



## Creating an Exhibit

### #1- At the Start: Themes, Interpretation, & Storytelling

A good exhibit does more than just recite facts and figures. It's important as a local history organization to "tell your story." Some of the best exhibits find the balance between what is "unique" about the story they are telling with explaining how it fits into a wider framework of the overall culture and time.

#### Exhibit Themes

Exhibits work best with focus. Some ways you can think about focusing via themes are:

- Choose one main theme to focus your exhibit around.
- Remember that not every theme works well for an exhibit. Some may be better served as written articles, videos, or live programs.
- Think of themes that are relevant to your community today and provide ways for people to connect with their own lives.
- You may want to start with a broad theme (i.e.- Agriculture) then focus it down to fit what is unique or most applicable to your community and/or exhibit audience (e.g.- time period, type of farming, who farmed, change over time, etc.)

*Activity:* Group brainstorm on exhibit themes. Ask- what themes have you successfully featured in your exhibits or programs recently? Why do you think they were successful?

*To Do:* Write a theme sentence. The theme is generally a complete sentence or two stating the key concept you are trying to convey. It should be a message that connects the exhibit and the visitor.

#### Interpretation

Interpretation is the way that museums engage their audience with collections, information, and ideas. While we should do our best to ensure exhibits are "factual," both the information we present and the way we present it will represent certain viewpoints. Good interpretation works to:

- Present multiple/diverse points of view
- Treat the audience as intelligent people, but does not assume specific knowledge. For example- do not assume people know about a specific historic figure or event.
- Encourage dialogue and illuminate relevance. For example- pointing out specific features of an artifact and their meaning, or drawing parallels between something in the past and today.
- Connect audience to meaning, but allows audience members to have and maintain their own perspective

You can create exhibits with better interpretation by:

- Showing cause and effect
- Linking history to other disciplines (science, art, etc.)
- Using visual metaphors and involving other senses
- Identifying and building your exhibit to a specific audience
- Including a human presence in your text
- Making choices (don't include everything)

*Activity:* Based on a chosen theme, write down 3 important topics visitors should understand, learn, or be exposed to. Explain why those topics are important and what you want visitors to "take away" from them.

*To Do:* Using an overlapping grid or visual system, plot out the following three things for your exhibit: 1. What are the most important stories to tell? 2. What are visitors most interested in? 3. What do we want to communicate? Where these three things overlap should be your primary exhibit content.

### **Storytelling**

Just stating information or providing “dry” details does not engage visitors. Storytelling offers a familiar way of understanding information that aligns well with many interpretive goals and offers a bridge to build emotional connections. Exhibit storytelling often utilizes:

- *Narrative structure:* typically follows a clear, linear progression, often including an introduction that sets the scene and establishes the main theme, a central body that develops the narrative through key points and supporting evidence (often with artifacts as focal points), and a conclusion that summarizes key takeaways and leaves the visitor with a lasting impression
- *Characters:* people bring the human element into the story. Specific characters can help visitors identify with their experiences and serve as more fleshed-out representatives of larger groups. You can also personify organizations, objects, or events to create characters.
- *Challenges and Triumphs:* people tend to respond to narratives that examine the barriers or obstacles faced by people or communities, alongside how they overcame those challenges. This is the classic hero’s journey.

*Activity:* Write a history fairytale. Take a person, place, or event in your community history and write down the following: Setting, Characters, Problems, Important Happenings, and Solutions/Resolution.

*To Do:* Cruise the Collections- pull three to five objects and start writing their stories and how they might be used in the exhibit. Use these prompts to help build your story: Physical Attributes (What material is it made out of and why?); Available Themes (What was this made or used for?); Uniqueness (Why is this specific object important?)

### **Additional Resources**

*The books listed below are available to borrow from the LLHSM Lending Library. Details on that program are available here:*  
<https://vermonthistory.org/local-history-resources/>

[Creating a Small Exhibition](#) (video) by Museums Australia

[Exhibit Design & Development Workbook](#) by Texas Historical Commission

[Interpretation Workshop Materials](#) from University of Southern Indiana

Beth Hansen, *Great Exhibits: An Exhibit Planning and Construction Handbook for Small Museums* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017)

Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord, eds., *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions* (AltaMira Press, 2001)

Alice Parman and Jeffery Jane Flowers, *Exhibit Makeovers A Do-It-Yourself Workbook for Small Museums* (AltaMira Press, 2008)

Lisa Brochu, *Interpretive Planning: The 5-M Model for Successful Project* (National Association for Interpretation, 2003)