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interpret europe
European Association for Heritage Interpretation

Engaging your visitors

Guidelines for achieving excellence in heritage interpretation

www.interpret-europe.net

Devised by:

Michael H Glen

with the help of:

Zeljka Miklosević
Roger White
and many other contributors

Cover design:

Kaja Antlej

Picture credits:

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Introduction

Interpretation is a valuable management tool

Heritage interpretation is about connecting people to places, objects and events. It's about explaining the significance of tangible and intangible heritage and helping visitors – tourists and local people – to engage with and value your heritage site – and to find what it means to them. Interpretation is non-formal education that contributes to lifelong learning. It uses creativity and inspiration while maintaining the integrity and authenticity of the story you have to tell.

Heritage interpretation is a storytelling skill

Interpretation is not information. It is not filling visitors with facts – it is designed to help them come to an understanding of what have been called 'hidden truths'. The aims of interpretation can be summarised as to relate (to visitors), to reveal (new understanding) and to provoke (thought and enquiry).

Good interpretation widens people's horizons and increases their satisfaction and enjoyment. It can also help to change visitors' behaviour and attitudes. For this reason, it's an important tool in managing sites and encouraging both greater awareness of their significance and support for their protection from local people and tourists. However, it must aim for high levels of planning, implementation, operation and maintenance.

The first definition of interpretation

Freeman Tilden wrote the following definition of interpretation in 1957 but others have been devised since then, largely by membership associations:
Interpretation is an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.

Who will find these guidelines helpful?

These guidelines are for managers and staff of natural and cultural heritage sites who want to make heritage interpretation an integral part of their management. They will help those who may not have considered the value of heritage interpretation or appreciate its principles, its role in enhancing visitors' experiences and its wider benefits. However, this is a guide on how to use interpretation, not a manual on how to do interpretation.

Heritage interpretation is not an exact science

Interpretation is both a field of practice and a subject for research. It is constantly evolving and requires specialist input to achieve its full potential. It also varies in its style from country to country to reflect national and regional cultures. These guidelines are indicative and not prescriptive and are open to adaptation to suit local circumstances.

What do these guidelines include?

The guidelines apply to all forms of on-site interpretive media at protected areas, nature parks, coastal and countryside destinations, botanical gardens, zoos, historic sites, townscapes, museums and galleries. They cover the work of staff, volunteer guides and interpreters. Websites are not included but their construction and contents will benefit from following interpretive principles.

What the guidelines will do?

The guidelines will help you to commission and deliver interpretation projects, work with interpretive consultants and manage interpretive staff and their programmes. They focus on how you can meet accepted professional standards and will help you to formulate goals for your interpretation and to make informed decisions about the quality of its content and delivery.

What is a heritage interpretation project?

We've used this term to describe any scheme involving interpretation, in any form, at any scale, from a major heritage site to a simple leaflet. Where your project is part of a wider initiative, the guidelines relate mainly to commissioning and operating the interpretation.

What the guidelines won't do?

The guidelines cannot 'teach' you how to do interpretation. They can't replace the advice, practice and experience of professional interpreters who have been educated and trained in interpretation.

Getting more help

If you want to learn more about interpretation, there is a list of useful links at the end of the guidelines. You can also find out more about Interpret Europe, the organisation that has supported the development and testing of these guidelines.

Using these guidelines

The guidelines follow the normal steps in planning and delivering an interpretation project:

1. Establishing your project
2. Defining your project
3. Creating your project
4. Designing the content of your project
5. Operating your project

In practice, the order may change but the steps pose the questions you need to ask yourself, your stakeholders, interpretive consultants and colleagues. Some questions may not relate to your site.

Always prepare an interpretive plan

The guidelines will help you to create the essential document, your interpretive plan. This will set out the parameters for your project, what you want to achieve and how to go about achieving it.

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1. Establishing your project

This section deals with many of the important initial steps you need to think about when developing your proposals for an interpretation project particularly designed to engage tourist and local visitors. For some projects, not all the questions will be relevant.

Why are we doing it?

You should set out clearly the purpose of your project and its role in interpreting the heritage of your site. Make sure that you justify it fully in order to get backing for it from your stakeholders. The more support for a project the more likely it is to succeed.

How does it fit in?

Set out the role that your interpretation project will play within a larger project, such as a museum, visitor centre or heritage site. Determine your interpretive objectives as an integral part of management aims. Interpretation should not be an 'added extra'.

What will it accomplish?

Prepare a concept statement to summarise your project. Use this to advocate its development when seeking support from managers and funders. Your concept should embrace the essence of your project and play a key part in publicising your site.

Can we pay for it?

Set out, at the beginning, a robust and realistic budget estimate. You need to secure sufficient money for your project so that it can proceed smoothly and meet the level of excellence you want. Interpretation is often a loser when other costs over-run.

Will it offer good value?

Be clear how the cost for setting up and maintaining your interpretation project represents value for the investment in it. Consider its support for conservation and its cultural, social and community benefits – not simply its financial returns.

Who is likely to have an interest?

Identify and consult all your potential stakeholders. These may include site owners, managers, tourism enterprises, heritage organisations, local communities, heritage groups, funders, national, regional and local government agencies and politicians.

Who will oversee the interpretation project?

Ensure that interpretation experts establish, guide and monitor the progress of your interpretation project. They need to work closely with other disciplines involved such as architects, designers, builders, manufacturers and marketing experts.

Will there be one person in charge?

Identify a project manager who can take responsibility for ensuring that all aspects of the interpretation project are coordinated and implemented within the agreed timescale and budget. The project manager will be your 'champion' on the project.

Will local people have a part to play?

Invite your local community to help with the planning and operation of your project. There are sometimes opportunities to play a part in practical interpretation activities, as trained volunteers. Local involvement creates local ambassadors.

Will it prosper?

Identify the market for the project, using research and experience, and try to assess your project's potential success where other attraction may offer competition. Enthusiasm is not enough; you must meet the expectations of your intended visitors.

Will there be concerns about the project's impact?

It's important to consider the potential effect on your site if your project meets or exceeds expectations. Will more visitors mean more car parking, greater maintenance costs, unsustainable wear and tear or unacceptable disturbance to wildlife?

Who will be involved?

Make sure that all tasks and responsibilities are identified and allocated to those best able to undertake them. It is important to ensure that good communications exist among those involved with regular reports of progress shared with everyone.

Will it be delivered on time?

Make sure, also, that a timetable is agreed and that it allows for all necessary steps to be completed. These include securing funds, tendering, detailed planning, research, conservation of objects, procurement, testing and removal of unforeseen problems.
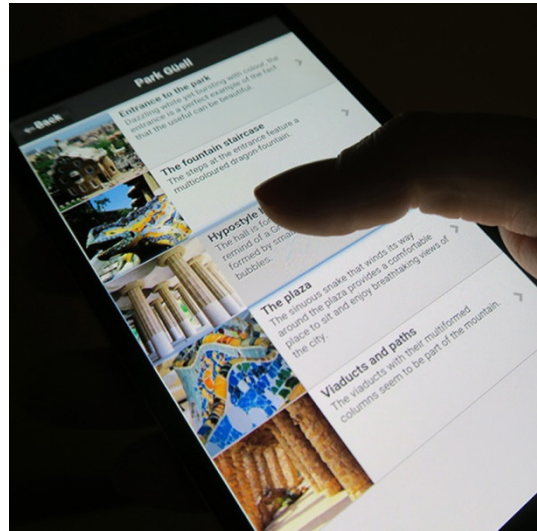
2. Defining your project

This section deals with the more detailed aspects of planning your interpretation – in whatever form you choose. This may include a range of media from extensive displays and interactives, person-to-person interpretation, a leaflet or the provision of an app.

What do we want to achieve?

Set down the overall interpretive aim of the project in a comprehensive statement and seek the support of your stakeholders. Your interpretive aim should reflect your ideals for the project in its own right or as part of a larger initiative.

What goals are we setting?

Develop a series of interpretive objectives and get stakeholder support. Your objectives will reflect your interpretive aim and, ideally, should be measurable. They should include learning, behavioural, emotional and participation objectives.

What will we be talking about?

Assemble all existing research material and knowledge, or commission new research, relating to the topics of your heritage interpretation. Make sure that you have significant stories to tell and verify their accuracy and, if appropriate, their objectivity.

Who will our audiences be?

Identify who will experience your interpretation. Use research and / or experience to prepare profiles of their different ages, origins and other characteristics. Find out what visitors will want to do at your site so that you can target your interpretation.

Themes can guide good interpretation

Interpretive themes are descriptive statements of the stories you want to tell, not simply topic headings. They should embrace all the elements that make your project special.

What are our storylines?

Identify a limited number of interpretive themes to steer the development and implementation of your interpretation. You will benefit from asking interpretation and learning experts – and potential visitors – to help you.

What do we want people to remember?

Similarly, you should get professional advice on the meanings that you want your visitors to gain from your interpretation. Meanings guide the themes you derive for your interpretation. But, remember, visitors should be encouraged to make their own meanings as well as considering yours.

How do we promote the project?

You will have to prepare a marketing plan that reflects the objectives of your interpretation plan. You should ensure that the interpretation and marketing activities are mutually supportive and contain the same meanings and themes. Your plan should cover all means of disseminating publicity including social media.

Will other attractions affect what we do?

Find out attractions that may compete or cooperate with your site. Consider joint marketing based on geography or subject matter. Where other sites deal with topics similar to yours, ensure your interpretation complements, and not replicates, theirs.

Have we got our approach right?

You will find it helpful to undertake a programme of pre-testing the design, style and content of interpretive media of all kinds. This will help you to assess and evaluate its likely appeal and effectiveness before you put it in place.

Will the project achieve its objectives?

To complement pre-testing, you should ensure that a programme of monitoring and evaluation of your interpretation project is part of your overall planning and management process. It will help you to remain informed of the effectiveness and value of your interpretation and its continuing relevance to visitors and their interests.

Evaluation and monitoring

Keeping tabs on the success of your interpretation is essential. As well as counting and watching visitors, you can involve visitors in a range of qualitative interviews and surveys. Monitor the comments and recommendations in your visitors' book and on social media.

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3. Creating your project

This section deals with the way you deal with and provide for visitors whether they are accessing your website, visiting your site or using your publications or apps.

How will we engage visitors?

Visitors' interpretive journeys often begin before arrival – either on your website or when they pick up publicity material. Don't forget the value and impact of social media in helping visitors to choose destinations. Children often have a role in this.

Will we be easy to reach?

Always make clear in printed and digital publicity how to access your project by car or public transport and how to get copies of your guide book, leaflet or app. Downloads from websites are now a preferred method of providing printed and digital media.

Will the entry point be clear to people?

As these guidelines relate to site-based interpretation of various kinds, you need to arrange for clear signposting of your site on and from public roads. This can involve both time and money.

Will people feel welcome?

Visitors' sense of arrival, and expectation, at your location or in your digital media should be self-evident. The warmth of reception from all your staff and introductory display media should be just as obvious – and implicit throughout the whole project.

Will people comprehend why we are here?

Make very clear the purpose of your project whether it stands alone or is part of a broader attraction. This purpose should be immediately evident to visitors when they arrive, meet an interpreter or first use a publication, audio guide or digital app.

Will people find their way around?

The layout of your site, publication, audio guide or digital app should be easy to follow. You should signpost all the facilities on your site as well as making it easy to navigate the contents of your publications, audio guides or digital apps.

Will people get to the interpretation easily?

Try to ensure that physical access to all interpretive media is as universal as possible by making reasonable provision for people with all kinds of physical or sensory impairments. This is not always possible at historic sites or vulnerable wildlife sites.

Will people understand our interpretation?

Equally important is to try to devise intellectual access to all interpretive media so that it makes reasonable provision for everyone to use and enjoy, including visitors with learning and social challenges. Remember, people have different styles of learning.

What are interpretive media?

Media used in interpretation includes person-to-person interpretation such as guided walks; graphic displays and panels; guide books, leaflets, maps and other publications; audio-visual presentations, digital media, apps and AR (augmented reality); sculptural and other installations, role playing, storytelling, song and other arts-based media.

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4. Designing the content of your project

This section deals with the more detailed aspects of commissioning and managing your interpretation project but does not go into detailed advice on interpretation methods and media. That advice is available from many sources, some of which are shown at the end.

Will people find things easy to read?

Make sure that the graphic design of visual media follows best practice for position, layout, typography, colour contrast etc. Many people have visual impairments, some have learning difficulties. For others, your language may not be their first language.

Will people find our words easy to follow?

Try to ensure that the content and style of writing in graphic, printed, digital and audio media is conversational, addressed to the reader or listener, aimed at a comprehension age of around 12 years (depending upon local norms) and restricted in length.

Will people find our staff easy to understand?

Interpreters who meet visitors and lead guided walks should ensure that their delivery follows the rules and displays the qualities as those set out for non-personal media. Guides should always allow for interaction between themselves and their audiences.

Will people follow our story?

Always relate the content of all your interpretation, whether as part of a major display or a single panel, an audio guide, app or guided walk relates to one or other of your chosen themes. Explain topics in a wider context to help visitors to understand better.

How can we show respect to our visitors?

Give careful consideration to the expression of all subject matter to make sure that your interpretation is sensitive to, and respectful of, visitors' ethnicity, beliefs, personal situations, culture and heritage. Don't be afraid to ask your visitors how they regard what is said.

Will people trust our story?

It's important to recognise that the integrity of your interpretation is paramount and matches the authenticity of the heritage itself. Never use interpretation to include or mask propaganda or the promotion of products.

Will people be engaged by what they see or hear?

Tailor your choice of media, whether visual, aural, digital or person-to-person interpretation, to your target audiences. This means it must 'make connections' by relating as far as possible to their existing knowledge or experience.

Will your interpretation provoke visitors into thinking more?

Similarly, try to ensure that your interpretation excites visitors' imaginations and encourages them to reflect upon, contemplate or even disagree with it. Let visitors find their own meanings and come to their own conclusions. Encourage your visitors to participate in the interpretation where appropriate.

Will people want to find out more?

Try and ensure that the approach taken by your interpretation provokes visitors to seek out more information and explanation for themselves while visiting your site or thereafter. Offer sources for further information where possible.

Can we help those who don't speak our language?

The language used in your interpretation will obviously be that of your own country or region. If you welcome visitors who don't speak it well, or at all, you need to think about providing translations or summaries of written and spoken text.

Will people feel part of the experience?

Try to make sure that the overall character of your heritage interpretation project forges emotional and sensory links with visitors and allow them to feel engaged in a 'conversation' rather than being, simply, an audience expected to read or listen.

5. Operating your project

This section deals with the management of your project once it has been established, designed and opened to visitors, or made available through digital media.

Will our staff be friendly and kind?

The people that you employ on site – and volunteers – should follow best practice in dealing with visitors of all kinds and origins. They need to show courtesy, respect and patience as the representatives of your heritage interpretation project.

Will our staff be professional?

Train all your staff to understand and employ the principles of interpretation. Ensure that staff – and volunteers – who are interpreters or guides are trained in interpretive techniques and encouraged to develop their own knowledge and expertise.

Will people enjoy all our facilities?

Design and manage the support facilities for site-based interpretation, from signposting to toilets, to the same level of excellence as your interpretation. Refreshments and souvenirs should reflect the meaning and themes of your project and its interpretation.

Will our site be properly cared for?

Establish and fund a programme of maintenance and carry it out methodically. It's important that the physical surroundings and media of site-based interpretation, and the operation of digital media, are kept in excellent and safe condition.

Will the interpretation remain fresh?

Try to carry out a phased programme of updating and revitalising the content of personal and graphic interpretation, printed publications, audio guides, apps and other digital media to retain the 'freshness' of what you have on offer.

Will the project achieve its objectives?

You should implement the programme of monitoring and evaluation to measure the impact and success of your interpretation. Observe and record visitors' use of your interpretation and carry out quantitative and qualitative research.

Will we maintain our high standards?

It's also important to make regular appraisals, ideally with the help of interpretation experts or consultants, of the viability and sustainability of your interpretation project. You want to be sure that it continues to function well within the parameters you set.

Sources of further information

Interpret Europe's website (www.interpret-europe.net) provides more material about heritage interpretation. In some countries, Interpret Europe has also country coordinators who are happy to support you. You can find their addresses at www.interpret-europe.net/top/contact.html.

In addition, websites of national membership organisations offer advice and information.

Interpret Europe

We are a non-profit association that brings together people from across Europe who are involved in heritage interpretation. Our mission is to serve all who use first-hand experience to give natural and cultural heritage a deeper meaning. Our members include interpreters, consultants, teachers and trainers, researchers, managers and others who want to further our aims. We intend to foster good practice and research in interpretation throughout Europe.

National membership organisations

Croatia
Interpretirajmo Hrvatsku – Hrvatska udruga za interpretaciju baštine
https://interpretirajmo-hrvatsku.crobiznet.com

Czech Republic
Sdružení pro interpretaci místního dědictví (SIMID)
http://dobrainterpretace.cz

Portugal
Associação de Interpretação do Património Natural e Cultural (Interpretare)
http://www.interpretare.pt/

Spain
Asociación para la Interpretación del Patrimonio (AIP)
www.interpretaciondelpatrimonio.com

United Kingdom
Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI)
www.ahi.org.uk

Further reading

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