

# Writing Interpretive Signs



## **Text length**

150 – 250 words for a large interpretive sign

## **Captions**

20 – 30 words for captions for images / other graphics.

## **Key message/s**

A key message (or 'take home' message) is the thing you want people to remember from reading the panel/sign.

Key Messages are different from topics or themes. For example, a topic might be 'The Grain Trade', but the key message might be 'this town was the major port for exporting grain for over a century'.

## **Things to keep in mind when planning text and other content**

**Voices:** different voices, views and perspectives.

**Opposing views:** acknowledge where there is conflict and debate.

**Questions & Doubt:** chance to capture interest and encourage thinking outside of own experience.

**Make a personal connection:** making a connection with something already known.

**Involve your audience:** create empathy and encourage stepping into the shoes of the people of the past.

**Tell a story:** Stories draw visitors in. They personalise a subject. They are immediate, exciting and involving so people keep reading to find out what happened next. '

**Photographs:** Photographs, drawings and maps are not just illustrations to break up text on a storyboard or make it look appealing, they are a rich source for interpretation. Pinpoint particular objects, clothing, groupings, expressions or surroundings in photos. Pose questions about why the photo was taken, what it was trying to convey and what it conveys now.

**Not just the good old days:** See the past in all of its infinite variety and complexity. Avoid generalising about the 'olden days'. See stories in the context of their times.

**Cause and effect:** show how each event is connected with another and how actions have consequences.

**Linking past and present:** Show how problems faced by people in the past are still faced today in different ways. This is part of making a personal connection.

**What's missing?** Find the gaps.

**Accuracy:** Check facts and stories. Watch out for contradictions and make sure writing style is clear and not open to being misinterpreted.

**Not the whole story:** Be selective. Focus on particular themes and parts of a larger story. Doing this helps avoid the temptation to provide long lists of dates, events and people's names.

**Context:** Interpret events, people and objects in the context of their own time and in contrast to the present.

**Acknowledging sources:** Let people know where information has come from.

## **Writing tips**

**Audience:** Use language and style that is accessible and understandable for all manner of audiences.

**Catch me if you can:** Use a catchy title to grab attention.

**Concise and clear:** Engaging text, clear and easy to read and comprehend. Use short sentences rather than long-winded descriptions. Use familiar words and avoid jargon. When it is necessary to include unfamiliar words, explain what they mean. Humour can sometimes make a definition more interesting. *A galley in this case is not a ship's kitchen, but rather the tray into which the printer placed the type.*

**Captions:** Use to tell more of the story, not just to state what people can see.

**Direct and emotive:** Get to the point. Make sure the first sentence in a paragraph is important or dramatic. Use simple sentences without too many qualifying phrases. Read text aloud to see how it 'sounds'. Instead of: *The town, due to the drought, which had continued for many years in this region, slowly reduced in its population.* Try a shorter, more vivid style: *The drought continued. The population slipped away with each scorching year...* Balance being creative, with using shorter, more familiar words. Rather than saying *Nevertheless the magnitude of the undertaking precluded it being completed swiftly'* ..Say it more simply: *The size of the project meant it took time to complete.*

**Positive rather than negative:** Focus on the positive rather than saying *Don't use the negative.* For example: Instead of: *This kind of dust storm was not new to Pinnaroo; say Pinnaroo had survived many storms like this.*

**Use active rather than passive voice:** Active voice is more direct and has more impact. Instead of *The town changed as a result of the bushfire* say *The bushfire changed the town.*

**Control and choice:** Influence what is read with clever use of titles and by using text to direct readers to move on to the bit you would like them to read next.

**Interactivity and posing questions:** Ask questions and tell stories that provoke a *how would you feel if this happened to you* response.

**Respect and sensitivity:** Text should be friendly and conversational. Use acceptable, non derogatory language and expressions. Consider double meanings and implications.

**Editing:** Edit, edit and edit again to gradually shorten and shape text.