

Writing Effective Museum Text - Practical considerations

✓ **Organise your text**

Stick to one point per sentence and one theme per paragraph. Keep sentences to about 8-15 words but use sentences of different lengths to make the text more interesting to read. Limit paragraphs to 50 words.

✓ **Mind your language**

Keep language simple, immediate and vivid and choose short words over long ones. You want to avoid tiring your reader with overcomplicated sentences. Try to think of imaginative words that will appeal to the senses. Avoid superlatives - visitors may not agree that this is a 'stunning display' or a 'delightful object'. Use commas in moderation and never use exclamation marks unless they are part of a quotation.

✓ **Check for readability**

Reading age is a measure of the complexity of word and sentence structure. It is unrelated to the actual age or reading ability of visitors. For a general audience, museum text is usually pitched at a reading age of 12 (as is the writing in tabloid newspapers). The Fog Test is one method of assessing the readability of a text:

1. Count the first 100 words to the nearest sentence.
2. How many sentences are in the 100 words?
3. Divide the number of words by the number of sentences to get the average sentence length.

Average sentence length	Readability	Communication factor
Up to 8 words	Very easy	90%
9 to 11 words	Fairly easy	86%
12 to 17 words	Standard	75%
18 to 21 words	Fairly difficult	40%
22 to 25 words	Difficult	24%
26 or above	Don't bother	Consider joining the civil service

✓ **Watch your style**

Does your placement host have an existing 'house-style' that your text will need to conform to? This could determine its tone (e.g. conversational, factual, or formal) and the number of words per line, sentence or paragraph that you can use. It can also determine design elements like typeface, colours and finish.

- A sans serif typeface, such as Arial or Helvetica, is much easier to read than a typeface with serifs, such as Times New Roman. The RNIB recommends a minimum type size of 14 points.
- Text that is justified on the left hand side only is generally easier to read than text that is justified on the left and right because it allows more even word spacing.
- Avoid hyphenating words at the end of lines. It reduces legibility and reading speed.
- For maximum legibility use a white background for your text and avoid materials with a gloss finish (acrylic plastic, polished metal, shiny paper) as they can result in reflections or glare which make text difficult to read.

✓ **Location, location, location**

- Decide the location of your panels and labels early on to ensure that text is large enough in relation to viewing distance. Be aware of introductory panels causing bottle-necks at the entrance to an exhibition.
- Locate labels as close as possible to the objects they relate to. Number objects and labels where necessary.
- Labels in front of objects are more comfortable to read than those placed on the side.
- Ensure that panels and labels are sufficiently lit and that visitors won't cast shadows over labels.
- Children and visitors in wheelchairs will find it difficult or impossible to read labels laid flat in display cases.

✓ **Meet your deadlines**

- Ask colleagues to read and comment on your drafts. Check factual accuracy with a specialist. Allow plenty of time for re-drafting.
- Know your deadlines. When does your text need to be approved by? How far in advance does the designer require the approved text?