

Information Sheet: Exhibition and Display Basics

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This information sheet provides a basic overview of developing an exhibition in a museum or gallery setting.

Sources of further information are listed at the end of this information sheet.

OVERALL GUIDELINES

Simplify - Be selective with items on exhibition, choose the most engaging and important items for display, and show them to advantage

Explain the Items- It clear what each item is, what it means, and why it is important. All text should be easy to read.

Tell stories- Engage audiences with stories about people

Clear layout - Items are grouped in a way that makes sense, e.g. thematically

The design should be attractive but not detract from the display.

PLANNING AN EXHIBITION

Engaging exhibitions begin with a strong concept, and are based on visually appealing objects and/or images. The exhibition should communicate interesting stories or ideas. Associated material such as photographs, diagrams, maps, personal stories, or artists' statements can also contribute to a strong exhibition concept.

Documents such as certificates, letters or newspaper articles as the primary content may be better suited to a publication format, either physical or online, rather than a physical exhibition.

Planning an exhibition also includes working out who would be interested in visiting the exhibition (audience/s) and what you would hope they would get out of the experience (key messages).

An Exhibition Proposal or Brief is a foundation document to help scope out an idea for an exhibition, the document can be used as the basis for communicating and decision making about the exhibition, and as a basis for funding applications. For a basic template see:

http://www.mavic.asn.au/assets/exhibitions_handbook/ExhibitionProposal.doc

A Project Plan will help you work through the stages of developing the exhibition. Planning an exhibition involves working backwards through the process, breaking down all the tasks that need doing, providing plenty of time for each stage, and working out who is doing what. For some templates and examples see:

http://www.mavic.asn.au/assets/exhibitions_handbook/ProjectManagementBrief.doc

http://www.mavic.asn.au/assets/exhibitions_handbook/Timeline3.doc

For more information on planning an exhibition (includes an example) see:

http://www.magsq.com.au/dbase_upl/5.PLANNING.pdf

If you are thinking of refreshing an existing exhibition, see this template for reviewing an exhibition:

<http://community.history.sa.gov.au/how-do-i/review-display/interpretive-programs-template>

EXHIBITION DEVELOPMENT

DIGITAL IMAGES IN EXHIBITIONS

You may want reprint photographs, to display as enlargements or to include on exhibition labels. These could be from your own collection, or you may be collecting digital images from other organisations and individuals. For printing purposes, images will need to be high resolution images, at least 300-600 dpi, and ideally at least 1-2 MB. See below for information on digitising:

<https://www.prov.vic.gov.au/community/managing-your-collection/just-digitise-it>

MGNSW also has a series of info sheets on digitising:

<https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/>

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE CREATIVE CONTENT

Before re-using images, artworks, literature, dramatic works, or music, you will need to check if they are in copyright; even if the item belongs to you, the creator may still hold copyright.

Copyright information is available at:

<https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/organisation-management/copyright-basics/>

https://www.copyright.org.au/acc_prod/ACC/Information_Sheets/Galleries_Museums_Introduction_to_Copyright.aspx

Many copyrights holders are happy to provide permission for museums and galleries to reproduce their work, though professional artists and collecting organisations may charge fees, in which case you will need to plan ahead, as it can take weeks for an organisation to process a license request. Content licensing is always for a specific purpose (e.g. online for 5 years, print run in Australia of 1000 copies) so be clear what you intend to use it for, and include all planned uses in your request, so that you don't need to go back for permission to re-use the content, e.g. to use a photograph to advertise the exhibition on Facebook.

Template for information to capture when acquiring a picture for use in an exhibition:

<http://community.history.sa.gov.au/how-do-i/pictorial-material-donation-and-reproduction-forms-examples>

Example of an image license agreement

https://mgnsw.org.au/media/uploads/files/Image_Licence_template.pdf

Creating a table or spreadsheet to track the process of getting copyright and other relevant permissions is recommended, so that you can easily see where you are up to, and how to recontact the permission provider if needed.

You can also reproduce content that is out of copyright, or that has been shared online with a content sharing license such as Creative Commons license; you will not need formal permission to re-use this content, you will just need to follow the license restrictions (e.g. not for profit, can be modified) and credit requirements (e.g. creators name and link to website). For more information see:

<http://creativecommons.org.au/>

Some Image sharing sites have search tools for usage rights, for example google images and Flickr have search options to see images that can be reproduced for non-commercial use. The State Library of Victoria has uploaded high resolution copies of out of copyright images from their collection that can be re-used, see: <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/search-discover/explore-our-digital-image-pool>

LOANS

Loan of additional collection items for display need to be arranged well in advance. For templates for loan forms see:

http://www.mavic.asn.au/assets/exhibitions_handbook/InwardLoanForm.doc
<http://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/collection-management/loan-fact-sheet/>

Items will need a condition report when received and when departing to owners, see: <https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/collection-care/condition-reports-how-guide/>

LAYOUT AND DESIGN

A consistent overall look will tie the exhibition together, and help the visitors to focus on the content. You may want to choose some a key image to use on the title wall or introductory panel, and perhaps also for the invitation, booklet, and publicity. Think about how you can 'set the scene' or introduce the exhibition. A coloured wall or introductory panel can help draw visitors in and orient them in the exhibition space.

To plan the layout for an exhibition, group the elements of the exhibition, for both meaning and visual appeal. Consider visitor flow - is there a logical order to the display or can people wander freely?

If you have the budget, employing an exhibition designer is recommended, as they can provide a cohesive look for the exhibition as well as solving display issues.

EXHIBITION DESIGN TOOLS

Mocking up your exhibitions before installation is recommended. Before a final choice of items is made you may need to undertake further research about the items, and source additional items, images or stories. Roughly working out the layout of the exhibition will help see how much material you can exhibit, and identify where you will need to cull items or any gaps that need

addressing. Mocking up the exhibition first is safer for collection items, as there is less handling of items in a rush while installing.

If you have the items at hand, you can set them up in groups in the workroom, allowing the same space as they would have in the cabinet. For framed images, try lining them up against a wall to check how they look together.

If you only have digital images of the exhibition items, you can group them together and scale them so you can play around with layout, using word processing or design programs.

In terms of arranging the space, simple layouts can be worked out using a scale drawing of the space or graph paper, or you can work on virtual grid paper using Microsoft Word gridline option (layout - align - gridline). There are also software programs which can assist with designing the floorplan or all elements of an exhibition:

- Floorplanner, free basic interior design for quick and easy floorplans, can move walls etc. bit limited for exhibit elements and can't upload images. Can see walls painted in different colours. www.floorplanner.com/
- Photoshop Elements, good for 2D, if fluent in Photoshop
- <http://www.adobe.com/au/products/photoshop-premiere-elements.html> Example of use <http://serendipitypatchwork.com.au/blog/2014/04/02/plan-exhibition-layout/>
- Sketchup, free for basic version, can add pictures. Many exhibition designers use this program, takes a little practice <http://www.sketchup.com/>
- Oretelia Curator, custom exhibition design program - a virtual exhibition space can be mocked up, including 2D and 3D artworks, wall colour, didactics, lighting, moving image and sound based works. Sophisticated program developed in collaboration with the National Exhibition Touring Service, costs apply <http://orteliacurator.com/>

CASES, PLINTHS, PEDESTALS AND PARTITIONS

- Should be stable, neat and clean, and suited to the objects on display.
- Can be a good way of influencing people traffic.
- Should be insect and rodent proof, and lit so as not to cast the exhibits in shadow.
- Case lining can be fabric, but avoid wool.
- If painting use low VOC water based paints, and air the cases for several weeks.
- A heavy weight in the base of a plinth can ensure it is not top heavy.
- Mylar (inert plastic) can be cut to size to provide a barrier underneath sensitive display items, to protect them from dye transfer or other damage from fabric or painted surfaces

ATTACHING ITEMS TO THE WALL

- Avoid presenting items or text less than 90cm or more than 200cm from floor level.
- Many galleries set the 'eye level' for hanging pictures at 155cm above floor level.

- Light weight graphics, diagrams etc. can be fixed to walls with Velcro adhesive patches.
- Paintings should hang from D rings attached to two sturdy picture hooks firmly fixed to the wall, or from two wires suspended from a picture rail.

OBJECT MOUNTS

Some items will need supporting mounts to support them (for example book cradles).

Raising selected items can also highlight them, and provide more visual interest, particularly if there is a lot of unfilled vertical space within the exhibition cabinet.

Object mounts can include:

- Perspex 'risers' available from shop supply shops
- Custom made supports, made from acid free board, with acid free tape or hot glue.
- Painted or fabric wrapped wooden blocks (see information on display cases above for recommendations for painted or fabric surfaces within exhibition cases).

Items can be secured using wire wrapped in silicone tubing, or with museum wax (for example at the bottom of a vase).

LABELS

Generally, exhibition information is layered – broken down into 'bite-sized' portions so that it is easy to follow. Every item should be clearly identified with a label.

Layers of text may include:

- Title panel – name of exhibition, can be something catchy followed by actual description, e.g. Firebrands, WWI Anti-Conscriptionists in Marlborough. The title sets the tone through words, colour and font
Approx. 400pt (10cm high)
- Introductory panel – intrigues and outlines what exhibition is about
Approx. 200pt (5cm high), 50-150 words
- Thematic text panels – story or context for a part of the exhibition
Approx. 36pt (1cm high) 50-150 words
- Extended labels – presents story/context for highlighted items as well as explaining what an item is
- Approx. 24pt, 50-100 words
- Object labels - explains what a particular item is and when it was made
Approx. 18-22 pt., 15-25 words

Small displays may combine some of the first two or three panel types, for example the title and introduction, or a single introductory panel, then straight to extended and object labels.

Consider also if you need an acknowledgement panel, instructions for interactives or general signage (e.g. emergency exits / do not touch), as these also form part of the overall look.

Using relevant images on text panels can help bring the exhibition to life.

WRITING LABELS

- Label text should be very concise, but conversational in tone
- First person quotes are engaging
- Avoid jargon, unexplained specialist or abbreviated terms.
- Expression should be in simple concrete language.

Writing interpretive signage, good examples of effective language for exhibition text

<http://community.history.sa.gov.au/how-do-i/display-interpretation-and-writing>

Effective label writing, slideshow

<http://www.slideshare.net/HelenHales/writing-effective-museum-text-8243677>

More on good writing for exhibitions

<http://australianmuseum.net.au/Writing-Text-and-Labels>

LABEL DESIGN

Labels should use a clear 'sans serif' font such as Helvetica, Geneva or Arial, with a font size of at least 18-22 points. 12-point text is common for written documents but is much too small for an exhibition setting. Extended spacing between lines can make text easier to read.

Black text on a white background is the most readable for most people; avoid pale fonts and fonts that 'shimmer', such as white on red. If using white text on a dark background you may need to increase font sizes.

Designers can quickly create quality labels. If you do not have access to a design professional, you can create your own template labels in Word. Set a border with a pale grey line as a cutting guide, and set generous margins. The object name should be in bold. A standard size for a basic label for an individual item is around 15 wide and at least 10 cm high, with 1.5 cm or wider margin. Experiment with what will work for your purpose, as long as font sizes are appropriate, see above. To make your sample into a template scroll down the Save option and 'Save as' a template.

Longer form exhibition text is much easier to read when presented in columns.

MAKING LABELS

Simple labels can be printed on heavy card, or attached to Foam Board. You can either print on paper and attach to adhesive Foam Board, before being cut to size, or print on adhesive paper and attach to Foam Board. Acid free Foam Board should be used inside display cases.

Printing businesses can create more hardwearing and stylish labels, this is particularly worth considering for introductory and thematic labels, and for long term or travelling exhibitions. Vinyl wrapped Forex and matt laminated prints attached to Corflute are two popular production methods, you can ask printers to show you samples, and to provide estimated costings.

PLACEMENT OF LABELS

Place labels in consistent positions wherever possible, for example on the right side of item, bottom edge one metre from floor level.

Small groups of items could be described on one label. To make it easy to see at a glance which label goes with which item you can use numbers, or visual cues such as images or outlines of shapes of items.

Card labels can be attached with to walls with double sided tape, small Foam Board labels can be attached to walls with Blu-tac, and larger labels and text panels can be attached to walls with Velcro tape.

DIGITAL EXHIBITION CONTENT

Digital content, such as films, audio recordings, audio tours, interactive websites or apps can add extra depth and interactivity to exhibitions, and need not be expensive to incorporate in some way. Producing digital content needs to be considered and planned for in same way as other display content, and the communication of the exhibition key messages should be paramount.

Think carefully about which exhibition elements would work best as a screen based or audio experience, and which elements would work best as part of the physical display.

Consider if digital content will form part of the core exhibition, or will it be an optional way for particular audience segments to discover more detailed information? Is the experience an intimate solitary experience or a group experience? Will it be a linear or visitor controlled experience? Will it be looped, or visitor activated? Can the content be repurposed for online use?

Guidelines for digital content creation

- Both curatorial and digital content production skills will be needed, to select relevant and high quality source content such as images, oral histories etc., create scripts or conduct interviews, edit text, audio and/or footage, and design the flow and look of the end product.
- Image and sound quality should be high
- Copyright and image credits needs to be addressed as with other display content
- Commonly used editing programs include Audacity, for sound, iMovie or Adobe Premiere or Final Cut Pro are common video editing tools.
- Image series can be looped, for example using PowerPoint
<https://support.office.com/en-za/article/Create-a-self-running-presentation-57fc41ae-f36a-4fb5-94a3-52d5bc466037>,
- Avoid fancy transitions between images or segments, they can be distracting

Tips for creating a short video or image sequence can be found at

<http://museumvictoria.com.au/discoverycentre/websites/making-history/>

<https://open.abc.net.au/learn?sortBy=publishedDate&tutorialType=1>

IN HOUSE HARDWARE FOR DIGITAL CONTENT

Where the museum or gallery provide the hardware for viewing digital content, such as a TV monitor, staffing resources will be required to turn devices on and off, troubleshoot operating issues and maintain the equipment over the course of the exhibition.

Some of the options for displaying images or footage onsite include digital picture frames, computer monitors, projections, touch screens, and audio players, with speakers or headphones.

Guidelines for screen and audio based museum and gallery experiences:

- Provide seating for any playtime of more than a minute or two.
- Separate the area from the main space as much as possible, flickering light and soundtracks can be very distracting for viewing other displays (unless the soundtrack is ambient sound for the exhibition)
- Consider headphones for an intimate experience
- 3 minutes suggested maximum per recording, film or image sequence
- 8-10 minutes' total maximum, for multiple segments.
- Arrange a technical run through of the exhibition for all relevant staff/volunteers and create a technical instruction sheet for each exhibition.

BYO DEVICE OPTIONS

It may be preferable for exhibition visitors to view or listen to digital content on their own phone or tablet, so that your organisation does not need to supply and maintain the equipment used by visitors. The content still needs to be developed and made accessible, such as footage or audio that has been uploaded to a page of the museum or gallery website, or that sits on another website.

A simple way for visitors to access online content can be through a QR code which functions as a short cut to a web address, and can be created easily through a QR generator (several free online services are available), and printed on exhibition signage. The full web address should also be provided, for those visitors who have not downloaded a QR reader to their device. You will need to check that most devices will have internet access in the building, and where possible link to websites that have been designed for viewing on mobile platforms – the content will look better and be easier to navigate on a phone or tablet.

More sophisticated content can be created through commissioning an app developer to work with you on developing an app, which can be downloaded by visitors.

For information on using iPads, see:

<http://australianmuseum.net.au/blogpost/museullaneous/ipads-as-tools-for-museum-interpretation>

LIGHTING

- No exhibit should be placed where it is in direct sunlight at any time of the day, this is particularly important for fabric, paintings, drawings, prints or original photographs.
- Any windows near exhibits should be being blocked out or fitted with UV filtering screens for the duration of the exhibition.
- It is always best to light works that are hanging on walls from an angle, positioning spotlights so that they pan over several exhibits.
- Plan lighting early in exhibition development, as it makes a huge difference to displays and is often left until the last minute, a lighting designer can be useful for major projects.

- Once the exhibition is installed walk through the space, looking for shadows and any points that may shine into the visitors' faces, and correct the lighting as far as possible.
- If installing lighting choose long lasting light forms that emit little UV and heat, with flexible lighting systems, including the ability to reposition, and to adjust the arc and intensity of lights.
- Case study on lighting systems:
http://www.magsq.com.au/dbase_upl/ACaseStudyonLightingforMuseumsandGalleriesFinal.pdf

TEMPERATURE

- No exhibits should be placed close to or over radiators, heaters or heating ducts. Ensure that exhibits are not placed near hot lights or electrical equipment.
- The AICCM recommended Interim temperature and relative humidity guidelines for acceptable storage and display conditions of general collection material are:
 - Temperature – between 15–25°C with allowable fluctuations of +/-4°C per 24 hr.
 - Relative Humidity – between 45-55% with an allowable fluctuation of +/- 5% per 24 hr.
 - Where storage and display environments experience seasonal drift, RH change to be managed gradually across a wider range limited to 40% – 60%.

EXTRA INFORMATION

BOOKS

Exhibitions: a practical guide for small museums and galleries, Georgia Rouette, 2006
purchase pdf of book for \$10/\$20
<http://www.mavic.asn.au/resources/publications>

Exhibition Design for Galleries and Museums: an insider's view, Georgia Rouette (Ed) 2010, \$29
<http://www.museumsaustralia.org.au/site/publications>

FREE ONLINE INFORMATION

Downloadable templates for all exhibition related documents and forms, including exhibition briefs, budgets and loan forms
<https://mavic.asn.au/exhibitions-guide-resources-templates>

Video on Creating a Small Exhibition, five minute slideshow with voiceover
<https://mavic.asn.au/training-videos>

Interpreting everyday objects, finding the meaning - scroll down for a great example about interpreting flat irons
http://www.magsq.com.au/dbase_upl/4.INTERPRET.pdf

Exhibition techniques and support (includes instruction on making a book support)
<http://community.history.sa.gov.au/how-do-i/display-techniques-and-supports>

Ideas for involving audiences in exhibitions
<http://www.participatorymuseum.org/read/>

Curatorial Toolkit

https://mgnsw.org.au/media/uploads/files/Curatorial_Toolkit.pdf

Exhibitions at your place, includes costings and timeframes

https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/sites/default/files/10-exhibitions-at-your-place_0.pdf