

Interpretive Methods

National Association for Interpretation

The National Association for Interpretation is a nonprofit professional organization with the mission of inspiring leadership and excellence to advance heritage interpretation as a profession. In 2008, the organization had over 5200 members in over 25 countries. It provides a variety of programs, products and services to the profession including regional, national, and international conferences; publications; certification of individuals; training; and supports facilitation of collaborative efforts such as the Definitions Project and development of Standards and Practices.

Interpretation is a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource.

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Project Background

The collective membership of NAI represents a multitude of agencies and organizations, including government agencies at all levels, private not-for-profit organizations, commercial enterprises, and academic institutions. With this diversity, it is understandably difficult to provide standards of practice for the entire profession; however, it is a frequently requested item from the NAI office as interpretive organizations strive to improve their operations and provide justification for the important work of their staff and volunteers.

In 2007, the NAI Board of Directors mapped a strategic plan for the profession that included a strategic vision that the interpretive profession will have a foundation of universally accepted standards. To that end, a focus group of individuals representing the diversity within NAI's membership was assembled and contributed to this documentation of preferred practices for interpretive methods.

This document is not intended to serve as the ultimate authority on establishing preferred practices; however, it captures the essence of a variety of benchmarks that can be used by any interpretive organization to determine areas in which they excel or might improve in their provision of interpretive products, programs, and services. Certainly, it would be appropriate for specific organizations to develop standards for the interpretive methods they employ (for example, living history practitioners could develop standards specifically for living history programs). Since NAI serves the greater profession rather than any one agency or type of organization, this more generalized approach can be considered an umbrella of standards and practices suitable for the interpretive profession overall.

It is anticipated that this document will undergo periodic revision to remain responsive to constantly changing economic, ecological and social environments.

Comments or suggestions for revision may be forwarded to: NAI Best Practices, PO Box 2246, Fort Collins CO 80522 or naiprograms@aol.com.

Terminology

For the purposes of this document, **interpretive methods** are considered any personal or nonpersonal media employed by an **interpretive organization** to connect an audience emotionally and intellectually to a resource. Examples might be any type of program, product, or service: presentations, special events, exhibits, signs, publications, websites, sales items, or electronic broadcasts. An interpretive organization is considered an agency or organization that manages a site or company that employs methods of interpretation in their daily business. Examples might be national parks, county parks, community nature centers, zoos, aquariums, botanical gardens, theme parks, tour companies, cruise lines, or museums.

Due to the variety of organizations that might be using this document, it is assumed that the user will substitute appropriate terminology for the organization in question. For example, a museum or zoo's **resource** might be its collection, while a park's resource might be the significant natural features of the landscape. A **site** might be a building, a boat, or a land base of several hundred or thousand acres.

Terminology used is consistent with the Definitions Project, www.definitionsproject.com.

How to Use this Document

The Standards and Practices are divided into eleven benchmarks that appear to be important components in the development and delivery of interpretive products, programs, and services. Each of these benchmarks is then divided into three levels of achievement. Good practices suggest the minimum level of achievement for basic operations. Better practices generally include "good" practices but advance the achievement to preferred operations. Best practices generally include both "good" and "better" practices and add a level of achievement that may or may not be achievable given an organization's financial, physical or managerial realities. In other words, the "best" practices suggested here are what an organization in a perfect world might hope to achieve if it has all the operational resources it requires.

An organization can use the suggested practices in any category to evaluate its own performance. Choosing to use these standards to provide benchmarks for success may enable an organization to become better positioned to attract support and serve its audiences by connecting them emotionally and intellectually to the resource, leading to fulfillment of the organization's stated mission.

It is hoped that this document will stimulate critical thinking and planning strategies that may improve the overall performance of an individual organization and the profession as a whole. It can be used as a stimulus for planning strategic initiatives once an honest self-assessment takes place and is discussed amongst staff, management, governance and stakeholders.

AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT

Good Practice

Address the needs and interests of specific target audiences.

Better Practice

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Best Practice

Address the needs and interests of specific target audiences.

Involve target audiences in the planning and design process.

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Help people engage with the resource both mentally and physically through a variety of techniques including but not limited to:

- Questioning
- Role-playing
- Sensory experience
- Challenges
- Games
- Participation
- Props

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Good Practice

Opinions of local stakeholders are represented in selected interpretive methods through focus groups or collaborative planning.

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Interpretive methods are based on a constructivist model that utilizes what people already know and what is relevant to them to provide a beginning point for concept, theme, emotional, spiritual, and inspirational connections.

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A civic cooperative group including economic, environmental and social stakeholders meet regularly to discuss common challenges and collaborative opportunities.

CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Good Practice

Staff training includes a segment on cultural competencies.

Staff and volunteers understand that personal and professional values may be different from those of site users, site neighbors, under-served groups and/or nontraditional groups.

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Best Practice

Staff training includes a segment on cultural competencies.

Staff and volunteers understand that personal and professional values may be different from those of site users, site neighbors, under-served groups and/or nontraditional groups.

Interpretive methods balance and facilitate a dialogue between multiple points of view.

An annual inventory is taken of staff and volunteer language/cultural capabilities to be used as a resource when needed.

Supervisors receive feedback and monitoring of performance and identify features of their own professional style that might impede or enhance their own practice of cultural competence.

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All signage, brochures and websites include language and culturally sensitive options for major market segments from other cultures.

Staff and volunteers develop specialized knowledge and understanding about the history, traditions, values, family systems, communication styles, and cultural expressions of the client groups they serve, including previously underserved groups.

ETHICS

Good Practice

Staff and volunteers affirm and abide by a code of ethics regarding delivery of interpretation.

Better Practice

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Best Practice

Staff and volunteers affirm and abide by a code of ethics regarding delivery of interpretation.

Interpretation delivers multiple perspectives in a culturally compassionate and respectful way.

Interpretation delivers multiple perspectives in a culturally compassionate way.

Information presented is accurate and sources are credited.

EVALUATION

Good Practice

The organization clearly defines interpretive standards and regularly evaluates staff programs.

Better Practice

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Standardized evaluation of interpretive program or product effectiveness is completed through a variety of sources including input from visitors, peers or outside sources, and self-assessment.

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Results of evaluations are incorporated into new or revised programs, products, and services.

Results of evaluations are reported to management and used as a tool to support interpretation efforts in the annual budget.

Results of evaluations are shared with and used in all of the organization's planning and management.

INTERPRETIVE PRINCIPLES

Good Practice

Interpretive methods are organized, enjoyable and appropriate for the audience.

Better Practice

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Interpretive methods support the mission of the organization and are delivered with passion and enthusiasm.

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Interpretive methods are highly relevant to the audience and actively engage the audience with the resource.

Interpretive methods facilitate a connection between the interests of the visitor and the meanings of the resource, thereby providing spiritual uplift and encouraging resource stewardship.

MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Good Practice

The interpretive program reflects positively on the organization; staff acts professionally and nonpersonal media is well-maintained.

Measurable objectives exist for every interpretive product and service that align with the mission of the organization and measure declarative knowledge and behavioral change.

Management ensures that staff understand the significant resources and messages that the interpretive program should be addressing.

Better Practice

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Measurable objectives exist for every interpretive product and service that align with the mission of the organization and measure declarative knowledge and behavioral change.

Management ensures that staff understand the significant resources and messages that the interpretive program should be addressing.

Management is proud of their interpretive program and strives to make it the best it can be.

Management and interpretive staff work together on updating objectives annually.

Interpretive methods align with interpretive plan logic model objectives.

Management prepares orientation materials for the staff that identifies significant resources to be interpreted.

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Management prepares orientation materials for the staff that identifies significant resources to be interpreted.

Interpretation has an integral role in management of the site and resources.

Management routinely looks for opportunity to involve interpretive staff in explaining resource issues and working with the community for solutions.

Successful achievement of management objectives are shared through professional networks with colleagues.

Staff and management meet annually to discuss messages and visitor reactions so that sensitivity is developed between staff, management and visitor regarding the impact of messages.

OPERATIONAL COMMITMENT

Good Practice

Interpretive methods are supported by the annual operations budget.

Better Practice

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Interpretive programming is aligned with specific operational objectives in annual plan of work or business plan.

Maintenance issues are resolved immediately.

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Interpretive staff and other operational staff assist each other as needed and are cross-trained to each other's jobs as appropriate.

SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS PRACTICES

Good Practice

Artifacts, documents, and other resources on display or used in programs are protected from damage by visitors, animals, light, and other sources of deterioration.

Better Practice

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Interpretive media choices do not compromise the integrity of the resource.

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Fabrication of interpretive media incorporates environmentally friendly products and methods to the greatest extent possible.

TERMINOLOGY

Good Practice

Terminology is understood amongst staff.

Better Practice

Terminology is understood amongst staff and used consistently from year to year.

Best Practice

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Employees are proficient in use of professional terminology.

Terminology is consistent with the Definitions Project.

THEME

Good Practice

The site has an identifiable central idea or theme that ties the content of various interpretive methods together in a coherent way.

Each program or product has a theme related to the site's central theme.

Better Practice

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Each program or product has a theme related to the site's central theme.

Themes are stated in a single sentence.

Thematic interpretive methods are part of a larger interpretive plan aligned with organizational objectives.

Best Practice

The site has an identifiable central idea or theme that ties the content of various interpretive methods together in a coherent way.

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Themes are stated in a single sentence.

Thematic interpretive methods are part of a larger interpretive plan aligned with organizational objectives.

A site's central theme expresses what it is about the topic that supports the site significance, what is relevant to the audience and what management hopes to convey to the audience.

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Good Practice

All staff are trained to deliver complete experiences in accordance with the interpretive plan.

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Individual interpretive methods are part of a larger planned visitor experience.

The quality of the visitor experience is evaluated on a regular basis.

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Staff meet regularly to determine and implement ways to improve the quality of visitor experiences based upon evaluation data.

Visitor experience issues are integrated into every aspect of park management (facility maintenance, construction projects, public relations, staffing, programming, etc.).