



Getting Visitors' Attention: Writing Exhibit Labels

We asked Kate Roberts to offer advice on writing labels for exhibits. A staff member at MHS for six years, Kate has been curator for the History Center exhibit Minnesota A to Z, and the exhibit at the Mille Lacs Indian Museum, Learn about Our Past: The Story of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. She has written text for MHS exhibits On the Campaign Trail and Manoominikewin: The Story of Wild Ricing.

Think about the last exhibit you produced. As you inched toward opening, was there one pesky little task that kept cropping up, week after week? If you're like most people, writing the labels is one of the last things you do before an exhibit opens.

But good labels—concise, informative, and readable—can make or break an exhibit. A well-written label can jog a memory, start a conversation, or change an opinion. Following are a dozen tips for writing and producing successful labels.

1. Pretend you're at the visitor's side, tugging at her sleeve. Nothing piques interest in an object faster than being invited to focus on a specific, provocative detail.

Remember how you felt the first time you saw the object in question, or learned about the topic at hand. Try to instill in your visitors that same sense of satisfaction in learning in your visitors.

Which of the following leads would compel you to read on?

“See the date ‘1949’ on this bowl? Do you know why it’s there?”

or

“The date 1949 engraved on this bowl commemorates Minnesota’s territorial centennial.”

2. Don't forget to state the obvious. For instance: Remember that many of our visitors are too young to remember Hubert Humphrey's funeral, let alone his political career. Don't worry about insulting the intelligence of your readers. It's far worse to leave them feeling uninformed.

3. People don't necessarily read labels in the order you'd suggest. As exhibit visitors, we've all done it, too—zeroed in on the



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case with the red plaid lunch box that looks just like the one we used in grade school. Hurrah! A personal connection with the exhibit! And we've totally ignored that brilliant introductory label that puts our lunch box in the context of growing up in America. Most visitors step back and look at the larger picture only after they've had a close-up view. Write labels so visitors can "drop in" anywhere and feel informed.

White Bear Lake and asked if he had time for a visit. The result? Mr. Spiess loaned us sketches, snapshots, and shopping lists for reproduction in the exhibit, and agreed to come to MHS to tape an interview. His explanations brought his experience to life for us—and for our visitors.

"The smaller the boat is, the safer the boat is. That's what people don't understand."

and,

"They'll be in the worst storm imaginable, and they're just getting beat to pieces, and they'll look out and see a light bulb floating in the water, or a bottle, or birds even . . . and the waves are crashing, and the boat can be rolling over, and here's this little light bulb just bobbing along, and there's no way the ocean can do anything to it."

6. Set limits. Early on in the development of Minnesota A to Z, we set length limits for labels: a 35-word maximum for object labels (not including the basics—what, when, where, etc.—which

should be readily accessible), and a 100-word maximum for introductory labels. Adhering to these limits forced us to write concisely and to cut all but the most essential information.

7. Format follows function. If your production method allows you to vary type size within a single label, consider making the key facts—who, what, where, and when—larger and bolder than the extended explanation.

8. A good label isn't hard to find. There are many opinions on placement of object labels. I favor placing labels as close to their objects as possible. Visiting an exhibit is like going shopping. I'll walk away from a can of tomatoes if I can't find its price, just as I'll walk away from an object in an exhibit if its description isn't easy to spot.

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Right: In this view of Minnesota Communities, bright, attractive objects and enticing drawers draw visitors' attention away from the main text panel—if they read it at all, they'll probably read it after they have looked at many of the objects.



4. It's not just what you say—it's how you say it. Let the tone of your exhibit labels grow out of their subject matter and your audience's sensibilities. The friendly, flippant tone you adopt for one subject might be wildly inappropriate in another.

5. Need help? Go back to your sources. Excerpts from first-person accounts can be much more powerful than an exhibit curator's words.

One of the objects featured in Minnesota A to Z is *Yankee Girl*, the 10-foot sailboat that Minnesota adventurer Gerry Spiess sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in 1979. After reading Spiess' account of his voyage and watching numerous taped interviews, I was stumped how to make his voyage come alive for visitors. Then my colleague Jim Roe had a brainstorm. Jim called Gerry Spiess at his home in



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Right: When your case is too cramped for objects and their labels, consider forming a “ledge” directly beneath the objects, where labels can be positioned at a uniform height and size. If you anticipate confusion about which label corresponds to which objects, consider adding small object sketches to labels as needed.



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9. “Now, where should we put the exhibit introduction?” You’ll save time and avoid frustration if you consider label size, placement, and format from the very beginning of your exhibit development. Every sketch, every model, every case layout should account for object labels and text panels.

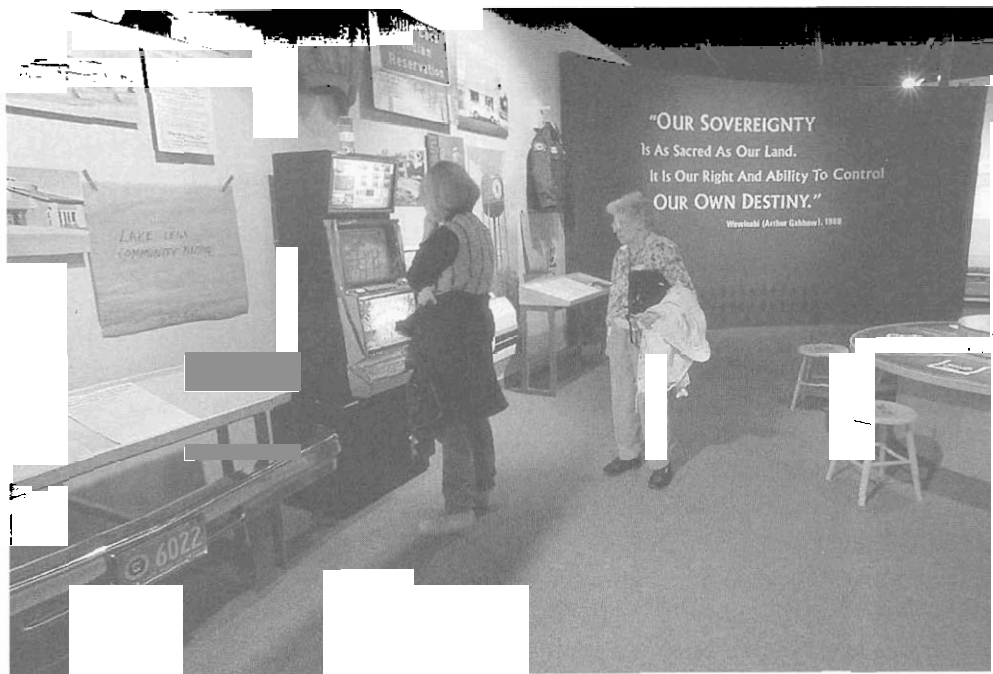
10. Always rely on the kindness of strangers. Or anyone willing to read and comment on every

label you write. Try to find someone willing to be brutally honest about whether your labels are interesting and informative.

11. “Daddy, does ‘Minnesota’ have three ‘n’s’?” Above all else, proofread those labels. Ideally, two people should proofread—one reads aloud from a draft, including all capitalizations and punctuation, while the other concentrates on the formatted text. Remember: It’s easier to get it right

in the first place than to redo it after your exhibit opens.

Right: Exhibit text can stand on its own as a strikingly powerful component. In this view of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum, the concept of sovereignty as defined by a respected Mille Lacs leader is an instructive focal point for the exhibit section.



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12. Get to the point. When appropriate, a conversational tone is fun to read and to write, and it also saves space. For example, “At the turn of the century, the automobile had not yet been invented.” (13 words) —and: “There weren’t any cars in 1900.” (six words).