

Session 2b

How to reach audiences:

Label writing as part of preparing exhibitions

HPHE7009 Skills in the Museum

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From objects and collections to exhibitions

PREPARING EXHIBITIONS

What is the purpose?

- Redesign
- New material
- Celebration
- Change in curriculum
- New acquisition
- Project



Planning

- What is the purpose?
- What is the time frame?
- Who is it for?
- Budget?
- Ethical Considerations?
- Narrative and Research?
- Objects?
- Technology?



Time frame

- Permanent
- Temporary
- Thematic change within a given period
- Object related



Who is it for?

- General public
- Specific group
- Schools
- Universities/College



Budget

- Self funded
- Grant funded / aided
- Sponsored
- Co-Curated and funded



Ethical Considerations

- Decolonisation
- Globalisation
- Funding Streams
- Political Affiliations



Narrative and Research

- What is the narrative you are conveying?
- Is the information still relevant and appropriate?
- Is there new research available?



Objects

- Material
- Condition
- Environment
- Insurance
- External Loans



Design and Layout

- Accessibility
- Ergonomic
- Language
- Visuals



Fossil Wonders: A Hidden Collection Awakened



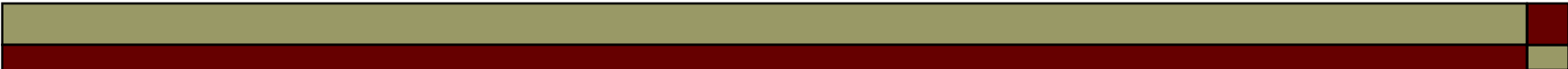






From objects and collections to exhibitions

LABEL WRITING AS PART OF PREPARING EXHIBITIONS



Museum labelling – short intro

- ❑ practice of providing descriptive and / or informative text(s) alongside exhibits
- ❑ to ensure visitors understand the context, significance, and origin of displayed items
- ❑ effective labels: concise language, engaging storytelling, and appropriate design (fonts, images)
fonts to enhance accessibility and visitor engagement
- ❑ Now important: optimize museum labelling for search engines → include relevant keywords → improves online visibility + attracts more visitors

Different forms of labels

- Descriptive – simply describe what an object is without providing any additional information
- Informative
 - Didactic – factual information about an object on display, such as its date, origin, and purpose
 - Interpretive –



Stone Head

Date unknown

This mysterious stone head was found near the former Holyrood Catholic Church, Nelson Street. This head predates the churches built on the site but currently we do not know if the head is Medieval, or even thousands of years older yet. Ancient stone heads like this are difficult to date as they were often re-used on newer buildings as an interest in antiquities grew from the 1500s.

More research to come so watch this head!

Former Holyrood Church Site - Late 1960s



8 Mounted Police Truncheon
1984

A police officer chased miner John Booker down until he escaped under a hedge, grabbing the truncheon away.

9 Pit Helmet
1950s

This helmet took a battering when worn at Royston Main.

10 Pit Boots
1976

These hardly-worn boots belonging to miner Bill Johnson were kept for best. New boots were more than a day's wage.

11 Humane Canary Reviver

Mid 20th Century
Canaries were used to detect dangerous gases underground before they could harm a human. The birds could be revived with oxygen.

12 North Gawber Colliery Water Bottle
1970

Coal dust still sticks to the bottle, hung in Mr Oates' 'coal hole' or outhouse, from his retirement in 1970 to his death 30 years later.

13 Mining Print
1990s

Donated by ex-miner Steve Skelley, who grafted for hours at Goldthorpe Colliery and Barnsley Main.

14 Barnsley Main Exploder
1950s

This fired detonators to explode rock and coal.

15 Miner's Dial
c.1900

The dial pinpointed directions in the disorientating underground conditions.



Harpé aux cartouches de Ramsès II

**Qantir (selon le vendeur en 1967)
Nouvel Empire,
19^e dynastie, règne de Ramsès II
Bronze**

Musée du Louvre,
département des Antiquités égyptiennes, E 25689

Cette arme est l'apanage des dieux qui l'offrent et du roi qui est seul à l'utiliser. Elle tient à la fois de la hache et du sabre par son unique tranchant extérieur. D'abord étrangère à l'Égypte, elle y apparaît vers 1400 av. J.-C. pour signifier la force et la vaillance du pharaon lors de la consécration des ennemis. Son nom moderne nous vient du grec ἄρπη, qui désigne l'arme courbe dont se servit Persée pour décapiter la Gorgone Méduse.

ANUBIS

Maître des cimetières, Anubis préside aux opérations d'embaumement, procédé qu'il met au point, pour sauver de la destruction le corps démembré du dieu Osiris. À ce titre, il veille à la momification de tous les morts et les introduit dans l'au-delà. Il est représenté comme un homme à tête de chien, ou sous la forme d'un chien sauvage noir. Cet animal qui vit dans les zones des nécropoles lui est associé.

ANUBIS

Anubis is the god of cemeteries and embalming, a technique he invented to preserve the dismembered body of the god Osiris. He ensures the mummification of the deceased and ushers them into the afterlife. He is depicted as a dog-headed man, or in the form of a wild black dog – an animal that lives around burial sites and is associated with him.



Propeller thought to be from the Pogmoor Crash 1940s

On January 6, 1942, a Whitley bomber left Dalton Airbase to attack the docks in France. It was too cloudy, so the plane returned with a full load of bombs. On its return to England one of the engines failed and the plane was losing height. The Captain, Alexander Hollingsworth, made the decision to jettison the bombs safely and on the approach to Barnsley ordered his crew of four to parachute out.

Captain Hollingsworth made the courageous decision to stay and pilot the plane away from a residential area, crashing into the Pogmoor quarry. Hollingsworth died but three of his four crew survived, and no Barnsley residents were hurt.



Before



DAVID D'ANGERS

Lady Morgan

Signed and dated 1830

Lady Morgan (b. about 1778) was an Irish novelist and socialite. This bust was commissioned by the sitter from David d'Angers, the preeminent French portrait sculptor of the time. She is depicted as a confident woman who was in her fifties at the time the bust was executed.

[48 words]

After

Lady Morgan (about 1778–1859) was a well known Irish novelist, whose works championed the rights of women and Irish Catholics. She was less than four feet high and had a slight deformity of the spine and face. This bust, commissioned by her from a leading French sculptor, captures her lively and determined personality. [54 words]



CHARACTERS:

Indiana Jones

Indiana Jones is an archaeologist, a man whose work is of and beneath the earth. The colour palette for the costume, whether in professorial tweeds or leather jacket and khakis, is the warm colour of the ground he walks on.

Brown is a colour that is at once vulnerable, accessible and approachable. His leather flight jacket is emblematic of his character: tough, straightforward, honest, utilitarian, impermeable, but also soft, warm and comfortable. These are the clothes that Indy slept in – they were his second skin.

A wealthy landowner and big game hunter, Colonel James Jonathan Harrison (1857-1923) of Brandesburton Hall, in the East Riding of Yorkshire, spent his extensive leisure time travelling the British Empire and beyond, hunting and killing animals for pleasure and to fund his lifestyle. He frequently visited East Africa, particularly the Ituri Forest, in what was then Congo Free State and under the direct authority of King Leopold II of Belgium. In 1905, he brought back six indigenous Bambuti people from the Ituri who he toured as a 'human zoo'.

After his death, his widow gave his collection of taxidermied animals, diaries, photographs, gramophone recordings and objects obtained on his travels to Scarborough Corporation, where it was displayed in a room named after him, now the Concert Room at Scarborough Library. In the 1950s, the collection moved to the Wood End Natural History Museum and was absorbed within the museum's collection.

This exhibition explores his collection as a new, dynamic archive. It does not follow the conventions of a traditional museum display that tells the 'story' of Harrison or focuses on themes. Instead, it recognises that this archive is an unfinished project, with multiple strands and layers, that raise many questions.



Scarborough Museums and Galleries, like other organisations in this country, has benefitted from colonialism. The donation of the Harrison collection is one example of this.

We want to understand where our power and privilege has come from and take actions to redistribute some of it to those who have been

historically excluded, marginalised or misrepresented, such as the people who were colonised in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). One important element is introducing Congolese and African voices that have been missing from the collection.

Citizen researchers from Scarborough and beyond, members of the Congolese community in the UK, indigenous Bambuti people from the Ituri Forest in the Congo, academics, students, artists and activists have been introduced to the collection and made contributions to demonstrate how **a collection like this can act as a springboard to explore multiple perspectives, some that have always existed, but have been marginalised by British colonial thinking.**



Part of
Scarborough
Museums and Galleries
Shaping the world around you

Big game hunting in Scarborough

One Citizen Researcher has made the connection between Scarborough's own history of big game hunting and Harrison's exploits.

The prevalence of herring in Scarborough attracted one of the largest fish species in the world - Atlantic bluefin tuna - to our local waters, providing the opportunity for big game blood sport for the rich and famous, without the need to travel outside the UK. Its heyday was the 1930s, when aristocrats and millionaires - men and women - and reportedly Hollywood actors came to Scarborough to participate in the sport. Lady Annie Yule, at one point the richest woman in the UK, sailed her 'superyacht', *Nahlin*, to Scarborough to hunt, and Lady Broughton, who was a renowned big-game hunter in Africa, took part in the Women's World Tuna Challenge Cup. Colonel Sir Edward Peel sailed to Scarborough on his large, Sudanese-crewed, steam yacht *St George*, landing a world-record tunny of 798 lbs (362kg) in 1932. This was outdone a year later by Lorenzo Mitchell-Henry, whose fish, weighing 815 lbs (356kg) remains a British record. His taxidermied fish is now part of the museum's collection.

The hunting of tunny fish for sport in Scarborough echoes the exploitation of animals by big game hunters across the British Empire and was another entertainment outlet for rich people seeking new thrills.



Tunny fishing in Scarborough
© Scarborough Museums and Galleries

Cup. Colonel Sir Edward Peel sailed to Scarborough on his large, Sudanese-crewed, steam yacht *St George*, landing a world-record tunny of 798 lbs (362kg) in 1932. This was outdone a year later by Lorenzo Mitchell-Henry, whose fish, weighing 815 lbs (356kg) remains a British record. His taxidermied fish is now part of the museum's collection.



♀



JOURNEY is a photographic tour of the Egyptian-style architecture found throughout Yorkshire. It reflects the West's enduring fascination with Egypt's ancient monuments, long regarded as the ultimate symbols of immortality and copied and constructed for centuries right across Europe, and certainly around Yorkshire.

For the Egyptians' ability to celebrate resurrection and eternal life while commemorating death explains the creation of the pyramids, obelisks, temples and sphinxes which are now part of our regional landscape.

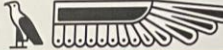
They were built to memorialise specific individuals, celebrate military victories, immortalise industrial heritage and enhance grand buildings, and they certainly resurrect something of the spirit of ancient Egypt.

The use of black and white photography also captures the gothic atmosphere of C.19th England, with black as the traditional colour of mourning. Yet black was also the ancient Egyptian colour of resurrection, the addition of subtle touches of gold reflecting the life-bringing power of the sun as Egypt's ultimate deity.



Detail of the Illingworth Mausoleum
in Bradford's Undercliffe Cemetery.
Kyte Photography

♀



Yorkshire's Egyptian monuments can be found in every part of the county – for Yorkshire has more pyramids than any other part of England, has the oldest obelisk erected in Britain and the only full-sized replica of an Egyptian temple in the country.

For over 300 years, Egypt's ancient architecture has been used to memorialise a wide range of Yorkshire men, women and children, from industrialists and academics to soldiers and miners. It was also regarded as a sure way for the elite to demonstrate their wealth often derived from the region's textile and coal industries, with Yorkshire's Egyptian 'temples to industry' housing flax mills, valve houses and pumping stations. Yet the earliest and most monumental were also employed for structures designed for pleasure, including Scarborough's Egyptian Gates opening into South Cliff Gardens from the Esplanade and the pyramids housing the town's Sea Life Centre. In part, the monumental Yorkshire journey resurrecting the spirit of ancient Egypt.



The exhibition follows a clockwise direction

Castle Howard Pyramid Gateway



Castle Howard Obelisk



Castle Howard Pyramid Cenotaph



Castle Howard in North Yorkshire has no fewer than 7 pyramids which are among the earliest such monuments in the country. With the house itself created by the 3rd Earl of Carlisle, Charles Howard (1699-1738) and his architects, dramatist Sir John Vanbrugh assisted by Nicholas Hawksmoor, most had been completed by 1715. So the earl and his architects set out the Grade I listed grounds in the manner of a spectacular stage set, clearly influenced by

Castle Howard Pyramid Gallery



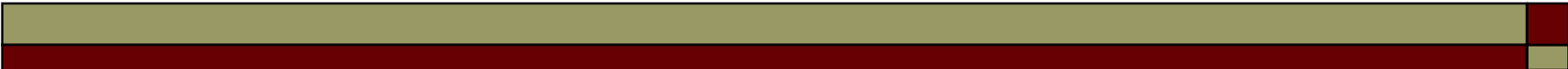
Gaille Howard O'Brien



Castles Howard Pyramid Cemetery



Cassini House in North Yorkville has no fewer than 17 pyramidal motifs as among the earliest such ornaments in the country. With the house built for the son of Earl of Carlisle, Charles Howard (1789-1839) and his architects, dramatist Sir John Vestriugh assisted by Nicholas Hawthorn, must have been composed by 1793. In the front and its architects set the Grade 1 listed grounds in the manner of a spectacular stage set, strongly influenced by Egyptian architecture as an extension of the classical tradition. The house is a masterpiece of the style, with a "newly invented" by Egypt for its entire architecture. With a 24m (100ft) high pyramidal obelisk on the main approach to Cassini House erected in 1714, this was followed by the Pyramid Gate completed in 1719 and a smaller pyramid flanking a 17m (56ft) high obelisk. The house was built in 1719 and the pyramidal motifs, added in 1718, acting as a monument to the family's Elizabethan founder Lord William Howard and housing his canonized ancestor's tomb, the country's pyramid was topped up by its green-green-green-green-green-green, the first Lady Anne Howard (1719-1794) and her husband, the first Lord Howard of Effingham, the son of the writer's work, for "none can justly pyramidize" them.



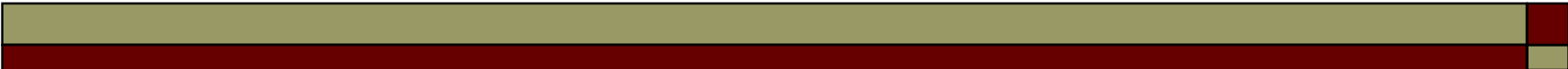
The exhibit label

- Writing exhibit labels can seem daunting. How do you keep your visitors' interest while still communicating important information?

- 
1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print
 2. Never use a long word where a short word will do
 3. If it is possible to cut a word, always cut it out
 4. Never use the passive when you can use the active
 5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday equivalent
 6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous
- 

George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*, 1946

George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', *Horizon*, April 1946 (volume 13, issue 76, pp. 252–265).



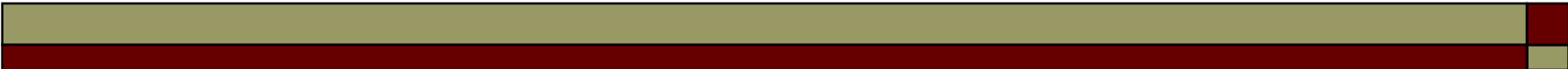
1: KNOW YOUR PURPOSE

- ❑ **What do you want your audience to know or learn?**
- ❑ you cannot select works for an exhibition, nor write any label text until you've (at least started to have) thought through this question
- ❑ How does this object support the theme of my exhibition?
- ❑ What does this object bring to the conversation that other objects do not?

Audience

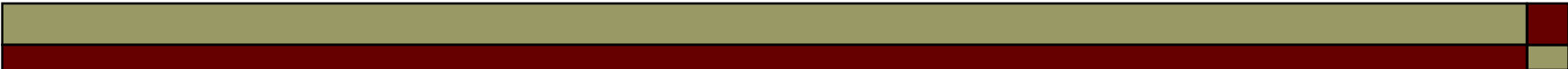
- ❑ Who are you engaging with?
- ❑ Are they local or from further afield?
- ❑ International?
- ❑ Demographic
- ❑ SEND





2: BE CONCISE

- ❑ **What information will you include, and what information will you leave out?**
- ❑ connects back to 1
- ❑ Visitors are easily overwhelmed when presented with too much information at once
- ❑ leave out details that don't support the overall message of your exhibition
- ❑ labels should contain ideally 50, but no more than 120 words

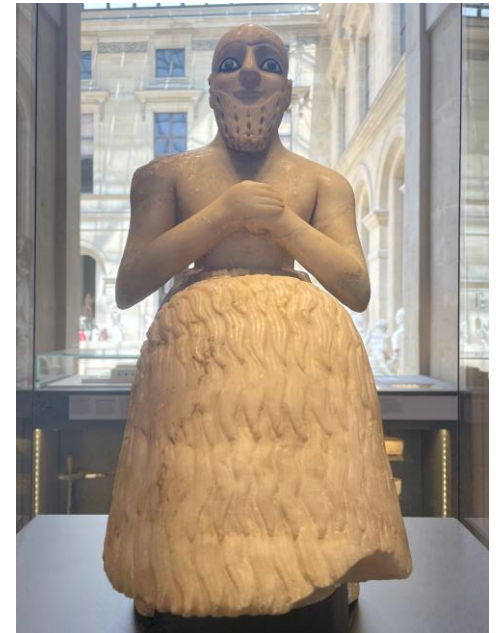


KEEP YOUR VISITORS IN MIND

- ❑ Writing with your audience in mind = crucial to create clear and concise exhibit labels
- ❑ Not everyone is a native English speaker: Keep language simple but don't speak down to readers
- ❑ Assume your visitors are unfamiliar with your subject, they know less about the exhibit than you!

Language

- Tone
- Accessibility
- Basil Bernstein – speech codes



Write as you speak

- ❑ Enthusiasm
- ❑ Conversational
- ❑ Terminology / vocabulary

Bowl with Cranes and Clouds

Korean

Stoneware with inlaid design under celadon glaze
13th century

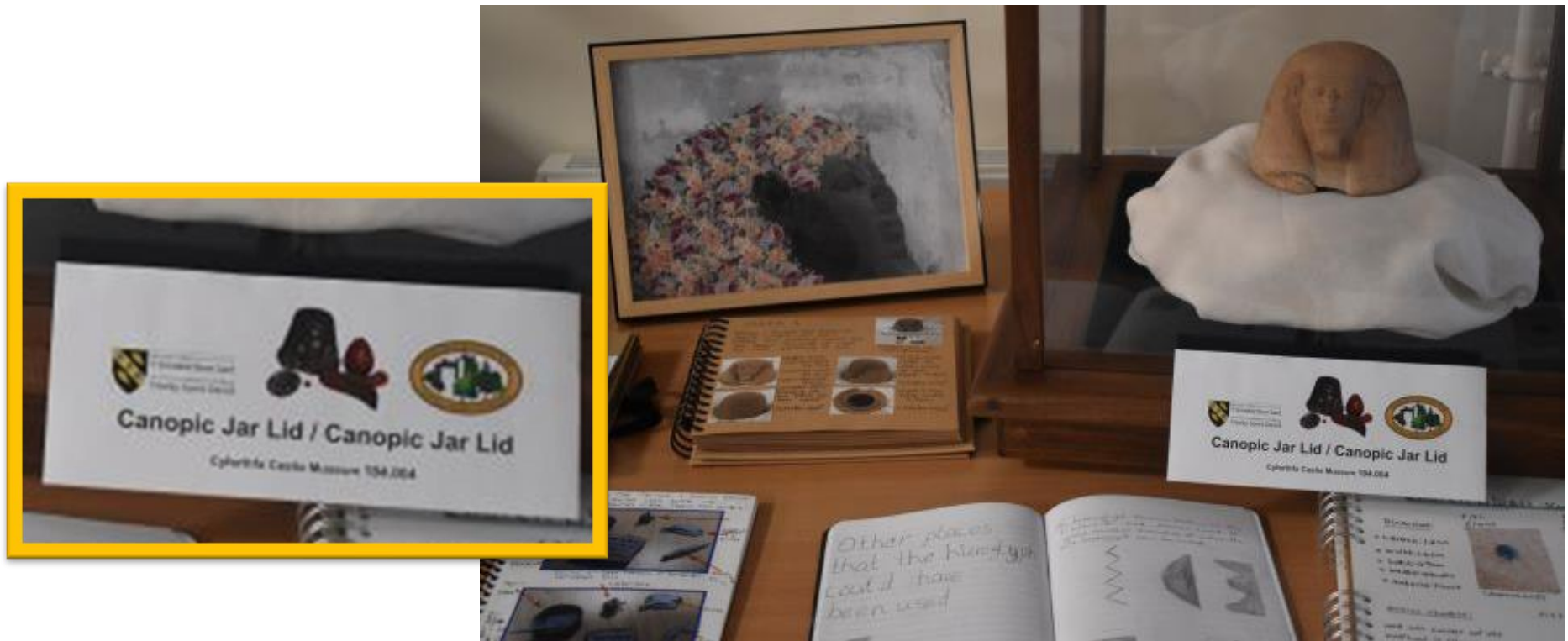
Korea borrowed celadon pottery techniques from the Chinese and improved upon them in the late Goryeo Dynasty (918 — 1392) by inlaying designs as seen here. Due to the high firing temperature of celadon, this was the only way to apply designs to the work.

Ordinary people used undecorated stoneware, but royalty and aristocracy commissioned celadon pieces with inlay. This bowl has cranes and clouds on the inside and chrysanthemum around the outside, all common motifs of the Goryeo period.

Purchased in 2016

2: BE CONCISE

- ❑ Some labels contain only the tombstone information—the most basic details about the work of art (artist's name, title, date, medium, etc.)



2: BE CONCISE

The Myth of Osiris

According to the Greek writer Plutarch, the god Osiris was the first king on earth, a great ruler who civilized the Egyptians and introduced the cultivation of grains. Osiris was worshipped as a deity of agriculture, and his jealous brother Seth decided to have him eliminated to take his place. Seth trapped Osiris in a coffin and threw it in the river. Upon hearing of the death of her husband, Isis set out to look for him. She found and hid the coffin in the marshes until she could give Osiris a proper burial.

Seth fell upon the coffin while hunting in the marshes and, in a fit of rage, tore Osiris's body into pieces and scattered them over Egypt. Isis and her sister Nephthys found all the body parts but one. Anubis came to help them piece together the broken body, wrap it in linen bandages, and perform the funerary rites. Isis used her powerful magic and resuscitated her husband, with whom she coupled before he descended to the underworld to rule in the kingdom of the dead.

From her union with her revived husband, Isis conceived a boy named Horus, heir to the throne of his father. Seth contested this claim but ultimately lost when, after a lengthy debate among a council of deities and numerous challenges, Horus was declared the rightful successor to Osiris. This myth tells us about the prevailing succession of kingship—from father to son.

- Other labels contain
 - Tombstone
 - AND
 - paragraphs of informational text → Remember to not to overwhelm visitors, so include text for objects or additional information that best reinforce your exhibition's message

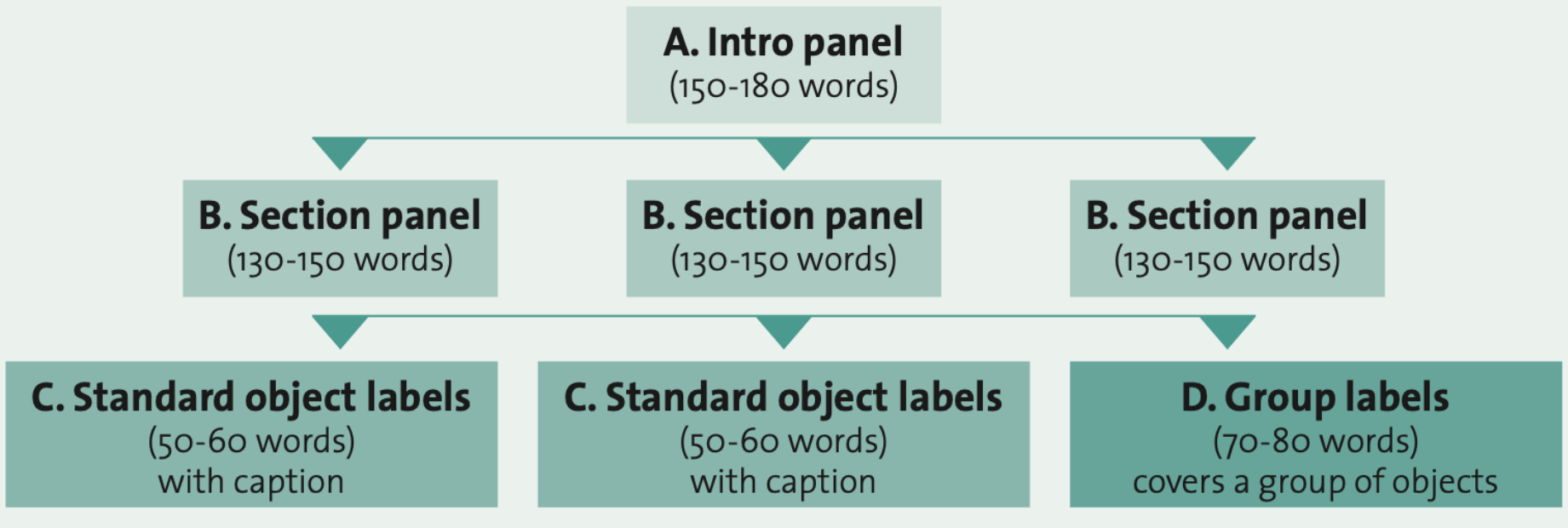
KEEP THE TEXT SHORT & SIMPLE & SHARP

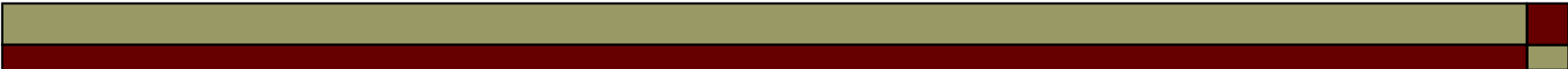
- ❑ Most visitors scan or read a shorter label but may bypass a label if there is too much text
- ❑ Don't use a long word when a shorter word will do.
 - ❑ Some visitors may have a limited vocabulary and you want them to enjoy the exhibit as much as others with larger vocabulary.
- ❑ Use paragraphs to break up longer labels.
 - ❑ Two or three shorter paragraphs are less intimidating than one large chunk of text.

KEEP YOUR WRITING ACTIVE

- ❑ Keep to active verbs so your text is strong and precise. Using the passive voice often uses more words and can be vague. Make sure the subject of your sentence does the action instead of the subject receiving the action.
- ❑ "The savannah is roamed by beautiful giraffes." versus "Beautiful giraffes roam the savannah."
- ❑ "The baby was carried by the kangaroo in her pouch." This one is a prime example of passive voice being vague. Who's baby is it? Is it her baby or a human baby? The sentence isn't clear. So to change it to active voice you'd write, "The kangaroo carried her baby in her pouch."

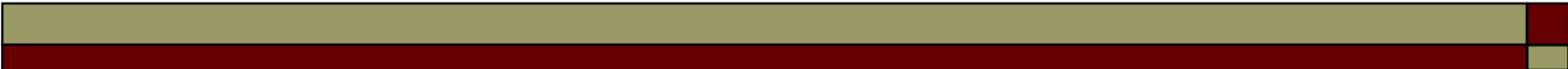
(Avoid) Word Bombardment





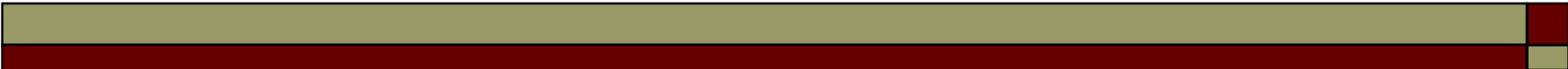
DON'T BE BORING

- ❑ Texts = friendly, but speak with authority
- ❑ Labels combining text and graphics = more meaningful + and memorable
- ❑ Explain technical terms but avoid jargon and confusing acronyms
- ❑ Different displays attract different audiences and so need a different approaches and tones



KEEP IT CASUAL & CONVERSATIONAL

- ❑ Write your text as direct conversation with visitors
- ❑ Show enthusiasm with your word choices
- ❑ Avoid judgments and sentimental descriptions



BRING OBJECTS TO LIFE

- In a museum or gallery, display items have been removed from their human connection. You'll want to reconnect them for the visitor.
- Try incorporating quotations to help visitors connect with an object. Quotations can be evocative, thought-provoking or humorous.
- Humor is very subjective, so avoid putting jokes in the actual text. What is funny to one person can be embarrassing, even offensive, to another. A wry comment or an anecdote can easily bridge the differences.

#3: CREATE A FORMAT AND STICK TO IT

- ❑ **How will you organize the information you want to share?**
- ❑ labels are **visual experience** → should be pleasing to eye
 - Visitors unconsciously register aesthetics of a label
 - “look” of label should match the “look” of exhibition
- ❑ Culture (e.g. Cycladic)
- ❑ Place of Origin (if known)
- ❑ Date and/or Time Period (e.g. Early Cycladic Period, circa 2500-2400 B.C.E.)
- ❑ Material(s) (e.g. marble)
- ❑ Credit line (e.g. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. X, 1986)

Basic information structure

- Artist / maker
- Title
- Date
- Medium/materials
- Dimensions
- Provenance or collection
- Description

How much information?

Your label will be read by people without any prior information and by those who are well versed on the subject, so choose language that is clear, concise, integral and avoids jargon.

Select information that provides contextual significance about the object and its place in the exhibition.

Keep the order of information consistent and include key things of interest about the artwork to give important story line information.

Be aware of audience fatigue and use a 70–80 word count on individual artwork labels and 100–200 words for introductory panels.

A standing read time of 10 seconds is also the average time given by audiences to any one label, so once you have written it, test it to know the most important information is included.

Label hierarchy

For large scale exhibitions with an overarching narrative a label hierarchy is useful to break up information into digestible sections.

An example might look like this: An introductory panel to the exhibition – themed labels for each room – individual artwork labels.

Visual cues or symbols help connect sub-themes and provide quick identification of other sources of information such as for audio guides or children's labels.

Consistency of font, text size, spacing and type assists audiences in digesting information. Studies suggest that certain fonts such as Helvetica Regular, Verdana and Arial in a size of at least 18 points are the easiest for the eye to comprehend for text based information. Text sizes should be increased if audiences are standing further than 1 metre from labels.

Here are some examples in 18 points:

Futura Bold

Futura Medium

Verdana Bold

Verdana Regular

Graphik Medium

Graphik Regular

Label types and materials

The most basic form of label is printed information on adhesive paper mounted on card or foam board. This can be done in house and cut to sizes as needed.

Laminated or vinyl printed labels can be sourced through external printing companies. These offer flexibility for specific size requirements, large batch printing, and present better graphic qualities for printed information. These may be single use as vinyl stickers or made more durable for long term use as printed photo paper with laminate mounted on boards such as Forex.

Black text on white, cream or clear background is best for legibility however it's good to reassess this if the wall colour or lighting may be different for a particular exhibition design.

Labels should aim not to dominate over the objects they are placed alongside.

For other signage including the masthead, exhibition title signage, and large introductory panels, capture the audience's attention by using large print vinyls which offer good visual qualities.

Audience

Knowing which audience groups your labels may not communicate effectively with is very important.

**Some
(design)
points to
think
about**

Graphik Medium / size 17

[**Koji Ryui**
Born 1976, Kyoto, Japan

Graphik Regular / size 12

Graphik Regular Italic / size 14

[***HAVE A NICE DAY***
2016
clay, plastic, found objects

Graphik Regular / size 11

Graphik Light / size 12

[Koji Ryui works intuitively to imbue everyday and often found objects with distinct life, personality and possibilities. The selection of his materials – often chosen for their scarcity and ephemerality – is core to Koji's practice. In arranging these objects, he constructs curious scenes, softly spoken moments that are tied together with intriguing narratives.

In creating the installation before you, Koji has used found objects, tools and plinths. These objects form the backdrop to Koji's *HAVE A NICE DAY* sculptures - an ongoing project of art making using air dried clay, moulded in smiley-faced plastic bags.

Within the installation, each character is unique. Mass produced smiles have been turned upside down, warped askew, left crooked and lopsided. These are the resulting expressions of Koji's characters as they are left to their own devices – interacting, intermingling and wreaking havoc.

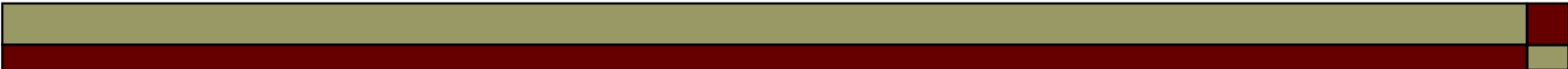
Graphik Light / size 10

[Writer and academic, Georgina Cole has responded to Koji's work in the *Soft Core* catalogue.

Graphik Light / size 8

[Artwork courtesy the artist and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.

[Koji has previously shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia (2006), the Mori Art Museum, Japan (2011), the Mildura Palimpsest, Victoria (2015), Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Sydney (2014) and 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney (2009).



Some tips at the end – and before you start...

- ❑ Remember that the objects are the reason for all the labels.
- ❑ Don't be afraid to have your voice stand out on a label!
- ❑ Consider your own opinions on the art when writing labels while keeping the information objective.
- ❑ Write, revise, and ask a friend to read what you've written to see how well you've communicated your message. Then, revise again!
- ❑ Good luck!