The interpretive theme as a foundation for visitor management planning

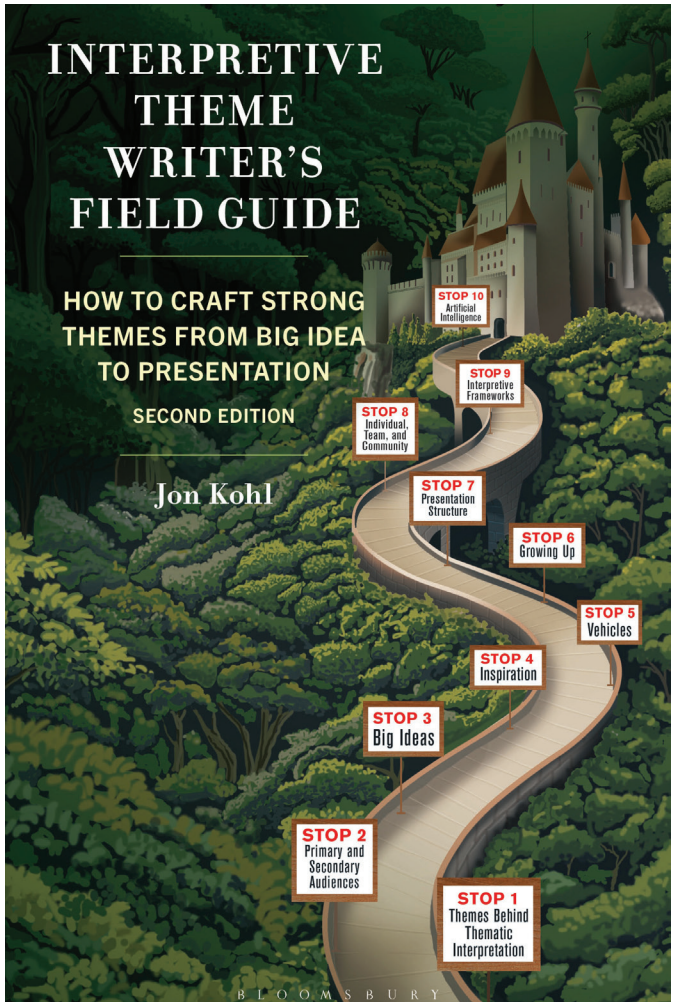
Jon Kohl

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Insofar as protected areas receive visitors, they must communicate with them—whether tourists, school groups, local community members, reporters, or VIPs. Managers may hope to teach them, shape their attitudes, or influence their behaviors, yet visitors typically arrive on their own and remain only briefly. These characteristics call for a specific communication strategy. Managers often default to education, but heritage or environmental interpretation may be the more appropriate tool. Although education and interpretation employ similar techniques, their goals diverge. Education seeks to increase knowledge, attitudes, skills, intentions, and behaviors. Interpretation, by contrast, creates the conditions for meaningful experiences—ones in which visitors understand more deeply, appreciate more broadly, and connect more intensely than when they arrived. Such connections between visitors and a protected area—its inhabitants, stories, and resources—can cultivate relationships that later translate into support through donations, volunteerism, advocacy, word-of-mouth promotion, or political action.

To encourage this short-term shift in visitor disposition, an effective interpretive strategy integrates site architecture, programming, media, and management goals so they work together to make meaningful connections more likely. What ties these elements together is a strong interpretive theme—a Big Idea that provokes visitors to contemplate deeply some aspect of the interpreted heritage. In this sense, the interpretive theme becomes a foundational visitor management planning building block: the DNA that weaves together place, experience, and purpose. When thoughtfully developed, themes align communication with management objectives, guiding how sites welcome visitors, frame experiences, and ultimately influence how people relate to and support protected areas.

This excerpt reprinted with permission from *Interpretive Theme Writer's Field Guide: How to Craft Strong Themes from Big Idea to Presentation,* Bloomsbury Academic, 2026.
https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/interpretive-theme-writers-field-guide-9798881807504/



Stop 1
The Theme That Lurks behind Thematic Interpretation

THERE ARE DIFFERENT BRANCHES ON THE COMMUNICATION TREE

Interpretation is not the arrow for every target. Some communicators want only to convey information for the enjoyment of their audience or information that makes clear both rules and consequences if violated. Other times, communicators may have well-defined education goals, while others lurk in theme parks seeking nothing more than pure unadulterated entertainment. (In fact, we shouldn't call Disneyland, Xcaret, or Jurassic Park "theme parks" at all—they should be "**topic** parks.")

> "Theme itself" is perhaps best summed up by its simplest definition: Theme is a unifying idea or subject, explored via recurring patterns and expanded through comparisons and contrasts.
>
> — K.M. Weiland, *Writing Your Story's Theme*

Other branches on the communications tree include **marketing** (to influence consumer decisions and beliefs), **public relations** (improve the public image or perception of organizations and people), statements of will ("Save the rainforest!") including regulations, **propaganda** (information deliberately spread to help or harm a person, group, or movement, or promote a particular doctrine propagated by an organization or movement), **education** (knowledge acquisition and skill development), **orientation** (helping people find their way), academic publishing (advance science through the rules of academia), and even small talk among lovers (strengthen personal relationships). I mention these branches because if interpreters confuse the kind of communication they wish to engage, their resulting themes only radiate that confusion outward to the audience. Often statements they write aren't interpretive at all. As Sam Ham (2013: 53) writes, "When you know ahead of time what you're trying to accomplish, succeeding is much more likely."

INTERPRETATION, LIKE ALL OTHER BRANCHES, HAS ITS OWN PURPOSES

Developing the right theme, message, or statement for the situation anchors all communication, not just **interpretation**, and thus you cannot take this writing task lightly, though some might see it simply as another box to check on some obligatory lesson plan format passed down from your forebears. If your game is indeed interpretation (see Sam's Chapter 3 on interpretation endgames), then developing the discipline to finely craft a provocative theme marks the difference between a bazooka and a sniper. A sharp, precise theme laser guides the selection of your content and helps visitors to decipher your communication goals. A theme can also straighten out interpreters who wish to hide from accountability: it obligates them to live up to their communication goals; by being written, a theme makes their ideas public and ensures that the entire team or even community are on the same page and not working at cross-communication purposes as happens in so many organizations.

The cultivated theme allows interpreters to evaluate their communication, or, to see if the audience's understanding falls within the intended **zone of tolerance** (see Sam's Chapter 8 and the *Voices from the Field* by Angela Pfenniger, page 115). Beverly Serrell, in her book on exhibit labels (2015: 7), says, "A powerful exhibition idea [theme] will clarify, limit, and focus the nature and scope of an exhibition and provide a well-defined goal against which to rate its success."

Sam's subtitle "Making a Difference on Purpose" as well as Beck, Cable, and Knudson's title *Interpreting Cultural and Natural Heritage for a Better World* (2018) signal that through proper use of interpretation we can greatly increase over random chance alone the probability of desirable and planned change coming into existence. The interpretive theme represents a first great leap down that trail.

All of this can occur because inside the audience's mind, a strong interpretive theme provokes thought, it excites and connects neurons, and rouses the audience to want to know what lies behind the theme. It makes them beg for more.

> The moment at which music reveals its true nature is contained in the ancient exercise of the theme with variations. The complete mystery of music is explained right there.
>
> —Pierre Schaeffer, French composer

When an interpreter leads an audience into an opportunity space that provokes thought and emotion that in turn forges connections between the experience and background of the audience with the (not inherent) qualities and meanings of a heritage place or idea, the audience deepens its immediate appreciation and relationship. In that state of heightened awareness, people become, at least temporarily, much more likely to participate if given a convenient means to do so, be it engagement, donations, volunteerism, or something else. Help them love the heritage, provide them a route to express that love, and they will embrace their connection through their investment of time and treasure (see Powell and Ham 2008 on traveler philanthropy). That is the major heritage management connection of interpretation, for which Sam in other publications has demonstrated the research links in this cause–effect–love–contribution chain (Ham 2009).

But let's not separate themes from their context. Sam argues that successful thematic interpretation must be **TORE** (Chapter 2): **t**hematic, **o**rganized, **r**elevant, and **e**ntertaining. No coincidence that the theme holds the kickoff position, but alone a theme is not a program, not an exhibit; a theme must be developed (see Theme Spotlight: Theme Writing vs. Theme Development at Stop 3), and then presented (see Stop 7).

Make no mistake, without a theme, you likely will not have a measurable, successful program or exhibit. Serrell describes how an exhibit might behave without a Big Idea or strong interpretive theme to lead it (2015, 13):

> Exhibitions that lack a big idea are very common. And they show it because they are overwhelming, confusing, intimidating, and too complex. There are too many labels, and the texts do not relate to the objects. The labels contain too many different ideas that do not clearly relate to each other. They are hard to grasp. They are typically underutilized—the majority of visitors move through them quickly, stopping at fewer than one-third of the elements.… Without a big idea, the job of the label writer is much more difficult: interpretive text contains fragmented, unrelated facts with emphasis on providing information for the sake of information, not on providing meaningful, useful experiences for the visitor's sake.

Don't go there.

STOP 1 BIG IDEAS

1. Interpretation represents but one communication objective and does not suit every purpose.
2. A strong theme makes interpretation accountable and evaluable. It allows an interpreter to judge its success within its intended zone of tolerance. It directs selection of content.
3. Theme is the first ingredient to successful TORE-defined thematic interpretation.
4. Without a theme, interpretive media's ability to communicate can break down.
5. Strong interpretive themes and transformational interpretation can provoke audience actions in favor of heritage management and conservation.

REFERENCES

Beck, Larry, Ted T. Cable, and Douglas M. Knudson. 2018. *Interpreting Cultural and Natural Heritage for a Better World*. Champaign, IL: Venture Publishing.

Ham, Sam H. 2009. From interpretation to protection: Is there a theoretical basis? *Journal of Interpretation Research* 14(2): 49–57.

Ham, Sam H. 2013. *Interpretation: Making a Difference on Purpose*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing.

Powell, Robert B., and Sam H. Ham. 2008. Can ecotourism interpretation really lead to pro-conservation knowledge, attitudes and behaviour? Evidence from the Galapagos Islands. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 16(4): 467–489.

Serrell, Beverly. 2015. *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.