

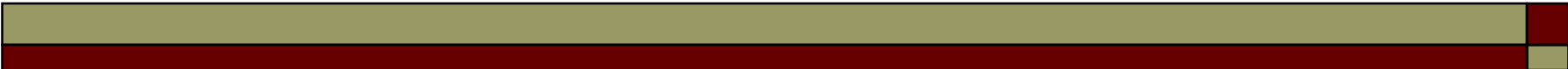
## Session 2

# How to reach audiences: Label writing

ECGE5002S

Changemakers: Creating an exhibition

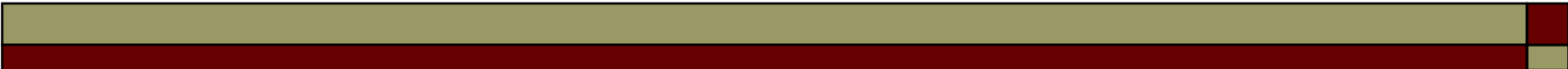
Jody Deacon, Portalis Project Officer (formerly Curator:  
Prehistory at National Museum Wales).



# The exhibit label

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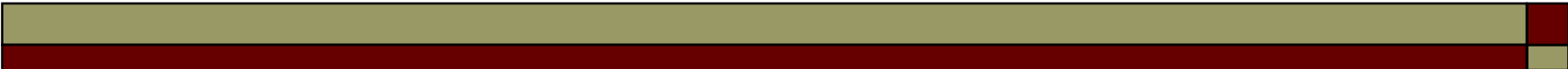
- Writing exhibit labels can seem daunting. How do you keep your visitors' interest while still communicating important information?



# 1: KNOW YOUR PURPOSE

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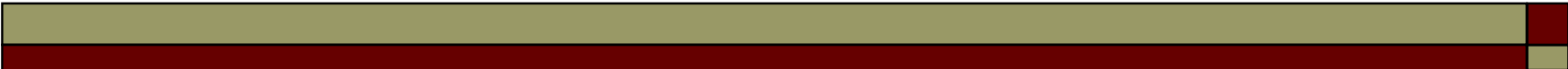
- ❑ **What do you want your audience to know or learn?**
- ❑ you cannot select works for an exhibition, nor write any label text until you've (at least started to have) thought through this question
- ❑ How does this object support the theme of my exhibition?
- ❑ What does this object bring to the conversation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



# Why object biography?

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- Igor Kopytoff (1986) → cultural biography of things: “What makes a biography cultural is not what it deals with, but how and from what perspective. [...] In the homogenized world of commodities, an eventful biography of a thing becomes the story of the various singularizations of it, of classifications and reclassifications in an uncertain world of categories whose importance shifts with every minor change in context.”



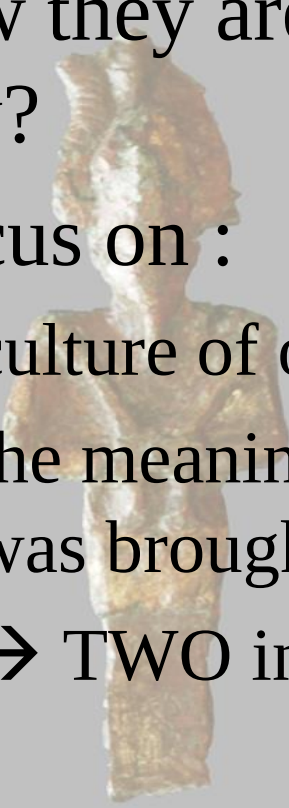
# Why object biography?

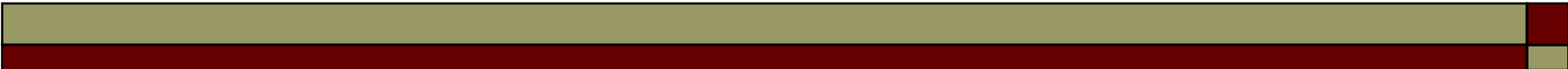
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- According to Gosden/Marshall (1999): biography “seeks to understand the way objects become invested with meaning through the social interactions they are caught up in”
- Therefore “inextricably linked to the creation of social worlds” (Steel 2013)
- BUT: Life-cycle not only interesting or linked to social worlds at the beginning → whole life cycle, also at **stage of reception** → heritage studies process: what are WE doing with these objects

# Why object biography?

- ❑ not only social life of things in ancient Egypt, but how they are interpreted in a museum in the present day?
- ❑ Focus on :
  - culture of origin (in this case Egypt) AND
  - the meaning today as the culture, in which the objects was brought into
  - → TWO intersecting lives

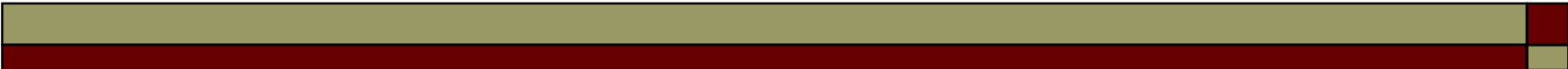




## 2: BE CONCISE

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- ❑ **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



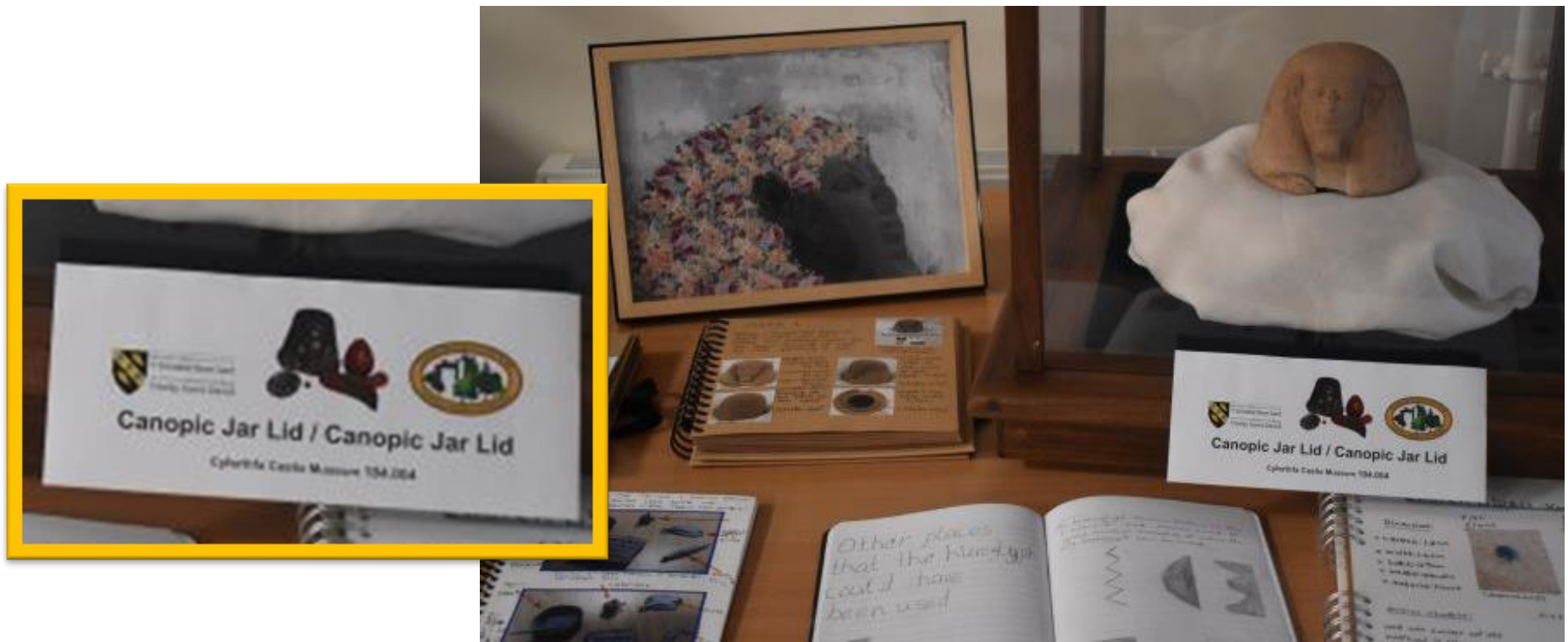
# KEEP YOUR VISITORS IN MIND

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- ❑ Writing with your audience in mind is 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!

## 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

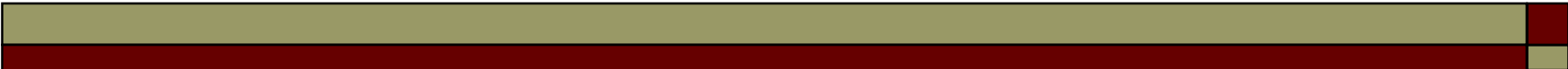
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- ❑ Most visitors scan or read a shorter label but may bypass a label if there is too much text
- ❑ Don't use a long word when a shorter word will do.
  - ❑ Some visitors may have a limited vocabulary and you want them to enjoy the exhibit as much 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

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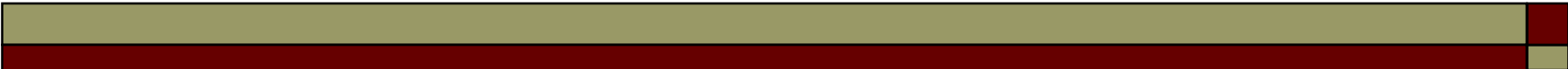
- ❑ Keep to active verbs so your text is strong and precise. Using the passive voice often uses more words and can be vague. Make sure the subject of your sentence does the action instead of the subject receiving the action.
- ❑ "The savannah is roamed by beautiful giraffes." versus "Beautiful giraffes 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."



# DON'T BE BORING

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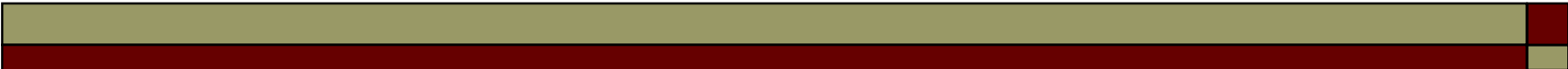
- ❑ Texts = friendly, but speak with authority
- ❑ Labels combining text and graphics = more meaningful + and memorable
- ❑ Explain technical terms but avoid jargon and confusing acronyms
- ❑ Different displays attract different audiences and so need a different approaches and tones



# KEEP IT CASUAL & CONVERSATIONAL

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



# BRING OBJECTS TO LIFE

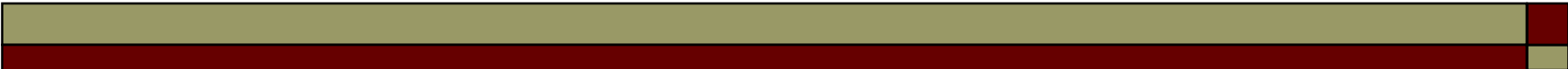
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- In a museum or gallery, display items have been removed from their human connection.
- Try incorporating quotations – they can be evocative, thought-provoking or humorous.
- Humor is very subjective, so avoid putting jokes in the actual text.
- What about evoking other senses; touch, taste, sound and smell.
- Try connecting the past to the present, the unfamiliar to the familiar.

# #3: CREATE A FORMAT AND STICK TO IT

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- ❑ **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)



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

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- ❑ 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!