



Producing a Pop-Up Exhibition: Part 2 – selecting images and writing accessible text

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In my last blogpost, I described the initial processes undertaken for the exhibition project; how we established the themes, and went about designing the overarching look of the panels. In this second part, I discuss the next steps: selecting images and writing accessible and engaging text for each of the exhibitions.

Selecting images

This proved to be a somewhat difficult task. The photographs of archaeological sites typically taken by archaeologists for other archaeologists meet the particular needs of the contexts in which they will appear, e.g. journal articles and monographs. But images included in an exhibition, particularly an exhibition aimed at a non-specialist audience, need to be eye-catching, engaging, and crucially, tell a story. While text can help fill in the contextual gaps of an image, we also know that many people visiting an exhibition just don't read much or any of the text. As Screven (1992: 183) puts it, 'Most visitors read some labels occasionally. Some read nothing at all.' Thus, a lot of the information they will absorb from the exhibition-visiting experience will be visual. So, what makes an image engaging?

A picture paints a thousand words, as the old adage goes. Striking landscapes draw people in and works brilliantly for top banner images. But, equally, as the exhibitions feature a strong call to action, i.e. encouraging local people to engage with and help protect endangered cultural heritage, it is important to show dynamic images of local archaeologists at work, local people visiting sites, and local people participating in outreach activities. By seeing themselves represented in the exhibitions, the message will (we hope) feel more inclusive, more relevant, and hit home more strongly, motivating visitors to get interested and involved in protecting heritage.

There were also practical considerations: are the images of sufficient quality for print? Are they a minimum of 300dpi? While more recent digital images can often be manipulated in Photoshop to improve quality and resolution, those taken on a basic mobile phone (of the type typically used in some MENA countries), often couldn't be improved. On the other hand, sometimes high-quality image files were too large to be transferred online because of slow internet speeds. This meant that we couldn't use many of the images supplied by our in-country partners.

And so, sourcing a good assemblage of images from which we could select the best examples, has, in some cases proved tricky and continues to be an issue that we're working hard to resolve as we finalise the exhibition project. Some work-arounds have included buying high quality images from professional photographers or selecting from the pool of images on Flickr that are licensed under the Creative Commons (all properly credited to the photographer, of course).

Writing accessible text

We had two key objectives for the text:

- 1) It should correct common misconceptions about heritage;
- 2) It should connect concepts and ideas to familiar, shared experiences and knowledge.

In addition it should:

- 3) Encourage visitors to draw analogies – 'oh, this is just like that', etc.;
- 4) Ask questions of visitors, as a means of encouraging deeper thought and the processing of messages and key ideas;
- 5) Challenge visitors to problem-solve – 'what would you do in this situation?'

It was hoped that this approach would prompt social interaction, encouraging visitors to talk about the issues raised with each other, staff members, and attendants at the venue, thus ensuring that the exhibitions have real-life impact.

In order to achieve this, the text needed to be accessible and readable.

What do I mean by 'accessible text' and why does it matter? Well, this quote from the Victoria & Albert Museum's Guide to Writing Gallery Text, does a really good job of summarising the compelling reasons for producing both physically and intellectually-accessible text and what it looks like:

To write gallery text that is interesting, engaging and accessible for a wide audience is difficult but not impossible. In doing so, we do not have to 'dumb down' our scholarship and collections. Instead, we have to recognise people's needs and interests, and use the devices of good writing to communicate our ideas. By good writing, we do not simply mean clarity and correct grammar. To appeal to readers and visitors, text also needs personality, life and rhythm (Trench 2013: 1).

In short, accessible text:

- Meets the needs of different audiences;
- Is concise and to the point;
- Is organised hierarchically (see below);
- Is active and avoids passive voice;
- Assumes no prior knowledge but doesn't patronise;
- Is 'readable', i.e.
 - the font is sans serif and of a sufficient size and weight;
 - there is sufficient contrast between the text and the background;
 - the text is not right-justified for English or left-justified for Arabic;
- Is authoritative but friendly and approachable.

No small task, particularly for academics trained to write and present their ideas according to scholarly conventions, which is where I came in. I have prior experience of writing accessible exhibition text and my task was to turn the text supplied by the various country teams into something concise, readable and engaging for non-specialist audiences.

To these ends, I made heavy use of a brilliant online app – Hemingway. This handy tool indicates how to edit and adapt a piece of written text to improve its readability by reading age (in the UK, museums typically craft their text to meet a reading age of 12). The app highlights long, overly complex sentences, gives hints on shorter words to replace long ones and marks incidences of passive voice, adverbs, and 'weakening phrases', such as overly descriptive passages, subjective qualifiers and redundant words.

In terms of organising and structuring the text, for the main block of text on each panel (around 150 words), we took a broadly hierarchical approach:

- Paragraph 1 – the primary message, the key 'thing' we wanted to get across.
- Paragraphs 2 and 3 – the secondary messages and detail.

The first paragraph is in bold, designed to focus visitors' attention. This may be the only part of the text they read before moving onto the next panel (we hope not, but studies have shown that exhibition visitors just don't read text in the depth that exhibition designers and museum professionals would like).

- Tertiary messages – information that is interesting but not essential. These are often explored in the image captions, helping to contextualise the image and explaining its significance.

Typically, each tract of text has been through several iterations as we honed the information and messages we wanted audiences to grasp. Following this, the text was sent for translation. In the spirit of engaging local audiences, we commissioned local Arabic translators, to ensure that the languages used in the exhibition were those of the target audience.

So, where are we currently at? The Egypt panels are now in-country and touring venues, including the Protecting the Past conference in Sharjah (December 2018). The Libya, Tunisia, and Jordan exhibitions are close to completion. With the project nearing its conclusion, we are now turning our attention to evaluation, recording the responses of visitors to the exhibitions and measuring the impact of the project.

References


Screven, C. G. 1992. 'Motivating visitors to read labels'. *ILVS Review: A Journal of Visitor Behavior* 2 (2): 183–212.

Trench, L. 2013. 'Gallery text at the V&A: A Ten Point Guide'. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/238077/Gallery-Text-at-the-V-and-A-Ten-Point-Guide-Aug-2013.pdf> (accessed 13 December 2018).



Visitors attending the opening of the exhibition, Nubian Museum, Aswan, Egypt, November 2018. Photographs: EAMENA.

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Fantastic to hear that Tell es-Sultan #Palestine has been added to the @UNESCO #WorldHeritage List. We investigated the broader landscape of the site in an #openaccess paper in @JournalLevant by @Pfi87 @michael_fradley and the late Andrea Zerbini doi.org/10.1080/007589...

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 BREAKING!

Just inscribed on the @UNESCO #WorldHeritage List: Ancient Jericho / Tell es-Sultan, #Palestine 🇵🇸. Bravo! 🙌🙌 ...

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