

EPIP Industrial Heritage Leaflet Writing Guide

How to Create Appealing Panels



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A panel is an attractive and engagingly written short introduction to your site designed to attract visitors passing by who may not know anything about the site or its history.

Catch their eye

Your panel needs to catch someone's attention in less than a second as they pass by.

People will read it while standing outdoors, possibly distracted by the weather, their friends, dog or children. They are likely to only spend a few minutes at your panel.

The panel's design, layout and contents need to be as immediately attractive as possible. Its contents should be easy to identify, and it should communicate your messages succinctly and with interest.

Think of a panel as the front page of a newspaper – designed to catch your eye as you pass by the news stand.

How far will they read?

Some people may only look at the illustration and title. Some may only go on to read the introductory paragraph. Ensure all the essential messages are here.

Other people will read everything and want to discover more. The panel should be written for all levels of interest without putting anyone off at the start.

Good panel design and text layout will encourage more people to read on...

To create a good interpretation panel you need to ask yourself:

- What key messages do you wish to communicate?
Be selective - don't try to tell everything you know about the site.
- What are your aims? What are you trying to do?
 - 1) Tell the heritage story?
 - 2) Control behaviour? (tell visitors where to go, or about conservation issues, dangers, etc.)
 - 3) Encourage visitors to engage with a story? (e.g. living and working conditions in the past)
- Who is your target audience?

The essentials of design – a good interpretation board should have:

- An eye-catching title that can be read from a distance. Minimum 60 point size.
- A large, attractive and immediately identifiable main image. This will be the first thing to catch a person's attention.
- A small number of other images that illustrate the messages. A clear, uncluttered, annotated map may be important for people to orientate themselves. A modern photograph of the site taken from the panel's location doesn't add anything unless it is annotated.
- Text that is accessible and engagingly-written. The key things are to keep it brief and interesting, leading people on to read more. Type size is also really important – don't make it too small!

Writing text visitors will read

People will only read for a short time while standing outside. Aim to write no more than 150 words, 200 at a maximum.

Use short sentences and break the text up in to small digestible sections through paragraphs, subheadings and layout.

Avoid jargon and technical terms unless they evoke the activities and are explained.

Use no more than two fonts. The type size should be at least 24 point.

People with even slight visual impairments find it easier to read text which is on a plain background and has a strong contrast. Light coloured text, or text on pictures or a patterned background is difficult to read.

Relate to your audience by using an active writing style. We often write in the third person but try writing in the second person, e.g. 'You can see the waterwheel to the left...' rather than 'The waterwheel is to the left...'. Try using active rather than passive verbs and placing the subject first, e.g. 'Foundry workers hammered the iron...' is better than 'The iron was hammered by foundry workers...'

Bring the site alive. Evoke the experience of being there when it was a working, living place full of people, sights, sounds and smells.

Materials and installation are important

- Place it somewhere accessible where people can see your site and relate it to the panel contents. Have a firm surface in front of it so boots won't churn the ground into mud.
- Ideally don't install the panel facing due south. UV bleaching from sunlight can take years off the life of a panel.
- Panels can be installed on legs as angled lecterns or set vertically, or mounted on plinths or walls (not listed buildings).
- The height above ground should be one that is good for standing adults and people in wheelchairs to read. The lowest point of a panel should be about waist height.
- There are many materials to choose from to print the panel on. Glass-reinforced plastic and melamine laminates are very durable to physical damage and sunlight. Vinyl, acrylic and polycarbonate more easily fade and damage.
- It is a good idea to have someone check the panel every few months to clean dirt or leaf litter away and check for damage or fading. A dirty, damaged panel can be a bad advertisement for the site or your organisation.

And finally...

Creating an interpretation panel is fun and creative. The hard work is choosing what to leave out, but by doing so you will increase the chances that visitors will learn about your site.

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