

All interpretation comes down to using physical things as symbols for universal ideas. We see this done every day in commercials, stories, political speeches, etc. The plots of books and movies and plays (the good ones, at least) are really about something other than what they appear. The stories that resonate with us over the years and generations usually can be seen to symbolize a universal concept that elevates the story above the simple recitation of events. This symbolism is often the element that causes some books and movies to endure and become classics while others are forgotten.

Sometimes, the writer is not aware of the symbolism he/she is including in a story. Most of the time, however, the symbols and universal concepts are consciously placed in the work by the writer. This is not to say that the images are always so overt as to leave no doubt as to the writer's intentions. Several people may read the same story and all come away with different ideas as to what it really meant. Nevertheless, writers usually have a specific idea they intend to convey when they construct their stories.

Interpretive products are the same. A good interpretive product should be designed with a specific symbolic link in mind between the resource and a universal concept. At the same time, the audience members may find several symbolic universal concepts that are different from what the interpreter intended. This does not mean that the interpreter failed or that the audience was "wrong." But the possibility of the audience finding a variety of symbolic links does not let the interpreter off the hook in having a specific one in mind when designing the program. This essay, then, outlines a systematic framework for constructing and analyzing interpretive products.

When interpreting the meaning of physical objects, there are three elements to consider: the significance, relevance, and the universal concepts that the object symbolizes. A theme may be constructed to express those ideas in order to organize a program.

Meanings

The meanings of a resource answer the general question, "So what?" The answer really has two parts, because interpretation is working to satisfy two different levels of questions: "Why is this thing/object important?" and, "Why should I care about it?" These are the two types of meanings we should convey; one that appeals to the intellect and one that appeals to the emotions. Let's take them one at a time.

1) Significance: "Why is this resource important?"

All the resources we interpret have been preserved by someone for some reason. Since we deal with national parks, the places and objects have been deemed to have national significance. They are important to the nation. All parks have significance statements—descriptions of "why, within a national, regional, and system wide context, the park's resources and values are important enough to warrant national park designation."¹

The significance of the resource is an argument that describes why the resource is nationally important.

For example, the Battle of Gettysburg is important. The details of the battle in terms of strategy, causes, motives, etc., may be open to debate, but if these elements, collectively, were not important to the nation, Gettysburg wouldn't have been preserved. For all national parks, there are attributes that informed people would agree are points of national significance. Some aspect of this significance should be conveyed in all interpretive programs, but we need to go further than simply stating the significance as fact. We need to be able to defend our claim of significance and be prepared to explain what the significance *means*.

Characteristics of the National Significance of the Resource Statement:

- This answers the question, "**Why is this resource important to us?**" It should point out why the resource is important to us as Americans—or, rather, to the nation as a whole. If it does not, it does not convey a point of national significance.²

¹ DO2 GMP Sourcebook, p.71. The GMP Sourcebook goes on to say, "Statements of the park's significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and system wide context; are directly linked to the purpose of the park; are substantiated by data or consensus; reflect the most current scientific or scholarly inquiry and cultural perceptions, which may have changed since the park's establishment."

² I know that, at this point, someone is going to say, "What about international visitors? Aren't we excluding them if we focus on national significance?" The answer is, "No, we aren't." Think of it like this: Let's say I have an Uncle Gus. In Uncle Gus's house, he has hundreds of interesting souvenirs, knick-knacks, photos, etc. Now, I am not Uncle Gus, so I cannot appreciate these objects in quite the same way as Uncle Gus would because I don't share his experiences or the same background with these objects as Uncle Gus

- The national significance involves facts and appeals to the intellect. This is the way most visitors will form their intellectual connections to the resource.
- It may contain superlatives and reveal what makes the resource special among others of its type.
- It should be expressed as complete sentences, rather than as a single word. If it is a single word, it is a topic or a universal concept, not an explanation of the meaning of the national significance.
- It can also present information about a resource in such a manner that may cause visitors to *think about the resource* in a new way.

2) Relevance: “Why should I care about this resource?”

The danger in showing audience members what is unique or unusual about a resource is that it is easy for them to come to think of the resource as something separate from themselves, something that has nothing to do with them personally. Our goal should be not only to show them how special the resource is, but also to show how relevant it is to them. This is where the effects of the program become more subjective. The interpreter can tell a visitor why a resource is significant, but they can only *suggest* why the visitor might find it relevant.

Characteristics of Personal Relevance:

- *Personal Relevance answers, “Why is this resource important to me?”* Regardless of culture or nationality, visitors are human and personal relevance appeals to what we humans have in common rather than what separates us.³
- Personal relevance involves feelings and appeals to the emotions. This is the way most visitors will form their emotional connections to the resource.
- Personal relevance is often expressed by an aphorism, a Poor Richard’s saying, a quote from Shakespeare or the Bible, a moral from an Aesop’s fable, etc. In other words, clichés. This is not to diminish the importance of the resource, but rather to show how the resource relates to audience members in their daily lives. These types of expressions have endured throughout the ages because they can be understood by nearly everyone. They are universal. (In addition, there may only be a few of them. Some people believe there are only a handful of plots and all literature, movies, stories, etc., are only variations on these few basic ideas. That may be the same with relevance, because, while individual people change, human nature has been fairly constant over the generations.⁴)

does. But I can still appreciate the objects for their own interesting characteristics. And, on top of all this, I can learn a great deal about Uncle Gus, himself, by looking at the things he’s considered important enough in his life to save.

This is the same thing with international visitors touring America’s national parks. Granted, they may not feel exactly the same about the Grand Canyon as we do, because the Grand Canyon is *ours*. But, regardless, the Grand Canyon is still spectacular and interesting. Also, an international visitor can learn something about Americans simply by the fact that *we have chosen to preserve the Grand Canyon*. So, by emphasizing national significance, we are not closing the door on our international visitors. In a sense, the experience we are offering them is just as rich as that for Americans, but in a different way. When international visitors tour our national parks, they learn not only something about America, but they also learn something about *Americans* as well.

³ Here we can provide opportunities for international visitors to make connections to the resource because we’re addressing the individual rather than the group.

⁴ Freeman Tilden’s Principle 1: “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.”

The audience may ask, “What’s that got to do with me?” What does Saratoga, or Yosemite, or Harry Truman’s house, have to do with the visitor’s everyday life? Using Independence Hall to symbolize the Constitution and the rights of Americans reveals significance, but we need to do more because most people don’t spend a great deal of time thinking about those things in their everyday life.

Tilden’s Principle #5: “Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.”

Interpreting Our Heritage, page 16: “These people of other centuries played, loved, quarreled, worshipped, knew beauty—all the essentials were about the same.... The visitor says, ‘These folks were not so different, after all.’”

Interpreting Our Heritage, page 17: “‘The world exists for the education of each man. There is no age, or state of society, or mode of action in history, to which there is not something corresponding in his own life.’”

We cannot know our audience completely. They are different ages, different races, different nationalities, etc. But they are all humans, and there are generally universal concepts that they will all share. Those universal ideas are the things we must articulate. Multiple points of view are important, but interpretation is not intended to divide us; our universal ideas should show up what we have in common. Multiple points of view do not have to be conflicting points of view. For example, “security” is a universal concept, but it will be experienced differently by different people. A child might worry about something happening to his parents, while the father might worry about losing his job. Each is worried about “security” but they are relating to the universal concept differently based on their individual experiences.

- Personal relevance is expressed as complete sentences, rather than as a single word. If it is a single word, it is a topic or a universal concept, not an explanation of relevance.
- It can also present information in a manner that may cause visitors to *think about themselves* more deeply or in a new way.

The Universal Concept

To review, the framework has allowed us to:

1. Take an object (a resource) and
2. Explain why the object is important (national significance), and then
3. Address the importance of the object by such means as to suggest a way in which the object relates directly to the visitors' lives (personal relevance).

Now, we want to boil down the relevance (the aphorism, moral, or whatever) into a single word (or a list of single words): the universal concept.

The universal concept is an expression of what a program is really about. It suggests a way in which the resource is symbolic of something that can be understood by everyone, regardless of their age, nationality, gender, race, etc. Universal concepts are aspects of the human condition that are experienced by everyone, such as choice, risk, security, love, dedication, etc. Everyone will understand these universal concepts differently, but they will all understand them somehow. This allows visitors to appreciate the resource from *multiple points of view*.

Characteristics of the Universal Concept:

- It should be expressed as a single word.
- It should be an intangible concept.
- It should be an expression of something the resource can symbolize.

Discovering the symbolic relationship between the tangible resource and the universal concept requires two types of in-depth knowledge: knowledge of the resource (especially the meaning of the significance) and knowledge of human nature (a more specific and fundamentally inclusive type of "knowledge of an audience"). While an interpreter can never know the personal details of their audience members, they can be pretty sure that everyone in the audience is human. Because humans share characteristics of human nature, the chances of success in helping a visitor connect with a resource is more likely if the interpreter consciously knows how to facilitate the connection. This framework can help the interpreter do that.

Theme

An interpretive theme is an organizational tool. It is a descriptive statement that provides a structure for an interpretive program (that may then be cohesively developed and expanded upon) by expressing the significance of a resource, the meaning of that significance and its relevance. A theme expresses the relationship between the resource and the universal concept.

Just as the writer plans and organizes a story about a central point/thought/concept, so, too, the interpreter plans and organizes a program or product. Not all visitors will be able to repeat the theme word-for-word and they will come to their own conclusions in terms of resource meanings, but they should understand the central concept. The point of a program should be planned and deliberately shaped through use of a theme.

Characteristics of an interpretive theme:

- Interpretive themes express the relationship between universal human experiences that transcend time and culture, and the actual tangible resource.
- It should be expressed as a *single complete sentence*. If it's only a single word, it's a topic, not a theme. If it's an entire paragraph, it's an explanation or an argument, not a theme.
- It should make a worthwhile observation about the resource, something that relates to its national significance. If not, it's trivia.
- It should be supported by evidence. If not, it's a value judgment.

What follows is a diagram that I use when I prepare interpretive products of any kind, not just tours. When I teach interpretation, I use this in the class, both for the participants preparation and as a tool to evaluate other interpretive examples. See if you can answer the questions for your own tour.

Resource

“What’s being interpreted?”

Identify the resource (physical object) being interpreted.

Reason the resource is being preserved

“Why is this resource being preserved by the National Park Service?”

This is not something determined by the interpreter, but by the park’s documents. The DO2 GMP Sourcebook (p71) reads, “Statements of the park’s significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and system wide context; are directly linked to the purpose of the park; are substantiated by data or consensus; reflect the most current scientific or scholarly inquiry and cultural perceptions, which may have changed since the park’s establishment.”

Basic idea of program

“What is the basic idea of this program and how does it apply to the resource?”

The relevant idea is what the interpreter hopes the visitor will take away from the program. The visitor may not be able to repeat the interpreter’s theme verbatim, but, ideally, the relevant idea should be apparent as intentional by the interpreter. The relevant idea should be pertinent to the resource.

Meanings

“So what?”

Why should the reasons for a resource being preserved matter?

What is the meaning of this particular resource?

National Significance

“Why is this resource important to *us* as Americans?”

- It should point out why the resource is important to us as Americans—or to the nation as a whole. If not, it does not convey a point of national significance.
- The meaning of the significance involves facts and appeals to the intellect. This is the way most visitors will form their intellectual connections to the resource.
- It may contain superlatives and reveal what makes the resource special among others of its type.
- It should be an explanation expressed in complete sentences, rather than as a single word. If it is a single word, it is a topic or a universal concept, not an explanation of the meaning of the significance.

Personal Relevance

“Why might this resource be important to *me* as an individual?”

- Regardless of culture or nationality, visitors are human and relevance appeals to what humans have in common rather than what separates us.
- Relevance involves feelings and appeals to the emotions. This is the way most visitors will form their emotional connections to the resource.
- Relevance is often expressed by an aphorism, a Poor Richard’s saying, a quote from Shakespeare or the Bible, a moral from an Aesop’s fable, etc. In other words, clichés. This is not to diminish the importance of the resource, but rather to show how the resource relates to audience members in their daily lives. These types of expressions have endured throughout the ages because they can be understood by nearly everyone. They are universal.
- Relevance is expressed in complete sentences, rather than as a single word. If it is a single word, it is a topic or a universal concept, not an explanation of relevance.

Universal Concept

“What is this program really all about?”

- It should be expressed as a single word.
- It should be an intangible concept.
- It should be an expression of something the resource can symbolize.

Theme of the program based on everything above

“What is the overall idea that the interpreter planned to present in this program?”

- Interpretive themes express the relationship between universal human experiences that transcend time and culture, and the actual tangible resource.
- It should be expressed as a single complete sentence. If not, it’s a topic or explanation, not a theme.
- It should make a worthwhile observation about the resource. If not, it’s trivia.
- It should be supported by evidence. If not, it’s a value judgment.

Examples

1) Home page text blurb: This is the first paragraph on every national park's home page. Some are better than others. They can be only 400 characters long. I wrote this one for HSTR at www.nps.gov/hstr:

"Harry Truman's story is one of hope & frustration, choice & chance. As President, he took the US from its traditional isolationism into the age of international involvement. Visitors experience the surroundings Harry Truman knew from his formative years as a 22-year-old youth of modest ambition through his retirement and death at age 88 as a former president of the United States."

Before I wrote it, I answered the questions in the diagram like this. (And remember, just because this is what I intended doesn't mean that that's how it came out. Hopefully, however, the general sense of what I wanted comes through.)

Tangible resource: "The surroundings Harry Truman knew." By this, I mean the resources of the national historic site, both the Independence house and the farm house.

Basic idea of the product: If there was only one thing I would want a reader to get out of this, it would be, "How amazing it is that a regular guy like Harry Truman can grow up to be the president of the United States." It would be nice if they got more, but I'd settle for this.

National Significance: "As President, he took the US from its traditional isolationism into the age of international involvement." We have significance pretty easy here. After all, it's a president's house⁵. But I tried to find what I thought was the primary point of significance of Truman's administration and I decided it was in foreign affairs expressed by the Truman Doctrine. Some people claim Theodore Roosevelt (or William McKinley) was the first president to take us into the age of international involvement, but we retreated from that stance at the end of every conflict until the Cold War began. Never since have we returned to isolationism.

Personal Relevance: "From his formative years as a 22-year-old youth of modest ambition through his retirement and death at age 88 as a former president of the United States." Truman wrote to Bess once, "We never know what's in store for us." This is something everyone can relate to, unlike being president, which almost no one ever will be able to relate to.

Universal Concept: "Hope & frustration, choice & chance." It's not really about Truman or internationalism or houses. It's about the unpredictability of life, or uncertainty. It could be about other things, too, to other people, but that's what I was shooting for.

Theme: "The Truman home in Independence and the Truman farm home provide us with the opportunity to examine the hopes & frustrations Harry Truman experienced through the choices he made and the unexpected events that happened to him from his formative years as a 22-year-old youth of modest ambition when he had no idea what the future held for him, through his retirement and death at age 88 as, of all things, a former president of the United States."

2) Interpretive Media Product. I wrote the following piece for our web page (the older version of the web page, not the current one; a shorter version appears on our web site now). People don't like to scroll on the internet, so it's a good idea to never have more text than can be seen at one time. That's why there's only ½ page of text on each page. At the end of this piece, I go through the diagram questions again so you can see how I put it together.

⁵ This means, of course, that everything we discuss must come back to the fact that Truman was the president.

Fences and Fame

Jeff Wade 2004



Most people never stop to think about what happens to a man who has been President of the United States.

--Harry S Truman

Harry and Bess Trumans' home stands on a corner in an old neighborhood in Independence, Missouri. Tall trees lean over the house, and bushes, flowers, and shrubs fill the big open yard. The house is a rambling Queen Anne Victorian started by Bess Truman's grandfather two years after the Civil War ended and finished in the day when President Chester A. Arthur was deciding if the United States would continue building a wooden Navy. Mrs. Truman's family lived here for 115 years; this is an ancestral home. Harry and Bess spent the better part of their own lives here.

The house has changed little since it was completed in

1885, and, for the Trumans, it represented a place of familiarity and stability on a quiet street lined with the homes of lifelong friends.

Harry & Bess Truman at their home in Independence.

Photo by Eliot Elisofon for *Life*



I have wondered why so many people come from so far away and take so much trouble to look at the house where I live.

--Harry S Truman

After he became president in 1945, however, Harry Truman's house was surrounded by more than just shady maples and oaks. It also became surrounded by hundreds of celebrity seekers. Souvenir hunters pulled leaves off the trees, ripped flowers from the ground, and even pried boards off the house. One woman, discovered digging a hole on the Trumans' property, claimed to have a collection of famous dirt and was determined to have a sample from the President's yard. Some people were even more bold; once, hearing women's voices, Mrs. Truman found two sightseers wandering through her house. So, since 1949, a black iron fence, erected by the Secret Service, has also surrounded the Trumans' home.

A large crowd gathers at the Truman home.
Kansas City Star



There are a great many of them who don't know me as well as those home folks do, that are somewhat awed by the fact that I once lived in the White House.

--Harry S Truman

Although not a particularly imposing fence, it loomed large on the Trumans' personal landscape, an unwelcome intrusion. "Never did like it and never will like it," was the president's opinion.

Unfortunately, the Trumans had no other option; souvenir hunters threatened to tear their home apart. "It's a poor reflection on the American public,"

President Truman wrote, "when the president of the USA has to fence 'em out to keep them from carrying off the house bit by bit." Still, despite the bother and

aggravation, Harry Truman tried to be considerate to the sightseers. He recognized the iconoclastic nature of the American presidency. He wrote, "I realize that they come to see 'that man from Missouri.' And I try, when I am at home, not to disappoint them. I wave to them, and when I have time I exchange greetings with them and occasionally pose for a picture." He understood people. "I can see how I'd feel if I were meeting a President and I still lived here in Independence as a private citizen," Truman wrote. He remembered the long-ago day when, as a young man, he had run hopefully down a Kansas City street just to catch a glimpse of visiting President Theodore Roosevelt.

Harry Truman poses for a photograph.
Photo by Bradley Smith



I was happy to get back home again and resume a quiet, normal life. Washington was quite an exciting tour of duty, and I enjoyed it. But still, I was glad to get back home again.

--Bess Truman

Approaching the end of the president's term, the Trumans looked forward to escaping the publicity that went with living in the White House. Mrs.

Truman always referred to January 20, 1953—Eisenhower's inauguration—as “Independence Day.” They believed that, once they were out of office, they could return home and pick up their quiet former life. There was no Secret Service protection for retired presidents in 1953, so the Trumans would be free to do as they pleased. They even discussed tearing down the black iron fence. Mr. Truman wrote, “We believe that anybody can be the President and that when he is through, he can go back to being just anybody again.” Nevertheless, he went on, “It has not been that simple for me.” Harry Truman soon discovered that, even after his return to private citizenship, he would never again be able to live like “just anybody.” When reading the first newspaper of his retirement, he discovered, “The front page news was mostly about our homecoming. Mayor Wetherford of Independence was quoted as telling the townsmen, ‘He will always be Mr. President to us.’”

A large crowd gathers in front of the Truman home.
Photo by Bert Landfried



If someone down in Washington had told me that this sort of thing was just as common after you left the White House as it was before, I might have suspected that he was trying to tempt me to run for another term.

--Harry S Truman

Imagine relaxing in your back yard on a soft summer Missouri night, ice clinking in glasses of sweet tea, fireflies flitting on the lilac breeze, while hushed murmurs of next-door voices float across the fresh-cut grass. Imagine, also, a few yards away, a hundred people, some with binoculars, lined up and down outside your fence, staring, calling for autographs, flashing their cameras, bellowing, “Give ‘em hell, Harry!” Even before their return home from the White House, the Trumans decided that the fence would have to stay. Thick spirea and mock orange bushes growing around the house blocked the view from the sidewalk and allowed the Trumans at least a modicum of privacy from sightseers’ prying eyes. “How often I felt that it was too bad that our own temporary occupancy of the White House had resulted in a permanent compromise of our privacy,” Mr. Truman lamented. The fence became a constant reminder that the old days were gone forever.

*A crowd gathers at the Truman home in the evening.
ACME Newspictures, United Press International*



“I think I’ll put up a tent and charge admission!”

—Harry S Truman

Mr. Truman described the following situation when he went out for one of his morning walks:

“One day there was a car parked in front of the house with baggage piled all over it. ‘Is this where Truman lives?’ the fellow at the wheel shouted at me. I

said it was, and he called, ‘Are you Truman?’ I answered I was. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘me and the old lady are on a motor trip, all the way from the island of Maui in Hawaii. Been all over the country, but seeing you walk out of that house, big as life, tops everything else we have seen. Would you mind if I just got a picture of you standing there?’”

A carload of sightseers views the Truman home.
Photo by Bradley Smith



The president of the United States hears a hundred voices telling him that he is the greatest man in the world. He must listen carefully indeed to hear the one voice that tells him he is not.

--Harry S Truman

But consider this: What if a president developed an appetite for this attention and even came to believe that he inherently deserved it? Mr. Truman

wrote, "When you get to be President, there are all those things, the honors, the twenty-one-gun salutes, all those things, you have to remember it isn't for you. It's for the Presidency, and you've got to keep yourself separate from that in your mind. If you can't keep the two separate, yourself and the Presidency, you're in all kinds of trouble." The Constitution makes it the president's responsibility to maintain his sense of perspective. This idea is at the very heart of democracy. The public's continuing attention, however, must make it extremely difficult for a former president to think of himself as a regular American. "Wish my 'glamour' would come off so I can be a 'regular citizen' again. Looks now as if it never will," Mr. Truman wrote in his diary. "I could not understand why, as a private citizen, I should still arouse such wide-spread interest. I kept forgetting that, having once been where I was, I could never expect to cut myself off from public attention." Truman's cousin, Ethel Noland, who lived across the street, said, "Of course, since Mr. Truman came back from Washington, the tourists are omnipresent. They're there when I first look out in the morning. They walk down Truman Road, and they survey the house from all sides. And finally, you find them standing out in front. And one *always* goes across the street and takes a picture of those at the front gate. It seems to me that's almost an unwritten law, that they shall do this."

A family gets a photograph at the front gate of the Truman home.
Kansas City Star



*One becomes inured to flashbulbs
and reading one's own name in the
paper, so that after a while the
limelight seems more important
than it is.*

--Margaret Truman

How we see ourselves, though, is often determined by how other people treat us; how long can a person be treated as if they are more important than everyone

else before they come to believe it? “The president of the United States,” wrote Truman, “is two people—he’s the president and he’s a human being. The president has to spend half his time keeping the human being in line.” In a letter to his cousin, Truman wrote, “Woodrow Wilson said some people come here [to Washington] and grow up with responsibility. Some come and just swell up.” He tried not to let the crowds outside the fence go to his head. “If a fellow is in any position it doesn’t make any difference whether it’s a County Judge or a Mayor or a Governor of a state, or a President of the United States, if he gets to the point where he thinks he’s just what the people think he is, he’s a gone-goslin.” While giving a talk in Kansas City, he said, “To keep from going high hat and stuffed shirt, I have to keep in mind Luke 6:26 [‘Woe unto you when all men speak well of you’].” He wrote, “It is fortunate that I’ve never taken an attitude that the kudos and kowtows are made to me as an individual. I know always that the greatest office in the history of the world was getting them and Harry S. Truman as an individual was not. I hope I’m still the country man from Missouri.”

A crowd follows Mr. Truman on his morning walk.
Photo by Vernon Galloway



I always took the view that the Presidency is a gift of the people who elect the President for a limited period of time. When that period is over, he has not changed as a person from what he was before, and I thought it should be easy to go back to private life.

--Harry S Truman

“A man in his right mind would never want to be president if he knew what it entails,” wrote Harry Truman. Resisting the lure of never-ending fame must be exhausting. “It takes a tough citizen to

climb down the ladder after being at the top,” Harry wrote Bess. President Truman’s determination to retain his humility and make the distinction between himself and his office, however, serves as a reminder that democracy can and does work.

Mr. Truman gives a young girl his autograph.
Kansas City Star



If a man can accept a situation in a place of power with the thought that it's only temporary, he comes out all right. But when he thinks that he is the cause of the power, that can be his ruination.

--Harry S Truman

Nevertheless, the Trumans' black fence—a symbolic as well as a literal barrier

between the president and the people—still stands today. Perhaps, for any aspiring presidents, it can serve as a reminder of the sacrifices their fellow Americans will expect and the self-discipline their fellow Americans will demand. Perhaps, for the rest of us—those expectant, demanding, fellow Americans—Harry Truman's simple iron fence can serve as a reminder of the qualities of character we might consider when deciding who those leaders will be.

National Park Service sign hangs on Harry Truman's fence.
Photo by Regina Klein, National Park Service photograph

Tangible resource: The Secret Service security fence around the Truman home.

National Significance: One of the fundamental tenets of American democracy is the idea that individuals are elevated to the presidency for only limited periods of time, after which they return to private life as regular citizens. Fame, however, isolates one, and a basic question concerning the efficiency of democracy asks, “How removed from normal life can our leaders become before they no longer think of themselves as one of us?” Americans, however, never treat former presidents as regular citizens, even after the presidents’ retirements. **The Trumans’ fence is a symbol⁶** of the inevitable barrier that is erected between the president and the people and the never-ending challenge to our leaders when attempting to make the distinction between the office and the individual.

Personal Relevance: “Woe unto you when all men speak well of you (Luke 6:26).” Much of the way in which people see themselves is based on how other people treat them. If we are treated as regular people, we tend to think of ourselves as regular people. If we are treated like we’re bad or dumb, we can start to believe that we are, indeed, bad or dumb. And, if we’re treated as if we’re better than everyone else, it is easy to come to expect to be treated like that. The question for the visitors to ask themselves is, “What is the real me, and could I think of myself in a different way if I wanted to?” **The fence is a symbol** of how much of our own self-perception is based on how we are treated by other people.

Universal Concept: Self-perception.

It’s not really about a fence, it’s about *self-perception*. The fence symbolizes the concept of self-perception. (It could also been seen to symbolize the universal concepts of pride, humility, privacy, power, fame, peer pressure, etc.)

Theme: Although they attempted to return to their old life after their return from the White House, due to their fame, which continued even throughout their retirement, the Trumans were forced to erect a fence around their private home in order to protect their privacy and property from sightseers and souvenir hunters.

Things to keep in mind:

1. Objects should be seen as symbols of universal concepts.
2. Ask yourself the questions in the diagram about your program and try to clearly articulate the answers. Basically, these answers will be a defense of the significance and relevance of your program.
3. There is more to public speaking than simply providing interpretation, but techniques can be evaluated separately from interpretive content.

⁶ I would suggest literally using the words “the (insert your resource here) is a symbol of (insert your universal concept here).”