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Thoughts on Writing in Museums

By Philip Yenawine

In the winter of 2000, two members of the staff of the Detroit Institute of Art's education department interviewed twelve randomly selected visitors encountered reading labels in DIA galleries—ones holding modern and contemporary art. The visitors were asked a number of questions about their backgrounds and habits, and Matt Sikora of the DIA provided this quick overview of what they learned about label readers:

For the most part, our label reading visitors are all of the things that museums have traditionally liked to think they are: well-educated, interested in art, familiar with art and art history, and fairly frequent museum goers.

Just not to the degree that we expect. They are typically well-educated in areas other than art and they have minimal art or art history training. Their level of involvement is more frequently “attitudinal” (art fits into interests, they like to explore objects), than “behavioral” (they do not collect, are not art professionals). Their primary reason for visiting museums is often situational and social, not educational. Not to say learning is not a goal, but it's just not their focused intention.

Remember that this small sampling of visitors was found in the act of reading a label, and we might therefore think of them as among our most capable and engaged visitors; in fact, a third self identified as artists. The DIA staff found that an equal percentage (1/3) consistently reads the arts and entertainment sections of periodicals, though only one sixth reads art magazines. Equally useful to think about, half of them reads Time and local newspapers, almost as many read the New York Times, and one quarter reads Newsweek. It would appear therefore that their art reading outside of the museum was more likely to be in the popular than in the cultural press. For the most part, their reading—a major activity for only half of them (a number equal to those for whom sports topped the list of leisure activities)—was of journals where art is a small part of what there is to read.

What can we learn from this? I immediately begin to wonder what keeps them reading these news journals, and it occurs to me that they most likely seek current information and opinion. They are likely to read selectively, and they are likely to know the slant

given to a subject by authors whom they have come to know. But what is it about the writing itself that catches and holds their interest? To what are they therefore accustomed? And then, the scary question, how does museum writing compare?

I decide I better have a fresh look at both. After running to the magazine stand for examples of how the competition writes, several things stand out: the art pages (and, too, some of the business and even science articles) seem to be written for people with more inside information and experience than the general news stories. This irritates me actually. I am not so dumb that I cannot understand scientific discoveries, but if they are written in jargon, contain references with which I am unfamiliar, or are full of statements so dense that I get lost, then I lose interest. I may even feel excluded and dense myself. The art pages are easier for me, personally, but if you don't know what we art world types know, are you left feeling as I do when trying to grasp some aspect of embryonic cells?

When I turn my attention to the non-specialist areas of journalism, I discover something else. Whether dealing with an international event or some piece of economic news, the stuff they deem important is written to draw me in without the requirement of much prior knowledge. Headlines and sub headlines attract my attention and give me a clue as to the content. I can decide if the subject interests me with minimal commitment. If I decide to read on, catchy openings engage my curiosity. These usually employ human interest elements as ploys, and these carry me to the point where I find the basic ideas and information. Quotes give life and concrete insights into the subject. Virtually never do such articles use vocabulary that is not in common parlance--words like parlance, for example.

Somewhat excited by these insights, I pick up a museum catalogue. And I cringe. I read a typical label: we certainly make different choices from professional journalists. Maybe our too-often arid renderings of styles, mediums, influences, and biography, usually written in the language of our trade, address the desire for information that no doubt motivates reading. But do they really answer the questions people are implicitly asking? Do we write for the specialist or for the general reader? (Think of me as I struggle with science.) Can we assume that people understand our vocabulary and references? Do we orient and captivate our readers as we inform them, as Time consistently tries to do? I don't think so. At least not often enough.

The most useful body of information to help us answer questions about the capacities and interests of our audiences comes from Abigail Housen. Housen is a cognitive developmental scientist who has spent the last twenty-five years recording and studying the thinking of people—all sorts of people—as they look at art. Most of her subjects, it turns out, are beginning viewers, including most interviewed in museum galleries and some who work in museums, especially our all important volunteers. Their stream of consciousness comments about art contain no evidence that they either think or talk like art historians, the people who write most museum labels and catalogues.

A good deal is written by and about Housen's research that can help us decide both content and style that will both appeal to and be useful to our audiences. I have written an article, [Writing for Adult Museum Visitors](#), available on the website www.vue.org. But, for the present, if we only think about journalism as a guide, we might find ourselves writing differently. And perhaps having more fun because of it.

Here are some of my thoughts based on thinking about journalism's model for museum text writing:

- Be brief, of course. It is only common sense to account for the time people have to spend in the museum and the condition of their feet. But studies undertaken by The Museum of Modern Art, NY, in the 1980's indicated that visitors' preferences regarding length closely related to engagement: if they feel drawn in by what's written, they are willing to stay with it longer.
- Provide a headline.
- Begin in some captivating way, considering that human interest elements are very winning and common in all forms of good journalism, not just popular media.
- Keep language lively and comprehensible, avoiding jargon.
- Continuously draw the reader's attention to the work of art, directing them to look at it. Looking at captions in illustrated magazines can be helpful as models. Captions often help illuminate images in such a way as to reveal most of the content of stories.
- Use quotes but do so judiciously, always choosing an insight that illuminates the piece under examination.
- Save background information for catalogues and books. Select information to illuminate visible and apparent elements in the work.
- Sign your writing, ensuring that the reader knows that the comments come from some source that they could get to know as they do a columnist. Avoid the anonymous voice of authority.