



## Interpretive Themes

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Most interpreters are inclined to the work. They combine their knowledge, enthusiasm, and people skills to tell stories. Some interpreters are fundamentally gifted and intuitively transform what seems to be mundane information into meaningful and engaging presentations. As valuable as natural ability is, interpretive products and services are more powerful with the disciplined application of the tools of the profession.

Freeman Tilden described interpretation as art.<sup>1</sup> Artists use tools to express meaning. A jazz pianist studies musical theory in order to improvise. Sculptors master chisel and mallet to release forms only they can see.

Perhaps the most powerful interpretive tool is the interpretive theme.

### **A tool that cohesively develops an idea or ideas.**

The best way to reveal meaning is through the expression of an idea. To be relevant and provoking an interpretive product must cohesively develop an idea or ideas over the course of its delivery. A meaningful idea captures, organizes, and sustains the attention of the audience. It provides a platform for the audience to consider, react to, build upon, appropriate, and transform. A meaningful idea provides opportunities for audiences to make their own connections to the meanings of the resource. Without the cohesive development of a relevant idea or ideas, interpretive services are merely collections of related information, chronological narrative, or haphazard arrays of tangible/intangible links—they do not accomplish the desired outcomes of interpretation.

Effective interpretive themes help cohesively develop meaningful ideas. Successfully delivered interpretive themes are explored by and emerge from the whole of an interpretive product—by the force and effect of its entirety. When used well, interpretive themes provide a focus that encourages audiences to consider resource meanings and understand and appreciate the resource in ways they otherwise might have missed.

An interpretive theme is a tool that helps interpreters affect the audience. Its purpose is to provide focus for the audiences' personal connections. An interpretive theme articulates a reason or reasons for caring about and caring for the resource. Using a theme, an interpreter hopes to provoke the audience to know the resource is meaningful and feel that its preservation matters.

Interpreters are not the only professionals who use information to say something meaningful. Scientists do more than collect data and record inventory. They arrange

information in a way that explains how nature works. Similarly, historians research the past and sort and order evidence to understand the relationships of people and events.

### **A single sentence that expresses meaning.**

An interpretive theme statement summarizes, articulates, and distills the interpretive theme the interpreter wants to develop with the whole interpretive product. Expressed in a single sentence, an interpretive theme statement forces the interpreter to think clearly about what he or she is saying.

An interpretive theme statement is the artistic creation of the interpreter based upon the significance of the site. It is the expression of what the interpreter and organization knows to be meaningful about the resource in language audiences can connect to their own experience.

The interpretive theme statement can and usually should be stated in an interpretive product because it can help an interpreter make the central focus clear to the audience. However, the real purpose and success of the interpretive theme statement is as a tool that guides the development and presentation of the whole interpretive product.

Crafting a meaningful interpretive theme statement may be the hardest part of developing an effective interpretive product. It takes discipline. Successful interpreters frequently draft a theme statement and discover it does not convey the insight and emotion they wish to present—and choose to re-draft. Similarly, it is common to stick with a theme statement and change the program’s tangible/intangible links and opportunities for connections to resource meanings accordingly. Most often the process is a struggle that requires repeated adjustment, focussed effort, and time.

### **Links a tangible resource to its intangible meanings.**

An interpretive theme statement links a tangible resource to an intangible meaning. That’s what makes it interpretive.

A statement that ties a tangible resource to information and describes or elaborates the tangible resource is a factual or informational statement. Factual statements are used to develop services for audiences who are *only* interested in information or, perhaps, for safety or preservation messages.

### **Organizes an interpretive product or service.**

An interpretive theme statement provides an organizational compass. The theme statement guides the selection of tangible/intangible links. Those links must be developed into opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource and arranged in an order that “adds up” to the interpretive theme. The theme is the tool that cohesively develops the central relevant idea or ideas for the audience. Each opportunity for connection to meaning can also be stated in a single sentence that ties the tangible resource to an intangible meaning. Each opportunity for connection, in turn, illustrates an element of the theme.

A product or service that includes information, links, and opportunities for connection that are not related to the theme or is missing links and opportunities that support the theme lacks focus and power and will not be cohesively developed. Likely, the interpreter who delivers such a product isn't sure about the meaning or meanings he or she is attempting to reveal.

An interpretive theme statement might contain more than one idea. More complicated interpretive themes usually require more tangible/intangible links developed into opportunities for connections to meanings.

**Compelling interpretive themes link a tangible resource to a universal concept.**

One of Freeman Tilden's principles holds that all interpretation must be personally relevant to the audience.<sup>2</sup> Interpretive themes that are the most broadly relevant—and the most powerful—connect a tangible resource to a universal concept. The interpretive theme statement, and therefore the main idea or ideas of an interpretive product, should always contain a universal concept.

A universal concept is an intangible meaning that has significance to almost everyone, but may not mean exactly the same thing to any two people. Universal concepts are the ideas, values, challenges, relationships, needs, and emotions that speak fundamentally to the human condition.

Other intangible meanings that are not universal concepts—processes, systems, some ideas, challenges, relationships, and needs can and should also be linked to the tangible resource. Interpreters use these links to develop opportunities for connection and build to and support the larger and more powerful meaning(s) stated in the interpretive theme's universal concept.

**Expresses significance and meaning but is not a “take-home message.”**

The measure of interpretive success is not the audience's ability to parrot the interpreter's theme. Rather, it is the audiences' personal and meaningful connections to the resource. Interpreters are most effective when audiences understand the meanings being explored and are able to relate them to their own lives—agreeing, disagreeing, adding to, or taking from them. Interpreters use themes to cohesively develop ideas that say something important and powerful so they can provoke and facilitate personal connections—not merely transfer an idea to another person.

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<sup>1</sup> “Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is to some degree teachable.” Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957), 26-31.

<sup>2</sup> “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.” Tilden, 11-17.