

U.S. National Park Service

SIGN AND WAYSIDE EXHIBIT
Park Signs and Markers
Interpretive Signs and Markers

INTERPRETIVE TEXT WRITING

Guidelines for Texts of Signs and Markers.

Introduction: Text Writing as an Art. The writing of a good interpretive text is an art. Each separate text, is, moreover, an exacting literary exercise, easier to speak of than to produce with clarity of thought, felicity of style, and inspirational appeal. A good text is the product of long study and careful thought. For most people, it is not easily produced, but must be prayerfully sought, and occasionally achieved. It is not usually composed, or "struck off," in a few minutes, or even hours. There are, however, those rare individuals with a gift for the poignant thought, appealing phrase, and conciseness of expression, who may produce a gem of a text in a flash of inspiration. In fact, experience has shown that the best texts are often produced under the spur of happy inspiration following long study of the theme to be presented. Creative thought at its best should be reflected in the text.

Qualities of a Good Text. Four important qualities of good texts are as follows:

1. Clarity and Adequacy of Meaning. Texts should be both informative and interpretive in character. They should state facts accurately and clearly and should also explain carefully what these facts mean or represent. Historic periods should be identified (with key dates given, if pertinent) and time sequence presented logically without confusion. Texts for scenic-scientific sites or features should identify, describe, and make clear in laymen's language the unusual scientific relationships and significance of the particular feature. For the most part,

SIGN AND WAYSIDE EXHIBIT
Park Signs and Markers
Interpretive Signs and Markers

Guidelines for Texts of Signs and Markers (con.)

the subject of an interpretive text should cover thoroughly, but in condensed form, only one particular object or feature. Texts covering a broad historical movement or a major scientific phenomenon could be prepared, however, if they meet a positive interpretive need in the area.

2. Inspirational Character. The tone and character of the text should be more than merely factual. Within the practical limitations of its scope and length, the text should also be inspiring. It should uplift the reader's spirit and raise him above his usual level of daily knowledge and experience. It should open his mind to new understandings and broaden his spiritual horizon. The text should provide the reader with appreciation for the historic event or scientific manifestation which makes the site marked memorable to him as an American. It should be recognized that the appeal of scenic-scientific features is, in most instances, universal. The inspirational aspect of an interpretive marker, situated, for example, on the rim of the Grand Canyon or at the base of the General Sherman Tree, should produce some understanding of man's place in nature's grand scheme and in a changing physical world. In the case of the marker at a historic site, the text should make clear the fact that it is located at an actual, historic spot, where the reader may experience: "... a personal sense of identification with past generations, an understanding and appreciation for the continuity of history, and a thrilling sense of intimate reliving of past historic events on the sites of their occurrence."

3. Simplicity of Style. A distinctive literary style in the writing of a marker text is an intangible and elusive quality much to be desired but difficult to achieve. Style is the basis of the text's appeal. Without it, the reader's attention may lag with the text's opening words and lapse after the first sentence. Style is produced through the happy combination of right word choice and graceful expression. Simplicity and readability should be the keynote of the text's style, not the pretentious, the flowery, or the technical effect. Short sentences, with words of few syllables, uncomplicated by prefixes and suffixes, go far to insure readability. Through the use of the right word, the simple word, and the short word may be captured the original flavor and color of the region or the atmosphere and feeling of the site. This is especially true when examples of the local vernacular, if appropriate, or excerpts from original sources, are employed in the text. Academic phrases should be avoided, or

SIGN AND WAYSIDE EXHIBIT
Park Signs and Markers
Interpretive Signs and Markers

Guidelines for Texts of Signs and Markers (con.)

carefully explained in laymen's terms. Many successful markers have legitimately used the journalistic style, with eye-catching words and human interest stories, to secure reader appeal and understanding. In many cases, it is how the text is written, not its length, that determines whether it will be completely read and fully understood.

4. Brevity. Brevity is a primary rule for the length of the text. This may be modified with discretion to meet the interpretive need of different site and feature situations. It is the short text with distinctive style that is usually read and appreciated by the majority of readers. This does not mean that a text should be "crammed" into short space by "telegraphic" omission of articles or the use of incomplete sentences. Fewer sentences, but complete thoughts, briefly expressed, should form the backbone of a good text.

Basic Principles of Text Writing.* Salient principles to be followed in the composition of texts include the following points:

1. Careful thought should be given to the place that each text will occupy in presenting a part of the interpretation of the park -- it may often supply the first and only understanding of the park that the visitor may receive.

2. Preparation of a text presupposes a thorough knowledge of the human or natural history story to be presented by the interpretive facility.

3. Text writing requires two basic stages: thinking and composition -- with about 90 percent of the effort devoted to thinking through the subject and 10 percent involved in presenting it through composition.

4. In thinking through the subject of a text, visualize what the visitor wants to know about the key meaning of the feature being interpreted.

5. Since the park interpreter cannot be on hand at every site to be interpreted, his text on the sign or marker should leave a personal message addressed directly to the individual

*Based with permission largely on Freeman Tilden's chapter: "The Written Word," in his volume, Interpreting Our Heritage.

SIGN AND WAYSIDE EXHIBIT
Park Signs and Markers
Interpretive Signs and Markers

Guidelines for Texts of Signs and Markers (con.)

visitor -- a message written in second-person, conversational style instead of in a formal textbook manner of expression. Be conversational, but not "chummy" in expression.

6. An exacting requirement in the composition of texts is that ordinarily they should be brief, yet also be of sufficient length to make the subject interpreted clear to the visitor. The message should be adequate, the explanations full, and tricks to achieve brevity, such as the omission of words necessary to exact comprehension, should be avoided. In many cases, 50 words or fewer should suffice for the length of a good text.

7. Express one or two leading thoughts in the text -- certainly not too many.

8. Messages should normally be of two types:

- a. Usually -- interesting explanations; brief "hows," "whys," "whats" of the natural or historical scene being viewed.
- b. Occasionally -- to convey a feeling, a mood, or inspiration to the reader.

9. The use of quotations, of the fine thoughts previously expressed in a striking and eloquent manner, may be considered for the enrichment of the meaning of a text. However, as Freeman Tilden has observed "it is really uncommon to find one that exactly fits the needs we are discussing" at a particular site to be interpreted.

10. The introduction of humor in texts may serve to personalize and humanize the message of the text but must be done with the greatest degree of "discretion, finesse, and fitness." Freeman Tilden has aptly said, write "generally with 'lightness' but never with 'levity'," and he has summed up the problem in this statement: "When you are able to write with a light touch, without indulging in humor, then you shall be permitted to write humor with a light touch."

11. Texts should be revised and brought up-to-date to reflect advances in knowledge and information.

SIGN AND WAYSIDE EXHIBIT
Park Signs and Markers
Interpretive Signs and Markers

Guidelines for Texts of Signs and Markers (con.)

Guidelines to the Composition of Texts. A checklist of the key points to observe in the composition of texts is as follows:

1. Captions, if used, should have "headline" qualities in style and meaning.
2. Do not repeat the caption in the first line of the text.
3. Get action and interest expressed in the opening sentences of the text.
4. Be dynamic in getting to the heart of the story to be told and answer the question: "What happened here?"
5. Avoid the use of the passive voice; replace the verb "to be" with the action of participial form of the appropriate verb. Use words conveying a sense of movement.
6. Make a few words tell the full story. Freeman Tilden cites the classic couplet inscribed on the monument at Thermopylae: "Go tell the Spartans, thou that passest by, that here, obedient to their laws, we lie!"
7. Avoid the use of technical or unfamiliar words as far as possible, since they make the text difficult for the visitor to understand and his interest in the site may quickly wane.

When unfamiliar names of Spanish or Indian origin, for example, are used, a supplemental pronunciation guide would be helpful to visitors.
8. Use expressive and descriptive words known to nearly all intelligence levels.
9. Employ words accurately and in their most commonly used sense or meaning to the layman.
10. Shun the use of the awkward split infinitive in text writing.

~~Suggested Alphabets (con.)~~

SIGN DESIGN

~~parke preparing new Sign and Wayside Exhibit Plans or revising those now in use.~~

Lettering and Spacing

As a matter of information on spacing and legibility, the following is quoted from Percy J. Smith's book Lettering:

"Spacing (on which legibility largely depends).

"In spacing Letters, the aim should be to win evenness of tone, clearly a matter not of fixed measurement but of judgment and feeling. If packed too close, unevenness of tone will assert itself owing to the unavoidably wide space between some combinations. Light letters usually show to advantage with generous spacing, so that there is a consistent aspect of lightness and airiness over the whole. Heavy letters should usually be packed somewhat closer for the converse (though aesthetically similar) reason -- i.e., that there should be a general aspect of solidarity and weight over the whole.

"Words should be so spaced as to be easily readable, not so widely as to become separate units, nor so close as to run one into the other. All spacing is manifestly a relative matter. It should be remembered that we read not word by word as young children, but by seeing and comprehending several words at a time. Excessively wide spacing hinders this and tends to make reading jumpy instead of comfortably continuous. Conversely, excessively close packing of words also introduces a feeling of uncertainty. Uneven spacing is the worst evil. It is destructive of smooth reading and of dignity and quietness of effect. In a group of lines, even spacing of words is more important than rigid evenness of the right-hand ends of lines. These may be left irregular without the dire results which the timid appear to expect: or words may be divided at syllables more freely than is today commonly done in English; or letters may be compressed by monographical treatment, interlinked, made smaller, or evened up by elongation of strokes, though these devices should be practiced with reserve.

Lettering and Spacing (con.)

"In so far as letters and words are wide-spaced Lines should be wide-spaced also. This assists readability and also unity of effect. But letters, words and lines should not be so separated as to become disconnected. Here again all is relative. The longer the ascenders and the descenders, a characteristic feature which often consorts with delicate letters (especially italics), the more widely the lines may be spaced. If the letters are heavy and the words are closely packed, a correspondingly close packing of the lines is not imperative. This is because the lines, being as it were like bands of darkish decoration, may be in themselves pleasing and regular units. The close massing of lines, words and letters combined with weight of letter is illustrated in the customary treatment of gothic or 'black' letters. Such lettering suffers in legibility, but is rich and strong as decoration.

"Of spacing in general, it may be said that on its judicious management legibility largely depends. A simple straightforwardness is commonly seen in good examples, though it by no means follows that the apparently inevitable result was easily found. The larger in scale and less in quantity the matter, the more is it likely to require careful and even formal arrangement. Relation to position and formality or informality of the message are also important points to be considered."

Sign Colors

1. General. The color scheme for park signs other than those for which colors are prescribed below shall be determined by the superintendent and designer and specified in the Sign and Wayside Exhibit Plan. In selecting a color scheme careful attention should be given to the matter of legibility which is dependent on good color contrast between letters and background.

The following table is a consensus of several authorities on the comparative legibility and visibility of certain color combinations, disregarding reflectorization.

The highest or best legibility is listed first.

Sign Colors (con.)

1. BLACK letters on a YELLOW background
2. GREEN " on a WHITE "
3. RED " on a WHITE "
4. BLUE " on a WHITE "
5. BLACK " on a WHITE "
6. RED " on a YELLOW "
7. WHITE " on a BLUE "
8. WHITE " on a RED "
9. WHITE " on a GREEN "
10. WHITE " on a BLACK "

Signs for which colors are prescribed are as follows:

2. Traffic Control Signs. These colors are to be as specified in the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control referred to in Part 2, chapter 6 of this Handbook.

3. Official National Park Service Emblem. Colors for this emblem are to be as specified in Part 1, chapter 3 of this Handbook.

4. Prescribed Standard Signs. Part 2, chapter 4 of this Handbook illustrates several prescribed Protection, Regulation, and Operation signs and specifies colors for them as green letters on a white background or red letters on a white background. If necessary to order these signs with color specification please match as closely as possible the green color used for the trees and buffalo on the official National Park Service emblem and the red used as background on the standard STOP traffic control sign.

5. Routed Wooden Signs. For parks having predominant scenic or natural features the routed wooden sign continues to be favored, particularly where wood is available and fits into the surroundings.

A color scheme for such signs that uses a natural weathered gray background with white or light bright colored letters will be found to blend well with almost any background and will require repainting only of the routed letters from time to time.

It is suggested that a stock of redwood or cypress be kept available and naturally weathered so that new signs will not have a raw appearance. For pressure treated posts or other raw members a coat or two of gray oil stain will produce a more

Sign Colors (con.)

uniform appearance of the entire sign and further stain coats will not be required as the entire sign will weather naturally in time.

Removable Panel Signs

In Part 2, chapter 2, "Entrance Signs" reference is made to possible uses of removable panels to show time and other information. Many other uses of reversible, removable, or changeable panels will suggest themselves to designers, for example, to indicate "Reserved" and "Available" on a reversible panel at campsites, "Lifeguard on Duty" and "No Swimming" on a reversible panel at beaches, etc.

*Use of Metalphoto in Signs

This process reproduces on presensitized anodized aluminum plates anything that can be photographed. It produces a locked-in photograph on metal in black on natural aluminum or one of several colors which is virtually impervious to weathering and not affected adversely as to legibility or quality by moisture, light, abrasion, age, heat, cleaning and paint remover solvents, and general exposure. With these apparent advantages of permanency it should be considered for use where metal signs are appropriate, for example, as labels for nature trails, wayside exhibits, building signs, etc. Metalphoto offers its most economical use where more than one sign or label is needed of the same design since only one lettering layout is needed to produce any number of signs.

In considering Metalphoto for use as a complete sign or a portion of a sign it should be remembered that, common to all metal signs, there may be undesirable reflections according to the source of light. The brightness and amount of reflection from the light portions of Metalphoto signs may be reduced by use of a screen in the photographic process. Please consult your photographer or Federal Prison Industries.

Federal Prison Industries has opened a photographic laboratory and is now in position to fill orders for finished products of this process. Please refer to the Procurement and Contracting Handbook, Part 1, chapter 6, page 16 for further instructions.*

SYMBOLS

Signing research has shown that symbols have the following advantages:

- a) They are more explicit than words. More can be communicated in a shorter time.
- b) They require less space than most phrases which they replace. Sign size can therefore be reduced.
- c) They are more universally understood.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE RECREATION SYMBOLS

GENERAL

| | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------|--|--|--|--|--|----------------------------------|
| Firearms* | RS-001 | | | | | | RS-039 Picnic Shelter |
| Smoking* | RS-002 | | | | | | RS-040 Trailer Sites* |
| Automobiles* | RS-003 | | | | | | RS-041 Trailer Sanitary Station |
| Trucks* | RS-004 | | | | | | RS-042 Campfires* |
| Tunnel | RS-005 | | | | | | RS-043 Trail Shelter |
| Lookout Tower | RS-006 | | | | | | RS-044 Picnic Area* |
| Lighthouse | RS-007 | | | | | | RS-045 Kennel |
| Falling Rocks | RS-008 | | | | | | WINTER RECREATION |
| Dam | RS-009 | | | | | | RS-077 Winter Recreation Area |
| Fish Hatchery | RS-010 | | | | | | RS-046 Ski Touring |
| Deer Viewing Area | RS-011 | | | | | | RS-047 Downhill Skiing* |
| Bear Viewing Area | RS-012 | | | | | | RS-048 Ski Jumping |
| Drinking water* | RS-013 | | | | | | RS-049 Sledding* |
| Information | RS-014 | | | | | | RS-050 Ice Skating* |
| Ranger Station | RS-015 | | | | | | RS-051 Ski Bobbing* |
| Pedestrian Crossing* | RS-016 | | | | | | RS-052 Snowmobiling* |
| Pets on Leash* | RS-017 | | | | | | WATER RECREATION |
| Environmental Study Area | RS-076 | | | | | | RS-053 Marina |
| ACCOMMODATIONS OR SERVICE | | | | | | | RS-054 Launching Ramp* |
| Lodging | RS-018 | | | | | | RS-055 Motor Boating* |
| Food Service | RS-019 | | | | | | RS-056 Sailboating* |
| Grocery Store | RS-020 | | | | | | RS-057 Row Boating* |
| Men's Restroom | RS-021 | | | | | | RS-058 Water Skiing* |
| Restrooms | RS-022 | | | | | | RS-059 Surfing* |
| Women's Restroom | RS-023 | | | | | | RS-060 Scuba Diving* |
| First Aid | RS-024 | | | | | | RS-061 Swimming* |
| Telephone | RS-025 | | | | | | RS-062 Diving* |
| Post Office | RS-026 | | | | | | RS-063 Fishing* |
| Mechanic | RS-027 | | | | | | LAND RECREATION |
| Handicapped | RS-028 | | | | | | RS-064 Horse Trail* |
| Airport | RS-029 | | | | | | RS-065 Trail Bike Trail* |
| Lockers | RS-030 | | | | | | RS-066 Bicycle Trail* |
| Bus Stop | RS-031 | | | | | | RS-067 Recreation Vehicle Trail* |
| Gas Station | RS-032 | | | | | | RS-068 Hiking Trail* |
| Vehicle Ferry | RS-033 | | | | | | RS-069 Playground |
| Parking* | RS-034 | | | | | | RS-070 Amphitheater |
| Showers | RS-035 | | | | | | RS-071 Tramway |
| Viewing Area | RS-036 | | | | | | RS-072 Hunting* |
| Sleeping Shelter | RS-037 | | | | | | RS-073 Stable |
| Campground* | RS-038 | | | | | | RS-074 Interpretive Trail |
| | | | | | | | RS-075 Interpretive Auto Road |
| | | | | | | | Prohibiting Slash |

INTERPRETIVE SIGNS AND MARKERS

Objectives of Sign and Marker Interpretation

The objectives of interpretive signs and markers are as follows:

1. To provide interpretation of sites, objects, features, and structures in the field where they may be observed in place and are of greatest visitor interest.
2. To provide interpretation supplementary or complementary to that usually furnished at points of intensive visitor concentration, such as visitor centers or park museums, thus dispersing visitor use.
3. To provide opportunities for increased visitor enjoyment and appreciation en route. These facilities afford interpretation for all visitors, including those who do not use other phases of the park interpretive program.
4. To provide interpretation on a continuing basis, i.e., throughout the visitor day.
5. To afford the visitor the unregimented opportunity to achieve a feeling of participation and of personal discovery through the unfolding of a unified park story and of other facets of interest in the park. By this means the visitor may also gain a sense of identity with the scene.
6. To stimulate the user to seek other interpretation in addition to that provided by roadside interpretive facilities.
7. To supply effective interpretation without the use of uniformed personnel.
8. To assist the visitor in re-visualizing or recalling a scene, object, structure, or feature which no longer exists and where the character of the original site has been materially changed or altered over the years.

The new result (and collective objective) of several of the numbered paragraphs above is to reduce the cost of interpretation.

General Definition

An interpretive sign or marker is a device or facility situated at a significant point in the park to provide interpretation of the scene or site. Such facility both supplements and complements the park story presented in the visitor center or by other interpretive devices.

Definition of Classes

Interpretive signs and markers are all basically signs. They may be divided into two broad classes: (1) Interpretive Markers, and (2) Signs for General Interpretation.

Interpretive Markers

Purpose. Interpretive markers identify or explain specific events, sites, structures, features, objects, or natural processes. In effect, this type of interpretive device "marks" a particular site or feature, instead of presenting a general story or abstraction.

Format. Interpretive markers consist of simple texts, no matter how brief, with or without painted or incised maps or diagrams. A park identification symbol on the marker, like the rifle and powder horn of the Blue Ridge Parkway, is permissible.

Specific Varieties. Besides the basic type--the interpretive marker itself--this class of device includes the following varieties:

1. Name Marker. A marker identifying by name a history or natural history site, object, structure, or feature; e.g., "Hurricane Creek" marker, Natchez Trace Parkway; "Anhinga Trail" marker, Everglades National Park; "Confederate Trenches" marker, Fredericksburg National Military Park.

2. Orientation Marker. A marker which graphically assists the user to fix and to understand his location with respect to important features of the park and to grasp the geographical relationships of these features to each other.

3. Numbered Post or Guide Marker. A simple post or marker, containing an incised or painted number, located at a position or station on a self-guiding trail or tour, and related to a similarly numbered paragraph describing this station and its

Interpretive Markers (con.)

features in an accompanying booklet, e.g., the numbered markers on the "Lassen Peak Highway", Lassen Volcanic National Park; and the numbered posts on the "Mountain Farm" Trail, Blue Ridge Parkway; on the "Fort Harrison" Trail, Richmond National Battlefield Park; and on the "Lower Ruins" Trail, Tonto National Monument.

4. Plaques, Tablets, and Markers. These devices, usually commemorating an event or person, may be classified as either an interpretive marker or as a sign for general interpretation, depending upon the character and purpose of the commemorative effort and upon the treatment given the subject in the text of the device. National Historic Site Markers, placed in accordance with the provisions of the Historic Sites Act of August 21, 1935, (49 Stat. 666), should be classified as explained in the preceding sentence.

The Historic Sites Act provides that the Department of the Interior may enter into cooperative agreements with responsible private or public sponsors to erect a Historic Site Marker on non-Federally owned Historic Sites, provided the site in question is considered to be worthy of such commemorative recognition by the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments.

If a site, in private ownership, is considered to be of national significance by the Advisory Board and has been so designated, permission to erect a Historic Sites Marker may be granted to use the standard drawings, patterns, an Eagle emblem and the Seal of the Department of the Interior.

Advantages. Interpretive markers offer the following special advantages:

1. They provide simplified interpretation.
2. They are quickly read and understood.
3. They offer opportunities for on-site interpretation.

Signs for General Interpretation

Purpose. Signs for general interpretation convey a fundamental thought, concept, or philosophy with regard to the broad aspects of the natural or human history of the park, as distinct

Signs for General Interpretation (con.)

from description or explanation of specific events, sites, structures, features, or objects.

Format. Signs for general interpretation are normally longer in text and larger in physical size than the interpretive marker. The text of the sign for general interpretation usually employs the expository or descriptive form of writing to interpret an idea or principle, or to present the historical or natural significance of a whole park or of a major part of the park.

Advantages. Signs for general interpretation offer the following special advantages:

1. They provide the opportunity for interpretation of abstract ideas or principles not readily associated with specific sites, features, or objects.
2. They may present either a selected theme or the overall significance of the park.

Standards for Selecting Sites for Signs and Markers

The selection of appropriate sites for interpretive signs and markers should normally be governed by the following standards:

1. Select the best examples of natural or historic sites, objects, features, or structures which tell a part of the park story or contribute to an important supplementary theme or story.
2. The place for the facility should be easily found and readily useable by the visitor. The subject itself should be readily recognizable, and the site should afford the broadest opportunity to interpret the feature with clarity. Exceptions may be encountered, such as in the interpretation of abstract ideas covered under Signs for General Interpretation.
3. If several vantage points are available, select the one having the greatest intrinsic or potential visitor appeal from the standpoint of immediate surroundings.

Standards for Selecting Sites for Signs and Markers (con.)

4. Select the sites which meet obvious needs for interpretation, but be reasonable in the distribution of these facilities; avoid overcrowding.

5. Avoid dangers to visitors and installations.

a. Natural hazards:

- (1) Rockfalls
- (2) Flooding
- (3) Wind damage
- (4) Overhanging trees
- (5) Unprotected cliffs and dangerous walks
slippery when wet or icy
- (6) Steep grades

b. Traffic and other man-caused hazards:

- (1) Blind curves
- (2) Lack of adequate parking space
- (3) Lack of warning or approach signs

6. Normally, select points which will be visited by reasonably large numbers of people; but do not exclude interpretation of outstanding points which may be lightly visited.

7. Select points where features will not be damaged by excessive use; so that a natural process would be arrested or an irreplaceable archeological or historical structure destroyed.

8. Select the sites which provide for the maximum comfort of the visitor in his personal enjoyment and study of the feature. So far as possible, avoid sites with distracting influences.

Standards for Placement

Placement of interpretive signs and markers should be governed by the following standards:

1. Placement depends upon the number of features to be interpreted at this site. The size, materials, color, etc., of the devices selected also may influence placement on the site.

Standards for Placement (con.)

2. The facility should be so placed that there is little or no question in the mind of the visitor as to the identity of what is being interpreted. Generally, placement should be such that the text may be read, and the natural or historic subject observed, without requiring the visitor to change position.

3. The facility should be sufficiently visible to serve its purpose without intruding unduly upon the scene.

4. Place the facility in a position so that it may be reached and used with greatest physical ease. Ordinarily, the position selected should not require the visitor to stoop, stretch, exert himself unduly in climbing, etc.