



Creating an Exhibit

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

How well you plan for an exhibit can ensure a successful end product. Start by answering the questions below to help provide a framework for the designing, building and executing of an engaging exhibit.

Roles, Requirements, & Resources

- What are you trying to accomplish?
- What needs to be completed to make that happen?
- Who is responsible for fulfilling what roles in that process?
- What are the requirements/constraints on the exhibit?
- What will it cost to create the exhibit?
- What do you have that's already developed that you might be able to use/reuse?
- How might you use the exhibit (or pieces of it) elsewhere?

Creating a good exhibit often means realizing that you can't (and shouldn't) try to do it all. This is especially true for small organizations.. Defining the parameters of your exhibit project at the outset can make it a lot easier to make the tough choices as you move along in the process. Establishing a framework for exhibit creation can also help long-term when working on other projects.

Ideas & Themes

- What is the broad theme or topic for your exhibit? Secondary theme?
- What are your goals/objectives for the exhibit?
- What unique story are you telling (or how is your story relevant to the audience)?
- Do you have objects and/or visual resources to support an exhibit on this topic?
- Does your theme work within the requirements/constraints on the exhibit and the resources available?

A good interpretive 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. It's also important to realize that not every theme or story works as an exhibit. Some may be too broad, some might work best in other media (publications, talks/public programs, online resources, etc.). If you haven't already, consider creating an overall interpretation plan for your organization, so that you have a pathway for any and all programs you create.

Research & Interpretation

- What information do you already have on the topic? What additional research needs to be done?
- Where else might you look for further information or exhibit materials?
- How do you put the topic in the context of larger events?
- What were the causes and effects of the event(s)?
- Whose point of view are you using? Why? Are there alternatives?

An important step in creating any exhibit is knowing what you already have in your collections/research that you can utilize, and what further work you might need to do. You may need to look to local community

members or larger organizations to supplement what you already have. You might also need to do additional scholarly research. No matter what, it's also important to remember that your exhibit will have a specific point of view. Know what it is (select it with care even), but don't be afraid to explore other viewpoints that may add depth and discussion to your theme.

Activities & Actions

- Create a timeline for exhibit-related activities and make initial assignments.
- Group brainstorm on an exhibit theme.
- Cruise the Collections- pull three to five objects and start writing their stories and how they might be used in the exhibit.

Additional Resources

[Exhibiting Local Heritage series](#), by the Wisconsin Historical Society

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

[Museum Exhibition Design](#) by Mark Walhimer

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

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

Kenneth L. Ames, Barbara Franco, L. Thomas Frye, eds., *Ideas and Images: Developing Interpretive History Exhibits* (AltaMira Press, 1992)

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)



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#2- All About the Objects: Selection, Preservation & Mounting

Perhaps the most important part of any exhibit are the objects themselves. Your theme and interpretation should help you to choose these objects, but invariably not all of them will be (or should be) in the exhibit itself. Here are some criteria to think about when choosing and presenting objects in your exhibit.

Object Selection

- *Simplify*: You may start out with a long list of objects to use in your exhibit, but you'll want to narrow down what you use to just a few key pieces, especially in a small exhibit area. Think about what you absolutely need to tell the story. What objects are most relevant to your theme?
- *Catch Their Eye*: An exhibit is a visual representation of a theme. What objects might be the most visually arresting or unique that you might use? Along with historical significance, what objects might be most accessible to an audience-- think "My grandmother had one of those" or "Wow, phones sure have changed."
- *Replicate*: Can you use a copy instead of an original? Utilizing copies or alternate formats (e.g.- photograph of an object) means you don't have to worry of preservation needs, allows for greater use, and expands the ability for hands-on opportunities. Remember to make it clear if you have reproductions that can be handled and originals that cannot in the same exhibit.

Preservation

Exhibitions are often detrimental to the preservation of objects. Here are some of the ways you can help mitigate any negative impacts.

- Only select objects that are stable and can withstand the rigors of exhibition. Take a look at what objects are most vulnerable to exhibition hazards and what are least vulnerable.
- Know the materials that you are using in contact (or in the same environment as) with objects. Be aware of the types of materials that are ok to use and ones that are not.
- Know the hazards of the exhibition environment. These "Agents of Deterioration" include things like light, pests, incorrect environmental conditions, fire, water, etc. These agents will vary depending on the overall environment, whether an object is on display or in storage, and the susceptibility of the specific object to that type of deterioration.
- Think about preservation on both long and short-term scales. What is the potential for damage over a few months versus one in your own museum that is up for years? What are the possible irreversible or cumulative preservation issues?
- Handle objects as carefully and as little as possible. Always hold objects by their most stable part and support the whole weight. Always handle with clean/dry hands or gloves as appropriate.
- Think about how to pack and transport your objects safely and securely. Good packing provides surface protection, shock protection, support/cushioning, and barriers between incompatible materials.

Mounting

The mounting of an object is simply how you place it within the space of the exhibit. Mounting can be something as elaborate as a custom-fit suspended mount in a cabinet, or as simple as placing the object on a table.

- Gravity is constant and always wins. Think about this downward force as it relates to weight. What considerations would you need make for heavy objects? Or really light objects? Don't forget the impact of gravity on organic materials such as textiles or paper-based objects.
- Do not permanently attach objects to mounts, or add permanent hardware to objects. Mount an object utilizing their most stable aspect.
- A mount should showcase the “best assets” of an object while minimizing itself. Good mounts are unobtrusive and practically invisible, but provide security and stability to the object in its exhibition environment.

Activities & Actions

- Create a list of potential objects for the exhibit and begin to evaluate them based on importance/relevance to theme, preservation needs, ease of display, and value to organization.
- Inventory available materials that can safely be used with objects in the exhibit space. Make a “shopping list” for additional materials.
- Create a list of potential “hazards” for your objects on exhibit and what you may be able to do to minimize them.
- Take a field trip to another museum to observe how they have mounted objects, then select an object and design a potential mount for it.

Additional Resources

[Mounts](#) by Northern States Conservation Center

[Using Museum Collections in Exhibits](#) by the U.S. National Park Service

[Basic Guidelines for the Preservation of Historic Artifacts](#) by the Texas State Historical Commission

[Preventive Conservation and the Exhibition Process](#) by Toby J. Raphael

[Agents of Deterioration](#) by the Science Museum of Minnesota

Robert Barclay, Robert, André Bergeron, and Carole Dignard, *Mount-making for Museum Objects, 2nd ed.* (Canadian Conservation Institute, 2002)

Michael Belcher, *Exhibitions in Museums* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992)

U.S. National Park Service, *Exhibit Conservation Guidelines: Incorporating Conservation into Exhibit Planning, Design and Fabrication* (1999)



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#3- Labels & Exhibit Design

The layout, design, and text are what pull an exhibit together and bring the objects to life. Good labels and design provide context and help guide the visitor to where you want them to go (physically & intellectually). Poor design and text can severely hinder your objectives for the exhibit.

Exhibit Labels

(Labels for historical exhibits can be very different than labels for art exhibits.)

- Labels tell a story, they should include action and go beyond simply describing an object. They should make sense from wherever someone reads it in the exhibit (not everyone will read them in “order.”) Labels will have a point of view- make sure you know what it is and that it’s what you want.
- Main types of labels:
 - *Title:* Title of exhibit. Usually large, one sentence. Good titles arouse interest/curiosity while also describing what exhibit is about.
 - *Group/ Section Labels:* Medium-sized, can be larger blocks of text. These labels tie a group of items together to tell a broader story. May include images.
 - *Caption/ Object Labels:* Small, for one object or a small group of objects only. These are the labels most likely to be read. Should be descriptive and active, and about 50 words or less.
- Be consistent with label typeface, size and color, and placement. You can delineate different types of labels/information by varying these. Be aware of accessibility and readability parameters(typeface size, label location). BIGGER THINGS will always get read more than smaller things.
- Don’t assume extensive prior knowledge of the topic or object, but don’t “dumb down” labels. Effective labels get the message across quickly and succinctly.
- Labels can also be interactive by providing visitors with something “to do”: agree/disagree with statement, make conclusions, ask questions, make comparisons, make discoveries, etc. but limit labels that ask direct questions.
- When creating labels, start with what visitors can see/experience directly and expand from there. Vary the amount and type of information (including text length) included on labels to reduce visitor boredom.

Exhibit Design

- Start with a site plan or schematic of the exhibit area. Use that to help complete a model (either on paper or a virtual model). Mock-up your exhibit prior if you can to ensure everything fits and works as you want.
- Think about visitor flow through the exhibit. Where are people most likely to stop in the exhibit? Try to plan space around anticipated bottlenecks. Remember, not everyone will walk through the exhibit in the same order.

- Try to keep your exhibit accessible to a most patrons. That means having enough space for visitors to walk/turn around within the space, not placing items too high or too low, and making labels legible and at a proper font size and height.
- Light the exhibit so patrons will be able to read text and see objects easily, but keep direct light off of sensitive objects.
- Design your exhibit with preservation and safety in mind. Make it easy for visitors to see objects, but not easy for them to bump, grab, or touch objects. Make sure to have interactives/touchable items clearly marked or distinguished from those you don't want handled.
- Utilize logos, colors, and shapes from the objects in the exhibit for creating design elements and choosing a design style.
- Use different heights/levels to increase exhibit space and highlight particular objects.
- Focus information and layer content so that all visitors can get essential information while others can go deeper into a topic of interest. Think about what you want a visitor to take away after only spending 1-5 minutes at your exhibit.

Activities & Actions

- Create a floorplan for your exhibit space. Experiment with potential layouts
- Pick 3 objects and write labels for them. Have someone from outside your organization read the labels & evaluate their responses.
- Create a group/section label in 3 different fonts to see how that changes readability and design.

Additional Resources

[Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design](#)

[The Language of Artifacts](#) by the Wisconsin Historical Society

[How to Build a Museum Exhibit in One Hour](#) by the Morrison County Historical Society

[Engaging Text](#) by the Family Learning Forum

[Exhibition Labels](#) by the UK Museums Association

Elizabeth Bogle, *Museum Exhibition Planning and Design* (AltaMira Press 2013)

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

Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach, 2nd ed.* (AltaMira Press, 2015)