

# A Crash Course in Interpretation

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## The Roots of Interpretation

Interpretation as a profession is of recent origin, although its roots were planted thousands of years ago. Storytellers, bards, keepers of wisdom—these people had many names. But the common thread linking them was that prior to the written word, these were the people most responsible for passing down knowledge from generation to generation. In recent times, the disciplines of psychology, sociology, marketing and advertising have all contributed to the theories and techniques on which interpretation is based.

Today, interpreters work in a variety of settings—parks, museums, zoos, adventure tour guiding companies, and cruise ships—to name but a few. Regardless of where they work, interpreters share a common goal—connecting visitors with the resource. While often most commonly thought of when discussing interpretation, the United States National Park Service (NPS) is only one organization that employs and helps advance the profession of interpretation. The National Association for Interpretation (NAI) was formed in 1988 (but actually had its beginnings in the 1950s), and is the leading organization dedicated to advancing the profession of interpretation. Both the NAI and the NPS have recently begun standardizing certain aspects in the field of interpretation, and have begun certifying interpreters who demonstrate mastery of various realms in interpretation. While the NPS certification program is only available to NPS employees, anyone in the field of interpretation can work to become certified by the NAI.

### What is Interpretation?

The modern profession of interpretation began with the work of Enos Mills and Freeman Tilden. Enos Mills (1870-1932) was a well-known naturalist in Rocky Mountain National Park, a keen observer of the natural world, and an out-spoken advocate for nature and nature guiding. He not only guided people in the park, he also helped train other nature guides, and wrote what is perhaps the first book about nature guiding, “Adventures of a Nature Guide and Essays in Interpretation.”

Freeman Tilden was a writer and playwright who was asked by the NPS to study interpretation and write about it. Out of his travels and research came the landmark book, “Interpreting Our Heritage” in 1957. This is still a widely read book for the profession, as it lays out six principles of interpretation and does an excellent job of describing them in detail (see Appendix I for a list of Tilden’s Principles).

Over the years, numerous other scholars and practitioners have added to this early foundation. Some of the more prominent ones include William Lewis and Dr. Sam Ham. While interpretation has been defined in a number of ways, as you can see, the definitions all share some common ideas:

**Freeman Tilden:** “An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.”

**Dr. Sam Ham:** “Interpretation is an approach to communication...it involves translating the technical language of a natural science or related field into terms and ideas that people who aren’t scientists can readily understand.”

**NAI:** “Interpretation is a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource.”

**NPS:** “Interpretation facilitates a connection between the interests of the visitor and the meanings of the resource.” Expanding on this, the NPS said that interpretation is:

1) successful as a catalyst in creating an opportunity for the audience to form their own intellectual and emotional connections with the meanings/significance inherent in the resource; and

2) appropriate for the audience, and provides clear focus for their connection with the resources by demonstrating the cohesive development of a relevant idea or ideas, rather than relying primarily on a recital of a chronological narrative or series of facts.

Key commonalities running through the above definitions are that interpretation: 1) is a process, 2) serves to connect the visitor to something (the resource) on both an emotional and intellectual level, and 3) is more than mere information (i.e., involves more than just reciting facts, dates, lists, etc.).

Interpreters also deal with a special type of audience, and knowing a little bit about your audience will make you a better interpreter. Generally, people coming to interpretive programs are doing so in their leisure time, in other words for fun. In the academic sense, they are intrinsically motivated (internally), rather than extrinsically motivated (externally). Contrast this audience with students in a class who are motivated by grades, employees attending a training seminar who are motivated by higher pay or further certification, and so on. This is a critical in helping you understand how to connect with your audience, and in understanding the four qualities of interpretation to be discussed below.

This type of audience that attends interpretive program is also referred to as a non-captive audience. They are there because they want to be, and therefore are free to leave whenever they want. Again, the differences between this type of audience and a captive audience are important to understand—non-captive audiences expect an informal and non-academic style of interaction. If a non-captive audience is bored, they will either leave, or simply tune you out. So just realizing this difference in audience motivations should help you understand how interpretation is different than other types of communication.

Finally, good interpreters are also able to portray multiple points of view, rather than simply skewing the story to be one-sided. You should be able to acknowledge and discuss different sides to the stories you share, and doing so shows respect for the diversity of opinions and beliefs that are inherent in your audiences.

### Differences between Interpretation & Environmental Education

As you have may already guessed, interpretation is not the same as environmental education. As noted, interpretation deals with non-captive audiences (voluntary, leisure-based, internally motivated), whereas environmental educators often deals with students who are a captive audience (externally motivated—usually by grades). These students are usually participating as part of a larger school-wide program. Environmental education is also (usually) curriculum-based with corresponding educational goals and specific learning objectives that are tied into a state’s learning standards. Well-known and widely used environmental education curricula include Project WILD, Project WET, and Project Learning Tree.

Interpretation also deals with an audience or group of visitors for a short time, usually only an hour or two—they come to your program and then they leave, and you might never see them again (depending on where you work). On the other hand, environmental educators often see groups of students a number of times over the course of a day, a week, or even a school year, and thus can plan sequentially-based learning activities that can be built upon over a longer time period.

Finally, environmental education either deals with the natural environment specifically, or it attempts to incorporate environmental issues and themes into other subjects (history, math, etc.). Interpretation can take place anywhere (not just in parks), and can deal with any type of resource or topic.

However, similarities exist as well. Good teachers and educators, regardless of where or what they are teaching, use interpretive techniques in the classroom in order to help their students learn. Teachers who engage students, who make a lesson come alive by relating the topic to the students, who do more than recite facts—these teachers are also interpreting. And often with a little extra planning or modifying, interpretive programs can be made into environmental education activities that will fit state-based curriculum objectives. However, do not confuse these two types of activities or professions—while all teachers should use interpretive techniques, interpretation is quite different than environmental education.

### Qualities of Interpretation

Dr. Sam Ham has described four general qualities that will help make your interpretive programs successful. While interpreters should strive to use these in all their programs, sometimes certain programs or activities lend themselves to focus more on just a few, rather than all four.

#### Interpretation is Enjoyable

As described above, the audiences who participate in interpretive activities are voluntary, and can and do leave if they are bored or not interested in the program. There are many things you can do in order to make the information you are talking about more interesting and enjoyable for the audience. A simple technique is just to smile more! Other techniques include using active verbs, using exaggeration to make a point (size, time scale, etc.), engaging people’s senses, or focusing on a specific individual (who could be real or fictitious) in order to tell a story or make a point.

### Interpretation is Relevant

One of the crucial aspects of interpretation is being relevant—being able to relate what you’re saying to the visitor in a way they can actually understand it. Dr. Ham noted that relevance has two main characteristics: 1) being **meaningful**—the info you present must have a context, so the audience can understand it in relation to something they already know (this fosters an intellectual connection); and 2) being **personal**—you must connect the info to something the audience cares about, not just knows about (this fosters an emotional connection).

There are numerous interpretive techniques that can be used to make the information you are giving more meaningful, and many are things you already know about and probably use everyday. For instance, you can use examples, comparisons, analogies, metaphors, and similes. Being more personal can be done as easily as using the word “you” frequently—this technique is known as self-referencing. This means you are getting your audience to think about themselves as you are giving them new information.

Oftentimes, interpreters learn a lot about the resource where they are working, and can relate many stories or recite varied facts and statistics about the topic. However, the connecting threads that bind those facts together, and that bind the visitor to the resource might be lacking. Being relevant and having a theme (see below) will help strengthen this aspect of interpretation. Yes, you should know facts and stories too & be willing to share them. But also think thematically to connect these facts to your message in a relevant way. For example, in relation to Grand Teton National Park—what does this park and its resources mean to these visitors on a variety of levels? Where do GTNP and its features fit into their world (besides just a vacation spot)? Can you show them something that they will remember once they return to their homes, which could be anywhere in the world?

Taking this idea of relevance even further, how can you discuss our shrinking glaciers? Can you think of a way to make glaciers relevant to them? At the very least, how are you going to get them to understand what glaciers are & how they move? Specifically, what do glaciers tell us about this area? More broadly, what do glaciers tell us about the earth and its history? On a deeper level, who cares that there are glaciers here? What’s so special about them? Are our actions as humans affecting glaciers? You should think both broadly and deeply, and look for the connections that exist everywhere around us—this will take some thought and preparation—possibly more than you’re used to! If it seems difficult, think about the resource messages that you mention (“Help keep wildlife wild”; “Leave the flowers for others to enjoy too”, etc.). While bombarding visitors with constant reminders of things not to do or gloom & doom warnings is generally not the best course of action, the ideas behind them may help you. For instance, can you answer this question: What does recycling have to do with glaciers? If you can’t think of the answer, a little research and “out-of-the-box” thinking may help!

### Interpretation is Thematic

All good interpretive programs have a theme—and it is easy to incorporate a theme into any program or activity. A theme is not something to be afraid of, rather it is something to help you and your audience remember the importance of what you are saying. All interpretation should have a point or a message to it—after all, no one wants to be pointless. Having a good theme allows you to make a point and serves to answer the “so what?” in relation to your program. The definition of a theme is pretty straightforward: it is short simple complete sentence with one idea, and it reveals the overall purpose of your program or activity.

The theme is different than the topic of your program—the topic is merely the subject, whereas the theme expresses the main idea of the program. For example, the topic of your program might be “geology”, and the theme might be “The story of Grand Teton National Park is written on the landscape,” or “The dramatic landscape of the Tetons was created by dynamic geologic forces that are still at work today.” Many different themes can be written for one topic, and they can be either broad or specific. When I was being taught how to write papers back in school, teachers often referred to this idea of a theme as a “thesis statement.” Every paper or story you read should have a point that the author is making, so too does an interpretive program or activity. And when you finish a program or activity, if someone were to ask your audience what you talked about, the audience should be able to answer that question in a single sentence, and that would be your theme (hopefully!).

### Interpretation is Organized

In the words of Dr. Ham (1992), “...interpretation, at its best, does not require a lot of effort from the audience.” Here again, think about your audience and why they’re attending your activity—they are here to have fun and learn something new—but they are there voluntarily. By organizing your program using a simple outline—introduction, body, and conclusion—your audience will find it easy to follow and understand what you’re saying, as well as to remember what you do say. Sounds like what I (and probably you as well) learned in grade school when I was learning to write papers—and it is! Being organized will help you and your audience, and the organization serves as the glue that holds your program or activity together.

A short introduction should be used in every activity, and serves a couple of important purposes. Introductions should capture your audience’s attention, tell your audience the theme, and then quickly tell them what they’re going to see and hear about in your program. Some types of formal programs such as hikes, trail rides, river trips, etc., should also include a separate section prior to the introduction in which you go over the necessary safety information, as well as logistical concerns (how long the activity lasts, where you’ll be going, what to bring, etc.). The conclusion allows you to quickly run through some of the highlights from the program and most importantly, reinforces the theme. And the body is simply all the rest of the program, which is used to develop the theme and present the information you’ve prepared in an interpretive way.

## Conclusion

Hopefully by now you've realized that interpretation is more than just a bunch of facts sprinkled with the occasional interesting story. Interpretation does include information, facts, and stories—but it is and should be more. You will find interpreters working for the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service (and other federal agencies), in State and local parks, in museums, at zoos and aquariums, on cruise ships large and small, and for tour companies of every type. But no matter where they work or who they work for, interpreters fulfill a valuable role in connecting visitors to resources (natural, cultural, historical, etc.).

There are many benefits to you and your audience in providing quality interpretation. The essence of interpretation is to inspire, provoke and spark a flame in your audience. Seek to whet their appetite rather than stuff them full with every fact you know. You want to make them realize why the resource is important to you and to them. Interpretation results in a better informed public, so even if they don't agree with you on an issue, they understand better what the issue involves and are able to see more sides than just their own. Public land agencies use interpretation to build an empowered constituency of supporters; likewise, businesses (tour companies, wildlife parks, etc.) share a similar goal in trying to build an empowered customer base. Well-informed and educated customers will return to your business again and again, and will recommend your business to friends and acquaintances as one that not only provides a wonderful recreational experience, but one that enriches their experiences by providing quality interpretation.

This manual is just the starting point for interpreters, and really only scratches the surface of what interpretation is all about. Use it to spark (or rekindle) your own interest in interpretation, and then see what you can do to improve your interpretive programs and activities. It is likely that you are already using some of the interpretive techniques discussed here in your programs—see if you can work some of the others in as well. There are numerous books and materials available to help you, and a few are listed at the end of this document.

Appendix I—Principles of Interpretation by Freeman Tilden

- I. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
- II. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are not entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
- III. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
- IV. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
- V. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
- VI. Interpretation addressed to children should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.

## Useful References for Interpreters

Beck, Larry and Ted Cable. (1997) *Interpretation for 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Fifteen Guiding Principles for Interpreting Nature and Culture*. Champaign, IL: Sagamore Publishing.

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