

# Standards for Interpretation Provide Improved Visitor Experience

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For years, the discipline of interpretation grappled with a good description of the work it did. Freeman Tilden's book, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, identified six principles that were often cited to explain the work. Other times, interpreters used quotes from interpretive pioneers like John Muir, Enos Mills, Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson to describe the art of their profession. As eloquent and astute as those quotes and observations were, they did not go far enough to be a measure for interpretive success. As the primary link between resources and visitors, interpretation was agreed to be an important activity, but the irony was that the communication discipline in the NPS had difficulty articulating a definition of good interpretation.

The work to identify measurable elements of quality interpretation began in earnest in the early 1990's as a result of the creation of the park ranger career ladder. "Ranger Careers" as it was called, opened the door to a reexamination of interpretation. Groups of career interpreters formed to identify the competencies (the combination of knowledge, skills and abilities for a particular career field) for the park ranger job series. Over 300 field interpreters contributed their ideas to define and quantify their profession. The description of quality interpretation came in the form of a "rubric," an assessment tool used in education to describe and measure the elements of success for a particular task. These rubrics form the NPS National Standards for Interpretation.

The interpretive talk is the basic building block for other interpretive activities, so the national standard for an interpretive talk (sometimes called the "core" rubric) describes successful interpretive

content. An interpretive talk program demonstrates standards if it is:

*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*

*Is appropriate for the audience, and provides a clear focus for their connection with the resource(s) by demonstrating the cohesive development of an idea or ideas, rather than relying primarily on a recital of a chronological narrative or a series of related facts.*

The national standards measure outcome. As a result, they provide accountability for performance at a national level. There is personal accountability, too. Language from the national standards is being used in program audits, and in performance standards for interpreters, their supervisors and chiefs. Principles described in the national standards are also reflected in long-range interpretive plans, general management plans, national and regional goals and in various training venues. Because there are demonstrable results, the national standards support and help achieve the goals of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

National standards provide a high level of quality and improved visitor experience. But the power of the national standard may be strongest in providing a consistent link between the interpretive efforts of all of the individual units of the National Park System. This consistency establishes a "brand" and provides a national network that encourages professional discourse for interpreters and builds cumulative and quality experiences for visitors. The net effect has been a movement within the interpretive ranks of the Service that raises the bar for interpretation with a common language to define facilitated interpretive experiences. The standards

help parks connect their stories to the stories of other sites to promote a seamless system across the U.S. Through identification of intellectual and emotional connections and universal concepts, meanings are revealed. The process provides guidance for revealing these meanings in interpretive themes for a park or for individual interpretive media and programs.

The national standards for interpretation are useful for anyone who manages or performs an interpretive function at any time. Concessioners, park associations, contractors and designers have used the standards to improve quality and efficiency. The national standards are a useful check of the work of historians, curators, natural resource managers, designers and public affairs staff who contribute to, present or supervise programs, create exhibits, write brochures or perform other interpretive functions.

The NPS is proud to have pioneered new standards for interpretation. Many professional organizations, institutions and educators have recognized, quoted and borrowed them. Recent books such as *Interpretation for the 21st Century* by Larry Beck and Ted Cable, *Interpretive Centers* by Michael Gross and Ron Zimmerman, *Interpretive Undercurrents* by Carl Strang and *Personal Interpretation: Connecting Your Audience to Heritage Resources* by Lisa Brochu and Tim Merriam are all examples of publications where the language of the national standard "core rubric" is used with credit given to the NPS Interpretive Development Program. The National Association for Interpretation was so impressed with the concepts identified in the national standards that it used the language in its core values and definition of resource interpretation. "We believe that interpretation is a communication process that forges intellectual and emotional connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource."

State parks and universities have sent representatives to establish partnerships to apply the methods and principles outlined in the NPS Interpretive Development Program. The program continues to adapt and grow, but at the heart of the program are the national standards for interpretation. Through quality interpretation we are rediscovering the meanings of our resources and more effectively sharing them to spread our stories, stewardship and preservation.

For information about the NPS national standards for interpretation, visit the Interpretive Development Program Web site at [www.nps.gov/idp/interp](http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp). ■

## A Preservation Initiative

In June, The National Trust for Historic Preservation and Home & Garden Television (HGTV) announced the *Restore America: A Salute to Preservation* program. This series spotlights the restoration efforts underway at 12 historic sites throughout the country that are part of the Save America's Treasures program. One of these restoration sites will be featured every month from July 2003 through July 2004 on HGTV. Officials of both organizations say their focus on historic preservation stems from the need to bring new vitality and livability to cities, towns and rural areas across America.

HGTV's on-air and on-line programming will tell the stories of restoration efforts underway at two NPS sites. One is the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA, where Martin Luther King, Jr. spent much of his life. This church played a crucial role in the civil rights movement. The other is the Bodie Island Lighthouse at Cape Hatteras NS. The lighthouse was controlled by Union troops during the Civil War until Confederate troops destroyed it in 1861. It was rebuilt in 1872 and with its outbuildings, remains a classic example of the American light station. ■