In this issue's Nuts & Bolts:

THE PATH TO "FINAL COPY" WRITING GALLERY TEXT COLLABORATIVELY

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Customarily, the task of writing gallery text in art museums has been focused on the question of "what," as in *What is the background of this object? What needs to be said about it?* But increasingly art museums are also thinking about "how" in the writing of gallery text: *How can we ensure that visitors find the information provided both illuminating and accessible?*

To address this question, the task of gallery writing at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art has become a joint venture between curators and interpretive planners. Though certainly an iterative (and sometimes messy) process, we've found that by sharing the task, our text becomes more engaging and approachable, better serving our visitors. In this way, we are able to balance the museum's commitment to both the "what" and the "how."

Articulating a path to final copy—the steps through which collaborative writing happens—wasn't easy. Together, the relevant museum divisions had to wade deeply into the procedural weeds. By sharing the experience of developing our internal process, we hope to help colleagues consider ways to implement collaborative writing in their own institutions.

WHY COLLABORATIVE WRITING?

In an interview about writing opinions, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg quipped, "If you want to make sure you're read, you do it together, and you do it short."[1] The same holds true for museum text. When thoughtfully

implemented, collaborative writing bridges the different perspectives needed to create accurate and engaging content. The resulting text is grounded art historically, but also addresses visitors' needs for clarity, relevance, and brevity—rendering it more likely to be read, as numerous visitor studies have shown.[2]

Recognizing the benefits of a collaborative approach was the result of years of institutional change. Although the Nelson-Atkins had begun to engage audiences through more diverse and accessible programs and events, our galleries themselves reflected a more traditional interpretive approach, with content that was geared to a more scholarly audience. With the urging and support of our director and education department leadership, the museum began to make incremental steps toward shared writing. Initial efforts included our education staff in the production of gallery text, but still positioned curators as the ultimate arbiters of content.

In 2012, the museum launched an interpretation department. By dedicating educator positions to exclusively focus on the development of exhibitions and interpretive materials, these key aspects of a visitor's gallery experience officially became the joint responsibility of curators and educators. The museum's strategic plan, implemented shortly thereafter, specifically reinforced the objective to provide "powerful moments of connection accessible to visitors of all backgrounds."[3]

Despite this institutional commitment, some issues remained unresolved. The roles of curator and interpretive planner were ill-defined and there was no motivation to reach consensus. For example, an interpretive planner found that an installed label did not include her edits because the curator had apparently perceived them as suggestions that did not need to be taken or discussed.

The decision to revisit and revise our production process for gallery text was sparked by the arrival of new curatorial and interpretation staff. In an initial "getting to know you" meeting to establish how the museum's process worked, the group quickly agreed that existing procedures were handled inconsistently, which often led to problems. The biggest challenges revolved around two issues: 1) determining who had which responsibilities in the process and 2) a lack of articulated steps to take in the event of missed deadlines. All sides agreed that it was time to revisit text-writing practices.

DEVELOPING THE PROCESS

Over the course of several months, representatives from the relevant divisions (what we dubbed the "Process Group") met regularly to hash out each step in the process of creating label copy, from writing to production. Many of our discussions started with practical and logistical issues, such as *How should we record changes to a text?* and *What's the most efficient way to edit graphic layouts?* Underneath, there were harder questions to work through: *Who has the last word about which edits are accepted and which are dismissed? Whose concerns take priority?*

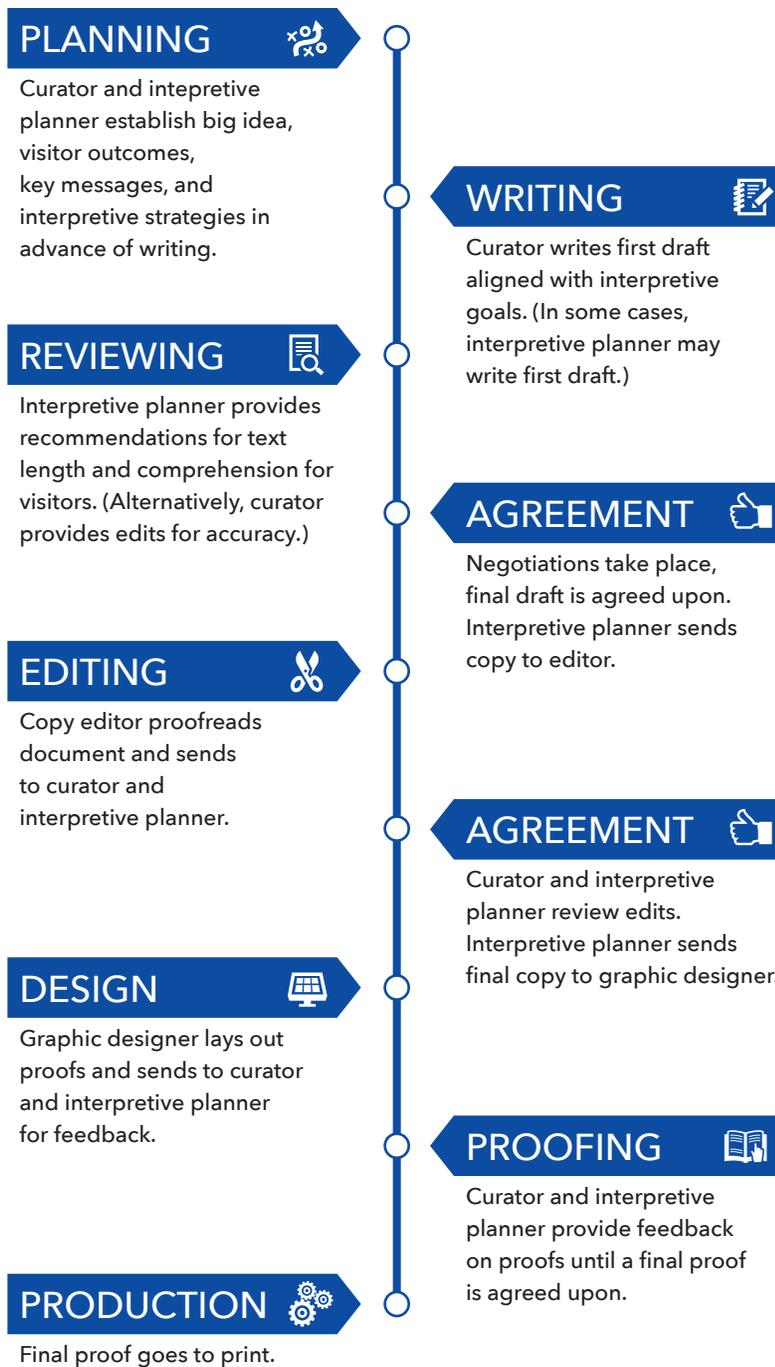1   Ruth Bader Ginsburg, in Nina Totenberg, "Liberal Justices Make A Point To Speak With One Voice," *NPR*, July 10, 2015, accessed September 21, 2015, http://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/07/10/421811833/ginsburg-liberal-justices-make-a-point-to-speak-with-one-voice.

2   For example, see Stephen Bitgood, "The Role of Attention in Designing Effective Interpretive Labels," *Journal of Interpretation Research 5*, no. 2 (2000): 31-45; Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); C. G. Screven, "Motivating Visitors to Read Labels," *ILVS* Review, 2, no. 2 (1992), 183-221.

3   The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, "Strategic Plan," accessed November 1, 2015, http://www.nelson-atkins.org/strategic-plan.

INTERPRETIVE MATERIALS PRODUCTION PROCESS

PLANNING

Curator and intepretive planner establish big idea, visitor outcomes, key messages, and interpretive strategies in advance of writing.

WRITING

Curator writes first draft aligned with interpretive goals. (In some cases, interpretive planner may write first draft.)

REVIEWING

Interpretive planner provides recommendations for text length and comprehension for visitors. (Alternatively, curator provides edits for accuracy.)

AGREEMENT

Negotiations take place, final draft is agreed upon. Interpretive planner sends copy to editor.

EDITING

Copy editor proofreads document and sends to curator and interpretive planner.

AGREEMENT

Curator and interpretive planner review edits. Interpretive planner sends final copy to graphic designer.

DESIGN

Graphic designer lays out proofs and sends to curator and interpretive planner for feedback.

PROOFING

Curator and interpretive planner provide feedback on proofs until a final proof is agreed upon.

PRODUCTION

Final proof goes to print.

fig. 1. Illustration of the Interpretive Materials Production Process.

What are the ramifications for staff and schedule when a deadline can't be met?

Together, we went into a collective problem-solving mode. We drew upon our own experiences and those of other museums to think about alternatives. We grappled with fine but important details, such as how to name files, or who to copy on which communications. The most difficult topics were those that revolved around control. If we were to reap the benefits of collaboration and shared responsibility, we would need to foster greater transparency and trust.

After four or five drafts, we produced a two-page document that we called the "Interpretive Materials Production Process." Through subsequent meetings with the broader staff, we made additional edits, and the plan was adopted. Decidedly more concise than anything we had ever produced, the production process defines key players, their roles, and a path to label completion (fig. 1). While there a number of steps in the plan, it breaks down into four main phases:

Initial Work of the Curator and Interpretive Planner. The two review the production schedule and frame the exhibition's big idea (a briefly-stated thesis) and key messages. They also address questions related to the interpretive approach and scope, such as *What information would be essential for the introductory panel? Do we need section panels and extended labels? Are additional interpretive elements warranted?*

Writing. While the curator typically authors the initial draft, in some instances it makes more sense for the interpretive planner to write first. Examples of interpretive planner-originated text

might include elements that lie outside the domain of art history, or copy that supports an interactive element. This fluid approach to assigning roles serves a practical purpose: it allows us to consider the workloads and expertise of the staff involved.

Review. The interpretive planner then reviews the first draft for alignment with the exhibition's big idea and key messages, paying special attention to text length and comprehension for non-specialist readers. In the case of draft written by an interpretive planner, the curator edits for factual veracity. All edits are recorded by Microsoft Word's Track Changes function.

After initial review, the pair meets to resolve disagreements and settle on a final draft. The interpretive planner then relays the updated content to a copy editor for proofreading. This step represents a major change from previous practice, in which the curator had the last word on the copy before it was given to the editor to proofread. The change positioned interpretive planners as teammates in the production of content, rather than as consultants to the curators. It also reinforced the need for both parties to come to agreement.

Layout in Graphic Design. After the interpretive planner and curator have accepted or declined each of the copy editor's recommendations, the planner forwards the final copy to the design division, where a graphic designer takes over. He or she provides two rounds of proofs, which are printed out and reviewed by both the curator and the interpretive planner. Once all parties approve the proofs, the final texts are sent off for production.

HOW IT'S WORKED SO FAR

Despite the time-intensive nature of collaborative writing, our process has made the work of writing and editing text more efficient. Project by project, the roles of the curator and the interpretive planner have become less ambiguous. Collaborations are far more collegial.

We have also had more success in meeting deadlines by creating procedures to enforce schedules. If a curator or interpretive planner runs late on a deadline, they can confer with the design division to renegotiate dates. Should the new deadline be missed, object label content is limited to identification information only. Since no one wants this to happen, our new strategy has proven to be good incentive for respecting schedules. We have implemented our default plan only once since we adopted the new production process.

Periodically, we will need to update the process. We have already identified the need to include designations for the scale of projects to aid in scheduling. We would also like to establish similar processes for producing digital content.

In making amendments to the process, we've found that the group needs to reconvene and consider changes together. On one occasion, a process group member attempted to add an additional step without gathering the group. Despite good intentions, the unilateral change raised enough questions that we realized we couldn't follow through with it until it was discussed cross-departmentally. In many ways, this bump in the road only reinforced the value of the time and effort we had spent together to articulate our process.

HOW OTHER MUSEUMS APPROACH COLLABORATIVE WRITING

The Nelson-Atkins' production process is one of many used by other institutions, with some variations. Our counterparts in the science and natural history museum arena tackled these issues well ahead of art museums. Staff members at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science (DMNS), for instance, have used collaborative approaches to writing since the 1980s. Today, interpretive writers at DMNS usually draft all text after meeting with science staff to identify key concepts. Interpretive writers then work closely with graphic designers to ensure the seamless integration of text, media, and design elements. Often, science staff members review text for accuracy only when all interpretive elements have been arranged in the graphic layout.

More recently, our colleagues at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) established a process that similarly involves a curator, an interpretive staff member, an editor, and a graphic designer. Depending on the project, the first draft may be written by the interpretive planner or curator, or split between the two. After reciprocal edits are made, their interpretation department is responsible for moving agreed-upon labels into production. The DIA's process also includes time for evaluators to test gallery copy for clarity and relevance with visitors. As more art museums foray into collaborative writing, the subject of process has become a perennial topic of conversation at conferences and meetings.

SOME HELPFUL STEPS

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to initiating the practice of collaborative writing, we can recommend some helpful steps:

Seek buy-in from leadership. Support from the director and/or senior leadership will signal institutional commitment for the endeavor. If more immediate priorities need to be addressed first, leadership can help identify the steps that will lay a solid groundwork for collaborative writing. In our case, this institutional change was incremental, and resulted from a broader set of priorities about visitor experience.

Identify key players and define roles. Think about your museum's infrastructure: *Who is currently involved in producing text? Is there anyone who should be included in text production that isn't?* Bringing in all the key players (usually including curators/content experts, educators, editors, and designers) to articulate a production process is essential to addressing all the inherent complexities. Take time to carefully define the roles of all players to avoid ambiguities. It's a worthy investment that yields day-to-day benefits in working relationships.

Work through difficulties. For some institutions, sharing the task of writing may represent a major paradigm shift. Curatorial staff members who are unaccustomed to working this way may feel anxious about losing oversight, having previously seen gallery text as an essential expression of curatorial scholarship. To establish a collaborative process, it is imperative to understand that there will be some difficult conversations and issues to resolve. Build a safe space for staff representatives to put their department's cards on the table and work to identify solutions as a group. Through mutual openness, trust will grow.

As our experience suggests, developing internal procedures requires quite a bit of commitment and soul searching on the part of an institution. However many steps are needed to chart your own path to "final copy," and however deeply you need to wade into the procedural weeds, you will find the endeavor is worthwhile. It will benefit your institution and, most importantly, your visitors. ∎

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