important how these elements are remembered. What is important is that they are skillfully applied when creating interpretive products. For NPS interpreters, knowledge of the resource, knowledge of the audience, and appropriate techniques are foundational competencies that define the work of interpreters and have been validated for use in professional standards. The following three sections describe the essential knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors necessary to obtain and apply professional standards in these three components.

### **Knowledge of the Resource**

If interpreters are to properly translate the meanings of collections, artifacts and natural resources at a site, they must have enough knowledge of these resources to be able to speak clearly. A translator who doesn't know both languages isn't of much use to anyone. The job of interpreters is to facilitate a connection between the interests of visitors and the meanings of the resource – an impossible task without a solid, and accurate, knowledge of the resource. Knowledge of the resource is the bedrock upon which all the rest of an interpretive service is built.

The NPS has developed a competency statement that defines the knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors associated with solid knowledge of the resource. The competency statement establishes the importance of knowledge of the resource and outlines the scope of what such knowledge contains.

### Competency Description

Interpretation relies on multi-disciplinary knowledge to provide different audiences with relevant and meaningful connections to park resources. Interpreters at all levels must have a thorough understanding of the underpinning research, tangible features, associated concepts, context, relationships, systems, processes, human values, and other meanings associated with the

resource. Interpreters must also understand multiple points of view regarding the resource as well as the park's past and current conditions and possess the skills to interpret them for all visitors.

All Interpreters should:

- Understand why research and knowledge related to the resource is important and why it should be current, accurate, and comprehensive
- Understand the ways that research supports the interpreter's ability to facilitate opportunities for audiences to make their own intellectual and emotional connections to the meanings and significance of the resource.
- Use the philosophies, methodologies, and assumptions of professional disciplines to conduct research and evaluate sources for their relevance and validity.

### Gaining Knowledge

Interpreters begin their efforts to create meaningful connections for visitors by first gaining knowledge of the site. Every aspect of interpretation is potentially improved as the interpreter learns more about park resources and their meanings and associated stories – connections to other events and modern issues may become clear, diversity of viewpoints may be more thoroughly understood, and provocative and controversial topics may be more thoroughly prepared for.

Knowledge is more than just the facts about the resource. Interpreters must identify and be fully aware of the many different intangible and universal meanings the resources represent to various audiences. Interpreters must possess a very broad knowledge of the history of the park beyond just the enabling legislation. They must be knowledgeable about past and contemporary issues, and the condition of the park and its resources.

What an interpreter does with their knowledge of the resource is as important as the knowledge they possess. To be most effective interpreters should use their knowledge to convey the park's primary interpretive themes. Interpreters must be careful to rely on accurate information when developing interpretive material and avoid the tendency to exaggerate or slant information to present a personal or particular viewpoint. Interpreters should not use their knowledge of the resources and the intangible/universal meanings associated with them to offer only bland recitals of non-controversial "safe" facts. For example, sound interpretation embraces a discussion of human values, conflicts, ideas, tragedies, achievements, ambiguities, and triumphs.

There are many different ways to build a solid knowledge of the resource. The most essential is to interact with the resource as much as possible. Interpreters must be fully immersed in the resource to gain an intimate knowledge it – hiking the trails, listening to the birds, touching the "real" things, smelling the farm, etc. – in order to comprehend a full range of those resource meanings. Being immersed in the resource provides an interpreter with a first-hand opportunity to explore the meanings of the resources at a site. Interpreters should explore their own relationships to these resource meanings before attempting to interpret them for their audiences.

Such first-hand knowledge can have a lasting impact on visitors. Take, for example, this visitor's recollection of a knowledgeable guide, shared with a researcher 50 years after the park visit:

*[The guide] talked about the alligators. He said that the alligators were just about gone and that something should be done to restore them to the Glades because the Glades some of them had been*

*drained and I don't know how many acres. He seemed very, very knowledgeable. Whether he made it up or not he really sounded like he knew what he was talking about.* (Barrie, 2001)

Another essential task in acquiring knowledge of the resource is reading a wide variety of sources of written information. While it's easy to rely on one or two common books or documents, real depth of knowledge only comes through a thorough literature search, including primary and secondary sources. An up-to-date list of these sources may or may not be provided by your park. In addition, knowledge of recent and on-going research can keep your KR on the leading edge, providing an understanding of changing theories, ideas and attitudes. Validating the accuracy of any information used in interpretive services is essential.

Knowledge of a resource should also be built by talking to people with experience at a site such as senior staff, park researchers, curators and historians. It can be very helpful to routinely approach these experts and ask questions like, "What is the most important message we should be trying to get out to the public about this topic?" and "How does this issue or problem impact the park?" Regularly reading a local newspaper can help prepare an interpreter for visitor questions and to provide visitors with historical comparisons. For example, how does segregation in the Omaha Public Schools today compare to segregation in public schools during the *Brown v. Board of Education* case of 1954?

### Telling a more complete story

One of the advantages of developing a solid knowledge of the resources at a site is that it gives you the ability to tell more of the story at your site. In describing a battle, is it a "glorious victory" or a "stunning defeat"? Or both? Interpreters must understand many different opinions and perspectives about each topic. Using multiple points of view is a necessary part of telling a more complete story, and illustrates that a subject may be legitimately viewed in many different ways. Interpreters should accommodate and present multiple points of view in their interpretation and not presume to expound what they think is the only "official" or "true" version of the resources and their meaning. Interpreters encourage visitors to see resources from different perspectives. The more perspectives a visitor has to choose from, the more likely they will be able to form connections to the resource that are relevant to themselves. By providing a relevant opportunity to connect with the meanings and significance of a resource, interpreters help visitors care more about the resource and its preservation.

### **Knowledge of the Audience**

To provide relevant opportunities for visitors to connect with the meanings and significance of a site, an interpreter must know about their audience. Understanding as much as possible about the audience during the development of interpretive products is essential to providing enjoyable visitor experiences. Without solid knowledge of the audience interpreters will not be able to meet their needs. They may inflict interpretation on a visitor who just wanted some brief information. Not every visitor requires an "intensive" interpretive experience. Or an interpretive product may alienate a portion of the audience by being inappropriate. Without understanding the audience an interpreter may provide opportunities for the audience to care *less* about the site, something no interpreter can afford to do.

It is important to understand and respect the reasons why visitors come to our places, and to meet them "where they are" in their understanding of the value of the resource. They would not have come if there weren't something about the place that already had some value to them – recreational, educational, or inspirational. Good knowledge of the audience enables us to recognize when to let the visitor and the resource interact on their own, and when, how, and where it is appropriate to use interpretation to help them discover new or renewed meanings in the resource.

### Competency Description

Knowledge of the audience characteristics, interests, expectations, and multiple points of view including psychological, social, cultural, economic, political, religious, historical and philosophical influences and perspectives is necessary to develop interpretation that is relevant to a wide variety of audiences. Knowledge of life stages, including varied learning styles of audience members and developmental functioning among different audience members is important to fulfill varied expectations and interests of the audience. Understanding the many motivations for visiting a resource and being cognizant of the existing meanings, present interpretations, and current attitudes that visitors hold about a resource can be important components in making interpretation relevant to as many visitors as possible.

All interpreters should:

- Understand the importance of in-depth knowledge of the audience in providing opportunities for connections to resource meanings relevant to a wide variety of visitors.
- Understand how comprehensive knowledge of the audience can be used to facilitate opportunities for a diversity of individuals to make intellectual and emotional connections to the meanings and significance inherent in the resource.
- Use research and analytical skills to acquire comprehensive knowledge of the audience.
- Understand that visitor motivation is self-generated and whatever their perspective or interest, they are potential stewards of the resource.

### Gaining Knowledge

Knowledge of the audience comes from an understanding of how people learn and communicate as well as how their motivations, values, beliefs, expectations and experiences shape their park visit. With this knowledge an interpreter can design everything about an interpretive opportunity from what technique is most appropriate to the depth of information covered, to the style and approach in which it is presented.

Interpreters should first develop some knowledge of who is, and who is not, visiting their park or site. Visitor demographic studies are often available for this. Then interpreters should seek out a variety of sources that help them understand and relate to their potential audiences. The more specific the understanding of audience backgrounds, needs, expectations, and interests, the more tailored and effective the interpretive service can become. Approaching all interpretation as being for some vague “general audience” is not an effective way to help visitors care about the preservation of park resources.

In addition, there are a number of accepted theories that can easily be applied to interpretation, including: basic communication theories, multiple intelligences, multiple learning styles, Bloom’s taxonomy, Piaget and the stages of cognitive development in children, and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. By utilizing how people think and learn, interpreters can maximize the potential for their audiences to receive and understand park messages.

### Relevant to the Audience

Knowledge of the audience is critical to successfully relating to the visitor. Audiences want to know how it relates personally to them or “what’s in it for me.”

All audiences who want to visit or read about a site are seeking something of value for themselves. They expect something special. Many have a personal sense of what the place means. Many know a great deal about the resource, some know what family or friends

have told them, and others simply assume the resource contains something worthwhile. Some visitors are not sure what to expect or may assume it has no personal relevance to them.

The meanings audiences ascribe to the resource have a great deal to do with the success or failure of interpretation. Expert audiences require different approaches than children, seniors, or international visitors. Of course, a given interpretive product can be required to meet any combination of those audiences as well as many more.

Some sites have formal visitor surveys and demographic information available. All interpreters, during the casual conversation that often offers itself, can benefit by asking visitors what the resource means to them. A visitor who says the forest is a place for spiritual renewal, solitude, and self-understanding requires a significantly different program than one that feels the forest is a place where they can get bitten by a snake.

Interpreters can gather understanding of audience meanings by asking questions like, "What brought you here today?" "What did you expect to find?" "What do you hope to gain here?" "What do you hope your children will take away with them?" "If you had my job, what would you tell people?" An interpreter who thinks about and records the answers to these questions has the opportunity to tailor their interpretive products to meet current audience interests/meanings as well as provide newly discovered relevance.

-From the process model section of the 2004 Module 103 Tel station packet by Howk and Baltrus

Asking the visitor what they think or feel about a tangible resource will often evoke emotionally-laden words and phrases, which can then be explored by the interpreter. It is critical to remember that a thorough knowledge of a resource also means a thorough understanding of the different meanings visitors ascribe to that resource, so knowledge of the resource and knowledge of the audience are inseparably linked.

The link between knowledge of the resource and knowledge of the audience is clear when considering multiple perspectives. As interpreters gain more knowledge of the audience, the multiple perspective visitors hold may be more thoroughly integrated into interpretive services. Incorporating multiple points of view enables the product to relate to the broadest audience possible. Using multiple points of view demonstrates and models inclusiveness and an understanding that visitors have the right to retain their own opinions while being exposed to new ideas.

### Respectful of the Audience

Knowledge of the audience is not only important to providing interpretive opportunities, it is essential to being respectful of the audience. Interpreters must recognize and respect the specific personal values and interests visitors associate with resources. To do so interpreters must know what those values and interests are. Interpreters should keep in mind the "visitors' bill of rights." Whether visiting a park on-site or virtually, visitors have a right to:

- have their privacy and independence respected;
- retain and express their own values;
- be treated with courtesy and consideration;
- receive accurate and balanced information.

### **Appropriate Techniques**

Knowledge of the audience and knowledge of the resource are clearly represented in the visitors' bill of rights. But to enable visitors to be open interpretive opportunities, there is one more piece of the equation that is essential. To link the tangible resources of a site with the intangible concepts they

represent, appropriate interpretive techniques must be used. Simply declaring that a resource is important because it represents the universal struggle for survival does not provide an opportunity for visitors to form their own connection to what the resource means or why it is significant. Using techniques like storytelling or comparisons, if appropriate for this specific service, can provide opportunities for connections to the resource which may motivate visitors care about, and perhaps even care for, the resource.

### Competency Description

Interpretation relies on the appropriate integration of a wide variety of techniques to foster opportunities for meaningful connections to the resource. The selection of techniques must always be based on specific program objectives and on knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of each technique. In addition, knowledge of both the audience and the resource is necessary to determine the appropriateness of the technique. Possessing and demonstrating the skills necessary to execute the chosen approach must also be considered.

All Interpreters should:

- Understand the role of interpretive techniques in fostering an opportunity for an intellectual or emotional connection to the meanings/significance of the resource.
- Understand the strengths and weaknesses of the use of a particular technique.
- Recognize the appropriate use of a particular technique in relation to the resource, setting, and audience.
- Skillfully implement a variety of interpretive techniques in formal programs, media development, and informal contacts.

### Appropriateness

Techniques should be appropriate for the audience, the resource and the interpreter. There are various factors about the audience to consider when selecting techniques, some of which are more obvious. Age, native language, accessibility issues and the social composition of the group (family, friends, strangers) are some of the first things to consider. Other factors include:

- Area of Residence (Rural, Urban, Suburban)
- Cultural Diversity and Influences
- Education level
- Site conditions
- Interests
- Learning Styles
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Group Dynamics
- Sexual Orientation
- Race
- Size of Group
- Socio-Economic Background
- Stage of Life

While techniques should be appropriate for the audience, they should also be appropriate for the resource. Protecting the resource is always paramount. Techniques that degrade the resource should be avoided. Collections and resources that are considered sacred require special attention when techniques are selected. To do this, interpreters need to communicate with other people at the site, such as administrators and collection/resource managers.



Appropriateness for the audience and the resource is crucial but ultimately the techniques selected must also be appropriate for the interpreter. An interpreter whose singing voice leaves something to be desired shouldn't include the technique of singing to the audience in their campfire program. But getting the audience involved in a sing-along could be appropriate if delivered with skill. If an interpreter doesn't feel comfortable with a technique, or has not practiced the use of the technique, it is not appropriate for her to use it. Just as a good host doesn't serve a dish he's never prepared to his guests, a good interpreter shouldn't use techniques in an interpretive product without practicing first.

### Selecting Techniques

A good hostess usually doesn't serve only one dish either. That would be boring and uninspired. Just as an effective interpretive service contains multiple points of view to be relevant to many visitors, the service should also contain multiple techniques to offer multiple opportunities for visitors to form their own connections to the meanings and significance of the resource.

There are many interpretive techniques, none of which is inherently better than any other. The interpreter should never choose a technique without first identifying the theme, goals, and objectives and the prospective audience to determine if it is an appropriate "fit." Choosing techniques willy-nilly or because the interpreter personally enjoys them may mean that programs are only reaching a small portion of the audience.

The selection of appropriate techniques requires knowledge of park audiences and resources, along with knowledge of the great variety of techniques that can be used, and how to skillfully apply them in different situations. Virtuosity in both selection and skillful delivery of appropriate techniques is gained through practice, experience, self-assessment and constructive feedback.

Interpreters need to stay current on communications and delivery techniques and new media possibilities, and use them as appropriate. However, beware of adopting new techniques simply because they are new. The key is to thoroughly examine the appropriateness of the technique before beginning to practice with it. Interpreters must regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the techniques used, and replace and update them when they no longer achieve the desired outcomes of addressing the themes, goals and objectives of the interpretive service while providing opportunities for visitors to form their own connections to the meanings and significance of the resources at a site.

### Making it Engaging

No matter which techniques are selected, an interpretive service should be actively engaging. Asking thought-provoking questions can be just as interactive as having visitors participate in a hands-on activity so it is possible for all interpretive services, including media, to be participatory. Effective interpretive techniques facilitate some level of audience involvement or engagement, be it passive or active.

Engaging the visitor directly, either by having them drive the experience with questions, concerns, and observations of their own, or by giving them something specific or tangible to connect with on a personal level, is essential to effective interpretation. Try to be creative in engaging the audience. Having audience members share their thoughts and experiences can allow the audience to participate without adding time and cost. With well-crafted text, interpretive media (like a brochure or self guided trail) can encourage visitors to participate in the experience by including questions that ask them to reflect on their own experiences or share their thoughts with other members of their group.

## **Delivery Skills**

In addition to the three essential components of the interpretive equation (knowledge of the resource, knowledge of the audience and appropriate techniques), effective interpretation requires good communication skills.

### Good Communication Skills

Interpreters and the services they provide are the communication link between the visitor and the resource. An interpreter may have a wonderful program planned out but if he or she does not have good communication or delivery skills even a well-designed service can fail. A poorly written wayside or a crowded, confusing graphic display has a greater chance of hindering visitor connections than facilitating them (site Theresa Coble). In personal services, eye contact, facing the group, appropriate volume and pitch, good grammar, a little confidence and even minimizing regional accents all play an important role in program delivery. Communication and delivery skills can also include reading and reacting to non-verbal gestures and the ability to overcome communication barriers. In media services, clear, concise and organized writing and design are critical to effectively reaching an audience.

# How do you do interpretation?

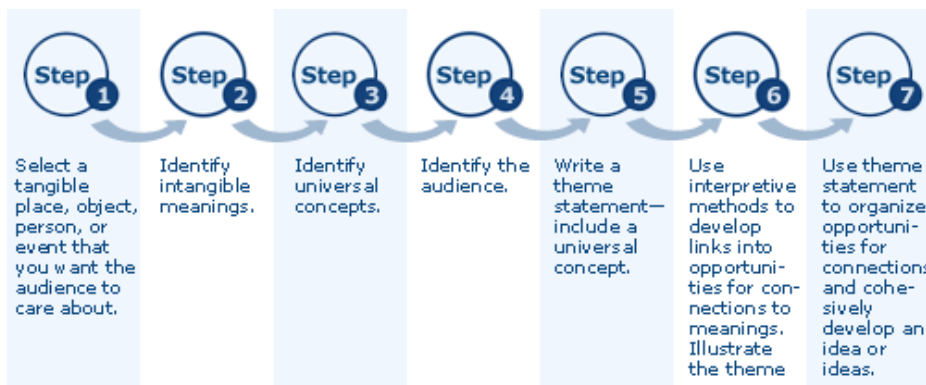
## The Pieces

There are various approaches to developing interpretive services because interpretation is a very creative process. While the approaches may all differ, they usually include the following essential pieces:

- Recognizing the motivations, expectations, and prior knowledge of the visitors to a site
- Identifying the site's primary interpretive themes
- Identifying your goals and objectives for the service or product
- Selecting tangible resources and choosing one as an icon for the focus of the interpretive service
- Identifying intangible meanings that the tangible resources represent
- Verifying that your intangible meanings include universal concepts (such as life, love, death, survival, family) that most people can relate to in some way
- Identifying your specific audience for the service
- Brainstorming an imaginative idea, a thread that will wind its way through the service and tie all the parts together
- Writing a specific theme statement that expresses this idea
- Selecting appropriate techniques that link the tangible resources with the intangible meanings they represent
- Selecting a strategy based on your theme to organize the opportunities for intellectual and emotional connections to the meanings and significance of the resource in such a way that the audience can follow where you are leading

## Putting the Pieces Together

One way the pieces of the interpretive process have been together can be found in the Process Model. The process model includes the following steps:



**Step 1.** Select a tangible place, object, person, or event that you want the audience to care about.

An interpretive product or service may provoke the audience to care about more than one tangible resource. A program might focus on a single plant but intend for the audience to also care about the species, place, and ecosystem. Similarly, an interpreter might use a specific artifact to represent the material culture of a particular time and the people who created and used it.

While an interpretive product or service may include several tangible resources, there is usually one tangible resource that acts as an icon or symbol. The icon is the engine that powers the presentation. It is a net that captures and reveals a myriad of ideas, values, relationships, contexts, systems, and processes. The icon provides a starting point and reference for an exploration of associated tangible resources and multiple resource meanings.

An interpretive product or service might use more than one tangible resource as an icon. An interpretive tour usually focuses on a different object or feature at each stop to explore a unique meaning or meanings. Sometimes an essay or talk uses two or more icons to describe multiple perspectives regarding the same topic. The more icons an interpretive product uses, however, the more complicated the development and delivery will be.

### Step 2. Identify intangible meanings.

Considered only in terms of its physical attributes, a tangible resource has limited significance. Without the stories that go with it, the Liberty Bell is a cracked piece of metal with almost no value. Without the meanings of beauty, life, and the forest ecosystem, a tree might only be measured in board-feet. However, when a tangible is linked to broader intangible meanings its value becomes relevant to more people — its importance more apparent and accessible.

Each tangible resource has an incredible variety of intangible meanings. Those meanings can be obvious and popular, or obscure and controversial. The more Knowledge of the Resource (KR) and Knowledge of the Audience (KA) an interpreter has, the more meanings can be linked to the tangible resources.

Tangible-intangible links are the basic building blocks of interpretation. Connecting experiences occur when the tangible resource is linked to some larger intangible meaning in a way that the audience can personally relate to and that provokes understanding and/or appreciation. Intangible meanings speak to different people in different ways. Only when the tangible-intangible link is personally relevant does an individual connect to the resource. Or as Freeman Tilden states in his first Principle, “Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experiences of the visitor will be sterile.” (Tilden, 1957, p.11)

A tangible-intangible link occurs when the interpreter, in constructing the product or service, meshes the tangible resource with an intangible meaning or meanings. Audiences wish to connect personally to the subject and/or resource, and if this meshing is skillfully done and developed through the use of a specific technique (see below), this produces a tangible-intangible link in the mind of the audience member. Sometimes this occurs through the better understanding of context, a gaining of insight, discovery, or revelation — in other words, the intellectual. Other times the connection comes through the emotions — provoking a feeling of enjoyment, empathy, wonder, concern, amazement, or pride.

### Step 3. Identify universal concepts.

Some intangible meanings are universal concepts — a concept that everyone can relate to, but that no two people will see exactly the same way. Universal concepts are intangible meanings that are relevant to almost everybody. They are powerful vehicles that reach many people in significant ways. Some of the intangibles in an interpretive product or service should be universal concepts because they provide the maximum amount of relevance to the widest audience.

Like all intangible meanings, universal concepts can, and must, be linked to a tangible resource in order to produce an interpretive opportunity. If presented by themselves, universal concepts can be abstract and too abrupt to help the audience make personal connections to the meanings of the resource. Merely stating a universal concept does not help visitors make meaningful connections.

Links that include a universal concept tend to work best when presented with other tangible-intangible links. For example, a program that proclaims the power of water without explaining the process of erosion might not reach a large segment of the audience. But if the program describes and uses erosion as evidence for the power of water to effect change (power and change are universal concepts), both erosion and the power of water might become more compelling. Similarly, standing in The Bloody Lane at Antietam National Battlefield and only speaking of death and bravery could seem disconnected to those unfamiliar with the Civil War. However, a description of the events that occurred there, the ways in which officers and soldiers maneuvered, stumbled, and fought — the significance of their equipment and technology to the results of the encounter might make more powerful impressions of both the tactics and the horror of war.

Universal concepts, joined with other tangible/intangible links, can provoke a desire to understand and appreciate intangible meanings that might otherwise seem uninteresting because these universals have touched a wider piece of the human spirit.

#### Step 4. Identify the audience.

All audiences who visit or read about a site are seeking something of value for themselves. They all expect something special. Each has a personal sense of what the place means to himself or herself. Many already know a great deal about the resource, some know what family or friends have told them, and others simply assume the resource contains something worthwhile.

For interpretive programming to be most relevant, audience group identity, culture, ethnicity, learning styles and motivations for visiting should be examined. What are the audience members' expectations and interests? What existing meanings, beliefs and attitudes do they bring to the resource? It is important to understand and respect the reasons visitors come to our sites. Visitors find value in park resources for a variety of reasons. Regardless of their motivation for coming, the interpreter's job is to ensure that each visitor has a positive experience that fosters care for the resource.

#### Step 5. Write a theme statement — include a universal concept.

An effective program has a focus and intends to clearly explore an idea or ideas. Yet, successful interpretation occurs when audiences make their own connections to the meanings of the resource. It may seem a contradiction — an interpretive product conveys an idea but the audience should take away their own meanings.

An interpretive theme solves the problem. An interpretive theme is a tool that develops an idea or ideas in order to inspire connections. An interpretive theme is not a message as much as it is a relevant point that encourages new thoughts and feelings. A well-presented program based on a solid interpretive theme will likely provoke connections the interpreter did not anticipate and may never become aware of. No one in the audience may be able to repeat exactly the interpreter's theme, but the focus should be clear and most people's versions will be related and recognizable. The theme

enables the interpreter to communicate and allows the audience to engage personally based on that communication.

Based on the goal for the interpretive product, the identified tangible-intangible links, and the knowledge of the audience, a theme statement is written that includes a tangible resource linked to one or more intangible meanings. The most compelling interpretive products have themes that tie a tangible resource to a universal concept.

Interpretive themes:

- Are single sentences that express meaning;
- Link a tangible resource to its intangible meanings;
- Organize interpretive products;
- Use tangible resources to focus on universally relevant concepts, linking them together.

In the past, interpreters and supervisors were advised that the success or failure of an interpretive product could be easily measured by the audience's ability to state the theme. This led to products where the theme was constantly repeated with the hope that the audience would be able to parrot the message. A theme is not a refrain, a sound byte or a "take home message." Products organized in this manner generally fail to cohesively *develop* an idea for the audience over the course of the delivery.

Crafting an interpretive theme takes care, time, and editing. It often takes several drafts of both the theme and the product for the interpreter to become clear about what to say and how to say it.

Examples of interpretive themes:

Topics (but Not Interpretive Themes)

Interpretive Themes

The power of water.

The power of water to carve, smooth, and continuously reshape this landscape provides opportunities for us to marvel at how a seemingly simple liquid can play such a profound role in every landscape on the planet.

Antietam was the bloodiest battle of the Civil War.

The Battle of Antietam was a pivot point in the American Civil War, halting the southern advance and making way for the Emancipation Proclamation — the moral, social, and economic legacies of which continue to profoundly influence the lives of contemporary Americans.

Lincoln's boyhood.

The values and life lessons that Lincoln learned here as a boy helped mold him into the man who would become President and typify the enduring connections that we all share in our progression from youth to maturity.

Fire in nature.

Fire is a natural process that creates life out of death and provides insight into tangible and intangible loss and renewal.

Step 6. Use interpretive techniques to develop links into opportunities for connections to meanings. The next step is to choose and develop tangible-intangible links that illustrate the idea or ideas expressed in your theme statement into opportunities for the audience to form personal connections

to the meanings of the resource. By themselves, links do not provide opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource. Links must be developed into opportunities for connections to meanings in order to present the resource in a compelling and engaging way through the use of specific techniques, such as stories, descriptive language, props, quotations, activities, and illustrations. A running narrative with facts is not a technique. It is information, not interpretation.

To be broadly relevant, an interpretive product must provide opportunities for both emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource. Some of the links should be intentionally developed to provide opportunities for emotional connections and some for intellectual connections. An interpreter needs to plan specific opportunities that are intended to inspire or provoke feelings like awe, wonder, sympathy, curiosity, amazement, regret, grief, and anger. Other specific opportunities should provoke insight, understanding of context, discovery, and reveal relationships. Some techniques are better at developing one type of opportunity over the other.

Remember that there are many techniques that may be used to develop a link into an opportunity for an emotional or intellectual connection to the meanings of the resource. Success depends on the link, the theme, the interpreter's KR and KA, style, and the purpose of the interpretive product. Stories, explanations, comparisons, quotes, activities, demonstrations, examples, evidence, illustrations, questions, and discussions are just some of the techniques interpreters use.

Step 7. Use the theme statement to organize opportunities for connections and cohesively develop an idea or ideas.

Think back to composition courses you may have taken in high school or in college. An interpretive product is not so very different. Remember how you would introduce your topic and theme in the first paragraph, then support your argument using specific techniques such as examples, citations from text, or comparisons or contrast in the next few paragraphs, and finally conclude your piece in the final paragraph.

The theme statement of the interpretive product should be used to organize the opportunities into a sequence that cohesively develops the relevant idea or ideas stated in the theme, much as you would in a composition for English class. It is important to plan effective transitions to move from one opportunity to another.

Opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource sequenced with effective transitions and arranged to support a well-crafted interpretive theme statement provide the architecture for a cohesively developed idea or ideas.

The best way to reveal meaning is through the exploration of an idea. To be relevant and provocative an interpretive product must cohesively develop an idea or ideas over the course of its delivery. A meaningful idea captures, organizes, and sustains the attention of the audience. A meaningful idea provides opportunities for audiences to make their own connections to the meanings of the resource. Without the cohesive development of a relevant idea or ideas, products are merely collections of related information or haphazard arrays of tangible/intangible links — they are not interpretive.

A tutorial has been developed to explain the process model in an interactive format. The tutorial is available online at <http://interp.eppley.org>.

## References

- Alderson, W., & Low, S. P. (1976). *Interpretation of historic sites*. Nashville, KY: American Association for State and Local History.
- Beck, L., & Cable, T. (1998). *Interpretation for the 21st Century*. Champaign, IL: Sagamore Publishing.
- Brochu, L., & Merriman, T. (2002). *Personal interpretation*. Singapore: National Association of Interpretation.
- Frankl, V. (1959). *Man's search for meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Goldman, T. L., Chen, W. J., & Larsen, D. L. (2001). Clicking the icon: Exploring the meanings visitors attach to three national capital memorials. *Journal of Interpretation Reserach* , 6 (1), 3-30.
- Gurian, E. (1999). The many meanings of objects in museums. *Daedalus* , 128 (3), 163-183.
- Ham, S. (1992). *Environmental interpretation: A practical guide for people with big ideas and small budgets*. Golden, CO: North American Press.
- Larsen, D. (Ed.). (2003). *Meaningful interpretation*. Eastern National.
- Muir, J. (1896). The national parks and forest reservations. *Sierra Club Bulletin* 1(7) , 271-284.
- Sharpe, G. (1982). *Interpreting the environment* (2nd ed.). New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Tilden, F. (1957). *Interpreting our heritage*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Tilden, F. (undated). *The fifth essence*. Washington, DC: The National Park Trust Fund Board.
- Wallin, H. (1965). Interpretation: A manual and survey on establishing a naturalist program. In *Management Aids Bulletin No. 22 of American Institute of Park Executives*. Arlington, VA: National Recreation and Parks Association.
- Wikipedia. (2006, Dececember 15). *John Muir*. Retrieved December 15, 2006, from Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Muir](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Muir)