

THEMATIC INTERPRETATION— MAKING A DIFFERENCE ON PURPOSE

WORKSHOP SUMMARY

Here are some themes I hope you've taken away from our workshop! Sam

INTERPRETIVE APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION

Interpretation is not the same as traditional “instruction.” Interpreters who try to “teach” their audiences in the academic sense will not be very successful. And whether visitors can later remember the interpreter’s content has little to do with how much they might care about what was interpreted. Caring is what matters to most interpreters.

In interpretation, **TORE™ = SUCCESS** (Thematic, Organized, Relevant, and Enjoyable)

You can hold an audience’s attention through simple entertainment. But interpreters who want to make a difference in how visitors think and feel about the things they interpret will build thematic communication into their interpretive activities and devices. The best interpreters are *both* entertaining *and* thematic.

The theme of an interpretive activity or device is not the same as the topic or subject matter. The theme is the message about a topic that you want to provoke your audience to think about. Strong themes are thought provoking because they matter to the audience.

Themes are always expressed in one or more complete declarative sentences. Complete declarative sentences have, at a minimum, a subject and verb. They always end with a full stop or exclamation mark.

Themes often can be expressed in a single sentence, but sometimes rules of grammar and punctuation will lead you to express it in two or more closely-related sentences. This is OK. The key to a theme is that it expresses a *single whole idea* regardless of the number of grammatical units it takes you to say it or write it.

All interpreters have their own personal style, and *any* style can be effective. The best style for you is your *natural* one.

THEMATIC THINKING

Successful interpretation provokes people to think. Their thinking creates meanings in their own minds. These meanings form the basis for whatever degree of caring they are capable of doing.

Thematic interpretation is not just entertaining fact-giving. It is facilitating “meaning making” in an ERO way.

Themes can stay with us, even when we forget the smaller facts that support them. You know that people are going to forget almost all of the isolated facts you tell them--even the most graphic, colorful and mind-boggling facts. But the overriding conclusions or impressions they derive from

your words--the moral of the story, the big picture, the BIG DEAL of it all--will stick, especially if it is strongly relevant to them. This is your theme. *Really strong themes stick in our minds*, some of them forever.

When you're planning any form of interpretation—an exhibit, a poster, a talk, or guided tour, for example—think carefully about the theme you're going to impart to your audience. Thinking thematically is a mindset, a way of seeing your job as a communicator. It is *nothing* more.

Thematic thinking requires you to think in terms of the messages you want to impart to people in your audience. Themes, because they are whole ideas, are expressed in the same raw form as information already stored in their minds. So when you impart a theme, you're giving them something they can readily react to, self-appropriate, or incorporate into their thinking, rather than forcing them to do the work to convert a bunch of cool facts into a moral.

The human mind is an amazingly complex repository of all the themes we learn in a lifetime. It is our life-long storehouse of lessons learned, of morals, of conclusions drawn from experiences. Metaphorically, a person's mind is a big bowl of thematic spaghetti. If the new strand of pasta you add to the bowl is highly relevant to the audience, it is easily internalized and integrated with all the rest. That's how themes impact our point of view, and it's how interpretation can make a difference in what audiences think, feel, and possibly behave with respect to the thing you are interpreting.

In communication, all things are 100% audience dependent.

Having a theme helps YOU prepare. It makes your job a lot easier because with a theme you're able to see more readily what to include and not include in your presentation.

Preparing communication programs around themes that are already interesting and provocative for your audience almost guarantees that they'll be successful.

The most powerful themes emanate from your own passion—they come from your heart as well as your head. Anyone can write a boring, lifeless theme. But writing strong compelling themes takes time and practice. The input of others often helps a lot.

Some ways to improve and strengthen a theme include making it personal, connecting it to things that have deep symbolic significance for your audience, using a metaphor or analogy, selecting visual and active verbs, and where possible, avoiding the verb “to be.”