Producing Interpretive Panels

Interpretive panels are the most common form of interpretation.

A well-produced and well-sited panel can be extremely effective, whereas a badly produced and wrongly sited panel will be counterproductive.

Interpretive panels should use an imaginative combination of text and visuals to tell a story about an object or a place. This is in contrast to an information panel which only contains instructions or directions.

Production process

The following stages show what is required to produce and install an interpretive panel:

1. Research and plan the panel's contents
2. Assess the site to locate exactly where it will be installed
3. Source pictures and / or commission illustrations
4. Write the draft text
5. Initial layout and design
6. Proof initial design
7. Final layout and design
8. Final proofing
9. Manufacture
10. Installation
11. Evaluation
12. Maintenance

The following notes provide some guidance on producing effective panels.

Keep it simple

The best panels are often the simplest.

A single panel should communicate one or two main messages. Panels that try to do too much will be ignored. As a guide, you should aim for a maximum of 200 words per panel, and a simple and attractive design.

Layering the message

Your message should be layered so that it is accessible to everyone.

Research shows that people look at adverts (and panels) in the following order:

- The headline
- The main picture
- Sub headings
- Bullet points
- Further illustrations
- The main text

Therefore, to get your message across to everyone it must be communicated by the headline, the main picture, and any sub-headings. The main text can contain all the necessary detail.

The panel must look attractive and be accessible at a glance. Many people will decide in seconds whether they will read it. These few seconds are vital: provoke and stimulate their interest, and you've got them!

You should use a text hierarchy of different type sizes, with the more important text in larger type. Guideline type sizes are given below:

Typography	**Suggested minimum sizes**
Headlines	12mm, 60-72 point
Sub headings	8mm, 48-60 point
Body text	5mm, 24 point
Captions	5mm, 24 point

Your text will also be improved if you

- Write in a lively and conversational style
- Write in short sentences and paragraphs
- Avoid jargon and technical terms

Relate to your audience by

- Addressing the reader in the first person (i.e. by referring to them as 'you')
- Use active rather than passive verbs (e.g. 'we manage...' is far better than 'this site is managed by...')
- Use metaphors, analogies and comparisons
- Use humour, poetry and prose

See the guidelines on writing interpretation for more detailed advice.

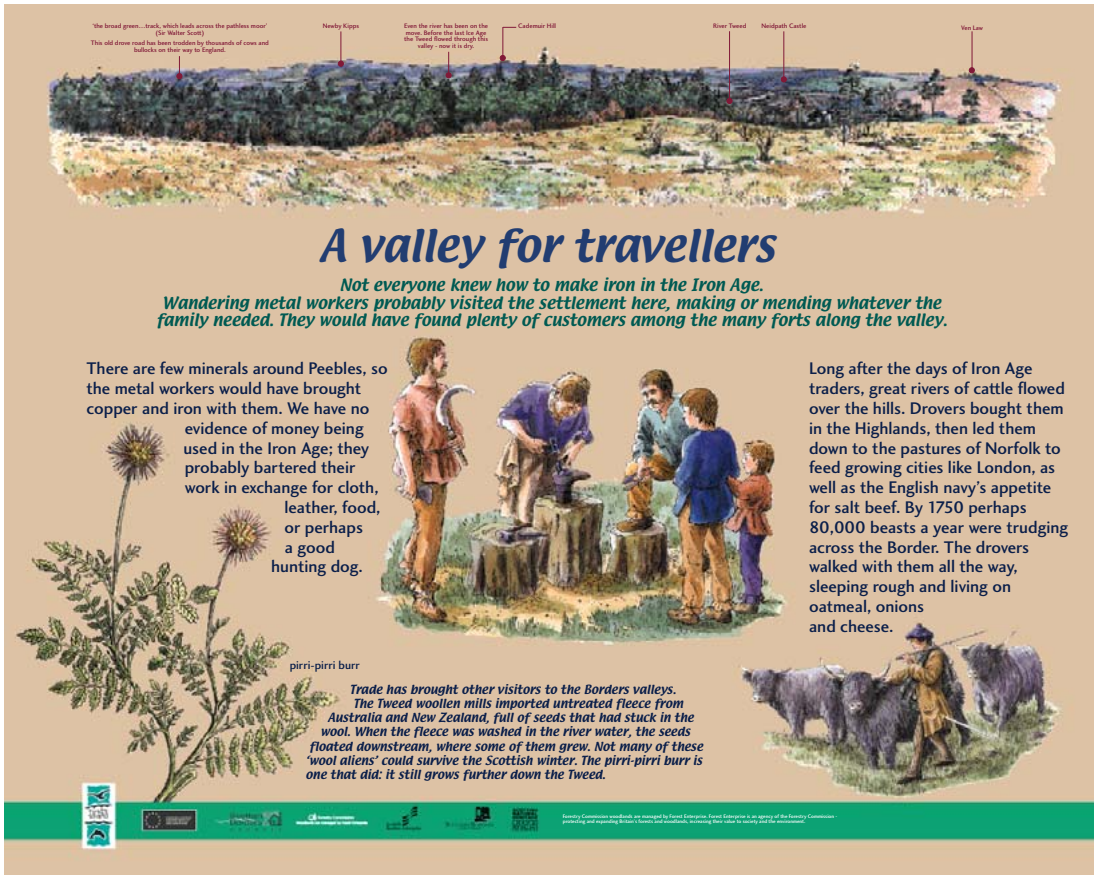
How to use visuals

Good visuals can make all the difference between a good and bad panel.

Visuals could be photographs, drawings or illustrations, and have important roles in communicating with your audience:

- They should illustrate something the visitor can't already see for themselves
- Drawings are often better at illustrating something than photos
- All illustrations should have a clear relationship with the text
- All illustrations should be clearly labelled or annotated
- Allow sufficient time and money to research and sources the visuals, commission drawings if necessary, and pay any copyright fees

This panel shows some of these good practice principles in action:



Design and illustration © Ross Associates

This panel is interpreting an iron-age hill fort in the Tweed valley, but it also makes thematic links to the drove road that can be seen from the hill fort, and to the Tweed woolen mills. Zoom in for a closer look.

Maps

If a map is needed on an interpretive panel it must be clear and easily understood.

Some points to consider are:

- Make sure you have copyright clearance for the map
- Only include information that is really necessary
- Make sure the map is large enough for the panel or leaflet
- Make sure the design is clear and easily understood
- Consider using an oblique '3-D' map if possible

This is a good example of a map on a panel.

Design and illustration © Ross Associates

Many people find hand-drawn maps such as this easier to understand than the usual Ordnance Survey format, especially if key features are illustrated in perspective. Zoom in to have a closer look.

Layout and Design

Good layout and design will unite the text and visuals, and will ultimately dictate how well your message is put across.

Your designer will make skilled decisions regarding:

- The graphic images and illustration style
- Graphic devices to add interest
- Typeface, typesize and spacing
- Colours
- The practicalities of the reproduction method to suit graphics, materials and quantities

Always involve your designer at the earliest stage and provide them with all relevant information about your panel such as why, who for, the site layout etc.

You should also identify at an early stage what materials you want to use for the panel by considering what will best enhance the on-site experience. This may determine the method of fabrication, which in turn can influence the kind of graphics you may or may not be able to use.

Proofing the design

Careful proofing is very important.

When you receive the proof for your panel from your designer, consider the following:

- Does it grab your attention?
- Is the layout logical and easy to follow?
- Is the text accurate and the spelling, grammar and syntax correct? (the text you gave the designer may have been correct, but mistakes do arise when the text is laid out)
- Show the proof to someone who doesn't know the subject to see whether your message is coming across loud and clear

At least one set of changes should be included in the price quoted by your designer. More than one set of changes may incur additional charges.

Once you are happy with the design, your designer will send the panel to be manufactured.

Panel Production

A number of techniques are available depending on your design preferences, budget and desired lifespan of the panel.

Most manufacturers can provide up-to-date technical advice on each technique they offer.

There are two main printing methods:

Digital printing is a flexible process that can reproduce full colour graphics such as colour photographs and drawings. The design is printed onto a special paper which is then encapsulated or encased in acrylic, glass reinforced polyester (GRP) or melamine.

Screen printing involves applying each ink separately onto paper or directly onto the panel surface. Some manufacturers offer a handpainted finish allowing illustrations to be produced in full colour, but this is expensive

Both techniques use inks that bleach in direct sunlight, so don't expect the original colours to last more than a few years.

Panel materials

A range of materials are available in which to produce panels. Some notes on the main techniques are as follows.

GRP

Designs are printed onto paper which is then embedded in the GRP. Alternatively the designs are printed in gel coatings, resulting in a finish identical to a fibreglass yacht or dinghy. GRP is fairly strong and long-lasting.

Melamine Laminates

Designs are printed onto resin-impregnated paper, which is then encapsulated in the melamine. Melamine is especially hard wearing and vandal resistant.

Acrylic and Polycarbonate

Designs are printed onto paper and 'sandwiched' between sheets of high impact acrylic or polycarbonate. Acrylic and polycarbonate are cheaper but less durable than GRP or melamine.

Etched Stainless Steel

Monochrome artwork is photographed and the image chemically etched into the steel. ESS is popular for viewpoint indicators, but where ink is also used (e.g. to pick out text), it can get scraped off. Can be difficult to read when reflecting directly in the sun.

Photosensitised Aluminium

Designs are printed onto photosensitive aluminium plates and the image is sealed for protection. An unusual material.

Sandblasting on Wood and Stone

Sandblasting creates a surface of raised lettering and designs. It is not a good method for detailed pictures and text, but offers interesting tactile surfaces.

Cast Signs

Signs can be cast in bronze or aluminium. These are very tough, but expensive.

Enamel

Text and images are painted or screenprinted onto sheet metal which is enamelled for protection. An old technique that was once common for advertising panels but is now very unusual and very expensive.

Installation

It is vital that a panel is installed at the right place and facing the right way.

- Orientate the panel so the viewer can relate what they are looking at to the contents of the panel.
- Try not to install the panel facing due south. UV bleaching from sunlight can take years off the life of a panel.
- Ensure you have a suitable hard standing or ground surface for people reading the panel.

Mountings

You can choose from a range of mountings:

- Wood or metal lecterns
- Stone, brick or concrete plinths
- Wooden or metal posts
- Roofed structures
- Existing walls

Only suitable materials should be used, such as anodised aluminium and pressure treated wood.

Lectern and plinth mounted panels should be at about waist height and inclined at an angle. The panel should be fixed between waist and shoulder height, although this could be lowered to cater for children.

Evaluation and Maintenance

Make sure your panel is properly maintained by keeping its surfaces clean, tightening all fittings and cutting encroaching vegetation etc.

To evaluate your panel, see the evaluating interpretation guidance notes for help.

Panel manufacturers

A number of companies offer sign manufacturing services. Please note the inclusion of these companies here does not imply any endorsement of their services or the quality of their products.

- Arien Products, Somerset 01278 785268 www.arien.com
- BEP Signs, Greenock 01475 784423 www.bepsigns.co.uk
- Charles Henshaw, Edinburgh 0131 337 4204 www.charles-henshaw.com
- Osprey, Berwickshire 01890 883127 www.signsbynature.co.uk
- Perstorp-Wareite, Co. Durham 0191 259 3397 www.formica-europe.com
- Sandblast Sign Co, Lanarkshire 01357 440441 www.ssc.gb.com
- Shelley Signs, Shropshire 01952 541483 shelly_signs@virgin.net
- VPB Industries, Manchester 0161 351 7400 paul@armourseal.u-net.com

Panel manufacturers not listed here are welcome to contact: lorna.brown@snh.gov.uk

Further Reading

Gross M, Trapp S and Zimmerman R (1994)
Signs, Trails and Wayside Exhibits, Interpreter's Handbook Series.
UW-SP Foundation Press, Inc

Ham S (1992)
Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets.
North American Press
[Contains reference for Fazio & Gilbert (1986)]

Miles R S (1988)
The Design of Educational Exhibits.
Unwin Hyman

Scottish Tourist Board (1993)
Site Interpretation: A Practical Guide.
STB

Veverka J A (1994)
Interpretive Master Planning.
Falcon Press