

## What is Interpretation?

\* A nature guide is a naturalist who can guide others to the secrets of nature. He who feels the spell of the wild, the rhythmic melody of falling water, the echoes among the crags, the bird songs, the winds in the pines, and the endless beat of waves upon the shore, is in tune with the universe. *Adventures of a Nature Guide and Essays in Interpretation*, Enos Mills (1920)

\* Interpretation is an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information. *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Freeman Tilden (1957)

\* Environmental interpretation involves translating the language of the natural sciences and related fields into terms and concepts that people who aren't scientists can readily understand. And it involves doing it in a way that's entertaining and interesting to these people. *Environmental Interpretation*, Sam Ham (1992)

\* Interpretation is an educational activity that aims to reveal meanings about our natural and cultural resources. Through various media - including talks, guided tours, and exhibits - interpretation enhances our understanding, appreciation, and, therefore, protection of historic sites and natural wonders. *Interpretation for the 21st Century*, Beck and Cable (1998)

\* Interpretation is a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource. *National Association for Interpretation* (2020)

# Interpretive Programming

## Interpretive Approach to Communication (Four Essential Qualities)

1. Interpretation is **enjoyable**.
  - interesting and entertaining in the sense of holding the audience's attention
2. Interpretation is **relevant**. (meaningful and personal to the audience)
  - interpretation is meaningful when we can connect it to something the audience already knows
  - interpretation is personal when we link it to something the audience cares about; when we connect ideas to the lives of the audience members
3. Interpretation is **organized**. (when presented in a way that is easy for the audience to follow)
  - *Magical Number Seven Plus or Minus Two*: On average, humans are capable of making sense of only  $7 \pm 2$  separate and new ideas at one time. (George Miller, 1956)
  - Therefore, interpretive programs should be limited to five or fewer main ideas
4. Interpretation is **thematic**. (i.e. interpretation should have a main point or message)

## Thematic Interpretation

- \* Interpretation should have both a **topic** and a **theme**:
  - A **topic** is the general subject matter of the program;
  - A **theme** is the main point, message, or story that the interpreter is trying to convey about the topic.
  - Any topic can have several themes, depending on what you want to communicate to your audience.
- \* Interpretation is thematic if it has a major point. All interpretation, whether spoken or written, should have a theme - a specific message to communicate.
  - Themes are statements (best expressed in one complete declarative sentence) of what the interpreter wants the audience members to understand and take away with them.
  - Themes are important because research shows that people remember themes but forget facts.
- \* **“So What?”**
  - Interpretation with a topic only proceeds without focus or direction, and begs the question **“so what?”** Thematic interpretation should always answer the question **“so what?”** with respect to the topic.
  - When interpretation isn't thematic, it seems unorganized, difficult to follow, and less meaningful to our audiences.

## **Planning and Preparing a Thematic Interpretive Program**

\* Old adage in speech communication: “Tell them what you’re going to say, say it, and then tell them what you said.”

\* For interpretive programs:

1. The **introduction** creates interest in your program, reveals your theme, and tells the audience what you’re going to say;
2. The **body** of your program develops your theme and tells them what you said you would talk about; and
3. The **conclusion** summarizes what you said and reinforces the program theme.

## **National Park Service “Tangible/Intangible” Interpretive Model**

\* **Interpretation should facilitate a connection between the intangible meanings of tangible resources and the interests of the visitor.**

\* **See document: “Connecting the Visitor to Universal Concepts”**

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\* **References:**

National Association for Interpretation (NAI) [www.interpnet.com](http://www.interpnet.com) (2020)

*Module 101: Fulfilling the NPS Mission: The Process of Interpretation*,  
[www.nps.gov/idp/interp/101/101mod](http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp/101/101mod) (2003)

*Interpretation for the 21st Century: Fifteen Guiding Principles for Interpreting Nature and Culture*, Larry Beck and Ted Cable (1998)

*Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets*, Sam H. Ham (1992)

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