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Developing Effective Museum Text: A Case Study from Caithness, Scotland

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THE ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

Developing Effective Museum Text:

A Case Study from Caithness, Scotland

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
BACHELOR OF SCIENCE DEGREE
IN MUSEUM STUDIES

HISTORY & PERFORMING ARTS & VISUAL CULTURE DEPARTMENTS

BY

HEATHER STRACHAN

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I. Abstract

When walking into museums, visitors already have expectations about what they will encounter inside. Whether they are there to see a specific object or exhibit everyone expects to confront an artifact and learn about it. What visitors might not think about is how they receive the information pertaining to these objects which can come from a docent, a guide, a label, or an online source. The written word is so relied upon by museums that a visitor will encounter text from the moment they enter a museum, throughout the visit, and until they leave. This means that everywhere they look there will be something to read from exhibit labels to restroom, and cafe signs.

Writing good museum text is more of an art form than an exact science due to the number of different writing styles available and the differing tastes of writers and readers. Even though the process is not exact, there are guidelines that can be followed to guide museum professionals and to give visitors the most out of their trip to a museum. By examining best practices laid out by the American Alliance of Museums and International Council of Museums and through good writing techniques from authors such as Beverly Serrell and Stephen Bitgood, this paper will lay some groundwork for what separates poor text from excellent text in a museum, as well as how to use these techniques to create cohesive online and onsite experience. These guidelines will then be laid out and utilized through an internship I participated in at a branch of the Archaeology Outreach & Consultancy Archaeology Group located in Edinburgh, Scotland. The

project at this internship involved writing online museum-based text about archaeological sites in Caithness, Scotland, the most Northerly land-locked area of the country steeped in Scottish and Viking history. A set of labels written for one of these sites will showcase the writing technique and processes discussed in the paper.

I. Introduction

Through personal observation it seems many curators overestimate the amount of information they need to provide their visitors hence, a lot of space in museums is filled with words. The same is doubly true for any sort of online experience a museum provides to its visitors since there are no physical limitations on space. It is hard to find a modern museum without large amounts of text inside and the majority of it is found within the exhibits themselves.

The point of exhibitions is that they are created to communicate ideas to visitors, whether to educate them, present their viewpoint on certain topics and issues, or provide opportunities for meaning-making. Museums are institutions of learning that try to preserve our history for future generations. Most of this is done through an informal process whereby visitors are allowed to pick and choose which exhibits they want to learn about. The text accompanies an exhibit is never the star of the show but good label writing separates outstanding exhibits from poor ones. The American Alliance of Museums has an annual competition to award excellence in exhibition label writing.¹ Winners of the contest are showcased each year as high-quality label writing standards to encourage and inspire others to create high quality content. It is also possible for an institution to utilize other methods of education because there are types of museums that do not require too many labels, such as living history museums, because they create an immersive experience for their visitors through oral communication.

1. The AAM website as of July 2017 listed the previous winners of the Excellence in Exhibit Label Writing competition in hopes of inspiring curators to with a varied collection of exhibit label writing techniques.

Modern museums need to not only educate their visitors but also provide an entertaining experience, necessitating designers and educators to use new methods to reach the broadest range and number of visitors.² The education is an informal learning process and may even take a back seat to entertaining visitors such as in children's museum where children enjoy hands-on activities from which they may also learn. Many institutions have created an online presence to reach as many audiences as they can and to entice potential visitors into visiting their physical locations. These websites allow a wealth of information to be put on display at virtually no cost and without taking up any physical space. A visitor can use these websites as maps, an index of the galleries, as well as a secondary source of information about objects that interest them.

The downside is that many of these websites are filled with essays about the collections which can bore visitors instead of entertaining or educating them. Most of the information displayed on these sites is important to teaching about the history of an item but the writing can also be presented to visitors in such a way that entertains along with educating them. When text in a museum and text online follow the same writing guidelines then it can create a pleasant cohesive experience for visitors that makes them more likely to remember what they learned about the objects. One of the most important ways to do this is to utilize clear and concise writing to prevent readers from being confused by what they are looking at. Another way is to utilize many links to create different precisely categorized pages that allow for small blurbs of writing on each page instead of making visitors sift through one large page for whatever interests them.

2. Sejul Malde, "Museums Connecting Cultural Tourists: More Substance Over Style, Please," *The Guardian*, April 2, 2013, accessed July 20, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2013/apr/02/museums-cultural-tourists-digital-content>. Many museums now need to compete with other attractions of leisure time such as amusement parks, movie theaters, and other tourist destinations. By providing good marketing and entertaining exhibitions, museums can become local and national tourist destinations to draw in more visitors.

Once all of the different varieties of text and different ways to write excellent text are covered this thesis will go on to apply these techniques in a case study. Over the summer of 2014 I spent time writing texts for an archaeology company in Edinburgh, Scotland about different archaeological sites in the Caithness region. The process involved lots of independent research and writing which was followed by editing sessions with my boss. During the writing process and each edit it became easier to understand what constitutes excellent text in a museum. After an outline of my internship experience the case study will be made using one of these texts showcasing how the text written went from poor to an outstanding example of what the company was aiming to create.

II. Varieties of Text in Museums

The most commonly read texts in a museum are the signs and maps designed to guide visitors. Though exhibits may be designed with a certain path to follow or sequence of labels to read, many visitors will follow their own agenda instead of following the layout of the exhibition as it was designed to be followed. For instance, visitors may look at statues or pottery that looks appealing rather than follow the chronological order of the exhibit. Visitors may turn to go the wrong direction or leave from the first exit available instead of doing what museum professionals intended as studied and stated by Falk.³ Despite the intention of museum professionals to place many wayfinding texts and a path for their exhibits, the physical layout of an exhibition space and its text can have little impact on how a museum-goer walks through the space. Designers can try to subtly or unsubtly direct people through the spaces but if it does not interest visitors then they will follow their own path. Even someplace such as the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, which is laid out in an upward moving spiral, will have people walking against the flow of others to go to the objects or areas that interest them at the time (See Figure 1).⁴

Besides being used for wayfinding, text is used in a museum for the main purpose of informing visitors about the objects or exhibitions that they are viewing. The way that the information is interpreted, how it is conveyed, and how it is physically laid out is completely up to each institution and even the individual curators and designers working on a project. Thus, the physical layout and context of text is up to the designers of an exhibition but text is usually

3. John Falk, "Assessing the Impact of Exhibit Arrangement on Visitor Behavior and Learning, *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 36(2), 1993 135"

4. According to Frank Lloyd Wright's design of the museum visitors takes an elevator to the top of the museum and then strolls down the spiral ramp taking in one continuous gallery. This design was meant to marry form and function into one building and allow for harmony between an artifact and the gallery.

expected to be found in an exhibit. Writers have to balance being interesting and engaging but not being too academic and dry, all while keeping a visitor's attention for as long as possible.

There are two broad categories of text listed by Blais:-those that are independent and those that interrelate. Independent texts are those that stand alone in a space such as larger broad panels. Dependent text is the category that interrelates with the objects, items, and artifacts in the exhibition. This text may introduce an exhibit or be the label next to objects. Underneath these two broad categories are five different types of museum text organized in terms of size.⁵ The largest of this text is the macro-scale, the one category that is read by all visitors. These are the exhibition zone titles, outdoor and indoor banners, and advertisements placed just before visitors enter the museum (See Figure 2).

After macro-scale text is large-scale text which refers to the larger text that is also read by most or all visitors, such as the headings, subheadings, catch-phrases, and major slogans that promote the understanding of the thematic content. Medium-scale text is the support text, including the subtitles, and it continues the theme with a broad topic or text specific to exhibition items. One good example is the text placed at the beginning of exhibits that explain what will be found inside. Medium text can also include the smaller signs in a museum that will lead visitors to the restrooms and cafes (See Figure 3).⁶

Next to last is the small-scale text which is the ones that are only read by those genuinely interested in the subject or an object and will take require more time to read them. Though this

5. Andrée Blais, *Text in the Exhibition Medium*. (Quebec: Societe des Musees,1995) 68-73.

6. Ibid.

does not mean that visitors will read every single one as there are usually many of them. These are the headings, text that develop a topic and provide specific information. The text may also discuss in-depth the technical, thematic, and descriptive interesting information about objects.⁷ Most commonly near an object these labels are the one people often imagine when they think of museum labels (See Figure 4).

Lastly the micro-scale text is the text that will provide extremely specific information on a theme, subject, or object. This usually includes any metadata such as its age, the material it's made from, and its collection reference number. As the smallest label and the one closest to an object in a case these labels have almost as much chance of being read as the large-scale text.

There are many components that make up text in a museum and though they go through a long process of being written and edited there can still be mistakes in the work. It is very easy to write a bad label and it is quite a common problem with museums and other institutions. To properly understand how the text can meet the highest standard, the writer must be aware of the audience intended for these texts, the writing process, and the label's content. Given the amount and variety of text that can be found in a museum as well as the many differing writing techniques that can be used to create text, museums should be able to create labels that interest a multitude of different types of visitors.

7. Ibid.

III. The Museum Audience

Museum text is used to engage and inform while at the same time being accessible to the intended audiences. The type of text and writing style found in museums reflects the type of audience the institution wants to attract. Through personal observation there seems to be more formal styles of writing found in art museums and less formal writing styles in natural history museums. The least formal of all seems to be found in children's museums where a hands-on approach is used for children instead of making them stand around and read. The different writing styles are important because many museums focus on being accessible to as many different audiences as possible but their text may only limit them to a few.

It is accepted and believed that the most common type of museum-goers are people of higher education, families, or younger school groups.⁸ Of course, there are differences in the demographics depending upon what type of museum is being visited. Art museums tend to have more groups without children than any other type of museum. Teenagers also tend to be underrepresented in museum visitor surveys.⁹

To attract as many groups as possible means that institutions should write for audiences with varying degrees of ability if they want to attract all of them. The texts need to be fascinating enough to hold the attention of children while at the same time being able to satisfy the willingness of adults to encounter something interesting. They also need to be able to

8. Victoria & Albert Museum, *Gallery Text at the V&A: A Ten Point Guide*, London, 2009, 5.

9. Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2015), 50.

9. Serrell, in her 2015 publication, also refers to a comprehensive bibliography of published studies to showcase that these demographic stereotypes are a trend after the collection of a representative sample. The study can be found in C.G. Screven, ed., *Visitor Studies Bibliography and Abstracts*, third edition, Shorewood, WI: Exhibit Communications, Research, Inc., 1993.

accommodate those who have trouble standing around and reading, those who do not have a good grasp on the native language of the institution, and those who do not have a general knowledge of the subject, which can be taken for granted. Museums should never stop trying to expand their visitor demographics but instead should accommodate the needs of all these visitors when trying to create appropriate content for exhibitions.

No matter how educated visitors might be they may not know much about the subject of the exhibition or the collection that they are visiting. Due to the wide range of visitors that a large institution can accommodate it can be safe to assume that visitors are unlikely to know everything about all the different subjects in an institution. Even if they do have knowledge about a subject, say archaeology, then they might be a specialist in Medieval glassware and not know anything about artifacts from the attempted Roman invasion of Scotland. Most of the time museums need to anticipate this lack of knowledge and accommodate it in their writing. This does not mean that every visitor should be treated as if they do not know anything at all but instead that the option should be there for them to learn the basics if they wish it. The best way is to engage visitors through what they already know using that knowledge as an entry point into the exhibition.¹⁰ Using the example above, a good entry point would be to start with associations about the Romans: conquerors and armies. Once visitors are in the exhibit then you can expand upon what they already know.

There are five assumptions about audiences that Serrell believes make exhibits ineffective and non-audience orientated.¹¹ The first assumption is that it is important to reach and appeal to

10. Liz Maurer, "Building Exhibits on What Visitors Already Know," Design and Production, Inc, Virginia, 2014. <http://www.d-and-p.com/blog/2015/4/10/building-exhibits-on-what-visitors-already-know>, accessed July 20, 2017.

11. Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2015), 60-62

more educated and sophisticated, portion of an audience in an exhibit. Instead Serrell suggests that a more focused exhibit will pick which messages in the exhibit are the most important to communicate and work to have it reach the widest possible audience. The second assumption is that if there is lot of information available in labels then all visitors will find something of interest to them. This does not work because it will create an environment that will overwhelm visitors and cause them to leave the exhibit without spending a lot of time there or leave them feeling as if they need multiple visits to ingest all the information. By decreasing the amount of text overall, especially complex text, then more elements of the exhibit will be visited.

The third assumption is that it is difficult to engage visitors and have them use the exhibit to examine their beliefs and opinions because most visitors do not have enough time or knowledge about the subject in the exhibit. This just passes the blame on to the visitor instead of trying to understand that it may be the detailed, complex nature of an exhibit that puts them off. Not all visitors have an extensive knowledge of the subject of an exhibit but that does not mean each visitor should be forced to go through an introductory section to have the information forced upon them. Instead the exhibit designer should vary the texts to engage in several different levels of education.

The fourth assumption is that exhibits should not be taken down to the lowest common denominator because the more sophisticated and repeat visitors will be bored and lose the opportunity to learn more. This tends to be the belief if a museum does not have an extensive survey of their visitors to track the percentage of repeat visitors. Those who believe museums should be exclusive must not notice the visitors who get overwhelmed or intimidated by all the

“sophistication and affluence” in a museum. Museums should always work to create an exhibit that works to reach the most common of denominators not the lowest, especially as this will allow them to reach the broadest audience possible.

The fifth and last assumption is that the motivations and stereotypes of visitors will determine their behavior inside exhibitions. Indeed, these characteristics determine if a visitor visits a museum or not but they are not a concrete set of behaviors once the visitor gets inside. The museum, not the visitors, has the responsibility to control the environment that visitors find inside an exhibition and to make it as inclusive as possible.¹² Research for this thesis seems to show that while these problematical assumptions still exist and some institutions do look as if they follow them most museums (especially large well-known museums) are moving away from these stereotypes about visitors to become more inclusive. When museums became popular in the United States and United Kingdom they were exclusive and meant only for the upper class. As time went by and more people started to have leisure time museums did start to become more inclusive.¹³

Museums should be something that everyone “gets” instead of making the space feel like an exclusive club that only a certain type of educated person could fit into. To reiterate our growing list of requirements so far for the text to reach the broadest audience, it needs to be interesting, appropriate, educational or informative, easy to read, accommodating for multiple academic levels and languages, and it must entertain visitors. This is quite a list of things

12. Each of these assumptions are laid out in 2015 edition of Serrell’s book *Exhibit Labels*.

13. Based on personal observation through class work and research for this thesis museums seem to always be looking for a way to be more inclusive for audiences. Both as a way to teach the broadest possible audience but also as a way to help support museums through continued and repeat patronage. Having many visitors and donors is what helps keep a museum open and allow them to preserve their collections for future generations.

museum text needs to have before even acknowledging how to create the physical structure and content of museum text.

IV. Writing Onsite and Online Museum Content

A. Onsite Content

Writing content for museums is a long process involving a lot of editing and rewriting to make an exhibit not only interesting to the visitors but to also make it have a cohesive, harmonious narrative and corresponding experience for visitors. To have the feeling that visitors are taking in only one main overarching theme the whole time as opposed to a different one at each object, can be a jarring experience. One way to smooth out this process is to have professional standards that can apply to all institutions when they are designing exhibits. A Committee on Education for the American Alliance of Museums created a short guide for best standards for museum education listing the different key concepts that should be considered when creating content.¹⁴ There are three different areas to consider that are related to education in a museum: accessibility, accountability, and advocacy.¹⁵

Accessibility stresses a museum's responsibility to make collections accessible to the public and, at the same time, to engage with their communities, schools, other museums, and the general public. It also emphasizes the importance to exhibit a diversity of perspectives, either cultural, scientific, historic, or aesthetic, to promote engagement with a broader audience and to bring in new visitors. Accountability holds a museum responsible for content that they create by holding them to the high standards of proper research, professional training of employees, and the use of variety of appropriate educational tools to promote learning. Lastly, advocacy calls for

14. The American Association of Museums and the American Alliance of Museums are the same advocacy group but there was a name change in 2013 from Association to Alliance to embody the organizations mission. The group works to unite and benefit all museums, the communities they serve, and the individual who work in them. The two names will be used interchangeably in this thesis depending on the publication date of the published work of the AAM.

15. Committee on Education, *Excellence in Practice: Museum Education Principles and Standard*, American Association of Museums, 2005, 6-8.

museums to promote education as a core part of any museum's mission and goals. By promoting continuous learning in visitors, as well as museum professionals, a museum will continually better itself in terms of fiscal and ethical responsibility, professional development, and create a spirit of inquiry by sharing the joy of learning.

Another authority on best practices to follow is the Committee for Education and Cultural Action, one of thirty different committees that make up the International Council of Museums.¹⁶ This committee has been releasing their own best practices since 2011, in three different languages, to try to create an international standard for museums. This committee suggests that best practices should be used as a guideline to create better practices overall instead of being strict guidelines to follow.¹⁷ By using these guidelines as suggestions an institution can experiment with texts to find the one that suits them best. This also prevents different countries from using best practices that may work in one country but not another due to differing public values and roles assigned to museums. So, it is vital to remember that these steps and rules are suggestions to create a better overall exhibit, and they should try to seek creative solutions in their content development.

The first step in creating an exhibition is for an institution is to pick a topic. Next, exhibit designers will be chosen, either ones in house or hired from an outside company. Simultaneously with the proposal for an exhibition, objects from the museum will be picked out by curators and

16. The International Council of Museums is made up of over 100 committees as listed on the home page of their website. The international subsection of this council is made of 30 different committees who are global think tanks on museums and heritage. <http://icom.museum/the-committees/international-committees/>

17. Emma Nardi. et al, *Best Practices 2011-2016: A Tool to Improve Museum Education Internationally*. Ediziuni Nuova Cultura-Rema, 2016, 25.

collection managers that fit the theme, the geographical and historical framework, and space of the exhibit being created.

One example is the *Early Peoples* exhibit at The National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, Scotland which debuted in 1998. The *Early Peoples* exhibit is a permanent exhibit which showcases Scotland's ancestors from pre-recorded history up until the beginning of Christianity. The purpose of the exhibition is to teach about the prehistoric ancestors of Scotland and its theme is that varied cultures of the inhabitants collectively created contemporary Scottish nationalistic pride. Objects that relate to this subject are everyday items and tools that earlier inhabitants would have used such as pots, fishing poles, and baskets. These were exhibited to illustrate the simpler lifestyle practiced by these people. Once the big idea, floor plans, front-end evaluations, and elements of interaction in the exhibit are chosen, then the writing can start. It will be easier to have a cohesive narrative by creating an overall exhibit experience before the first label is even written (See Figures 5 and 6).

The next step in the process is to start creating content for the exhibit to cement the themes of the exhibit in the mind of the visitors. The content includes the advertisements, the large exhibit panels, and the labels describing the objects. The writer can either be an expert or not in the subject of the exhibit but they should be enthusiastic about the topic. It can be tedious to write, rewrite, and edit a label so enthusiasm will make the process easier on the writer. The *Early Peoples* exhibit utilized a fictional first-person narrator in the form of one of the early ancestors to describe in large and small text how the early people lived and used objects. By using a fictional singular speaker, the exhibit created a narrative for the audience that was easy to

read. It is often the default to use the authoritative, academic third-person but a dry narrative does not have to be used in a museum. It does not matter if the narrator is the institution, a person, or a combination of multiple voices, it should be something that is discussed before the creation of the labels and content to minimize the confusion in visitors.¹⁸

B. Online Content

On the other hand, online content, as opposed to onsite content, has a much different overall feel. When putting information online many museums tend to put up too much information to hold the interest of a reader unless they are very interested in the subject. Since there is no real limit to the amount of space that can be used, most online pages hold too many words which can be off-putting to a reader. The online space of a museum should be used to entice people to visit a museum and to give them an idea of what each collection and exhibit holds. If an institution is ambitious they could even create a virtual museum experience for those who cannot make it to the physical space.

Many larger museums have worked towards the goal of making their online presence appealing to visitors. Some have even started to put their entire collections online in the hopes of educating people and creating more interest in the museum. The problem with online spaces occurs when content writers produce whole academic essays about each of the objects instead of putting just enough information to pique an interest in readers.

18. Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2015), 137

One thing that can be done differently online is to give visitors a choice about the reading level they want to engage with instead of just forcing them to read at a prescribed level. If a visitor goes to the Museum of Scotland's website to look at a Neolithic artifact such as pottery fragments and they will a picture of the fragment showing their size and color. Under the photo would be the metadata that explains where it was found, what it is made of, how it came to the museum, its age, and its identifying number within the museum's collection. Next to the photo is usually a lot of words about the object describing it but instead there could be links to different pages for the reader labeled for example: academic information, grade school information, and interesting facts. The reader could then pick and choose to go to these different sections depending on how much they want to read.

The academic level would state complex information such as that the artifact is from the Neolithic Age, making the assumption that the reader knows about the different ages and what they all entail. The grade school level would state easier to understand information for younger audiences and for those who are not confident about their grasp on the host language of the museum, stating information such as the artifact is from the Stone Age which started in 10,000 BCE or 12,000 years ago.¹⁹ Finally, the interesting information section would be in between the two academic levels and state how old the artifact, maybe 8,000 years old, along with any other fun facts that are memorable and make the reader feel as if they learned something interesting.

The most important part about creating content online is that the writer should treat the online space as if the visitor was looking at a physical museum space. By following the best

19. The Neolithic or Stone Age was from 10,000 BCE to as late as 2000 BCE. BCE stands for Before Common Era. These terms are an academic replacement of the commonly used Christian timeline BC and AD, which stand for Before Christ and After Death. The dates and timeline used between the two are still the same and the timelines run parallel to one another.

practices for writing exhibit labels, a content developer can write in such a way that educates and entertains the websites visitors and allows for a more cohesive online and in-person experience. By creating a more unified look and feel between the two spaces visitors will be more inclined to remember the information they read if they experience it more than once.

The writing and presentation practices that are covered in later sections also play a large role in helping to create a better online space since it stops readers from feeling overwhelmed or fatigued by the amount of information provided. By cutting out large amounts of text and allowing visitors to avoid complex topics if they like then visitors can consume more online material overall.

A way to blend both of these online and onsite spaces is to allow visitors to access the online spaces in the museum through interactive activities.²⁰ The combination will make their visit more memorable. Portable devices such as smartphones and tablets can be used to create an activity for visitors to follow instead of say an in-person video or touchscreen. These devices can be used to give visitors a visual guide to follow in the museum as well as an option for additional audio guides or give them a transcript to read as well if they do not or cannot listen to the audio. There are so many different types of apps that can be created and downloaded onto phones to ease, educate, or entertain visitors. These are just some of the ways devices can be used to make a visit easier on visitors who either have disabilities or do not wish to interact with others during their visit.

20. Ailsa Barry, "Creating a Virtuous Circle Between A Museum's On-line and Physical Spaces," Toronto, 2006, accessed July 20, 2017. <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2006/papers/barry/barry.html>

Along with using devices to make visits easier they can also be used to make the visit more entertaining. Allowing visitors to scan codes that lead their phones to online pages, encouraging them to post to social media accounts, access Wikipedia pages, or play an online game, will create a fun and educational experience for them. They could also be encouraged to post on social media, use their phones for scavenger hunts, or explore how their favorite objects have changed over time and the different places in the world that they have been in. Games could be created for children and teenagers to play inside such as a visual “tag” where they have to find certain objects. An app that can allow someone to save pictures of their favorite objects so that they can look at them later and learn more when they leave the museum space would also be an effective learning tool.

As of this writing there is the Twitter social media tag #musesocial created by the online space Museums and the Web which asks questions about museums that can be answered by anyone who wishes to.²¹ They have covered questions with museum experts, museum communities, and museum lovers, all participants have answered questions about learning, participation, and metrics within museums. It is important for museums to engage with visitors online since they will receive direct feedback from visitors and the answers provide a great resource about how well a museum is doing, both online and onsite. With more and more people carrying personal devices it is important for a museum to utilize them if they wish to stay relevant and as an option for entertainment in a time when there are so many other choices.

21. Museums and the Web is a collaborative space for professionals who create culture, science, and heritage online. The #musesocial tag is used to create weekly online conversations using thought provoking questions for the museum community. This hashtag as of this writing is used all over the web and is not exclusive to Museums and the Web. A log of their past questions can be found on their website http://www.museumsandtheweb.com/blog/erin_blasco/musesocial_museums_and_social.html, accessed July 20, 2017.

22. Ailsa Barry, “Creating a Virtuous Circle Between A Museum’s On-line and Physical Spaces,” Toronto, 2006, accessed July 20, 2017. <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2006/papers/barry/barry.html>

Enabling visitors to personalize their visit, engage with content, and bookmark it to revisit later is vital for institutions to offer in this technologically advanced time.²²

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22. Ailsa Barry, "Creating a Virtuous Circle Between A Museum's On-line and Physical Spaces," Toronto, 2006, accessed July 20, 2017. <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2006/papers/barry/barry.html>

V. Structure of Museum Text

Before visitors even enter a museum, it is easy to spot the numerous writing styles that the institution has chosen to use. Text is everywhere in a museum, it is in the advertisements, the entrances, all over the walls, and it can even be on the floors or ceilings. Any piece of writing in a museum has been designed and planned for several different functions. The largest written panels can lead people to different parts of the museum, lead visitors to the actual exhibits, and advertise future exhibitions. The most commonly found text appears in a variety of physical forms in a museum setting from loose leaf sheets to catalogues, pamphlets, and books. They can even be found in non-material forms such as projections using optical devices or displayed on televisions and video screens in the form of electronic text. The physical format of texts combined with the layout of the content should create strong eye-catching messages.

Labels are comprised of content, structure, and presentation. The guidelines for the content of labels will be covered in the following chapter after the guidelines for the physical structure are laid out. While it is important to try to follow these suggestions, breaking them does not mean that visitors will necessarily skip over the text or ignore it completely. These guidelines make it easier for visitors to read more overall and have a better experience. The physical components of labels include legibility, organization, size, typeface, density of information, and colors. The composition and presentation of the text is very important because if it is not attractive or legible at a glance then it is not likely to be read by visitors. Words that are spaced too closely or too far apart are hard to read and the same is true of the spacing between lines of text. Letters can be too small to be able to be read easily and while it is hard to make letters too

big, if the letters or words cut off between the lines then they can be too hard to read. Presenting different arrangements of text is known as typography. Typographical choices influence legibility, readability, appropriateness, design, and effectiveness of text and every content writer should at least have a basic understanding of typography.²³

Typeface, a component of typography, is important to think about with all the different types of fonts available.²⁴ Fonts are categorized as Roman, blackletter, or italics depending on which historical style influenced it. Roman refers to type modelled from European manuscripts of the 15th century that were based on the writing style used in ancient Rome.²⁵ Blackletter is the Gothic script, known for its thick lines and sharp edges which could be carved quickly to print books. Italic is a cursive font that is based on a stylized form of calligraphic handwriting.²⁶ This paper is written in Times New Roman, a serif typeface that is very common in books, general printing, and as a standard computer font.²⁶ Each of these different types of font create a different mood in writing styles and can create a whole different tone in a narrator's voice. While there are no hard suggestions on which of the typeface to use, serif is much more commonly used in printing. Online typeface on the other hand can be with or without serif due to the nature of a digital screen which is made up of pixels instead of ink. Depending on the size of the font and the colors on digital backgrounds it is good to experiment with what font looks the best and does not cause a lot of fatigue to read. The most important consideration about an online font is to use one that does not strain the eye of the viewer since will cause them to spend less time reading

23. Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2015), 266.

24. Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style* (version 3.2), (Vancouver: Hartley and Marks, 2008) 124.

25. Ewan Clayton, *The Golden Thread: The Story of Writing*, (Bedford Park: Atlantic Books, 2013), 104-106.

26. Simon Loxley, *Type: The Secret History of Letters*, (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2006), 130-131.

overall. Writers should be creative and unafraid experiment with fonts as long as they work with the theme of the exhibit and are not too hard to read.

The next component is the structure of these labels.²⁷ Labels that are too busy in terms of color, shape, and typeface will not allow visitors to properly absorb the information. A good example is a children's museum which can be filled with bright colors and loud noises to cater to the shorter attention spans of children but may give a parent or guardian a headache from all the noise. To prevent eye strain dark colors on light backgrounds are the easiest to read but white letters surrounded by a black outline can be read on any type of colored background. Reading labels is a passive activity that can become boring after a couple hours so it is important to make the labels as easy to read as possible.

A way to combat boredom in visitors is to incorporate an activity that they can engage in every once in a while, such as a touchscreen or hands-on model to play with. Children's museums are often filled with these types of activities since children tend to learn better through touch and action. One activity suggested earlier can be to encourage visitors to use their personal devices and incorporate an online activity. Examples of this would be encouraging them to post where they are on social media, leading them to a funny Twitter account related to an object or topic, or to encourage them to download an app that allows them create fun photos of an item or show them how it has transformed over time. While videos can be placed periodically throughout an exhibit, playing videos is not always a good way to combat boredom in visitors since that also

27. The structure of labels includes the format, level of interactivity, sound, and graphics, either in print, video, or computers. Busy or clashing color choices can cause a strain on a reader's eye and if the strain is too much then it can cause a text to be read much less often than others.

a passive activity and not something that visitors can easily immerse themselves in especially if they encountered it after the video has started.

Just as with too many labels, too many electronics and electronic graphics can put a strain on the eye of visitors preventing from taking in large quantities of information. Another problem can be clutter surrounding the label that can overwhelm visitors including the noise, lighting, sight-lines, and competing stimuli. When these things disrupt a reader from the text they are not likely to go back and finish what they were reading.

Density of information and label length are other important factors of presentation because length correlates negatively with a reader's attention span. It is too easy to go overboard with the amount of text in a museum to try and teach as much as possible in a short amount of time. This is one of the most common mistakes with labels found in many exhibits in big and small museums. Since visitors are more likely to read a larger proportion of short labels than a small proportion of long ones, Bitgood suggests that the safe number of words per labels is somewhere between 30 and 75 words but it does not hurt to go even shorter²⁸.

Trying to juggle all of the different components that make up just the physical structure of a text is hard to do. It is very easy to create a bad label but author Beverly Serrell lists eight deadly sins that compromise the quality of labels in her book on exhibit labels.²⁹ Avoiding these eight major sins, as defined by Serrell should be the biggest goal when creating label content.

28. Stephen Bitgood, *Engaging the Visitor: Designing Exhibits That Work*, (Edinburgh: MuseumEtc, 2014), 56.

29. Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2015), 89.

1. Too long and wordy
2. Too technical for the intended readers
3. Boring, with inappropriate information
4. Badly edited, with mistakes in grammar, spelling, or syntax
5. Too small- tiny words crammed on a 3x5 card
6. Hard to read as a result of poor typography
7. Colored in a way that makes reading difficult or tiresome
8. Badly placed, causing neck, back, or eye strain in the reviewer

Even just one of these deadly sins by itself can lead to a label that puts a strain on visitors. When people have to strain to read labels they can be perceived to be more work than the reward the information will produce. At this point the reader will stop engaging with the label and move on to something else that seems to be less work. The goal of a label is to attract visitors and to engage them but when they are poorly done they can have the opposite effect.

By understanding all the different ways that a label can be written poorly, writers can then start to understand the ways to write good ones. The content in a museum label should also follow Bitgood's guidelines to make it a clearly understood interpretive label.³⁰ The first rule is that these labels must attract the reader's interest and draw them into the subject. Second, they should also correct any misconceptions visitors may have about the subject that they are reading. Third the interpretive label should reach advanced readers with more complex concepts rather than using more complex language. The text should also tell more than facts, it should engage

30. Stephen Bitgood, *Engaging the Visitor: Designing Exhibits That Work*, (Edinburgh: MuseumEtc, 2014), 68

readers and ask them questions, preventing too much passivity. Finally, it should also present problems with the subject and acknowledge when there is something that is unknown by experts. A good example of this would be an introductory panel to the “Scotland: A Changing Nation” at the National Museum of Scotland. This permanent exhibit covers the most recent history of Scotland from the turn of the 20th century to the current day. The introductory panel starts the exhibit off with an artifact, a short blurb, and a quote that engages the visitor with a question at the end (See Figure 7). While the quote is more of a rhetorical question it still pulls the reader from a passive state and asks them to think about how Scotland is normally viewed as a nation full of tough people.

Many visitors at a museum go with the expectation of learning something and the first step to reaching that goal is to make labels physically appealing. There are many different types of way to engage visitors and different ways to lay out text in a way to convey information without causing the visitors to become overwhelmed. Once the guidelines for the structure and presentation is understood then a writer can begin to refine a writing technique for the content their labels that fits their style or the style of the exhibition. The same is true for an online presentation as well since all of these sins and eye strains can cause readers to leave a website and not want to go back. When writing online it is important to follow the same guidelines as onsite writing to not only create a uniform look but to also to prevent visitors from getting frustrated with the online content.

VI. Writing Structure and Techniques

Along with the components that make up a good text physically there are also guidelines for developing the content of exhibit labels. There are many different writing styles and the label writer should find the one that best fits the exhibition or the one they are most comfortable using. The major point of these labels is that the messages in a text must be understood by as many people as possible. As Blais suggests it is “essential to use simple, not simplistic, writing styles in order to reach visitors, regardless of their knowledge.”³¹ The functions of these labels are to provide information on the visual content of exhibits, to instruct visitors, personalize topics, and to interpret the exhibition theme.

To make museum text accessible to a wide audience a writer should use a reader-relevant approach to writing. The explanations should be easily understandable and generally aimed at around a middle school reading level. The best way to do this is to write in a conversational tone that is approachable and familiar but not patronizing or too formal. Addressing and engaging the reader directly is important and the active voice and vivid language are also key to doing so. By making the reader more active, they are more likely to retain the information learned from the labels. The best way to go about writing text is to use a style that is concise, friendly, and inviting. A label with all of these components will be able to keep an audience engaged and encourage them to continue reading.

31. Andrée Blais, *Text in the Exhibition Medium*. (Quebec: Societe des Musees, 1995) 205.

Despite the different styles that can be used to write labels it is important to make sure that an exhibit is not filled with more than one voice or narrator, unless it is intentionally done. One narrator for the whole exhibit is the key to keeping it unified and polished. Multiple voices and writing styles in a single space need to be done carefully and the different voices need to be labeled clearly so they do not confuse the visitor.

Shorter text is more often read which means that every word needs to count. Talking straight and dropping unnecessary words is the strategy to follow. Including surprising facts or information about objects at the beginning of the label to makes them more interesting and more likely to be read by the visitor.

Serrell offers another list of guidelines to following when writing labels for an exhibit.³²

1. Write about what visitors can see, feel, smell, or experience from where they are.
These are concrete things that a writer knows about and can encourage someone to interact with instead of trying to guess the characteristics of visitors.
2. Vary the length of the sentences.
Longer sentences can be difficult to read and a lot of long sentences in similar length can bore visitors.
3. Use short paragraphs and small chunks instead of blocks of information.
Too many words can overwhelm visitors or cause them to skip it since it looks like too much work
4. Metaphors are good for some narratives but not labels.
They will add too many visual ideas to a complex environment even if the visitor understands the metaphor. If they are used then they should be more of visual metaphors than written ones.

32. Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2015), 118-126.

- 5.** Alliteration is easy to use but can become gimmicky very quickly.
This writing style where words start with the same letter or sound is easy to use but should only be done when necessary.
 - 6.** Haikus and other poems should only be used if they are relevant to the theme of the exhibit.
 - 7.** Do not force exclamations points and emphasis on readers.
Avoid this punctuation and allow visitors to discover on their own something they believe causes exclamation.
 - 8.** Use humor sparingly.
It is harder to convey tone of voice over text than audio and humor can cause confusion or anger if done improperly.
 - 9.** Use quotations sparingly as well.
Using too many to fill space will teach readers that they are irrelevant and not needed to understand the theme instead of being used as a complement to the theme.
 - 10.** Expect your visitors to want to read.
Assume that all labels will be read by someone and do not put information in unless it is expected to be read.
 - 11.** Do not put content in for the “more interested reader.”
It is hard for readers to skip text in a label and this excuse just allows more words to be put into a label, which will make it less likely to be read.
 - 12.** Use informative paragraph titles and one or two heading phrases.
This stylistic device allows labels to be broken into pieces and introduces ideas quickly. It will allow ideas to be communicated quickly.
 - 13.** Newspaper journalism is not a good model.
Newspaper length assumes that readers are sitting down and it repeat ideas and information under the assumption that readers will not read everything. On the other hand, label readers are standing and time limited and should have shorter blurbs to read rather than a long passage.
 - 14.** Stay flexible within the label system.
There are recommended word lengths but be flexible. Avoid the same number of words overall in labels which can make for a dull design and writing style. Be creative with the stylized look and leave white space occasionally, not everything needs a catchy title.
-

15. Interrelate labels and their settings.

Information in text works best when it enhances, echoes, and reflects its overall setting as well as the objects on display. Well integrated labels with the rest of the exhibit will allow for a good-looking design overall since they all work together.

16. Have a snappy ending.

Give readers reward for their effort in the form of closure, new insight, or reinforcement. Make them feel happy that they read through all the text.

Effective labels will encourage readers to start to read, to read aloud to others, to remember what they read, and to read all the way to the end.³³ There is no way to tell someone exactly what to say because it will differ from institution to institution based upon their mission, collection, and theme of the exhibition.

Similar to the physical guidelines laid out earlier these content guidelines also work well for creating an effective online experience. When creating a webpage, the main page should be like the macro-text of an exhibit with short blurbs, eye catching design, and easy to spot navigation buttons or signs to take visitors to different areas. Once visitors pick a sub-section the text should reflect the large-scale text that gives out the different sub-sections, themes, or exhibits available in that page. This section should still avoid extensive content and instead have a short blurb describing what visitors will find inside. An example would be a webpage showcasing an archaeological department, the page should inform visitors that inside they will find artifacts ranging from this date to this date that give us clues into how our ancestors lived and worked. It should be short, to the point, and tempting the visitor to click on it. The biggest appeal of websites is that unlike onsite writing there can be a multitude of links for visitors to click on. There is no need for a writer to put all of the information in one spot because it can be

33. Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2015), 137

broken down and categorized into short online text. By separating bits of information through links and treating pages as if they were each a different physical room, it allows for a break in reading which prolongs that amount of time visitors can spend online before they get fatigued or overwhelmed.

Once a visitor is past the home page and has picked a department to explore there should be different sub-departments to lead to more detailed content such as the timelines of a certain country or artform, the different areas that participated in this timeline, and the types of collections that one can expect to be related to the department. All of these texts are similar to the medium scale text giving an introductory statement and describing the overall theme of the section. Writers should still avoid complex words and long text since it may be off putting to a potential reader. This could be a section where a quotation could be used but only if it fits the theme of the content very well and add to the overall effect instead of causing the reader to get lost and confused.

Going farther into these sub-sections should lead visitors to the different objects available, all based on the specifics that interest them. Here is where online visitors can find individual objects in the collection and pick and choose which ones to look at based on their interest. This section is going to be filled with many headings and pictures which allows visitors to pick and choose what they would like to see based on sight. Only after an artifact has been chosen should visitors expect to see the largest amount of text written out to explain the object. Similar to what was described in the fourth chapter these webpages should contain a mixture of

medium and macro scale text that allows the visitors to pick the reading level that they would like.

Each of these different pages in a website should be treated as if they are different rooms in a museum that guide people to their preferred destination. They should be appealing, not overly busy, not have too much to read at first, and easy to navigate in terms of presentation and content. This will give visitors the most pleasurable and easy going online experience as possible and will make them willing and likely to keep visiting the museum in person and online repeatedly.

Having now covered the definition of label text and different writing techniques, this thesis will now cover the case study which is based upon the author's internship experience undertaken in the summer of 2014.

VII. Case Study: AOC Archaeology Group in Caithness, Scotland

A. Internship Outline

During my internship at Archaeology Outreach & Consultancy Archaeology Group over the summer of 2014 I was tasked with writing text hubs for an online resource centered on archaeological landscapes in Caithness, the most northerly landlocked point in Scotland (See Figure 8). AOC Archaeology, as they call themselves for short, had been put in charge of using a LiDAR³⁴ landscape survey as the framework to create an interactive educational resource. This resource will allow visitors to view information on over 150 monuments that date from 8000BCE to modern times. Using this method, the laser allows for even the smallest distance to be measured and recorded, revealing sites that are so well hidden they were lost over time.

This area of Scotland is so rich in history that it is possible to walk through 10,000 years of Scottish history in about two hours. The text written for this online resource needed to be up to date but also accessible to anyone interested in Caithness. As stated by the Managing Director, Dr. Andy Heald, "they must be, in essence, a mini open area museum display."³⁵

This project centered on my being taught the correct parameters and techniques for writing museum exhibitions. Everything related to my work was under the supervision of Dr. Heald, who spent 10 years working at the National Museum of Scotland under the direction of Dr. David Clarke, the previous Head of the Department of Early Peoples. During that time, Heald worked on many displays at the National Museum including their *Early People* gallery and the creation of the displays at Portmohomack and the Caithness Broch Centre.

34. LiDAR stands for Light Detection and Ranging and it is a remote sensing method that uses the light from a laser to measure distances from the laser point to the Earth.

35. Andy Heald, Interview with Heather Strachan, July 2014.

The process for creating these labels started off with researching background information on the archaeology of Scotland, the different types of monuments, the specific archaeology of Caithness, and antiquarians of Scotland.³⁶ I also needed to familiarize myself with online research databases such as the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland: Canmore³⁷ and the Highland Council's website, HER Online.³⁸ Most of the sites written had not been excavated since the 1800s and were only visited once a year by a surveyor to assess the physical state of the site. Much of the reading material for this research was over 50 years old and even the online databases had to be fact checked to make sure there were no mistakes.

After a couple weeks of this research the writing process started following parameters to defined by AOC. Each of the hubs for this online resource were going to appear with a photograph of the site and needed to be limited to 120 words. The text also needed to be written in a way that was interesting and engaging to the average visitor. Through the different rounds of writing and critiques, as well as following the guidelines listed in this paper, my labels were refined over time through independent learning and review sessions with Dr. Heald.

I was encouraged to look through the different museum exhibits in the National Museum of Scotland and other institutions in Edinburgh, Scotland to find examples of good label writing.

36. Antiquarian refers to collectors from the 1800s and early 1900s who were some of the first people to excavate and catalogue archaeological sites in Scotland.

37. The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland in 2015 merged with Historic Scotland to become Historic Environment Scotland. RCAHM or HES now identifies, surveys, and analyses the historic and built environment of Scotland. The old website www.rcahms.gov.uk now sends visitors to the new website, <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/>.

38. HER Online stands for Highland Historic Environment Record. A Scottish government database that stores land surveys about archaeological sites, historic buildings, and finds within the Highland area. <http://her.highland.gov.uk/SimpleSearch.aspx>

Reading and online research were also utilized to research the best practices of label writing through the guidelines of Bitgood and Serrell. The internship ended before the completion of the project but the labels I wrote during the internship were of a high enough standard to ultimately be incorporated into the database.

B. Example of Effective Text

The attributes of excellent museum labels outlined in this paper were utilized when writing the text on different sites at Caithness during my internship. Of the 150 sites at Caithness I wrote 21 of them and these labels have been used for the online resource is being compiled. This section will showcase and discuss how the labels were written and evolved from the beginning of my internship to the point that they are at now. It must be stressed that these labels are unfinished, unpublished, and still need to be edited by someone else so all will have a singular tone. One text, about the South Yarrows South Cairn near the Loch of Yarrows in Caithness, will be used to illustrate this evolution.

The Yarrows are on the Eastern coastline of Scotland and boast some of the best-preserved examples of the archaeological sites that were written about. There are two large burial chambers that are related to one another, listed as South Yarrows South and South Yarrows North (See Figures 9 and 10). These two long rectangular tombs are also called cairns since they are made up of stone stacked upon one another. The site is surrounded by many other types of archaeological sites since the Yarrows was a strategic resting point for people traveling down the East coast of Scotland. The following is the first label written for the Southern chamber.³⁹

39. Both of these sites are cairns, which is an academic term for large piles of stones stacked upon one another with or without chambers inside, though the Yarrows cairns both do contain burial chambers. Not a whole lot is known about cairns or what they were used for besides burials and they only reason that is known is because of cremated remains found inside the chambers. No one knows if they were used as ritual sites, places to worship ancestors, or as a meeting spot for councils. Due to the richness of archaeological sites in the area and the state of the cairns it would have been too easy and boring to just write about what they were near or how much each site had fallen into ruin. Of all of the 21 sites written about only one is open to the public, the one known as Camster Long, because of their ruined nature it makes them dangerous to explore.

Found close to the Loch of Yarrows this structure stands on the top of a heather grown ridge with both short ends facing to the East and West. Compared to the South Yarrows North cairn this site is much better preserved and largely free of vegetation. It is a well-defined long chambered cairn with horns at both ends but one end has been altered by the addition of modern walls outside of the entrance.

The whole main chamber of this cairn was found to have a lot of dark clay mixed with charcoal, ashes, small stones, and bone when it was first excavated. A large amount of human remains was also found here in burnt and unburnt fragments.

This first text, and many of the other first drafts, stretched close to the 120-word limitation by discussing the individual sites and their conditions. The information is factually correct and while not being overly technical and wordy, the label was considered too academic for the average reader and would limit the wide audience that the online resource caters to. In addition, the text was not written in a way that engages or interests the readers and the tone is too passive. It also does little to explain what visitors are looking at and why it is important enough to be researched. This was all pointed out during the first round of critiques and the goal for the next round became to write shorter simpler labels.

This label for the South Yarrows South came close to the limit because it was one of the best-preserved examples of a cairn in Caithness. Even after all the critiquing and editing it was still one of the longest labels due to the amount of information known about it. By the end of the project some labels at the end were only short blurbs containing no more than three sentences.

The original label for South Yarrows South also did little to explain overall that a cairn was a burial chamber which would make much more sense when talking about the fragments and artifacts found inside. Factually correct, too long, assuming too much knowledge on the part of the reader, but laid out in a readable manner, this label would have been looked at but not read through completely or often due to the confusion it would cause in readers.

Before the second round of critiques all of the labels had been simplified in their word use and structure. They catered more towards a 7th or 8th grade reading level but still contained interesting information where it was possible to give some. The goal of writing after the second round of critiques was to rearrange the labels to start off or end with a surprising fact and to have the information flow smoothly. An interesting fact at the beginning would engage readers quickly and make them more likely to finish the whole label. One at the end would give them a reward for finishing the text and give readers a sense of satisfaction. The smooth flow of information would also put less of a strain on the reading capabilities of visitors and allow them to intake more information overall in the course of their visit.

Each subsequent critique lead to shorter and shorter labels that stated obvious information to the reader. While catering to as many audience demographics as possible, the labels ended up being something that would not hold the attention of an academic for long since the information was presented out so blatantly. In an ideal online museum, there would be different reading levels for visitors to pick from, catering to their preferred reading level. An academic label which could be used for research or education, while a simplified label could be read by or to small

children and those unfamiliar with the host language. There could also be a label that catered to the average reading level for the majority of visitors.

By the end of my internship many of the labels written for the site did not reach 100 words. They also used very simple language and focused on teaching the broader history of the sites as opposed to listing information about individual areas, their shape, and their conditions. The text ended up balancing information about the different types of burial sites, their importance overall, and interesting facts about different ones. The following text is of the same South Yarrows South cairn as before but with multiple edits that allows it to be simpler but more engaging.

This final resting place has been used a lot since it was built around 5000 years ago. The main chamber of the tomb had many burnt items mixed on the floor. These items included ash, charcoal, stones, cremated remains, and pottery pieces. The amount of remains here shows how popular this burial chamber was. This site and many other long cairns have courts on the ends that come in different sizes. These sizes can be short and stubby to long and curved. The courts may have been used in rituals or ceremonies.

This text represents the kind of labels that AOC was working to create and put online. It has been written to reach the widest audience possible and communicate to them the importance of these sites in archaeology. It is meant to be read by anyone who can go online even web visitors from a foreign country across the world.⁴⁰

40. As of the time of writing I have not been able to find the documents online.

VIII. Conclusion

As simple as it looks in a museum writing the text for labels is a well thought out and very thorough process. What may look short and simple is the result of the long process of figuring out what to say and how to say it in a way that is easily understandable and interesting. Overall the internship was a great opportunity for learning how to write museum labels and how to write them well. The work done for AOC has started the process of understanding interpretation in museums and how to write text that communicate clearly to visitors.

Excellent label writing online and in person is all about being an efficient communicator and understanding that the process involves continuously improving your skills. Following all of these guidelines will not guarantee success in an exhibition but it will help writers avoid many common mistakes and better their writing and interpretive skills. There are many different variables to consider when writing, stylistically and visually, and it is hard to juggle all of them but it can be done. When overall writing skills and presentation are improved overall then the written words online and onsite will look much more attractive and will be more likely to be read and remembered.

When writing for online or an onsite space it is important to keep it concise and clear so that visitors will spend more time there and in the end learn more from their experience. By spending more time there they will learn more and remember more of what they read. The best labels are the ones that are read aloud, read all the way through, and encourage visitors to stay longer even though they may have pressing needs to leave the website or physical space.

In a time where museums have to compete with theme parks, pop culture events, and other low-cost leisure activities such as Netflix, it is important to try and stay relevant and up-to-date on all of the ways to reach potential visitors. This is why having an online presence is so important for museums. A good-looking website will attract more visitors and online activities will give them an incentive to visit the physical institution. The best way to make an online presence attractive is to have good writing, a beautiful typographical layout, and amazing presentation.

Even though it may never be the star of its own exhibition, writing is very important to the success of an exhibit. Writing and presentation go hand in hand when creating an exhibit as well. When done well it takes an exhibit to a whole new level and reaches a very wide audience. When done well online it will create an enticing space that will encourage visitors to keep reading and learning and it will inspire them to visit the physical space.

IX.Appendix



Figure 1: Photo of the interior of the Guggenheim Museum in New York City showcasing the upward spiraling architecture. Visitors start at the top and then make their way down to the lobby shown. Photo courtesy of David Heald



Figure 2: Photo of a macro-scale text banner that is an indoor advertisement panel showcasing an exhibit at the National Museum of Scotland. Photo taken October 2014 courtesy of Julia Allum.



Figure 3: Photo example of large-scale text which is the introductory panel to the *Ming: The Golden Empire* exhibit at the National Museum of Scotland in the summer of 2014. Photo courtesy of Julia Allum.



Figure 4: Photo example of small-scale text which goes into detail about each of the items in the display. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Scotland.



Figure 5: Entry way leading to the *Early Peoples* exhibit in the basement of the National Museum of Scotland. Sculptures by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi emphasize that people lie behind every exhibit and yet they are still shadowy unknown figures. The four groups represent the four themes of the exhibit: the use of natural resources, the movement of the peoples, roles of power, and religion. Photo courtesy of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland.



Figure 6: Cases showing common artifacts used by early peoples with text explaining where they were found, their age, and what they were used for. Note the far-right case which has a frosted glass vase. Broken and incomplete artifacts were married with frosted glass to give a better picture of the size of artifacts and how they were used. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Scotland.



Figure 7: An example of an engaging panel which uses the quotation at the top that ends in a question mark. The question is meant to rhetorically ask visitors if they believe Scotland can be beaten by the challenges it has faced in the past and will face in the future. Photo by author.

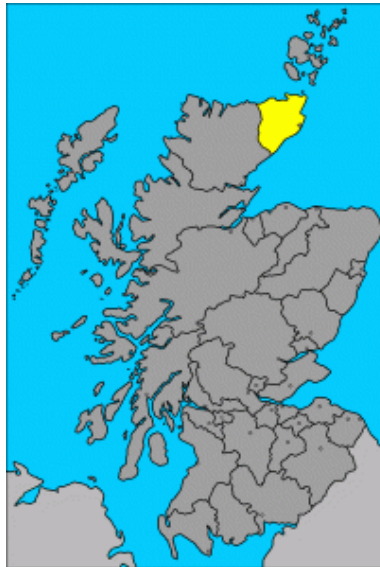


Figure 8: This map of Scotland shows the county of Caithness highlighted in yellow. As the most northerly point of Scotland this area is characterized as having wide open spaces and rolling hills. Due to its proximity to Scandinavia this area of Scotland is also rich in Viking history as well as Scottish history. Photo courtesy of My Scots Blood blog. <https://scotsblood.wordpress.com/about/caithness/>

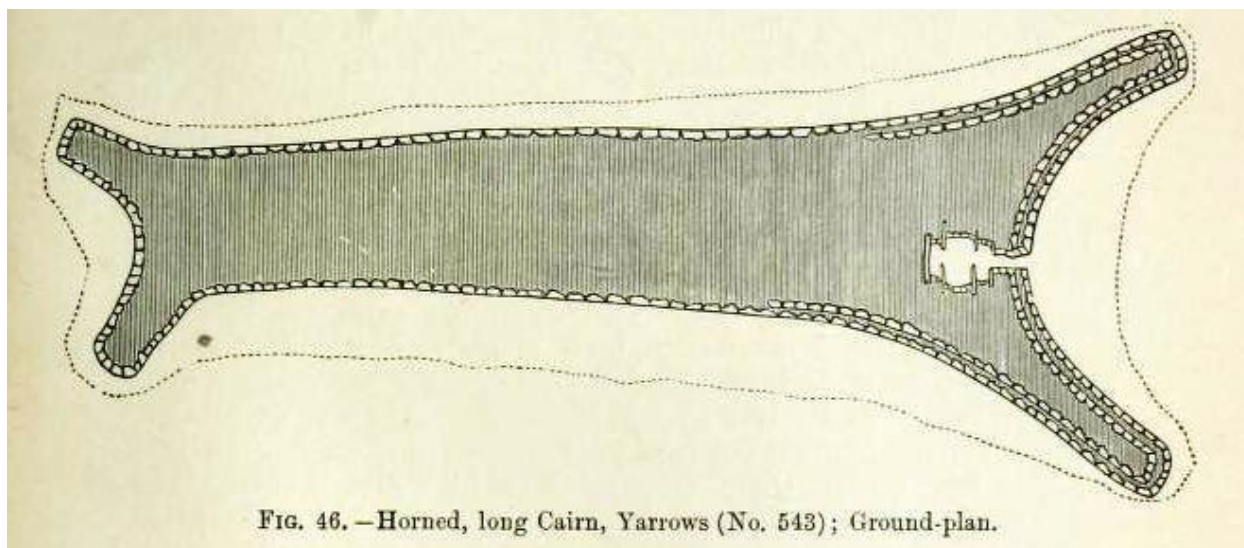


Figure 9: This drawing from Society of the Antiquities of Scotland shows the South Yarrows South chambered cairn which is distinguished from the other by its longer horns. This cairn is 240 feet in length and sits just West of the Southern tip of Loch Yarrows. Drawing courtesy of archive.org <http://www.megalithic.co.uk/modules.php?op=modload&name=a312&file=index&do=showpic&pid=95815>

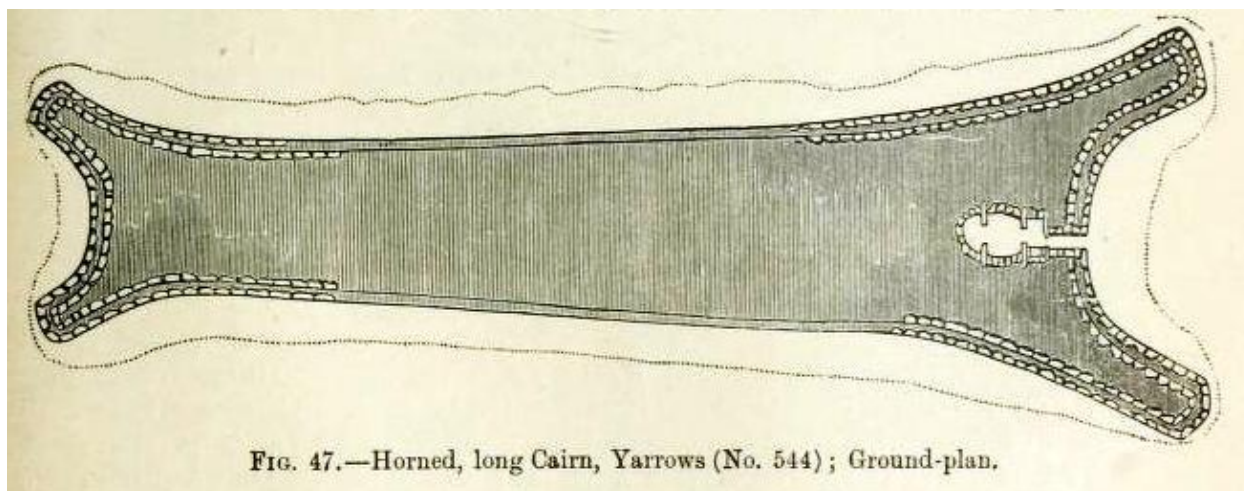


Figure 10: This drawing from the Society of the Antiquities of Scotland shows the South Yarrows North chambered cairn. This cairn is 190 feet in length and in much poorer shape than the more Northerly cairn. Drawing courtesy of archive.org <http://www.megalithic.co.uk/modules.php?op=modload&name=a312&file=index&do=showpic&pid=95822>

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