

Rejoice in the wordhoard

The role and power of writing in interpretation

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The Centre for Environmental Interpretation was based at Manchester Metropolitan University and published a regular bulletin, Environmental Interpretation. This is an updated version of the leading article in the February 1993 issue, which focussed on the role of text and writing in interpretation.

Written interpretation has been sorely neglected. Too often writing is seen as the poor cousin of design, and because interpretive texts are so short, something that can be done in a spare half-hour. This is an easy error to make – because most of us can write more or less fluently, the craft of good writing is devalued. Writing which commands attention and is memorable is hard work. It needs skill, effort and, above all, *time*: to think, draft and revise.

But in an age dominated by visual media does it really matter? So much interpretation relies on computers, graphics, videos, animated exhibits: perhaps writing is obsolete. The reverse, of course, is true. Words spoken from a script still carry the message of the most stunning video or audio-visual. Written text is essential to deliver the content of apps, to find your way around a city, to understand an exhibition.

There is a common belief that visitors do not bother to read the text which is offered to them. Yet at the Natural History Museum in London, research by Paulette McManus demonstrated that even visitors who appeared not to have read exhibit labels had in fact done so: their recorded conversations included fragments and paraphrases of the text (McManus, 1989).

What's that? BREAD BEETLE.

*Look at that. ARE YOU A PRIMATE? YES, YOU ARE A PRIMATE.
No, I'm not.'*

(Visitors' recorded conversation quoted in McManus, 1989. Exhibit text spoken by the visitor in capitals.)

It is not surprising that visitors appeared to ignore the text – we can scan whole sentences in a fraction of a second, taking in their content almost subliminally. The really interesting point is that as groups of visitors echo the text of an exhibition to each other, the writer's true role becomes clear: she is conversing with her readers. It is no accident that when we read something aloud we begin *'it says here...'*, not *'it is written here...'*. The words that are read should be as alive as those that are spoken and listened to. The 'conversation' that written text provides is as central to the visitors' experience as if the writer, or writing team, were there in person to guide them around.

If writing's central role in interpretation is clear, its purpose shifts and changes. The interpretive writer may need to give clear and concise instructions about what to do or how to get around. Like an advertising copywriter, she may need to tempt people to visit, or advocate certain beliefs and value systems. Like a journalist, she must summarise unfamiliar material in an accessible way, so that visitors are both informed and interested. Where should she stand on the fine line between objectivity and personal involvement?

To communicate atmosphere and drama, she must borrow skills from poets and novelists – the skills of what is often called 'creative writing', although all writing is creation. And

before she can do any of these things, she must grab and hold attention amongst many distractions. Here she is again like a journalist, but of that special breed who write the big headlines, who can say with just a handful of words 'PICK THIS UP AND READ IT'. Gotcha!¹

And at this point she runs into trouble. The board of the great and good, the doctors of ecology and the respected curators, the academic archaeologists and professors of history protest: '*But we don't want to write for Sun readers!*'

Now, aside from the snobbery behind this mythic remark, there is a mighty confusion here. It is to equate the style of language of the most popular newspaper in Britain with its attitudes. *The Sun* is popular only partly because of its content; it is also because it is written in a simple and, most importantly, engaging and lively way. To use the conversation analogy again, it talks to its audience in language they feel comfortable with and understand.

Of course there is a role for more complex language. Some interpretive material, intended for specialist audiences, can be written in the language specialists use. But the job of most interpretation is to act as a general introduction for the general public, and as such it should be more like a letter to a friend than an academic paper; more like a postcard home than an official report.

This approach extends to the content of interpretation as well as its style. People with a high degree of interest need in-depth knowledge, and it is quite right to provide it. But a general introduction needs just a few key concepts, or a collection of interesting facts. Simplicity is not the same thing as triviality, which is often what subject specialists fear. Specialists often forget that their detailed knowledge is the result of a long journey, and that visitors are only coming to see what the start of the road looks like. I once read a suggestion from a curator that you should research an exhibition five years in advance, then write the text from what you can remember. The idea has always appealed to me, although I've never been able to try it out!

There is a third element which an interpretive writer needs to consider, as well as her linguistic style and the factual content of the text. It is the *structure* which she gives to her material so that it remains interesting and is, hopefully, memorable. Style has a part to play in this – cognitive psychology suggests that people pay more attention to material which uses expressions and constructions with which they are familiar, or to which they attach credibility or affection (Ham, 1983).

But another cognitive principle is that a clear conceptual framework, a storyline, makes information both more memorable and more interesting. It is easier to hold visitors' attention with a clear *theme*: a concept which is difficult to define, and which is often confused with topic, or subject matter. A theme provides a way of structuring facts and insights about the topic: examples include taking the way certain plants are adapted to growing in wet places as the focus for a guided walk, or constructing a tour of an art gallery around looking at how gestures are used in sculptures and paintings.

¹ This bizarre word may need some explanation if you're reading this article outside the United Kingdom, or you're not aware of the history of Britain's vainglorious adventures in the 1982 Falklands War! The word is a contraction of '*Got you!*', and it's a common cry in children's games of tag. At the height of the Falklands War, British ships sank the Argentinian cruiser [*General Belgrano*](#) in a controversial action. *The Sun*, a popular tabloid newspaper, greeted the news with the banner headline '*Gotcha!*'. The headline became notorious as both a brilliantly effective piece of journalism and a crass infantilisation of an incident that cost 323 lives.

At the time I wrote this article, I hoped the reference would be an evocative, amusing example of writing that makes an impact, as well as introducing the discussion about writing style that follows. Some twenty years later, it also makes the point that powerful writing sometimes depends on shared cultural reference points with your audience.

The idea that interpretation can be a form of story-telling is a useful one. It reminds us that its functions include fostering wonder, fascination, enchantment. It also places writing where it belongs: an essential part of a potent cultural medium. Stories are powerful because they transmit far more than facts: they carry the values and beliefs of an entire culture, and messages about human experience which are universal.

*Could mortal Lip divine
The undeveloped Freight
Of a delivered Syllable -
'twould crumble with the weight -*

Emily Dickinson

Words and writing have this power too. Words are symbols which reflect our understanding of the world. They are rich and exciting because they come loaded with associations, some of them a common inheritance, others which are more individual. Consider the images and ideas which the combination 'bread and wine' trigger in a Christian audience, or the various shades of meaning which 'dewy, dank, boggy, misty' bring to the idea 'wet'. One fascinating idea in linguistic studies is that words carry the unconscious associations of their roots in other languages, as well as all their past usage in English. Whatever the truth of this, we define ourselves, and the world, through words. This is why writing can raise such high passions; why, in the television age, books are still burned when they question belief systems.

On a less dangerous level, it is why people get upset when writers make new or unexpected use of vocabulary and grammar. This article has deliberately used 'she' as a pronoun to indicate universality, instead of the gender-neutral 'they' or the traditional 'he'. This can be justified on the grounds that many interpretive writers are female. But it is also an interesting experiment: what was your reaction as you read it?

Changing language use, or choice of words, can arouse fierce opposition or warm alliance depending on the reader's point of view. Yet changes in language are inevitable. Languages are organic: like vast gardens they grow, mature, change and, sometimes, die. These changes reflect shifts in human experience, ideas and perceptions; and because words are so powerful they may even help to shape those perceptions.

As we write interpretation we use the power of words to mould our visitors' experiences. Finding the right words is far too important for it to be a last-minute job. Anglo-Saxon writers spoke of their raw material as 'wordhoard': a wonderful term which sums up all the excitement, richness and mystery of language. We must rejoice in the wordhoard, not squander it.

References

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