

Interpretive Planning



Planning is the bedrock of good interpretation!

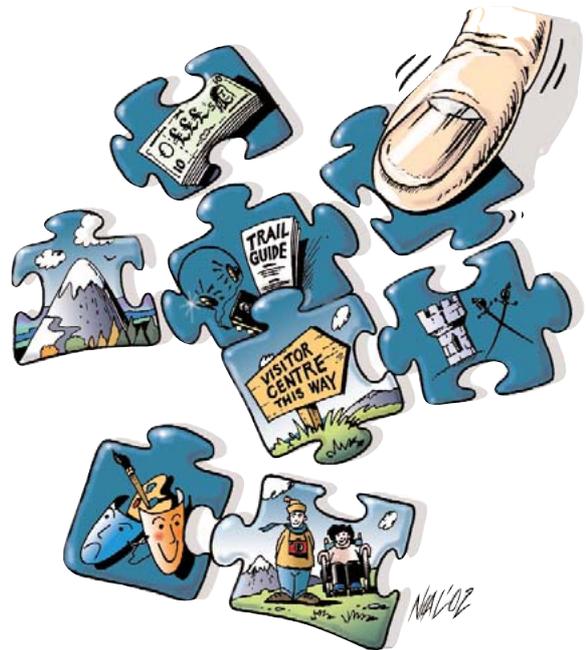
These notes will guide you through the interpretive planning process. You don't need to follow this model rigidly – it is only a tool – and you may need to consider some elements of the process in a different order. *But*, interpretive planning will help you structure what you're doing. It will help you produce successful interpretation and avoid wasting precious resources.

Scales of planning

Interpretive planning happens at many different scales – from a whole region to a single display. Within a National Park, for example, you might need:

- A Park-wide interpretation strategy
- Local Interpretive Plans for the main honeypot areas
- Individual interpretive plans for each visitor centre

Sometimes interpretive plans need a lot of work and a big report, whilst at other times a few pages of notes will do. You must decide what is best for you.



Key interpretive planning issues

There are a range of key planning issues you should consider...

1. *Why* do you want to interpret something?
2. *Who* should be involved in the interpretive process?
3. *What* are you interpreting?
4. *Who* you are interpreting *for*?
5. What *messages* do you want to communicate?
6. What are your *specific objectives*?
7. What *media* will you use?
8. How will your interpretation be *implemented*?
9. How will it be *evaluated*?
10. How will it be *maintained*?

1. Why do you want to interpret something?

You need to ask yourself why you want to interpret your collection, feature or site.

Your reasons could include education, conservation, marketing and promotion, raising funds or visitor management. Or simply to give your visitors a more enjoyable experience.

2. Who should be involved in the interpretive process?

It is important the right people are involved in the interpretive plan. In particular, different people may have quite different views about what messages should be communicated to visitors.

In a large area there may be several agencies, local communities and voluntary groups who should be involved. If so, you will need to decide how they can have an input. At the other end of the scale, only one person may be needed to plan a simple piece of interpretation.

3. What are you interpreting?

You need to think carefully about what you want to interpret. The key question to ask is:

- What is special about your site, feature or collection?

In addition, you should also consider:

- What visitor facilities like car parks, access, signage and toilets are already provided (or will be in future)?
- What other interpretation is available in the area?
- What staff, money and other resources are available?

4. Who are you interpreting for?

It is essential to understand your visitors so that your interpretation is relevant to them.

The sorts of questions you should ask are:

- Who are they?
- Why do they come?
- How many of them are there?
- How often do they come?
- Where are they from?
- What interests them?
- How long do they stay?

Some key points include:

- If you have many families and school groups you should do something specific for children.
- If you have lots of foreign visitors you should translate some of your interpretation.
- If you have lots of repeat visitors you could change part of your interpretation each year, or use arts media that can be equally enjoyed every visit.
- If you have visitors with particular interests you should interpret what they are interested in.

You may also wish to consider potential future visitors as well as your current audience.

5. What stories do you want to tell?

This is when you start to prepare the actual interpretation.

You need to refine what you wish to communicate into ‘themes’ – the ideas that you want visitors to take away with them. Themes should be stated as complete sentences that contain one main idea. You might interpret several main themes at a single site.

As a guide, you should be able to complete the following sentence for each theme:

“The thing I want people to learn from this interpretation is...”

6. What are your objectives?

Your objectives will now determine exactly what the interpretation is meant to achieve.

There are four kinds of interpretive objectives:

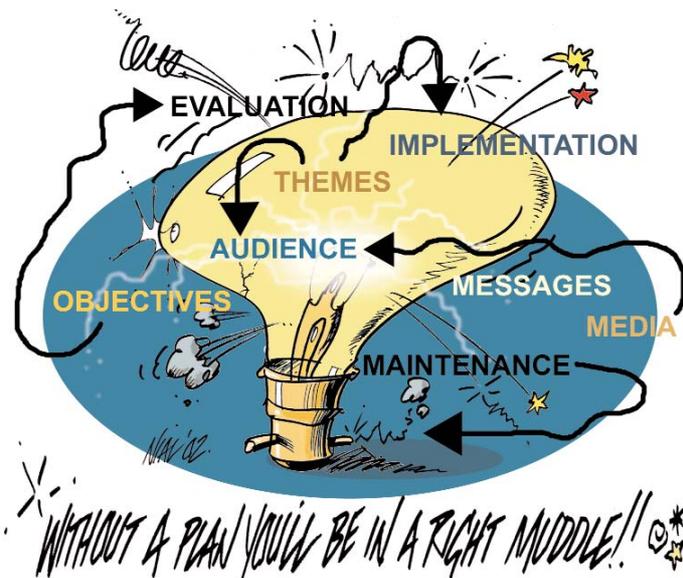
- Learning objectives – what you want your visitors to *know*
- Emotional objectives – what you want your visitors to *feel*
- Behavioural objectives – what you want your visitors to *do*
- Promotional objectives – how you want to *present* your *organisation*

Your objectives should be specific, measurable and achievable. They are essential to justify the resources to be spent on the interpretation, and are a critical reference for your future evaluation.

7. What media will you use?

It is only at this stage that you should choose your media.

Let your aims, resources, audience, site characteristics, themes and objectives determine what media you use, not the other way round.



A summary of some common interpretive media, and their advantages and disadvantages, is given below.

Medium	Advantages	Disadvantages
Graphic panels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need no supervision • Can reach a large audience • Low maintenance • Easy for the audience to use • Can combine text and pictures • Can help orientate visitors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are becoming ubiquitous and people might be starting to ignore them • Can have a negative landscape impact • Can be prone to vandalism
Guided walks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very effective form of interpretation • Flexible • Can present a complex story 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only reach a small audience • Need good marketing and administration
Publications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be used on and off site • Can contain more detail than a panel • Can aid orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be effectively distributed • Regular reprints may be needed • May be discarded as litter
Audio tour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be multi-lingual • Can use narrative to tell a story • Potential for creative characterisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolates users from each other • Relatively expensive • Important operational considerations like the hiring of headsets
Computer interactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages interaction • 'Modern' appeal • Creative combination of pictures, text and sound 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expensive to program, install and maintain • Technology can date quickly
Visitor centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduces a complex story • Can be an major attraction • Reaches a large audience • Can contain a wide range of media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very expensive to build and run • Much competition • Needs highly professional management

8. How will your interpretation be implemented?

You'll need to cost and timetable the interpretation, and to identify who will manage it.

You should consider what can be done in house and what will need to be contracted out. Interpretation is a skilled process and you should choose writers and designers with experience of producing good quality interpretation. Do not be tempted to write material yourself without adequate training. Effective interpretive writing is lively, incisive and personal - and much harder than it seems!

See the guidance notes on interpretive writing for more detailed help.

9. How will it be monitored and evaluated?

It is important to assess whether your interpretation meets the objectives you set for it.

Some evaluation can be undertaken as you develop the interpretation to test its effectiveness. Otherwise, you should check how well it's working once installed. Any changes should feed into your next interpretive programme.

See the guidance notes on evaluating interpretation for more detailed help.

10. How will it be maintained?

It is important there are clear responsibilities for maintaining and eventually replacing the interpretation. Maintenance needs might include, for example, clearing vegetation around a panel, making sure all interactives are in working order, re-touching paintwork, and ensuring all lights and fixings are working properly.

Marketing and visitor management

Remember your interpretive plan will have to fit in with any *business, marketing or visitor management plans* that may have been drawn up for your site.

And finally

Enjoy yourself! Interpretive planning can be creative and rewarding. In fact, the more you enjoy it the more of yourself you put in, and the better the results!

Further reading

Carter, J.

A sense of Place: an interpretive planning handbook

Tourism and Environment Initiative, Inverness, 1997

Ham, S.

Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets

North American Press, 1992

ISBN 1555919022

Tilden, F.

Interpreting our Heritage

University of North Carolina, 1977

ISBN 0807840165

Veverka, J. A.

Interpretive Master Planning

Falcon Press, 1994

ISBN 1560442743