



The Interpretive Equation *More than the Sum of Its Parts*

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If you take an interpretive program or product apart to find out what it's made of – what its components are – what do you think you would find? Some might argue that too much of this kind of analysis is detrimental to the creative/artistic process – or that interpretation is too subjective to be dissected or quantified. If this is true, then the only interpreters who can truly be effective are those with the innate ability to let the appropriate type and amount of creativity just flow forth. Would these “naturals” be able to articulate what makes their efforts successful? Freeman Tilden suggested that interpretation IS an art, but that, like all art, it is to some degree teachable. How do we help others learn the craft, if we can't analyze and articulate the elements of success? How can we evaluate our own effectiveness – the elements/techniques that work and the ones that don't? How can we make a case for managers to invest in what we do? The Interpretive Equation can help!

I hate math. I have always been math-challenged. So when someone showed me the Interpretive Equation for the first time, I groaned and began to feel a headache coming on. But the analogy of the Equation as a “tool” in the interpreter's “tool box” piqued my interest. Like any tool, once I learn to use it, I figured the Equation might be quite valuable.

The Equation is a metaphor. It is an analogy for understanding interpretation. Thankfully, it's really not math! Like all good tools, the Equation can be used in different ways – for self-evaluation, for training and coaching other interpreters, for explaining to managers, maintenance, and resource management folks how interpretation works. I can use the Equation to identify areas where I need additional training and knowledge, or where my employees have developmental needs. It turns out to even be quite useful for interpretive planning. I can use the Equation in the developmental stages of any kind of new product – programs, written products, exhibits or other media. Or I can apply it to existing products to see how they “measure up” (if I'm not afraid to take an honest look that may reveal the weaknesses and imbalance in my work).

But wait – there's more! The Interpretive Equation provides one way to identify the elements of successful interpretation, but its greatest strength may be that it can help us visualize the *relationship* between these elements. It may not be useful to everyone, but for me it represents a stroke of genius that provides a way to visualize, analyze, articulate, and balance the substance of each interpretive program and product. For me, the Equation adds up to something much more important than the sum of its parts.

Here it is – see what YOU think.

$$(KR + KA) \times AT = IO$$

KR—Knowledge of the Resource
KA—Knowledge of the Audience
AT—Appropriate Technique
IO—Interpretive Opportunity

KR – Knowledge of the Resource

Knowledge is the foundation for everything we do as interpreters. We are responsible for developing and maintaining a thorough and accurate knowledge base. This should be based on personal research as much as possible, rather than relying on what we hear from other interpreters. Knowledge of the resource involves taking a keen *personal* interest in continuous learning and understanding.

A fully developed knowledge of the story of our places obviously begins with the most comprehensive facts and information relevant to the resource. This includes an accurate understanding of both current and past theories and interpretations. Knowledge of the Resource is also comprised of the history of the resource as a resource (administrative and resource management history), as well as information about past and present uses and issues, current conditions, potential threats and opportunities. Also imbedded within the body of knowledge about a place are all the reasons why it has been deemed important and relevant enough to be preserved. Since interpretations of significance can change over time, we should also have knowledge of the history attitudes toward the resource, and a sense of the continuum of our site's natural and cultural history.

KR = Knowledge of Resource

- Comprehensive facts and information
- History of resource as a resource
- Challenges to resource and opportunities for the resource
- History of attitudes toward the resource
- Meanings of resource—tangible/intangible/universal concept links

But our KR must go beyond the “facts.” While information is essential to interpretation, information alone is not interpretation. An interpreter's knowledge base is not complete without a comprehensive awareness of, and ability to articulate, the many meanings and values that make the resource relevant to a diverse public – the tangible/intangible links and universal concepts. What meanings do the facts represent and which meanings are the most universal – understood in some way by the broadest audience? Without this level of knowledge, our interpretation will be “sterile” and one-dimensional. Interpreters should be able to articulate numerous potential links between each primary tangible resource at their site, and the intangible meanings it represents. How many “links” can you identify at your site?

Acquiring this knowledge involves first discovering our own meanings – the reasons why we value our place – making our own personal connections. Then we must open our minds and hearts to identify and understand the multiple meanings or perspectives that others attribute, even when they radically differ from our own. Interpretation that appropriately acknowledges multiple perspectives creates balance and depth, and fosters dialogue, rather than presenting a single “truth.”

KA – Knowledge of the Audience

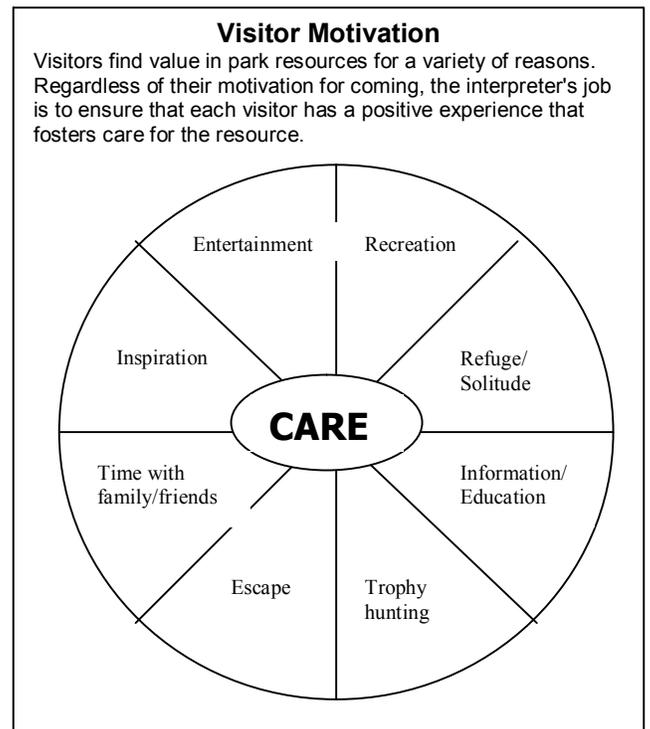
Comprehensive KR does little good without equal Knowledge of the Audience. A resource meaning that is not relevant to the audience does not make connections—as Freeman Tilden suggests, it's “sterile.” The foundation for KA is the variety of visitation and demographic

information about past and current visitors that has been collected, and sometimes interpreted, through statistical reports and studies. Where do our audiences come from, how old are they, how long do they stay, what park activities do they participate in? But this is just a starting point. For our interpretive programming to be most relevant, we must also know about their group identity, culture, ethnicity, learning styles and motivation for coming. What are their expectations and interests? What existing meanings, interpretations and attitudes do they bring to the resource? While we obviously can't know everything about each individual visitor, we can carefully begin to make some generalizations that can help us to meet the needs and expectations of individuals, and to offer multiple opportunities for them to find their own personal connections with the meanings of site resources.

KA = Knowledge of the Audience

- Visitation and demographic information
- Group identity, culture, ethnicity, learning styles
- Motivations, expectations, interests
- Existing meanings, interpretations, attitudes

It is important to understand and respect the many reasons why visitors come to our places, and to meet them “where they are” in their understanding of the value of the resource. They would not have come at all if there weren't something about the place that already had some value to them, whether it is recreational, educational or inspirational. An effective KA will enable us to recognize when to let the visitor and the resource interact on their own, and when and where it is appropriate to use interpretation to help them discover new or renewed meanings in the resource. An effective KA will also enable us to use our KR in the most appropriate and meaningful ways, rather than “fire hose” visitors with all there is to know about the resource.



"Visitors' Bill of Rights"

Whether visiting a park on-site or off, visitors have a right to:

- ❖ have their privacy and independence respected;
- ❖ retain and express their own values;
- ❖ be treated with courtesy and consideration;
- ❖ receive accurate and balanced information.

A good KA requires continued learning and sensitivity. It requires more than just lip service to truly begin to “know” our audiences, and to learn about and reach out to new or non-traditional audiences. If we care about who our audiences are, we can help them care about park resources so that they may want to help care for them.

AT – Appropriate Technique

Although knowledge of our resources and audiences is foundational, knowledge by itself is bound to fail if it is not selected and applied in an appropriate and compelling way. For me, the “technique” of interpretation is the fun and creative part – where I really dig into my “tool box” to creatively and provocatively attempt to connect the meanings of the resource (KR) to the interests/experience of my audience (KA). First and foremost, however, the selection of techniques should always be based on specific program/product objectives, that in turn support the larger resource interpretive themes, goals, objectives and or mission if such planning documents exist. Working from this foundation, the appropriate medium or vehicle is selected, based on knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. This includes having the necessary skills to execute the chosen approach effectively. Technique also involves selecting ways to engage/involve the audience, either actively or passively or both. Organization of the material is also a matter of creative technique. Crafting a compelling theme or central idea that can tie all the information and methods together will provide a focus for the audience to connect to the meanings of the resource. And, of course, technique also involves the interpreter’s style, attitudes and enthusiasm.

AT = Appropriate Technique

- Medium or vehicle—talk, tour, exhibit, etc
- Skills to effectively execute a medium
- Ways to engage and involve the audience
- Organization
- Style, attitudes, enthusiasm

With so much involved in constructing/creating an interpretive program or product, it is easy to forget to “reality check” as you get caught up in putting it all together. Have you ever attended an interpretive program as a visitor and found yourself cringing at the inappropriateness of some aspect of it? An audience of mostly children gets a lecture on plate tectonics, or a group of older adults is visibly embarrassed as the interpreter coerces them to dress up in bat costumes and pretend to fly around the campfire catching prey. Yikes! The interpreter may get an “A” for enthusiasm, but the style and approach of the program are all wrong. Appropriate technique means that the interpreter has not gotten so carried away with the “creative” part of their job that they have forgotten to apply technique against the canvas of KA and KR. This is perhaps where many of us get the Interpretive Equation seriously out of balance.

Technique is appropriate only if it shows care and respect for both the resource and the audience by applying a thorough knowledge of both -- $(KR + KA) \times AT$ -- throughout the entire process of crafting and delivering a program or product. In fact, the most effective interpreters learn to gauge their audiences as they go along, and have contingency plans for adjusting to “fit” if necessary. This means not being so enamored by the techniques we’ve chosen that we lose our sensitivity to audience response.

“Appropriate” also means knowing when to let the resource speak for itself, and that every program/product doesn’t need to be an “over the top” maximum intensity connection experience. The most appropriate techniques are those that provide effective access to resource meanings. Sometimes a subtle or simple approach, understatement or even silence can still have significant

intellectual and emotional impact. It is also important to remember that not all visitors require an intensive experience in order to find their own connections to resource meanings.

Involvement Techniques

Passive Involvement: promotes attentiveness, thinking, feeling (emotional involvement), and passive sensory involvement (watching and hearing)

Word pictures	Quotations/historical accounts
Storytelling	Body language – expressions, gestures
Relating concepts to visitor experience	Use of props, costumes, visual aids
Variation of voice and volume	Challenges/incentives
Role playing/dramatic interpretation	Thematic connections
Rhetorical or thought provoking questions	Forecasting
Demonstration	SILENCE!

Active Involvement: promotes physical action and movement, looking (as opposed to watching), active listening (as opposed to hearing), and other sensory involvement (tasting, smelling, touching)

- Demonstrations with visitor participation
- Questions that require a verbal answer
- Problem-solving
- Games, scavenger hunts
- Props that visitors can handle
- Assignments i.e. listing, looking/finding, counting, writing, making, drawing
- Sensory suggestions i.e. smelling, tasting, touching, active listening
- Team activities/assignments
- Brainstorming

IO – Interpretive Opportunity

An Interpretive Opportunity is an interpretive product or “output” that provides audience members the chance to learn about and appreciate the resource. When the Interpretive Equation is effectively applied an effective Interpretive Opportunity presents a favorable set of circumstances for a meaningful moment of connection between audience and resource. Since the connection happens within the individual audience member, who retains the sovereignty of their own mind and emotions, the interpreter’s job – the job of interpretation – is to *offer* the *opportunity*, which the audience may or may not take. Individual visitors come with subjective perspectives -- based on personal background, experience and circumstances -- that may or may not prompt them to take up the opportunity provided by the interpreter. However, the more effective the application of the KR, KA and AT, the more favorable becomes the set of circumstances for the IO to be irresistible! Furthermore, a well-constructed program/product is made up of smaller multiple opportunities for the audience to make their own intellectual and emotional connections to the meanings of the resource. Such a product is planned for the overall broadest appeal. (Think of the interpreter as the café waiter with the dessert tray – even though you resolved you would not indulge, the sumptuous array is carefully designed and artfully arranged to include a treat designed to appeal to every palate, from the light and fruity sorbet to the deep and decadent “death by chocolate.” The tray is the Interpretive Opportunity or product composed of individual opportunities that work together to create a larger set of favorable circumstances. Well, okay, maybe just a taste...)

From a very practical, put-it-to-work perspective, these smaller opportunities for emotional or intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource can be described as a tangible/intangible links that are compellingly developed and presented. An appropriately and effectively developed tangible/intangible link integrates and balances of KR, KA, and AT. The careful selection of the link represents the interpreter's knowledge of both the audience and the resource, and the technique/method for presenting the link is designed to make it relevant, meaningful and memorable for that particular audience. An interpretive program or product, then, involves creating a series or structure of these opportunities and creatively weaving them together to make a point, or speak to a larger overarching meaning or issue, that is relevant to both the resource and the audience.

More than the Sum of Its Parts – Desired Outcomes

By setting up the potential for the audiences' personal connections, an Interpretive Opportunity becomes the vehicle for the ultimate goal of interpretation. A "connection" can mean new or renewed insight, feelings, perception, revelation or discovery regarding a meaning of the resource that has some level of personal relevance to the visitor. Whenever a visitor reacts positively to an interpretive opportunity, and makes a personal connection, that visitor has likely come to care (a little or a lot, new care or more care, on an intellectual and/or emotional level) about the resource being interpreted. *A raised level of care is the result of connections made.*

"Care" about the resource may be felt as a mindset, memory or attitude, or it may result in actual behavior to help care for the resource in some way. Since the connection happens within the visitor, and their reaction may or may not manifest itself in immediately discernable ways, the most effective interpretive efforts should focus on raising the level of personal meaning the resource has for the visitor, rather than "preaching" stewardship. This approach allows the result of increasing care to flow naturally for each visitor, without laying a stewardship "guilt trip" on the unsuspecting audience, or imposing the interpreter's or the agency's values. Bottom line: visitors will only *care for* what they first come to *care about*.

The desire to help visitors care about the resource represents our best intentions. But isn't the attainment of this desired interpretive outcome merely guesswork without evaluation? Do visitors actually care more about the resource after attending my program or reading my article in the park newspaper? A formal visitor study (i.e. focus groups, entrance/exit interviews) is the only way to know with some certainty. However, the beauty of the Interpretive Equation is the amount of control it gives the interpreter in planning and designing a program or product to have the maximum *potential* effectiveness. I can plan and orchestrate the Interpretive Opportunities I want to present based on reliable principles, and I can continue to hone and fine-tune the program as my knowledge and experience with different audiences deepens. If something in the program doesn't seem to be working the way I intended, I can apply the Equation to begin to analyze where there is imbalance. (I've got good, creative techniques but are they appropriate for this audience? Do I have too much in-depth information for this audience and/or this delivery venue?) The ability to articulate and analyze the elements of success using the Equation can help eliminate some of the "guesswork." It can also allow me to use my own informal evaluation – observing and listening to visitor response – in more specific and proactive ways to increase my interpretive effectiveness.

We never know for sure if an interpretive product will be effective. But applying the Interpretive Equation makes it a “calculated” risk, rather than a shot in the dark. In this way, the sum total – the value – of the Interpretive Equation goes far beyond a catchy way to remember the elements of interpretation. It can become the great “equalizer” in the application of our knowledge and creativity toward the greater goal of responsibly and respectfully helping others to care about park resources.

Balancing the Interpretive Equation

- KR =** Balanced KR doesn't inundate visitors with an overload of “just the facts”; nor does it put the visitor in a passive role by telling them what they should think. Rather it provides balanced amounts and types of accurate information that provoke people to actively explore meanings, issues and ideas for themselves.
- KA =** Balanced KA recognizes and respects the diverse levels of interest, motivation and understanding of park visitors and constituents; it incorporates a balance of multiple perspectives that encourages people to think about and develop their own stewardship values.
- AT =** Balanced AT employs a variety of appropriate media and techniques that provides access to resource meanings, and encourages the greatest number of people to become personally involved with park resources.
- IO =** The more balanced the application of the KR, KA and AT, the more favorable become the set of circumstances for the Interpretive Opportunity to have broad appeal – to encourage the most visitors to make their own intellectual and emotional connections to the meanings and significance of park resources.