Writing Interpretation

"Too often writing is seen as unimportant, something done in a spare half-hour. Writing which commands attention and is memorable is hard work."

(J Carter [1], 1993)

Writing interpretation

The best text tells a story and uses a range of creative techniques to bring a site or object to life.

Writing interpretive text is a skill that requires thought and practice. The following guidelines will help you with this.

Reading age

In general, a 'reading age' of 9–12 is a good level at which to write your text.

This does not mean that all your visitors are 9-12 years old – it's simply a standardised term for reading level. The reading age of tabloid newspapers is around 9-12. Their writing uses very few technical or scientific terms, and is easily understood by the great majority of older children and adults.

You can find out more about reading age and how to measure it in the *A Way With Words* edition of the *Environmental Interpretation* bulletin.

Word length

There is nothing more off-putting than too many words on a panel or a leaflet.

As a guideline, an interpretive panel should contain a maximum of 200 words. Publications can contain more text, but no page should have more than half its space taken up with writing.

Writing style

It is very important that your text relates to your audience. This is one of the key things that differentiates interpretation from visitor information.

There are a number of writing techniques that will help your text relate to your audience:

1. **Address the reader in the first person**

    This mean referring to them as 'you', for example:

    'You can see the lichen clinging to the trees, taking in water and nutrients from the air'.

2. **Use active rather than passive verbs**

    This makes the text sound more natural and lively.

    For example, *'we manage...'* is far better than *'this site is managed by...'*

3. **Use metaphors, analogies and comparisons**

    These help people relate what you're telling them to something else they know about. For example:

    'Loch Ness is so deep it could fit in 100 Nelson's Columns, one on top of the other'

    and

    'Jays are a bit like us. When we're hungry, we pop to the fridge for some food we bought earlier. When Jays are hungry, they dig up an acorn they buried earlier'.

4. **Use humour**

    Humour can be a very effective way of relating to and engaging your audience, but be careful: not everyone finds the same thing funny. Use humour, but with care.

5. Ask questions and engage your audience's imagination

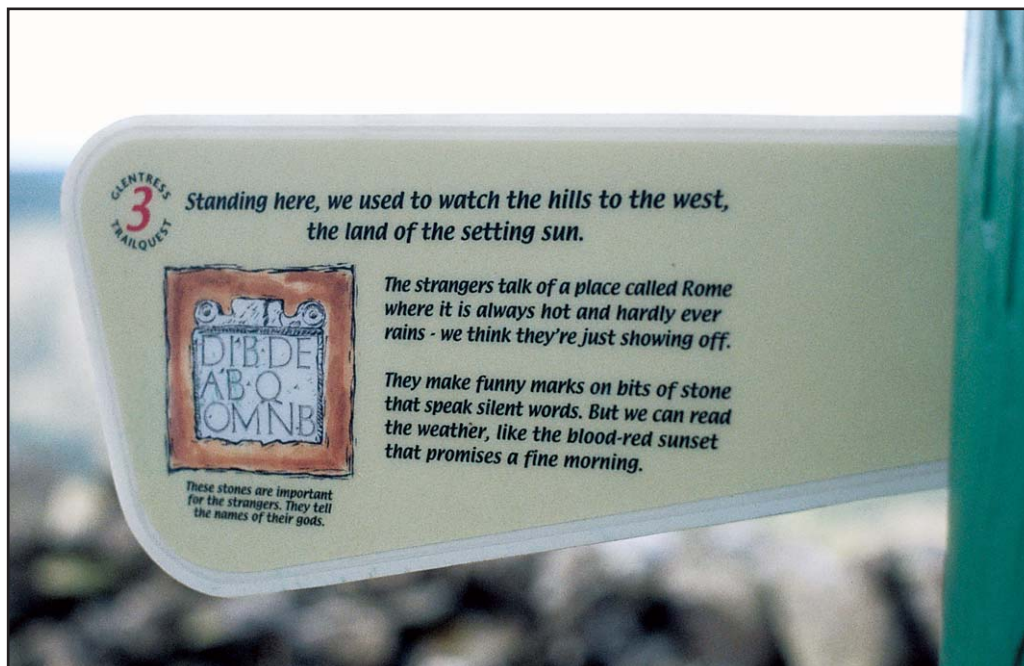Your text can ask specific questions and get your audience to imagine things. For example:

'What famous drink comes from this innocent looking bush?'

and

'Can you imagine living here during the Clearances when your whole village was thrown off its land?'

6. Use first person narrative

It can be very effective to adopt a character to narrate your story. This means your interpretive text is written in the first person. A good example of this is given below and comes from a cycle trail in Glentress Forest near Peebles:

Design and illustration © Ross Associates

This swingpost is part of a trail exploring an iron-age site. The interpreters developed characters to narrate a story to help visitors explore and enjoy the trail.

7. **Write in short sentences and paragraphs**

Long sentences and paragraphs that go on and on are so off putting that most people wont even bother to begin reading them or will be so bored halfway through they will find something more interesting to do instead.

Keep it short and simple!

8. **Avoid jargon and technical terms**

Jargon and technical terms will confuse or alienate the reader. Please use plain English.

Illustrations

Pictures are often far better at communicating than words.

For example, how would you describe an ammonite? Well, it's a fossil cephalopod of the order Ammonidea with a flat spiral shell...[1]

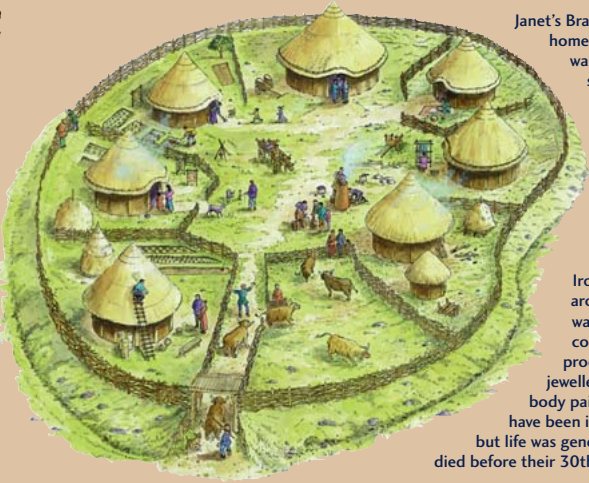Don't be silly! It's far better to draw one.

Other points to check

- Only use one idea per sentence. If you have two ideas, use two sentences.
- Vary the length of a sentence for better rhythm.
- Read your sentence and if you're in doubt, punctuate it. When you're happy with your punctuation, don't use more.
- Look out for potentially loaded words. These show bias and can make the reader take a contrary stance on principle. For example, 'people' and 'we' is far better than 'man', 'woman', 'him' or 'her'.
- Clichés make people switch off as they think they know what the sentence will say before they finish reading it. There are 'far reaching consequences' of using clichés!

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[1] See *A Way with Words* journal, CEI, 1993

This panel shows some of these good practice principles:

A desirable residence

Location, location, location - an Iron Age estate agent would have loved Janet's Brae.
"Good views with a commanding position, hay meadows in the valley, wheat fields on the hillsides, a river for fishing and trade...a very desirable residence indeed."

Pagans and Druids

The druids were very influential and had many important roles in the tribe - teacher, doctor, magician and priest. Julius Ceasar wrote about them in his description of the 'barbaric tribes of Albion'. Iron Age people were pagans and worshipped many gods and goddesses. Some of our traditional festivals were originally pagan holy days such as Beltane (May Day), Lammas (harvest festival) and Samhain (Halloween).

Janet's Brae farmstead was probably home to about 30 people. It was protected by a ditch and stone rampart, and was inhabited at the time of the Roman invasion in AD 79. The Roman soldiers built a large camp on the valley floor below, but soon moved to a fort further upstream.

Iron Age society was based around a class system of warrior aristocrats, druids, commoners, and slaves. They produced some beautiful jewellery, and wore tattoos and body paint. Play and ritual would have been important to them too, but life was generally hard. Most people died before their 30th birthday.

Design and illustration © Ross Associates

Finally...

Rewrite, edit ruthlessly and rewrite again. Always end up with fewer words than you started with.

As with any rules, there are times to break them. However, always keep your audience in mind and *talk to them using simple and clear conversational language*.

And above all don't just communicate facts and figures – let your writing tell a story.

Further Reading

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