

Writing Gallery Text at the V&A

A Ten Point Guide

V&A

The original version of these guidelines was written by
Lucy Trench, Interpretation Editor, in 2007 and updated in 2013.

The guidelines have since been revised and reissued in 2018.

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‘ This complex and fascinating story is told with quite exemplary clarity. The label writing is a study in what can be done simply by the use of clear, elegant language to make difficult things accessible without a hint of condescension. ’

*The Scotsman on V&A exhibition Encounters:
The Meeting of Asia and Europe 1500–1800, 2004*

This review sums up what we are trying to achieve in the V&A –

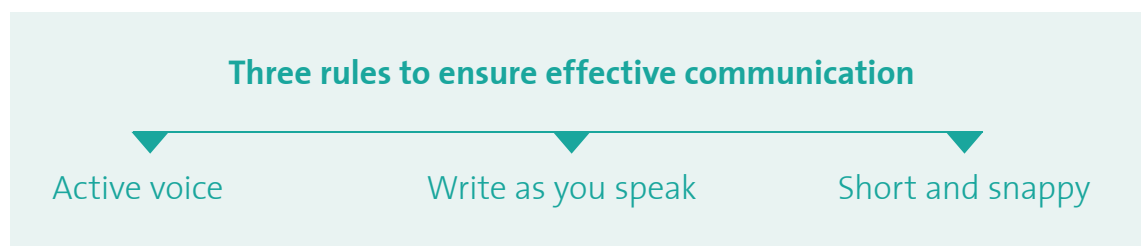
to write gallery text that is captivating, illuminating, and comprehensible for a wide audience. The goal is difficult but not impossible to reach. To achieve this, we do not have to ‘dumb down’ our scholarship and collections. Instead, we have to recognise visitors’ needs and interests, and use the devices of good writing to communicate our ideas. By good writing, we do not simply mean clarity and correct grammar. To appeal to our visitors in the busy environment of the museum, text also needs personality, life and rhythm. Only these qualities of communication will highlight the ingenuity of our collections and enrich the imaginations of our visitors in the way that we promise.

The guidelines are a quick summary of the main principles of writing good gallery text to inspire readers. They have been written for V&A staff but may, of course, be relevant to others outside the museum. They also uphold the V&A’s three main rules for tone of voice: to write as you speak, use the active voice, and keep it short and snappy. These apply to all contexts of the V&A but our focus for the guidelines is writing effective text for visitors reading inside galleries – those people most often standing up, with a range of factors competing for their attention. At the end of these guidelines, you will find a note on the planning and submission of gallery text for production.

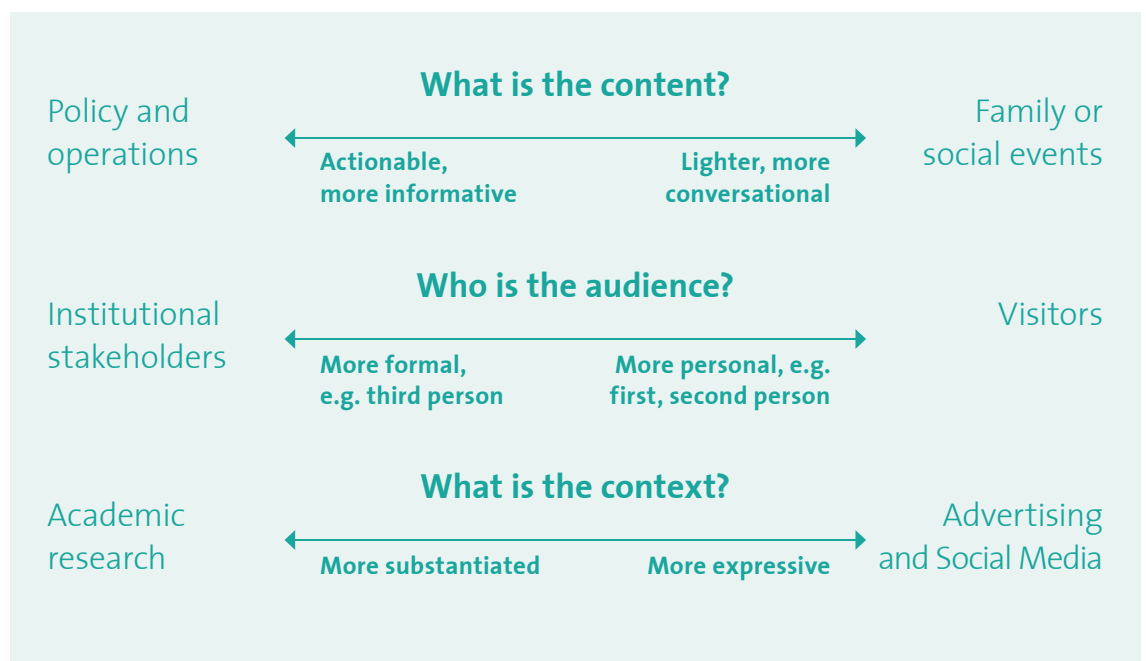
Please note: we have tried to include photographs of the objects that go with the labels. For copyright reasons, this has not always been possible but you will often be able to find the image online. Unless otherwise stated, all images © Victoria and Albert Museum.

At the V&A, we aim to create experiences that are *inviting, illuminating, intriguing and inspiring* throughout.

To do this we follow three principles for the tone of voice we use when talking to our audiences:



The extent to which we apply this tone of voice varies depending on the content, audience and context:



Ten points for good gallery text writing

6

These guidelines cover ten points to follow to write gallery text in a way that will always be at once **inspiring**, inviting, illuminating and intriguing to our readers:

Inviting

01 Know your audience

Find out who you are talking to and craft your communication to fit

02 Write as you would speak

Invite your reader in with warm and spontaneous text that is lively and easy to understand

03 Be active not passive

Use active phrases that explain information with energy and immediacy to hold your readers' attention

04 Keep it short and snappy

Get your key messages across with concise word counts that do not overwhelm or turn readers away

Illuminating

05 Organise your information

Set out your story in easily accessible layers that communicate message, topic and theme

06 Engage with the object

Inspire readers by highlighting otherwise hidden elements and inviting them to look

07 Bring in the human element

Spark connections by revealing relevance

08 Sketch in the background

Make sure you are telling the whole story, not a narrow slice that requires specialist knowledge

Intriguing

09 Admit uncertainty

Get your readers involved and prompt thinking by being honest about what is still unknown

10 Remember Orwell's Six Rules

Distil, distil, distil. And have fun!

01 Know your audience

Who are you talking to?



Recent surveys have shown that of visitors to V&A South Kensington:

- 41% had completed a university degree or equivalent qualification
- 25% had completed a postgraduate degree or equivalent qualification*

From this we might assume that our visitors tend to be well educated. This is in part true, but the one most important thing to remember is that they are unlikely to be educated in the subject you are writing about. If they do have a specialist area, it might be in Renaissance book production but not Buddhist sculpture, or whatever your topic may be.



In 2016–17, over 10% of our visitors were ‘still in education’. These people are likely to be young, with different areas of knowledge from older people. We need to be aware of this, and also of visitors who have limited reading skills or are not fluent in English. Almost 50% of our visitors come from overseas, and half of those from countries where English is not the primary language. The V&A also aims to grow under-represented audiences that so far make up a smaller proportion of its visitors, including family groups with young children.

These are broad demographic characteristics. The V&A has recently implemented a new way of considering our audience make-up, taking into account their interests, needs and motivations alongside their origins and backgrounds. Seven segments have been identified, falling into three broad categories. ‘Art Aficionados’ and ‘Cultural Explorers’ comprise the *Art & Design Lovers* category. They are interested in artists’ and designers’ techniques and they value interpretation which offers something to learn on a day out. *All Round Experience Seekers* holds ‘Savvy Networkers’, ‘Sociable Enthusiasts’ and ‘Traditional Self-Improvers’. These groups include digital natives, families and history enthusiasts. They are interested in art and design but for them, these are just two of a number of interests. The third group, *Mainstream Tastes*, is made up of ‘Open Persuadables’ and ‘Day Trippers’. They prefer conventional activities across a range of attractions and their focus is entertainment and relaxation.

*General visitor survey results 2012–13.

This varied make-up forms an array of sometimes competing needs from gallery text. In some specific cases (mostly when we know we are talking to families), it is possible to address an audience group directly. This will allow you to make certain choices about language, content and tone. Different temporary displays do largely attract different audiences and so require a tailored approach. It is absolutely right, and one of the strengths of the V&A, that the text for the

David Bowie is exhibition (2013) did not sound like that for the *Europe 1600–1815* galleries (opened 2015). The principles of good writing are the same, the tone is not.



Europe 1600–1815 is a permanent gallery, free and open for all our visitors every day. It can be problematic writing specifically for particular audiences in this context where panels or labels could be read by a whole range of visitors. If you do, you might sound patronising and alienate a certain audience group. Instead, you should focus on applying the most appropriate tone and balancing it with a choice of accessible words and ideas to make your text meet as wide a number of needs as possible.

In the 1990s the Getty Museum identified what it called the ‘art novice’. It defined this hypothetical visitor as follows:

- Is curious and motivated to learn
- Spends less than 30 seconds looking at an object
- Is unfamiliar with art terminology
- Expects a quick pay off (‘art should grab me’)
- Senses that their knowledge is limited and limiting to their enjoyment
- Lacks confidence in their ability to make sense of what they see
- Makes emotional and personal associations with the object first
- Wants to connect with the people associated with the object

With this in mind, look at the text overleaf on the mirror frame. Imagine you are passing through the gallery on your way to the café. You know nothing about Renaissance art and are reading this label with an elderly aunt who has lost her glasses and a small child who wants to know what it is about now. You have 30 seconds.

Before



MIRROR FRAME

Painted Cartapesta (papier mâché)

Workshop of NEROCCIO DEI LANDI (1447–1550)

SIENNESE; last quarter of the 15th century

850–1884

This type of mirror frame, showing an emblematic female head, exists in several examples in various media; a maiolica version (C.2111-1910) is exhibited in room 14. This work is characteristic of NEROCCIO DEI LANDI, who trained under Vecchietta and was active in Siena both as a painter and a sculptor. [50 words]

- Why is it called a mirror frame when it doesn't have a mirror and doesn't look like a frame?
- What is an emblematic female head? What is it doing here?
- What is maiolica and why do we need to know about this other version?
- Do you want or can you be bothered to find the other mirror frame in Room 14?
- Who is Vecchietta? Have you ever heard of him?
- Who is the writer talking to? Any visitor walking through the gallery, or specifically to a fellow curator?

This text was probably written in the 1970s but it remained in Room 17 in the V&A until 2006. Presumably it was once perfectly acceptable, but times have changed and now more people go to museums than to football matches. We cannot assume that visitors will know about the material culture of the Renaissance any more than all museum curators will understand the offside rule.

We rewrote the label to explain why the mirror frame looks as it does and to explain the concept behind the design:

After

MIRROR FRAME

About 1475–1500

Workshop of Neroccio dei Landi (1447–1550)

The mirror, which is now missing, would have been a disc of blown glass or polished metal. As well as being an expensive novelty, mirrors were thought to reveal the inner truth. This frame invited a moral comparison, since the viewer's face appeared below the beautiful (and therefore virtuous) image above. [52 words]

Italy, Siena

Painted cartapesta (papier mâché)

Museum no. 850-1884

V&A, Room 62, *Medieval & Renaissance galleries*

In the V&A, there are still older labels that are addressed to fellow experts or peers. They refer to places, people and objects that most visitors couldn't possibly recognise. They fail to explain what the exhibit is, or why it looks as it does, on the assumption that

the reader already knows. With gallery development projects since the 2000s, the V&A has endeavoured to imbed the needs of audiences into the text.

For the *Europe 1600–1815* galleries, we identified families as one of the key audience groups for the galleries, alongside the 'general adults' who would visit. We acknowledged that, further to needing to ensure the text would cater for as broad an adult audience as possible, here families' interests and requirements for specific content and language would necessitate a distinct approach in the text.

Adults with children often need a quick and easy 'way in' to the narrative of a display to keep the children engaged. This means providing text that does not require the adult reader to translate ideas or language into something a child will understand. To remove this step, we wrote 30 dedicated family labels that offered a different voice and story to the standard object labels in the Europe galleries. Have a look at this example:

Clock

1665–70

Clocks were the supreme example of European technology until the development of the steam engine in the late 18th century. Documents show that this clock remained in the goldsmith's workshop, which suggests that he probably made it to advertise his skill. A bell on top of the filigree-covered cupola chimed every hour, attracting the attention of potential customers as well as marking time.

Dutch Republic, now the Netherlands (The Hague)

Case by Hans Breghtel

Movement by Adriaen van den Bergh

Silver, gilded silver and filigree

Museum no. 92-1870



The decoration on this clock is all about the passing of time. Old Father Time stands on the top. The signs of the zodiac appear below him. Baby angels called cherubs hold an hourglass, which was used to measure time before clocks were invented.

Can you copy the pose of one of the figures?

V&A, Room 6, *Europe 1600–1815* galleries, section called *The Cabinet*

The family label is identifiable by the parrot illustration.
The text:

- is written in an informal 'storytelling' tone – 'all about' and 'Old Father Time'
- offers engagement and interaction – ends with a call to action for the children
- keeps it short: 45 word caption, with 12 word first sentence
- gets straight to the point
- is not a repeat of the information in the adult label written in a different tone – it offers alternative points that might be interesting to a younger audience
- assumes no knowledge of history – it explains specialist terms ('cherubs')

We wrote the family labels in this way to work for adults and children exploring the displays together. The format and content of these dedicated family labels is still being tested and developed. We know that the points highlighted above contribute to forming immediate and engaging text for intergenerational groups. But they also represent basic principles for good writing for all museum audiences. Compare the family label to the adult label it accompanies on the left.

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Can you copy the pose of one of the figures?

Like the family label, the adult label:

- is written in a clear yet enthusiastic tone
- offers a sense of action in the phrases 'made it', 'chimed' and 'attracting'
- keeps it relatively short: 64 word caption with a short first sentence (We recommend that where possible the first sentence is under 16 words)
- gets straight to the point
- provides context to the place of clocks in the history of European technology
- assumes no knowledge, nor does it patronise the reader – it refers to the 'filigree-covered cupola' with a direction so that visitors can identify the element from sight

These directly demonstrate some of the ten points for writing good gallery text. Both labels are written for their audience. The adult label also has, in miniature, a 'pyramidal' structure in which the information becomes increasingly detailed and argued. In addition, it asserts a human presence with the phrases 'the goldsmith's workshop' and 'he probably made it'. Together these features form the basis of the following points in this guide.

02

Write as you would speak

How would you explain
the object to your friend?



‘ The duck-billed platypus is one of only three living species of monotreme, meaning that it is a mammal that lays eggs rather than giving birth to live young. But this is not their only extraordinary feature. Platypuses are also venomous, with males having a hollow spur full of poison that can cause agonising pain in humans and kill a dog. ’

David Attenborough, *The Life of Mammals* (BBC documentary, 2003)

A test of good writing is that it should sound easy, spontaneous and convincing. This is especially true of gallery text, which needs to invite visitors to engage with objects by using a more friendly tone than the formal or scholarly language sometimes used in V&A books and catalogues. A conversational tone emphasises our commonality as humans. Yet the text should still speak with authority. The duckbilled platypus text comes from a BBC website written for a wide audience.

- It uses specialist terms such as ‘monotreme’ but instantly explains them
- It combines elementary information (i.e. that the platypus is a mammal that lays eggs) with more detailed information (i.e. that it is poisonous). In doing so, it informs the beginner and maintains the interest of the more knowledgeable reader.
- It is warm and enthusiastic

Enthusiasm matters. If we want visitors to respond positively to our displays, we have to show our own love for the collections and communicate it in an equally lively and encouraging manner. Visitors need to know why they should care about what they are looking at. They will pay attention to an enthusiastic tone, not to long, flat sentences or words they don’t understand. Past surveys have shown that V&A visitors sometimes feel that the authors of our text are remote and stand-offish. Comments include: ‘The person was just

interested in getting his information across' and 'The individual didn't seem as interested or enthusiastic about the subject'. The way to show enthusiasm is in your choice of words and your reaction to the objects, not in clichéd value judgements or gushing descriptions. Phrases like 'this painting leaves a lasting impression' and words like 'delightful' or 'stunning' add nothing to our appreciation of an object. They also assume that visitors will share the writer's view.

The following text, however, is full of the writer's passion for their subject and admiration for Wedgwood himself. The secret of its success lies in the vocabulary, which is rich, dynamic and precise.

MARKETING

Wedgwood was a bold and, at times, innovative businessman. After winning a royal appointment, he vigorously promoted his pottery at home and abroad, and built up a vast export market. He had the vision to support the Grand Trunk Canal, which connected the Staffordshire potteries to its markets and its sources of clay. His factory in Etruria, one of the industrial marvels of the day, was built on its banks.

[70 words]

V&A, Room 118, *Britain 1500–1900*, section called *Neo-classicism in Britain*

The descriptions 'bold', 'innovative', 'vigorously' and 'vast' add scale and action to the story, without creating extraneous information. When using adjectives and adverbs, however, do so with care. Consider whether they help what you are trying to say. Adverbs especially are often redundant and irritating, as in 'The mouse scampered hurriedly back to its hole'. A well-chosen noun or verb does not need qualification.

And talking of vocabulary, avoid Latinate words. They are the language of bureaucracy – dry and dead. Anglo-Saxon words, on the other hand, are lively and expressive.

Compare:

Purchase, procure, acquire, obtain, request, observe, expedite

With:

Buy, get, grab, snatch, ask for, watch, speed up

‘Bad writers, and especially scientific, political, and sociological writers, are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones.’

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

Think about how you would describe something you love to a friend. What words would you use and in what order? Write these down. Usually, we do not use Latinate words or passive constructions when talking. We are immediate and informal, because this type of language is easier to process. A good test is to read your label out loud when you have written it. If you stumble over words or get bored, you will know what visitors will experience when reading your label and you can identify where to make changes.

There is sometimes a fear in museums that simplifying language means ‘dumbing down’. This can happen, but when it does the fault often lies in the content not in the language itself.

To appeal to a broad audience while maintaining the confidence of our many well-educated visitors we have to be immediate and convincing. The following text is not:

Unfortunately in 1900 Sir Roger developed ‘musth’ – this is when male elephants are in heat, and can make them very dangerous. His owner, Mr Bostock, decided he had to be put down. Some soldiers and a man with an elephant gun shot Sir Roger one morning as he ate his breakfast.

Non V&A label, Science Museum

This was written for family audiences, but doesn’t work even on those terms.

- Male elephants don’t come ‘in heat’
- Would a child know what ‘in heat’ or ‘put down’ means?
- Why didn’t the writer include the origin of the word ‘musth’? It is an Urdu or Persian word meaning ‘raving mad’ or ‘drunk’. This would be of interest to some of our visitors, particularly those who recognise the word, and would have explained why Sir Roger was dangerous
- Is the bathos – of Sir Roger being shot as he ate his breakfast – intended?

Consider the terminology and phrasing you are using and the storyline they are communicating – do they play out the warm and direct explanation you would naturally say?

03

Be active not passive

What language will grab
and hold readers' attention?



Academic writers often favour remote, agent-less constructions.

Why say 'Tea and porridge were taken at breakfast' when you could say 'People had tea and porridge for breakfast'? Active phrases are more human, real and dynamic, plus easier to follow. In this way, they are inherently inviting.

Compare:

Birds eat insects

With:

Insects are eaten by birds

If you look in newspapers – any newspaper, from the *Daily Mail* to *The Guardian* – you will find paragraph after paragraph with no passives. Newspapers need to grab the attention of their readers and get across information quickly and succinctly. We have the same basic necessity in galleries. We have to use the active voice to enliven subjects and make our writing more direct, purposeful and confident.

But this does not mean there should be a blanket rule against passive constructions. Sometimes they are needed when there is no clear or known agent in a sentence. Other times they are necessary to signal the theme of the text. 'Men drank brandy' suggests that the theme is the drinking habits of men and women. 'Brandy was drunk by men' suggests that the theme is beverages. Look out for passive sentences and consider the meaning you want to convey. Where possible, switch the order round to form active phrases that will energise the text and keep hold of the reader's attention.

04 Keep it short and snappy

How much time do
your visitors have?



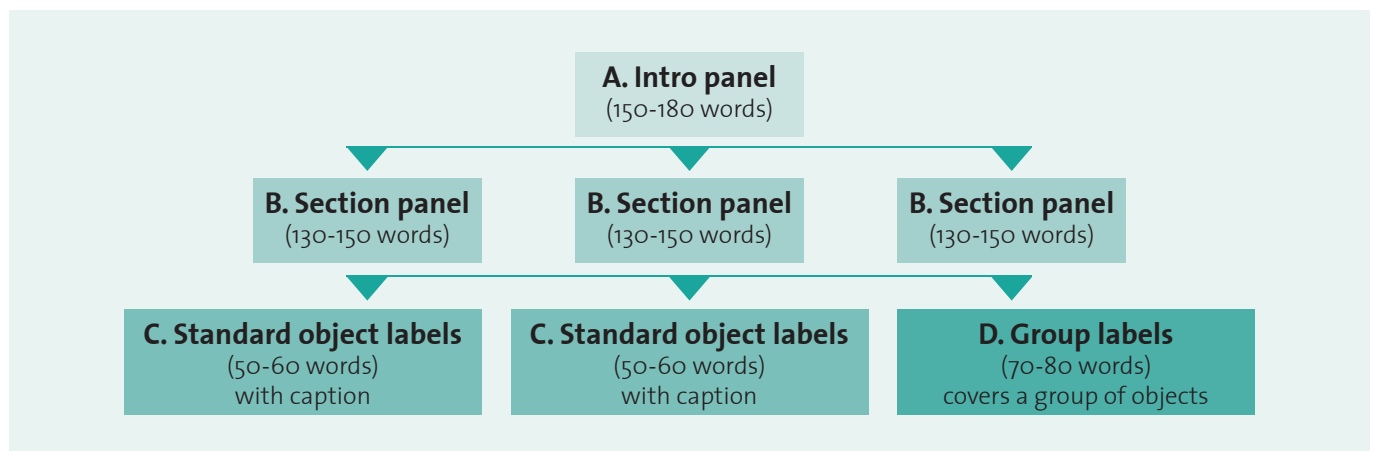
04 Keep it short and snappy

21

What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of the recipient. Hence, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.

Herbert Simon, *Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World*, 1971

Museum visitors are bombarded with information – with objects, spaces, signage, text and ideas. We need to make it easy for them. This shouldn't mean reducing ideas to simple formulae. Instead, it means allowing every element of the graphics to speak clearly so that the emphasis lies always on the objects. You should devise a text hierarchy that is uncomplicated but flexible enough to offer a clear path through complex ideas and information. Here is a standard V&A text hierarchy, with the recommended word counts.



Sometimes you need to adapt the text hierarchy, perhaps with an additional layer of theme texts at the beginning of a label strip. Or you may need to change the word counts. Some V&A displays have a longer introductory panel followed by 'tombstone-only' labels with hard text but no caption. Others, such as *Leonardo: Experience, Experiment and Design* (2006–7), have a case for requiring longer captions (80–100 words), and the rest of the hierarchy is adjusted to account for this. But the principle of short texts is non-negotiable. Visitors have come to look at objects, not to read books on the wall. They are tired, they are standing up, and they might well be craning over someone's shoulder. In this situation, long reams of text are off-putting, not inviting.

These word limits don't restrict the amount of information that most visitors absorb. Instead, they increase it. In a gallery or exhibition, less really is more. There is a real difference between the complexity and nature of information that can be gained through an exhibition and that which is suitable for a book.



Once the text hierarchy has been established, stick to it. Don't be tempted to add extra elements that are difficult to incorporate into the design and confusing for the visitor. Similarly, agree on your word count and stay within it. If you write over-length, the text simply won't fit and will have to be cut at proof stage which adds time to the designer's as well as the editor's work.

Remember, too, that we are providing other levels of information elsewhere, in catalogues and digitally on the web. Some information is more appropriate for these mediums, which visitors can access in their own time and space – while sitting down and without surrounding distractions.

The way to keep it short and snappy is to construct your text with care. Clear writing needs clear thinking. You should have one idea per sentence and one subject per paragraph. If readers are to navigate the text with ease, paragraphs are essential.

The text below illustrates the opposite of the 'short and snappy' approach:

SIR THOMAS LAWRENCE

Pope Pius VII

1819

As a staunch opponent of France's expansionist ambitions, Pope Pius VII (1742–1823) was one of the European leaders associated with the defeat of Napoleon who were commemorated in a series of portraits commissioned by the Prince Regent (later George IV). The frail pontiff was renowned for promoting peace and for his protection of Rome's great collections of antiquities, which were pillaged by Napoleon. The Apollo Belvedere, the Laocoön and the Torso Belvedere can be seen behind him. Lawrence gained nine sittings with the Pope, an unprecedented privilege for a Protestant painter, and created an imposing yet naturalistic portrait in which he captured, 'as he observed', an 'expression of unaffected benevolence and worth'. [114 words]

Grammar is the logic of speech, even as logic is the grammar of reason.

Richard Chenevix Trench, *On the Study of Words*, 1867

Equally, sentences should offer structure and rhythm to the text. In most cases they should be short and concise, with the first sentence of a label or panel ideally being no more than 16 words long. However, varying the length of subsequent sentences in the body text helps to keep it lively and imaginative.

The grammar should be immaculate. Correct grammar is not a matter of old-fashioned pedantry. It forms the building blocks of sound, clear writing. Sometimes text is inaccessible simply because it is so badly written.

After fifteen years in a convent, the king took Madame d’Etioules as his mistress in 1742...

Non-V&A label

Did the king really spend fifteen years in a convent? This is a construction known as a dangling participle, in that the subject of the subordinate clause is not the same as the subject of the main clause. It is a common mistake, and one that most readers can deal with without difficulty. The following label, however, makes no sense at all, even though it was written with the best of intentions for family audiences.

STILL LIFE WITH JAPANESE PRINT

Pringle showed an enduring interest in Japanese and Chinese art. In common with the Impressionists and Whistler, Japanese prints sometimes inspired him to paint in a different way. [28 words]

Non-V&A label

What does this mean? That Japanese prints, along with the Impressionists and Whistler, sometimes inspired Pringle to paint in a different way? Or, that like the Impressionists and Whistler, he was inspired by Japanese prints to paint in a different way? Be careful not to fall into these traps.

05

Organise your information

What is the most important thing visitors should know?



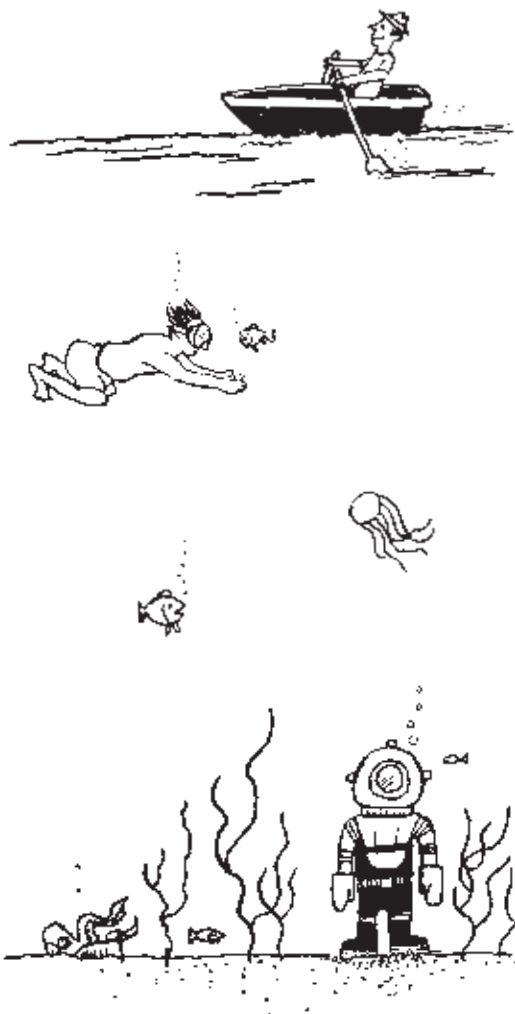
An illuminating gallery or display has a clear structure and a strong message. Your text will play an important role in this. When writing panels, remember that people remember ideas not facts. In some museums you often see panels that are so packed with names, places and dates that the central message is lost. Also, a display is a narrative laid out in a three-dimensional space. Visitors do not necessarily experience the story in a linear manner as if reading a book and they do not always read gallery text as diligently as we might like. They will read only parts, and often in an order you cannot direct.

A classic and well proven way of writing panels and labels to account for this experience is to always consider:

- Message: *'When people have read this they will know...'*
- Topic: *What is the main subject of the object and the display?*
- Theme: *What are the overarching messages running throughout?*

Make a plan of all of the elements of text in a display to see how the narrative unfolds in the space. You should examine the relationship between panels and labels and sift the text accordingly. We sort ideas into different locations: the big ideas go in the intro panel, the medium-sized ones in the section panels, and the small ones in the labels near the objects.

This accounts for how visitors interact with displays. Ultimately, some engage more than others. You can think of visitors in a display space as paddlers, swimmers and divers. Paddlers will skim the surface, only reading very top line information. Swimmers will delve a little deeper. They will read some of the panels and labels but not every one in detail. Divers will be searching for as much information as possible. They will be invested in the narrative and prepared to read information on every level.





At Home in Renaissance Italy,
V&A exhibition, 2006

You have to organise the storyline for these types of behaviour. The key message has to be easily visible and up front for paddlers to grasp. It should not be buried in the label text. Equally, detailed information will only be lost or confuse people if it appears on large panels in isolation from the objects to which it refers.

Here is an example of a panel from the 2006 V&A exhibition *At Home in Renaissance Italy*:

THE CAMERA

Renaissance houses had many bedrooms, the most important being the *camera grande* ('large bedroom'). The *camera* was smaller than the sala and had a fireplace, making it warm in winter.

The camera was a room at the heart of family life. Apart from sleeping, the daily routines of washing and dressing took place here, alongside devotion, textile work and even informal dining. It was also the setting for major life events – birth, marriage and death – and was open to selected visitors.

The room and its decoration were a visible manifestation of family memory and continuity. The splendid furnishings were often bought at the time of the marriage, to mark the beginning of the couple's new life together. This might involve a large investment. The bed and its rich hangings, the daybed, and the pairs of painted and gilded chests were among the most expensive items in the house. [148 words]

- **Topic** *The camera*
- **Theme** *The role of the camera
– its uses and significance*
- **Message** *The camera was
the most important room
in the house*

The topic of the panel is immediately clear from the title. The whole panel does not veer from this subject, continually referring to the camera in the body text. This content explains the role of the camera, so that the themes of use and significance can be extracted by the reader who delves deeper. And the message that ‘the camera is the most important room in the house’ is in the first sentence of the panel. Visitors skimming the surface who do not read any further will take away the key thing they need to know about the topic from this first sentence.



This is an example of the pyramidal structure captured within a panel. Reports, essays and books can follow the academic convention of analysing a situation and then offering a conclusion. But with many distractions competing for attention in the gallery environment, visitors need the conclusion immediately and the background afterwards (for those prepared to ‘dive’). This is where we look to the approach of journalists again. For them the most important point always comes first to ‘hook’ the reader in. Think of the pyramid inverted, with the big ideas first.

When writing text, you should create this structure in the labels, panels, and display. Make sure the big ideas are present throughout the upper level of text – the titles and panels – and that the most important point always comes first within the body copy. Use the lower level of text for details that build on the story. Remember that gallery text is not a stand-alone narrative but an element within a three-dimensional matrix of design, objects and graphics, and that

visitors will direct themselves through this matrix, often in ways we would not guide them. In permanent galleries, the ‘paddlers’ can graze by ignoring the panels altogether and dipping in and out of object labels. This is why ‘topic, theme and message’ are vital. While every piece of text should sit within the hierarchy of narrative of the display, it should also work as an independent point which would make sense if it is the only thing a visitor reads without any other context.



Opera: Passion, Power and Politics,
V&A exhibition, 2017–18

To test this independence, it is best to replicate the visitor experience of your text as far as possible. As you write, keep an eye on the plans and elevations to be aware of where text and objects lie in relation to each other. And what works on the page might suddenly appear wrong on installation. Lay out the panels, labels and images of the objects in a sequence that replicates the display, or pin them on a wall. Walk around the replica display, reading the panels and labels for each section in the different orders visitors could approach them. Take a break and read individual labels in isolation, or ask another person not involved in the display to read one. This will help to determine whether the texts make sense on their own as well as part of a whole.

o6

Engage with the object

What do you want
visitors to look at?



A good label illuminates an object by directly addressing it.

The text should encourage visitors to look, to understand and to find their own reward, whether aesthetic, intellectual or personal. To do this, the writer must fully engage with the object – which means, of course, looking at it, preferably for real but otherwise in a photograph. The most obvious aim of a label is to explain anything that might be puzzling in the object. Have a look at the label for the painting *Landscape with a Terminal Figure*:

Before



JEAN-FRANÇOIS MILLET
Landscape with a Terminal Figure
About 1864

This painting of about 1864 represents the coast near Cherbourg. It is a study for a painting of Spring from a series of the Four Seasons. The larger, final version of this subject is now in Tokyo. This painting belonged to Henry Hill of Brighton until 1889.
[47 words]

- What is a terminal figure? (Most people think a terminal is something to do with a railway station)
- Will visitors be able to identify the terminal figure in the painting?
- Will they understand its significance?
- Will they be able to visualise the painting in Tokyo?
- Who was Henry Hill of Brighton? (In fact, he was an important British collector of French painting, but this is not mentioned)
- Could this text have come straight out of the museum database?

After

This view of the French coast near Cherbourg is a study for a painting of Spring, from a series of the Four Seasons. The ivy-swathed pedestal supports a male bust. This is a 'terminal', a figure that once represented Terminus, the Roman god of boundaries and landmarks. [46 words]



The second aim of an illuminating label is to draw people into the object, to help them understand and appreciate it.

VASE WITH FLOWERS

Turkey, probably Iznik

About 1575

Iznik potters often showed great skill in matching the designs they used to the shapes of vessels. Here tulips, carnations and other flowering plants seem to sway gently in a breeze, following the curved shape of the vase. [38 words]

V&A, Room 42, *Islamic Middle East*,
The Jameel Gallery

JEAN-AUGUSTE INGRES

The Comtesse de Tournon

1812

...Ingres does not idealise the noblewoman, but rather portrays her as middle-aged, with large, round eyes, a bulbous nose and a tightlipped smile.

Non-V&A label, Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York

In helping people to appreciate the object, be careful not to rob them of the chance to make their own observations. We do not need to be told that the Comtesse de Tournon has large, round eyes, a bulbous nose and a tight-lipped smile. Anyone can see that.

...elsewhere Ingres took pains not to emphasize her age. Any wrinkles she might have had on her forehead are hidden by the curls of her hair (possibly a wig); those on her neck behind a large lace ruff; and those on her chest under a fine muslin chemisette.

In contrast, this text from the Metropolitan Museum website refers to the sitter's age and wrinkles but then goes on to show how Ingres is kind to her appearance in a way that people might not immediately notice.

The third aim of a good object label is to make sure the text fits with what the visitor can actually see. If you write the label without looking closely at the image, you might well get a nasty surprise on installation when you find that the two don't work together. In this instance, we

displayed the book closed rather than open, so the text made no sense as the visitor couldn't see the ruled pages.

Aisha Kahlid (born 1972)

Name, Class, Subject

2009

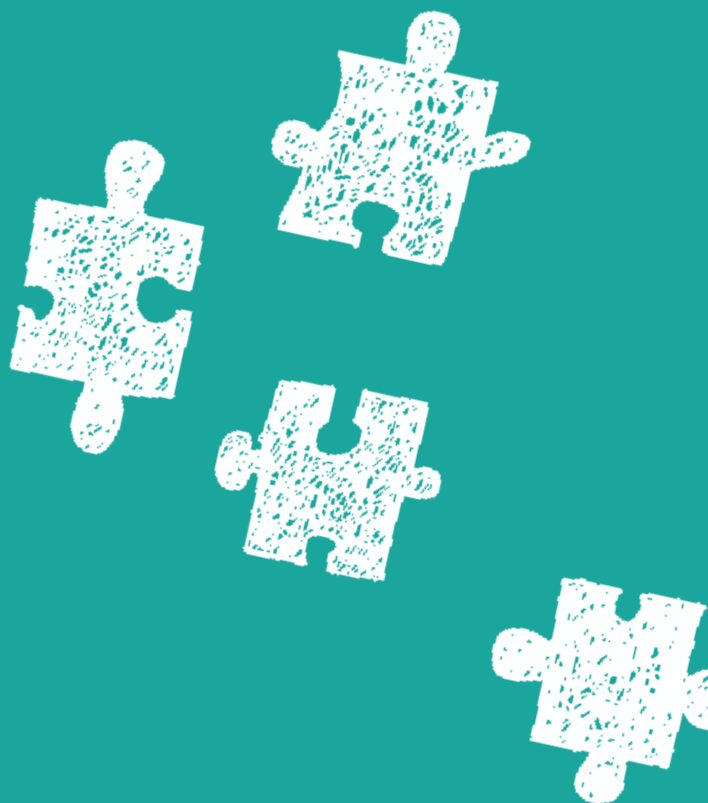
The blank, ruled pages of this apparently straightforward exercise book are in fact reproduced from over 300 miniature paintings made in the style used for Mughal miniatures.

Jameel Prize 2011, V&A exhibition, 2011

07

Bring in the human element

Is there anything familiar
about the object?



‘The good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies.’

Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 1953

We know from the Getty and other research that people connect with people. This presents a problem in museums, where objects have been divorced from people. But there are ways we can reconnect people and objects. The first, and most obvious, is to include real individuals or to use quotations and humour. This is especially important with periods that have been consigned to history.

MARGARET TUDOR'S BOOK OF HOURS
About 1500

Margaret Tudor was Henry VII's eldest daughter. He probably gave her this book in the summer of 1503 when she left England at the age of 13 to become the bride of James IV of Scotland. In it, he wrote, 'Pray for your loving father that gave you this book and I give you at all times God's blessing and mine. Henry King'.
[63 words]

Gothic: Art for England (2003–04),
V&A exhibition, Chatsworth

‘ In the caption to his ‘Widows of Culloden’ collection a quotation explains the reason behind his pride in his Scottish heritage. “It’s been marketed the world over as haggis and bagpipes”, he says, “but no-one ever puts anything back into it. What the British did there was nothing short of genocide.” In this respect, his voice narrated the exhibition, and the museum recognizes that he does it better than anybody could. ’

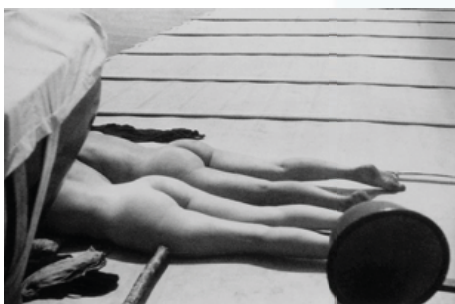
Maisie Skidmore, *It's Nice That*, 13 March 2015



Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty,
V&A exhibition, 2015

As this review of *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* highlights, quotes are useful tools to veer away from the institutional narrative. Quotations can also intrigue by being evocative, thought-provoking or humorous. They take visitors back into the past, illuminating the subject while immediately bypassing the curatorial (seen as neutral) standpoint.

Overt humour is more problematic. What is funny to one person is embarrassing or pointless to another. It might be difficult to tell jokes in accessible gallery text, but a wry comment or an anecdote can raise a smile. Use it where it feels natural or you know it is appropriate.



JACQUES-HENRI LARTIGUE
On the Deck of the Dahu II
1926

Lartigue was the world’s greatest master of snapshot photography. This work, photographed on board a yacht, particularly appealed to Bruce Bernard. He once discussed it with Lartigue, who told him that one of the naked women was his wife – but he was not sure which. [45 words]

100 Photographs: A Collection by Bruce Bernard, V&A exhibition, 2003

Another way to ‘humanise’ museum objects is to highlight common experience or shared concerns. This can help to link the past with the present, or bridge the gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

MANIPULATING MEMORY

Are there things you’d like to forget? While scientists can’t yet remove specific memories from our brains, they are investigating how memories could be manipulated. By breeding mice with specific memory problems, they hope to find out how and why we remember things – and perhaps learn to control memories too. [50 words]

Non-V&A exhibition label, Science Museum

We can make objects relevant to modern viewers by relating to present-day concerns like disability and ethnicity. The original label for the portrait of Alessandro de’ Medici ignored his African parentage and described the role of the Medici family in a way that many visitors would have found simplistic. The revision highlights his ancestry and also places the portrait in the Renaissance genre of a scholar in his study.

Before



AFTER JACOPO DA PONTORMO

Alessandro de’ Medici

1535 or later

Alessandro de’ Medici was an illegitimate offspring of the Medici family who exerted power and influence in Italy from about the 13th–17th century. He became ruler of Florence in 1530 and was assassinated by Lorenzo de’ Medici seven years later. [41 words]

After

Known as The Moor, Alessandro de’ Medici was probably the son of Giulio de’ Medici (later Pope Clement VII) and a black African serving woman. He became the first hereditary duke of Florence in 1530 and was assassinated seven years later. This picture is a version of a larger portrait showing Alessandro as a scholar in his study. [53 words]



The original label for Lady Morgan suggested that she was hardly more than an upper-class hostess. The reality was very different. She was a governess from a modest background who married well, developed her own career as a writer and had a keen social conscience. She was also very small and slightly deformed. According to the Dictionary of National Biography, 'Her whole life was a bravura performance in which she triumphed over these deficiencies through determination, wit, and sustained creativity.' Her disability should be mentioned, partly for her value as a role model, but also because it explains why her bust is the only one in the row in Room 22 that is looking up, not down or straight ahead.

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.

Hollywood Costume, V&A exhibition, 2013

Another way of linking objects to our own lives and experiences is to evoke the senses of touch, taste, sound and smell. In museums, sight is usually our only sense, but in life we experience the world through all our five senses. Through an imaginative use of language, we can capture some of the sensory responses that enrich our understanding of the world.

Here the label connects the audience with the feel of the fabric they cannot touch and the man they cannot meet.

o8

Sketch in the background

Is there anything
visitors won't know?



Remember to place objects in their historical and cultural context.

Labels sometimes give a very narrow view, focusing on art historical concerns such as provenance and assuming that the visitor understands the background. Yet people often have a limited knowledge of history or know little about material culture. Here, for example, most visitors would recognise that the Medici were the 'rulers of Florence', but beyond that their knowledge might be hazy.



MEDAL OF COSIMO DE' MEDICI

About 1480–1500

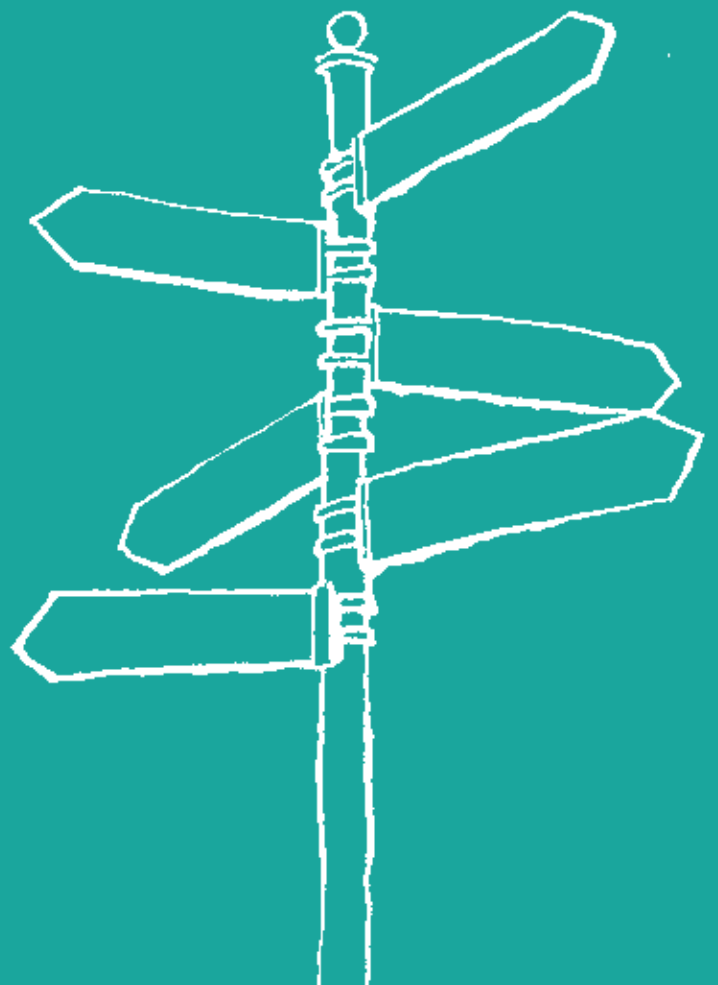
The Medici were bankers, and their company was one of the most powerful in Europe. But the head of the family, Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464), was also the unofficial ruler of the Florentine Republic. Here he is shown with the letters PPP for 'Primus Pater Patriae' (First Father of the Fatherland). This title, taken from classical Rome, was given to him after his death. [64 words]

V&A, Room 64, *Medieval & Renaissance*, The Wolfson Gallery

Similarly in the label for the mirror frame in section one, we took care to show that mirrors were then an 'expensive novelty', which many visitors may not realise.

09 Admit uncertainty

Is there anything
you don't know?



However carefully you look at them, some objects remain baffling.

Unfortunately some writers are reluctant to admit this, but actually it is better to be transparent. There is no harm in showing the boundaries of our knowledge. This dissolves the barrier between the ‘expert’ and the public, and engages the visitor in the debate that might exist about an object.

In the following label, the first draft was oblique and unsatisfactory. What is the connection between Margaret and the Virgin at Aachen? What exactly is the story of this crown? The answer is that we don’t really know.

Before

CROWN AND CASE FOR MARGARET OF YORK

About 1461–74

This crown and its case bear the name of Margaret of York, an English princess, and her initials, with those of her husband, Charles the Bold of Burgundy. The crown has long been associated with the 14th-century cult image of the Virgin at Aachen Cathedral, and it was possibly made specifically for this image.

[54 words]

After

The crown bears the name of Margaret of York, sister of Edward IV and wife of Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. Its history is a puzzle, but it may have been a gift from Margaret to the cult image of the Virgin at Aachen Cathedral, with which it has long been associated.

[53 words]

Another way of admitting uncertainty is to ask questions, as in the following example. But if you do so, make sure the questions are genuine ones to which there is no obvious answer. Otherwise you risk patronising visitors.

Before

Probably by Mirabello Cavalori

Portrait of a Youth

1572

Vasari described the Florentine artist Cavalori as a successful portrait painter. In this sensitive portrait of a youth the sitter holds a drawing of the three-quarter profile of a man. This may represent his own work, or, with its shadow of a moustache, may represent the imminent onset of puberty. [50 words]

- Why mention Vasari? Is he relevant here?
- Do we need to be told that the portrait is 'sensitive'?
- Why the reference to puberty? This seems a very modern interpretation of the image. What evidence do we have that people in Renaissance Italy would have wanted to mark the onset of male puberty?

After

Drawing was an essential part of a gentleman's education. In this enigmatic painting the boy is holding a drawing of a young adult. Is this simply an example of his fine draughtsmanship? Or could it be the boy's projection of his future self? [43 words]

At Home in Renaissance Italy, 2006.
V&A exhibition, section called
Lifecycle: Childhood

The rewrite links the painting more closely to the theme of the display (which includes education) and shows that we do not yet fully understand its meaning.

10

Remember Orwell's Six Rules

Have fun and break a rule
if you need to



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

Orwell's six rules, written over 70 years ago, are as necessary today as they were then. Perhaps more so. They could be said to summarise these text writing guidelines in the manner that is their aim: to make difficult things accessible in a short, lively and engaging way.

Following these rules will help to carry through the V&A's tone of voice. Standard phraseology referred to in rule 1 is immediately unimaginative and does nothing to make our text inviting or intriguing. Not trying to say too much according to rules 2 and 3 will keep it short and snappy to hold readers' attention. And adhering to rule 4 will ensure your text is immediate, easy and exciting to read.

Rule 5 is also particularly relevant. We shouldn't altogether avoid specialist vocabulary. Words like 'pyx' and 'pax' are essential to our understanding of objects, and we have a responsibility to introduce visitors to the terminology that frames our knowledge. But we must show very clearly what these words mean. Research has shown that if visitors encounter an unfamiliar word that is not explained they are likely to stop reading.



CHAIR
About 1760

During the 1750s, British furniture makers often combined Chinese, Gothic and Rococo motifs. In this chair, the clustered columns of the legs are Gothic, but the pagoda-shaped cresting rail and the geometric fretwork of the central splat are Chinese. [39 words]

V&A, Room 52, *Britain (1500–1700)*,
section called *Chinoiserie 1745–1765*


Sometimes, as with the chair label below, the object itself helps clarify the meaning of specialist terms. Without the object, words such as ‘cresting rail’, ‘fretwork’ and ‘splat’ might prove too great a challenge, but if the reader examines the chair they will soon become clear.

Do not use terms if they cannot easily be identified in the object. Words that belong to the abstract and specialised language of art criticism have no place in gallery text. Most visitors have no idea what ‘trope’ or ‘iconography’ mean.

Rule 6 is where rules end and your ear and judgement take over. What Orwell also means here is that good writing is an art not a science, and it doesn’t happen by following rules. If it is an art, it follows that our response to it is subjective. Readers respond to the same text in different ways, and critics – maddeningly – offer different solutions to the same problem. There may well be things in these guidelines that you won’t agree with or like, but we hope that at least they will sharpen your interest in writing gallery text and help you to continue the good work that has been done in the V&A in the last few years.

Appendix

When writing gallery text, please do the following:

- 
1. Discuss the project and its schedule with the Interpretation team and Design
 2. Agree the text hierarchy and label format with the Interpretation Editor before you start writing
 3. Liaise with the Interpretation Editor on the proposed design for the graphics
 4. Write all your text in one Word file, in the order in which the visitor will, or should, encounter the objects, i.e. section by section, with panels followed by objects, and with label codes or other directions to the editor/designer in square brackets []
 5. Include an indication of proposed images in the Word file and accompanying image files. The Interpretation Editor will remove any unnecessary references from the setting copy
 6. Follow the V&A House Style. A simple summary of these style guidelines is on the next page. Make sure to include the object credit lines as cited on CMS
 7. Circulate your text to the relevant curatorial colleagues before sending it to the Interpretation Editor
 8. Submit your text to the Interpretation Editor within the agreed amount of time. The text schedule will vary according to size and complexity, anything from 2 weeks to 6 months
 9. The Interpretation Editor should maintain version control, sending the final text to Design
 10. All PDF proofs go through the Interpretation Editor. They will save final signed off PDFs on the P Drive

V&A house style – a few points to remember

- Active voice. When referring to an action by the V&A collectively, use the first person: 'We' or 'Us', and address visitors directly with 'you'
- V&A Name. When referring to the museum, the preferred form is 'the V&A'. It is acceptable to use 'the Victoria and Albert Museum' but please use 'the V&A' wherever possible. Don't use any other forms, e.g. the 'Victoria & Albert Museum', the 'V and A', or the 'V+A'. The V&A logo should never be used as part of a sentence
- Centuries. Avoid where possible and use decades instead (e.g. 'between 1870 and 1900' or 'About 1880', not 'in the late 19th century')
- Latinisms. Use 'ruled' instead of reg.; 'about' instead of c/ca/circa; 'active' instead of floruit
- Place names. These should be contemporary with the period under discussion, with the modern name in parenthesis
- Quote marks. Use single quote marks, with double quotes for 'quotes within quotes'
- Style names and historical periods. Use capital letters for Renaissance, Gothic, Cubist etc., but lower case for 'medieval' and 'classical'
- Titles. Use English titles, except where the work is universally known by its original title (e.g. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*)
- Titles. In running text, use italics for books, works of art, TV shows and exhibitions. Use single quotes for patterns, e.g. the 'Willow Bough' wallpaper

For more detailed information, see the accompanying V&A House Style guidelines (available internally).

All efforts have been made to contact the relevant copyright holders. Any copyright holders we have been unable to reach or to whom inaccurate acknowledgements have been made are encouraged to contact the V&A.

- p. 4. 'Culture clashes present a wealth of masterpieces', *The Scotsman*, 28 September 2004. <https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture-clashes-present-a-wealth-of-masterpieces-1-556352> Accessed 21 January 2018.
- p. 5. Both diagrams courtesy of Saffron brand consultants.
- p. 17. George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', *Horizon*, April 1946 (volume 13, issue 76, pp. 252–265).
- p. 21. Herbert Simon, 'Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World' in Martin Greenberger, *Computers, Communication, and the Public Interest (1971)*, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, pp. 40–41.
- p. 23. Richard Chenevix Trench, *On the Study of Words: Lectures addressed (originally) to the pupils at the Diocesan Training School, Worcester*. First published 1851.
- p. 34. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953.
- p. 35. Maisie Skidmore, 'Step into Alexander McQueen's alternate universe in Savage Beauty at the V&A', *It's Nice That*, 13 March 2015 <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/v-a-alexander-mcqueen-savage-beauty> Accessed 20 January 2018.
- p. 35. 'On the Deck of the Dahu II' photograph © Jacques-Henri Lartigue.
- p. 45. George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', *Horizon*, April 1946 (volume 13, issue 76, pp. 252–265).
- pp. 7, 14, 18, 20, 24, 25, 27, 29, 33, 39, 41, 44 Illustrations by Kathrin Jacobsen, 2019.