



Quick Tips for Better Interpretive Signage

Start with one Big Idea

- Most visitors will only remember ONE thing from your interpretive signs. Pick your single, clear takeaway and focus ruthlessly on that. Typically this question answer the “so what”? or “why should I care” question in a way that aligns with what your audience is interested in.
- Ask yourself: What do you want the audience to know and learn? What do you want the audience to do? How do you want the audience to feel?

Use conversational language

- Write your text like you’re talking to a friend.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Aim for a 5th grade reading level.

Aim for 1/3 graphics, 1/3 text, and 1/3 blank space.

- It doesn’t matter how interesting the content is: most visitors will walk away from a wall of text.

Keep it short

- This is usually the hardest one!
- Small Signs (e.g., 24" x 36"): aim for 100-150 words.
- Medium Signs (e.g., 36" x 48"): aim for 150-200 words.
- Larger Signs: aim for 250-300 words, but make sure to break it out into sections and captions.

Use headings and subheadings to create a visual hierarchy

- Chunk information out: Avoid having one long content section, especially on signs with more than 100 words. Use subheadings to break the content into shorter sections.
- It can be helpful to consider three “levels” of text:
 - Heading = your big idea
 - Subheadings = key messages
 - Body = more detailed content

Consider your audience

- Answer the question: who is the person I am trying to reach with this sign? Why are they motivated to read this?
- The “general public” is not an audience—you need to get more specific. Are you writing for adults or children? Locals or tourists? History buffs or beachgoing families?
- Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of 12) should follow a different approach from interpretation addressed to adults. It cannot just be a dilution of adult-focused content, since kids have a great capacity for understanding if information is delivered to them in child-friendly ways.



But really... keep it short

- Aim for sentences of 10-15 words and paragraphs of 25-75 words (or 3-5 sentences).

Consider the “3-30-3 Rule”

- In general, you have 3 seconds to hook the visitor, 30 seconds of their attention once they’re hooked, and 3 minutes if they are *very* interested in the subject.
- Use headings, subheadings, body text, captions, and bullets to take advantage of this.
- Your heading should aim to hook visitors in 3 seconds—aim for 7 words or less.
- Subheadings should clearly convey your key message, because many visitors will *only* read the heading and subheadings. Aim for 10 words or less for subheadings.

Think of your audience as “skimmers”, “swimmers”, and “divers”

- *Skimmers* are lightly engaged—think of someone who is just walking by and happens to glance at your sign. They may read the heading and look at a big picture.
- *Swimmers* are a little more invested. They may already be a little interested, or maybe your heading “hooked” them. They are your 30-second audience and will probably read the subheadings, look at the pictures, and maybe a bit more body text.
- *Divers* are folks who will read every word of your sign. They are likely already interested in the topic.

Design with high contrast

- Use contrasting colors for text and background for ease of reading. Place blocks of solid color behind your text (no watermarks) to meet ADA accessibility requirements.
- Use websites like www.vischeck.com to check your colors for those visually impaired or color blind. Remember 1 in every 12 men are red-green colorblind.

Use clear and consistent fonts

- Use a sans, slab, or simple serif typeface, upper and lower case, with a minimum 18-point type size on signs. The National Park Service suggests 72-60-point font for titles, 48-40-point font for subtitles, 24-point font for body text, and 18-point font for captions.
- Do not put your entire sign in all caps! Capital letters are harder to read, so use sparingly. If you want to test it, time yourself reading a sentence in all caps vs. in sentence case.